

STORYTELLING AS AN INDIGENOUS RESOURCE IN THE INTERPRETATION OF OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS AND RELIGION

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Abstract

This article shows that indigenous resources could serve as a complementary mode of enriching and expanding existing discourses in knowledge production and use, especially in Old Testament interpretation. Specifically, it argues that, as an indigenous resource, storytelling could be employed as a powerful tool in the interpretation of Old Testament ethics. This is because Old Testament ethics itself is rooted principally in story and because storytelling is universal, it offers a medium to which everyday people can easily relate. Because interpretive parallels abound between indigenous African stories and Old Testament narratives, on an ethical level, these stories could be explored for their hermeneutical value.

Key Words: Indigenous Knowledge; Storytelling; Old Testament Ethics

A Brief Overview of Indigenous Knowledge

The turn of the last century witnessed a paradigm shift in knowledge production and development with growing calls to develop inclusive knowledge systems that would account for other modes of knowledge that are consistent with the needs of various peoples, especially the marginalized and formal colonial subjects. The thinking is that current so-called scientific knowledge systems which are primarily Western or Eurocentric in character dominate academic discourses and methods of knowledge production and dissemination. Voices from the margin therefore began to press for the diversification of prevailing approaches to knowledge that would include the knowledge resources of local or indigenous peoples in various disciplines – in medicine and public health (herbal remedies, acupuncture and the like are becoming the vogue), in development, especially sustainable development, in education, in law, in history, in agriculture and environmental management, in economics and other social sciences, etc.¹ It is argued that the socio-cultural context as well as the skills and resources of the participants or recipients of knowledge is important and should count in determining the epistemological paradigms in knowledge systems. In other words, indigenous knowledges could be a remedy to the imbalance inherent in the dominant Eurocentric frameworks that currently pervade the body of knowledge.

¹ See George J Sefa Dei, Budd L Hall & Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (eds.), *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. Isaac Mazonde & Pradip Thomas (eds.), *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Intellectual Property in the Twenty-First Century: Perspectives from Southern Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA, 2007). Paul Sillitoe, Alan Bicker & Johan Pottier (eds.), *Participating in Development: Approaches to Indigenous Knowledge*. ASA Monographs 39, London: Routledge, 2007.

Dei *et al.* claim that indigenous knowledge is at the center of current global concerns.² What then is meant by indigenous knowledge? According to Osei-Hwedie, “Indigenous knowledge is defined as knowledge that is unique to a given culture and society, and which is based on their common stock of experience”.³ Millat-e-Mustapha distinguishes between scientific formal knowledge and indigenous knowledge showing that the latter is unique to and collectively defined by local people and their cultural heritage.⁴ Indigenous then is associated with *traditional* or *local*. But Dei is quick to point out that indigenesness is not synonymous with ‘ignorance or backwardness’.⁵

Dei *et al.* affirm that “indigenous knowledges speak to questions about location, politics, identity, and culture, and about history of peoples and lands”. But they argue that “indigenous knowledge cannot be dismissed as mere localized phenomena” because it could “extend across cultures, histories and geographical boundaries or even time.”⁶ Dei himself shows that common elements in African indigenous knowledge systems for instance “can be found in variant forms among other indigenous peoples in other parts of the world”.⁷ In other words, in many cases, indigenous knowledge systems often have an international character. For this reason, one can presume that it is possible to use indigenous knowledges in the global milieu.

On the relevance of indigenous knowledge systems, proponents argue that they can be used to deconstruct stratified mainstream knowledge frameworks which prioritize Western models above other forms of knowledge and exclude the concerns of minoritized and marginalized peoples.⁸ MacIsaac notes that oral narratives for instance could be used to resist colonialism and ‘restore historical agency’, that is, restore the history of indigenous peoples who have been relegated by hegemonic power structures.⁹ Besides, indigenous knowledge systems could serve as bridges between the academia and the wider community as well as between the old and the new ways of doing things.¹⁰ And because of their uniqueness and dynamism, indigenous knowledges are not only locally appropriate, they also have potential for global appropriation. This article acknowledges the complexities associated with indigenous knowledges, especially in terms of their fluidity and issues of authenticity, authority and ownership. However, the primary concern here is to show that

² Dei *et al.*, *Indigenous Knowledge*, ix.

