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## About Our Story Circles



Story Circle underway at the Village of Arts and Humanities. Photo: Kat Ken

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*Among its many approaches to excavating, articulating and sharing understandings of local Yoruba-rooted beliefs and practices, Modupúe | Ibaye: The Philadelphia Yoruba Performance Project has employed “story circles” -- gatherings of individuals positioning themselves to both listen to the personal stories of others, and to offer their own in response. Story Circles have prescribed structures and rules to ensure that each individual’s story is given equal consideration. For example, the stories—often with beginnings, middles, and ends, with characters and plot – are expected to be roughly of the same length. As it moves around, the story circle unfolds to become a listening circle. As the Yoruba Performance Project got underway in 2017, we convened story circles for discrete groups of people with various relationships to Yoruba tradition. Below, Dudley Cocke, director of Appalachia-based Roadside Theater, and a consultant to our Project about story circle facilitation, discusses how such circles might contribute to the building of community centers of power. And anthropologist Dr. Nzinga Metzger, a Project scholar who has undertaken extensive ethnographic research about Yoruba-related drumming and dance practices in Philadelphia, reflects on the Project’s initial story circles.*



Dudley Cocke facilitating a Yoruba Project story circle, October 2017. Photo: Kat Kendon.

**Dudley Cocke spoke with the Yoruba Performance Project by phone in September 2018:**

If you want to bring a diverse and inclusive group of people from a community together – those who would not usually find themselves on the same agenda or in the same room – for example people from different churches, or political persuasions, or professions – the story circle is a way to create a level playing field. In the circle’s minimizing of privilege, people who ordinarily don’t hear from each other or don’t know each other have a welcoming space in which to listen and to share personal stories. Stories present us with vivid characters, settings, and conflict, and, consequently, they most always bring forth more nuanced meaning than even the eloquent statement of an opinion. The protocols of Roadside’s story circle methodology encourage each successive teller around the circle to take into account the stories that have previously been told. In this way, we think a collective story begins to form itself in the circle’s center.

*This is a way to set the foundation for a community to come together and, in coming together, there is the opportunity to build collective power. --Dudley Cocke--*

It's useful for a particular project's leaders to consider the discrete groups that may comprise a broader group – for example, the different inflections of spiritual practice among people who identify with Philadelphia's Yoruba tradition. While your first impulse might be to have a bigger circle that would include everyone, particular groups often benefit from first studying their own unique practice. Once they've had the opportunity to sit together and tell stories about their practice, they are more confident and better prepared when joining a wider circle.

A story circle creates a space where people feel free to tell stories drawn from their own lives that connect to the circle's particular theme. This is a way to set the foundation for a community to come together and, in coming together, there is the opportunity to build collective power – for example to build power together about the kind of future a community desires. In Roadside's work in Letcher County, Kentucky (in Appalachia), local residents of very different backgrounds and perspectives (many who had not spoken to one another in years, or ever) told stories that pointed toward a common future in which all children felt like they belonged, in which adults were able to make a living, and everyone had access to health care. To bring such a future into being, community members realized that they would have to take control of their destiny – and that doing that meant coming to grips with their strengths, weaknesses, and fears. Sharing stories helped Letcher County community members imagine and believe in the possibility of something better for their children, grands, and greats. And then they began organizing to make it happen.



John Wilkie, surrounded by Carole Butcher and Dorothy Wilkie. Photo: Kat Kendon.

*Story circles help articulate those desires, and create communities of action. Dudley’s work at Roadside often involves what he calls “rings of engagement.” There are story circles, for example, and then perhaps a performance is developed, based on the stories that emerged. Those in the story circles also take part in the performance – a performance presented back to the very communities from which the initial stories grew and whose issues they address. Following a performance, new story circles are created to give audience members and performers the chance to share what they just experienced, and to propose action based on the performances. In such an iterative way, the community uses stories and their public enactment to develop itself. Roadside’s formal methodology arose as a way to both constructively channel the potency of stories and prevent their use for exploitation or control, given the potential force of stories and their telling.*



Renelle Anansa Smith, Patricia “Peaches” Jones and Dorothy Wilkie, October 2017. Photo: Kat Kendon.