³ Kwaku Osei-Hwedie, “The Rationale for Using Indigenous Knowledge in Human Service Provision”, in *Indigenous Knowledge and Its Uses in Southern Africa*, (eds.) Hans Normann, Ina Snyman & Morris Cohen; Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, 1996:1-12,2.

⁴ M Millat-e-Mustapha, “Towards an Understanding of Indigenous Knowledge”, in *Indigenous Knowledge in Bangladesh: Present and Future*, (ed.) Paul Sillitoe; London: ITDG Publishing, 2000:27-30,27.

⁵ George J Sefa Dei, “African Development: The Relevance and Implications of ‘Indigenesness’”, in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*. George J Sefa Dei, Budd L Hall & Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (eds.); Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000:10-87,74.

⁶ Dei *et al.*, *Indigenous Knowledge*, 4.

⁷ Dei, “African Development”, 74.

⁸ George J Sefa Dei, Budd L Hall & Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg, “Introduction”, in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*. George J Sefa Dei, Budd L Hall & Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (eds.); Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000: 3-17,3-4,8.

⁹ Elizabeth MacIsaacs, “Oral Narratives as a Site of Resistance: Indigenous Knowledge, Colonialism, and Western Discourse”, in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*. George J Sefa Dei, Budd L Hall & Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (eds.); Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000:89-101,99.

¹⁰ Dei *et al.*, *Indigenous Knowledge*, 10,11.

they could be employed to simplify hermeneutical tasks both at theoretical and practical levels.

Recent studies in indigenous knowledge systems have tried to unpack and validate the histories, cultures, worldviews and experiences of indigenous peoples, especially in Asia, Africa, among aboriginal groups in Canada, United States and Australia. Africa which is our own geographical location, is home to various indigenous knowledge systems. Although the continent is characterized by diversity, the peoples have not only a shared history of colonial, political and economic domination but common problems – poverty, sicknesses and diseases of epidemic proportions, political instability, high rates of crime and insecurity, corruption in high places, interethnic and religious conflicts, low life expectancy rates, high rates of illiteracy, environmental degradation, etc. But most African nations and peoples also have some common resources – communal lifestyle, spirituality, and shared social and family values such as respect for elders.¹¹ The view in ongoing research on African indigenous knowledge is that Africa has abundant local resources that could be tapped in the production and use of knowledge.

In theological and religious discourses, scholars have foraged into aspects of African heritage and philosophy such as *Ubuntu* to buttress theoretical claims in public theology, practical theology and even biblical interpretation. Without particularly locating their arguments in indigenous knowledge systems, some scholars have called for the application of African values such as hospitality in addressing some contemporary economic and social issues.

The assumption here is that certain aspects of African indigenous knowledge systems could be probed for their hermeneutical significance for biblical ethics. In particular, the notion of storytelling and its use in the moral development and character formation of the African child could be investigated as a potential tool of interpretation in biblical – namely Old Testament – ethics. A relationship between indigenous knowledge and stories is assumed in Grenier's observation that:

IK is stored in people's memories and activities and is expressed in stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and taxonomy... IK is shared and communicated orally, by specific example, and through culture.¹²

Dei *et al.* assert that, "Deeply embedded in all writing about indigenous knowledges are implied lessons for teaching and learning. Indigenous knowledges are largely oral, passed on through the generations by women and men who have the trust of the elders of the community".¹³ If indeed lessons for teaching and learning are embedded in indigenous knowledges, then one could safely assume that indigenous knowledges possess inherent qualities not only for teaching and learning morals but also for interpreting prevailing

¹¹ See Dei, "African Development", 74-76.

¹² Louise Grenier, *Working with Indigenous Knowledge: A Guide for Researchers*. Online Resource Available at http://www.idrc.ca/index_e.html; Ottawa: International Development Research Center, 1998.

¹³ Dei *et al.*, "Introduction", 7. Morolong recognizes "myths, legends, fairytales, anecdotes, short stories, proverbs, riddles, rhymes, etc. as part of people's cultural heritage – Siamisang Morolong, "Protecting Folklore under Modern Intellectual Property Regimes: Limitations and Alternative Regimes for Protection", in *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Intellectual Property in the Twenty-First Century: Perspectives from Southern Africa*. Isaac Mazonde & Pradip Thomas (eds.), Dakar: CODESRIA, 2007:48-65,48-49.

ethical constructs such as found in Scriptures. And if stories and their expression constitute a part of indigenous knowledge, then they could be probed for their ethical significance.