*Yoruba Performance Project circles have inspired conversations leading to revelations and expressed desires for next steps in documenting aspects of the breadth and depth of Yoruba-rooted lived experience here, and making its impact on Philadelphia’s cultural ecosystem more widely visible. Some of the Project’s first story circles came together around a local institution and its surroundings. Many who had previously (or are currently) engaged in what was the Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center*

*and is now the Village of Arts and Humanities accepted the invitation to sit, listen and share stories that related to participation in Ile Ife or Village community-based arts and other activities and to life in that North Philadelphia neighborhood. Arthur Hall, visionary founder of Ile Ife, started Philadelphia’s first African-rooted dance and drum ensemble, based at Ile Ife. Through the teaching and performance of African-centered (including Yoruba-sourced) movement and rhythms, Hall offered alternatives to Euro-centric aesthetics. Through these arts, he dove head first into addressing needs and desires of this very community. Today the Village remains devoted to local community-building through engagement with the arts.*

**Nzinga Metzger sent us these thoughts about her experience participating in story circles as part of our Project:**



Nzinga Metzger participating in a Yoruba Project story circle, October 2017. Photo: Kat Kendon.

Time is a great and powerful river that endlessly waters change. Silently rushing by us all, it impartially irrigates the moments that make up our collective and individual lives without any regard for our feelings or sensibilities or biases. History, on the other hand, is a human-made instrument: Though we are taught to think of it as merely an objective recounting of events past, it is actually a tool that is used by those who construct it for specific purposes, declared or undeclared. History never escapes the slant of subjectivity and because of this, all too frequently and in all too many contexts, realities of great significance to “the whole” are often suppressed beneath the agendas that shape supposedly objective retellings of history. This combination of time’s indifferent march and history’s subjectivity frequently leads to the erasure of valuable voices which, if heard and considered, have the potential to change the way we view an event or a place or a period or a people. Potential oversight and inclusion have serious implications, as one or the other conceivably could have lasting and significant impacts on people’s lives -- determining what is important, what is valued, what deserves to be acknowledged or memorialized, what deserves to live on... This is a conundrum that is often faced by members of marginalized groups or communities who struggle to have their voices heard by the larger groups within which they may live, and to have their realities considered and valued in a world that overlooks them. These are some of the challenges that present themselves with regard to adequately remembering, recognizing and representing the realities and contributions of members of Philadelphia’s African American community who were engaged in the arts world

that was heavily influenced by Yoruba spiritual culture and the parallel movements for black civil and human rights throughout the city's history.

Dispensing with the façade of, and even the attempt at objectivity, takes participant and observer directly to truths that are best revealed through candid subjectivity.

— Dr. Nzinga Metzger

Cultural anthropologists rely heavily on ethnography, a method of research wherein the researcher immerses themselves in the culture of the people whom they are studying. Participant observation, field observation and notes, interviews and more are all employed to help the anthropologist uncover truths about that group. Oral histories, on the other hand, are recordings of oral recollections of historically significant eras or events prepared by interviewers. Both of these approaches have an important place in helping us to understand the significance of people, places, events and eras. However, ethnography's conclusions rely heavily on the interpretation of the ethnographer. Oral history's completeness relies heavily on the memory of the interviewee and the skill of the interviewer to paint a clear picture of a past event or era. Story circles, however, offer something unique, getting to a deeper and more nuanced reality that is frequently only hinted at in what ethnographies and oral histories are able to uncover: Dispensing with the façade of, and even the attempt at objectivity, takes participant and observer directly to truths that are best revealed through candid subjectivity.

Learning the process for creating a story circle and then implementing it in the community in order to unpack the layered influences of Yoruba/orisa culture in Philadelphia has proven invaluable to uncovering not only historical facts, but also the *realities* that artists and community members lived and experienced. The story circle's format is deceptive in its simplicity: One person speaks at a time. There is to be no cross talk or interruption of the person speaking. Each person is constrained to a specific amount of time. Each person must tell a story related to a specific theme given by the facilitator of the story circle. But what emerges from this process, as we've seen here, is often poignant and participants invariably find themselves able to connect with each other in ways they may previously have thought not likely.

As for myself, as a person who has lived, worked, and had relationships in this community [including Arthur Hall Ensemble dancers and drummers] for several decades, as an ethnographer, as an orisa devotee and as an observer, it was also very profound to experience the unfolding of what I perceived to be a perhaps renewed or new sense of value for all these experiences which had either been forgotten or had been laying dormant in the memory. It was moving to watch old friends come together and reminisce and share in the telling of stories about events they had experienced together and then re-experience them from a new vantage point in their lives, with new eyes and [what they acknowledged as] a new appreciation for the importance of the individual and collective moments which were resurfacing.