Old Testament Ethics and Story

In spite of some of its gory and seemingly anti-ethical content, many scholars have established that the Old Testament contains ample resources for ethical consideration.¹⁴ But because of the multivalent nature of the voices and views expressed in the text, it has been argued that no single method of approaching its ethics could be considered adequate. The ethical content of the Old Testament has therefore been investigated from divergent viewpoints, that is, in terms of the social context, the canonical outline (studying individual books for their ‘moral witness’) and as resource for ethical conversation.¹⁵

A basic distinction is also made between deontological (command ethics) and teleological ethics (striving towards laudable goals). While deontological (or Kantian ethics) focuses on the nature of the act, teleological ethics focuses on the consequences of the act in determining its moral rightness or wrongness.¹⁶ But another trend in Old Testament ethics that is neither deontological nor teleological is the perfectionist ethics which aims at transforming the character of the human moral agents in question. The perfectionist or virtue ethics, combines elements of the other two ethical modes and emphasizes the normative and formative character of Old Testament narratives (as in Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza and Marx), as well as the purity of the Holiness Code.¹⁷ Nonetheless, there is agreement that basically Old Testament ethics is theological.¹⁸

The corpus of Old Testament ethics is said to be found in the Pentateuch. Although it is also referred to as the Book of the Law, the bulk of its contents consists of stories. In the Torah, Israelite legal traditions and ethical laws were rooted in both the Covenant Code and the Holiness Code, as well as in the Deuteronomic Code. The people’s moral behavior was expected to be shaped by the terms of the Sinaitic covenant and by God’s standard of holiness which were spelt out in the diverse commandments and instructions in the Torah¹⁹. However, the rest of the Old Testament contains diverse material for moral formation, and ethical paradigms appear throughout the text. In prophetic books, prophets served as ‘moral agents’ who declared God’s word to the people to reprimand and call them to order when

¹⁴ Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach*. Louisville, KY.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994; Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994; Eckart Otto, “Ethics: Old Testament”, in *Religion, Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*. Vol. IV. Hans D Betz et al. (eds.); Leiden: Brill, 2008:580-82; John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998; John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003; Bruce C Birch, “Ethics in the OT”, in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 2 “D-H”, Katharine D Sakenfeld et al. (eds.); Nashville: Abingdon, 2007:338-48; Katharine J Dell, *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*. New York: T&T Clark, 2010.

¹⁵ Birch, “Ethics”, 399.

¹⁶ For a discussion of deontological and teleological ethics, see Louis P Pojma and James Fieser, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*. Seventh Edition. Boston, MA: Cengage Advantage Books, 2012:8-11.

¹⁷ For more on virtue ethics, see Pojma and Fieser, *Ethics*, 146-65.

¹⁸ Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 9; Christopher H Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004:23.

¹⁹ Temba LJ Mafico, “Ethics: Old Testament”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 “D-G”, David Noel Freedman et al. (eds.). New York: Doubleday, 1992:645-52,645-48. Mafico also notes that several categories of people had the responsibility to teach morality in the Old Testament. These included parents, judges, sages, priests and prophets (Mafico, “Ethics”, 651).

they went astray or to give them hope and remind them of the terms of the divine covenant with God. Old Testament prophets therefore represented an ethical ideal and demanded moral accountability from the king, the priests and the leaders of the people urging them to maintain social justice and equity.²⁰

In wisdom literature, ethics is related to the moral teachings in the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, some Psalms, and aspects of Job, which are grounded primarily in the maxim, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (knowledge)” and in the idea of reward or punishment for human action. Issues of social justice for the poor, dignity of labour, integrity, generosity and truthfulness are emphasized in the literature. Wisdom ethics is also linked to nature and experience and pays attention to the question of why the righteous suffer.²¹

Another rich field of ethical resources is Old Testament narratives. The Old Testament with its concentration of diverse stories which range from epic and fictional to historical, tragic, cautionary and didactic tales addresses implicitly or clearly issues of morality and social justice. For instance, narratives about Joseph (Gen 37-50) and Daniel (Dan 1-7) illustrate the didactic character of many Old Testament stories. Joseph’s refusal to succumb to Potiphar’s wife’s seduction and the unwillingness of Daniel and his three friends to partake in the king’s delicacies are held as ethical ideals.²² Barton notes that:

About half of the Old Testament, after all, consists not of overt moral teachings but of narrative histories, legends, stories, whatever we want to call it. And narrative is always particular, concerned with connected chains of actions and events which always befall particular people.²³

For Barton therefore stories help to shape our moral vision and inform our ‘moral life’. Notably, he shows that vast differences exist in human cultures, yet common grounds can be found also. The ‘essential humanity’ of the characters in our stories whether biblical, Greek or other is a common ground. The characters who are often flawed like David or other biblical heroes help us to understand the moral life even as we empathize with them.²⁴

Before Barton, Janzen had argued that the primary mode of transmitting ethical instructions in ancient Israel was the story, that is, through recital:

When the Israelite child asked his or her parents for an interpretation of their religious and ethical practices, the father was to reply by telling a story (Deut. 6:20-25). The Old Testament as a whole, in all its diversity, is in a sense a story. Even its legal collections, including the Ten Commandments, have been incorporated into that story in the final canonical text.²⁵

Illustrating his point with five Old Testament stories, Janzen further argues that the ethical content of the major genres in the Old Testament is rooted in story. In other words, stories

²⁰ Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*, 154-76; Birch, “Ethics”, 344-47.

²¹ Compare Mafico, “Ethics”, 651; Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 41; Birch, “Ethics”, 345.

²² See Walter Dietrich, “Joseph: Joseph Narrative,” in *Religion Past and Present – Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, Vol. VII “Joh-Mah”. Hans Dieter Betz *et al* (eds.). Brill: Leiden, 2010:35-36.

²³ Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 20.

²⁴ Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament*, 31-36.

²⁵ Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*, 2. On the intersection between story and Old Testament ethics, see also Gordon J Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically*. Old Testament Series; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000.

are paradigms of correct ethical conduct for the people of Israel. The story itself, he argues, is the ethic.²⁶

Actually, both Janzen and Barton only confirm Birch's earlier position about the centrality of storytelling traditions in the Old Testament and its ethics. Birch claims that Old Testament stories not only disclose reality but they have moral function and transformative power; they help to shape our conduct and character either by serving as salvation stories or by helping to shatter our illusions and misconceptions.²⁷ Parry confirms the relationship between ethics and narratives. She argues "that narratives play a major role in shaping individual and community identity, and that ethics finds its home within such narrative identity". This is because narratives provide a model for our actions and ethical reflections.²⁸ The question here is, could indigenous knowledge systems serve as a viable hermeneutic tool? Specifically, how can storytelling as an indigenous resource function in the interpretation and application of Old Testament ethics?

Storytelling as an Interpretative Tool

According to Birch, biblical stories have moral power because they intersect with our own story. Our stories are also shaped by our family stories and the stories of our communities. He explains that:

All persons find identity by learning and developing their own story, becoming conscious of its dimensions and adding to it as life goes on through adulthood... Our lives participate in the plot of many stories. The power of biblical stories is their ability to help us see the many stories of our lives as part of larger stories which integrate our life story into stories of ultimate meaning.²⁹

My point here is that if biblical stories indeed do intersect with our story and help to shape our story, then, the relationship should be mutual. Our stories (past and present), the stories of our communities, of our peoples, of our nations – our tragedies and our fortunes, our defeats and our triumphs – could also help illuminate the biblical stories in ways that could be more readily understood, that is, in more meaningful and personal ways.

Storytelling as an indigenous resource resonates with the character of the Old Testament text and because stories are an integral part of Old Testament ethics, indigenous stories should be harnessed in their retelling and application. Although his focus is on the use of anthropological theories in conjunction with historical research in biblical scholarship, Overholt's observation that there are difficulties inherent in interpreting data from a culture that is not our own is also valid here. He notes that because we are not participant observers of ancient Israelite culture and because social reality assumed by the text may actually be more complex than what we find in the text, we may be compelled also to use ideas and data that are derived from outside the text. Overholt therefore concludes that the process whereby we seek to understand social reality "will require the use of a variety of tools –

²⁶ Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*, 210. The five stories analyzed by Janzen are said to illustrate the priestly paradigm, the wisdom paradigm, the royal paradigm and the prophetic paradigm as well as the paradigm of Jesus.

²⁷ Bruce C Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991:51-60.

²⁸ Robin Allinson Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study*. Paternoster Biblical Monographs. Milton Keynes, MK: Paternoster, 2004:3,29.

²⁹ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 61 55.

historical, sociological, anthropological and literary”.³⁰ In the same way, storytelling as an indigenous resource could help us to understand what to the modern reader or interpreter would otherwise remain vague and esoteric in the biblical text. It could help us to grasp the social reality of the Old Testament text in a way that would enable us to appropriate it for our own time and purpose.

If we take Africa as a case in point, the timeless mode of imparting ethical teachings in traditional societies is through storytelling throughout the continent. Of course, proverbs, songs, riddles and instructions also play significant roles in moral formation and upbringing, but the primary resource is oral narration. A popular narrative genre in many African settings is folktale. In West Africa, among the Akan of Ghana for example, the protagonist in most of the folktales is Ananse (Mr Spider). Ananse, a model of good behaviour and sometimes personified as a man, is noted for his skill and especially for his cunningness and trickery. But Ananse is regarded as a folk hero of sorts who also could act on behalf of Nyame, the sky god.³¹

Ananse’s counterpart among the Yoruba of Nigeria is Ijapa (Mr Tortoise). In the eyes of the Yoruba child, the tortoise is unique among animals. Together with his equally infamous wife, Yannibo, Ijapa features in roughly eighty percent of the stories used to teach morals to children. Often as a mischief maker of sorts but sometimes as a wise counselor or even talebearer, Ijapa appears as a permanent fixture in many cautionary tales and wise sayings but especially in his role as a trickster.³² In Bantu folktales, the hare (Mmutle/Mmutla) is the chief of tricksters and the central character. Like Ijapa, Mmutle is also a mischief maker, at the same time, full of wisdom.³³

The folktales end mostly with one aphorism or the other, some of which find parallels in biblical proverbs. For instance, research has identified the prevalence of the trickster motif in the Old Testament and in particular the book of Genesis. At first, it was assumed that only women were culpable of deception or trickery in Genesis but further analyses have shown that several men equally exhibited this trait.³⁴ Deception or trickery can be viewed as a shared motif between the African folk tales and the stories in Genesis. Exposition of the Ananse, Ijapa or Mmutle tales and how the trickery of these characters is often used for the common good could help therefore to throw some light on the negative connotations

³⁰ Thomas W Overholt. *Cultural Anthropology and the Old Testament*. Old Testament Series; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996:1,21.

³¹ Peggy Appiah. *Ananse the Spider: Tales from an Ashanti Village*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1966. Luke Gyasi-Appiah. *Ananse Stories Retold: Some Common Traditional Tales*. London: Heinemann, 1997.

³² Akinsemoyin, Kunle. *Twilight and the Tortoise*. Lagos: African Universities Press, 1966. Richard Odeyemi. *Sweet Tales about Tortoise*. Kaduna, Nigeria: Gbabeke Publishers, 1987.

³³ Mary Kibel (ed.). *Mmutle the Hare and the Baboons*. Drawings by Bernard Griffin, New York: OUP, 1977. Nelson Mandela. *Nelson Mandela's Favorite African Folktales*. New York: Norton, 2002.

³⁴ Esther Fuchs. “Who Is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism”, in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*. Adela Yarbro Collins (ed.). Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985:137-144. Susan Niditch. *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore*. New Voices in Biblical Studies. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. Bellis Ogden. *Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes – Women’s Stories in the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994:67-98. Susan Niditch. “Genesis”, in *Women’s Bible Commentary*. Carol A Newsom and Sharon H Ringe (eds.). Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998 [1992]:13-29. Michael J Williams 2001. *Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon*. New York: Peter Lang.

associated with trickery in Genesis.³⁵ Such exposition could also help illuminate the stories of several wise women in the Old Testament such as the Wise Woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14) or the Wise Woman of Abel Maacah (2 Sam 20) who used their discretion to turn around what could have been disastrous situations.

Many communal stories of people's origin and migration, wars and struggles also find semblance in biblical stories. Some of these stories and the themes they share with the ancient text could serve as interpretive lens for biblical stories. It is noteworthy therefore that research in biblical interpretation in Africa has already begun to make use of indigenous resources even though it is not often explicitly stated in such works. On a comparative level, a number of contemporary studies have, for example, found interpretive parallels in African stories of migration and the Exodus story.³⁶ In addition, parallels have been observed between many Old Testament proverbs and some proverbs of different African peoples, a number of which have also been credited with didactic properties.³⁷

A notable attempt to employ the art of storytelling to interpret the book of Ruth is found in a recent article by Masenya who rereads the story of Ruth in a Sotho storytelling fashion.³⁸ Earlier in a volume edited by Musa Dube, Masenya had used storytelling to compare the story of Esther with Northern Sotho folktales and to show that in the two social contexts, women devise strategies for survival and resistance in male-dominated worlds.³⁹ In the same volume, Musa Dube employs a similar technique to read a New Testament text but from a postcolonial perspective. The article depicts Africa's trajectory from its colonial past through its independence struggle to its neocolonial present. Both Masenya and Dube recognize the value of taking up storytelling as an approach to biblical interpretation.

Disappointingly, some scholars do not yet appreciate the relevance of appropriating indigenous knowledge in contemporary scholarship or recognize it as a valid scholarly enterprise. For example, if the framework employed by a colleague or student is not 100%, some scholars harbour a kind of resentment or disapproval of the arguments and findings. This sometimes occurs in the context of evaluating theses or dissertations in which the

³⁵ Dube suggests that the strategies of Hare and Spider in African folktales can be used "to subvert powerful and exploitative powers". Musa W Dube. "Introduction", in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Musa W Dube (ed.), Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001:1-19:4.

³⁶ The 2008 joint research by Hendrik L. Bosman, Edwin Zulu, Jonathan Weor and Funlola Olojede examines the migration stories of the Na'ama of Namibia, the Ngoni of Zambia, the Tiv of Nigeria, and the Yoruba of Nigeria in the light of the Exodus. For a summary of the research, see Hendrik Bosman. "Contextual Readings of the Exodus in Africa: Negotiating Identity amidst Contending Narratives of Origin and Migration in Africa". Available online at: www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/religious_studies/SBL2008/Bosman.doc. Individual articles by the researchers are available in *Scriptura*, Vol. 108, No 1, 2011.

³⁷ See among others Friedemann W. Golka. *The Leopard's Spots: Biblical and African Wisdom in Proverbs*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993. Mercy Amba Oduyoye. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995:55-77. Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele). *How Worthy Is the Woman of Worth? Rereading Proverbs 31:10-31 in African-South Africa*. New York: Peter Lang, 2004.

³⁸ Madipoane (Ngwana' Mphahlele) Masenya. "Single African Christian Women's Encounter with the Book of Ruth: One African Woman's Reflection". *Verbum et Ecclesia* Vol 34, No 1 (2013). Available online: <http://www.ve.org.za/index.php/VE/article/viewFile/771/1762>.

³⁹ Madipoane (Ngwana' Mphahlele) Masenya. "Esther and Northern Sotho Stories: An African-South-African Woman's Commentary", in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Musa W Dube (ed.), Atlanta, Ga: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001:27-48. Musa W Dube. "Fifty-Years of Bleeding: A Storytelling Feminist Reading of Mark 5:24-43", in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, Musa W Dube (ed.), Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001:50-60.

students rely on local resources to advance their arguments. Conversely, some of those who employ such resources do not also do so in clear articulate ways that show that their study is based on the theoretical assumption that indigenous knowledge systems are recognizable points of departure academically. Such issues need to be defined more clearly.

Conclusion

I would try to sum up my thoughts at this point. I have provided a brief outline of what indigenous knowledge is all about and attempted to show that it is a viable system of knowing. The aim is not to present indigenous knowledge systems as alternatives to conventional approaches to knowledge but as a complementary mode of enriching and expanding existing discourses in knowledge production and use. Indigenous knowledge may be local but it has a global appeal because ordinary folks can identify with it. It is authentic and marketable and should not be viewed as inferior, substandard, antique or primitive. The tendency to assume that if something emanates from the Third or Two-Thirds World then it is not smart or trendy should be eschewed. The art of storytelling and the stories from different African communities could therefore serve to complement available critical approaches to biblical interpretation, especially in the area of ethics. It is in the area of ethical reflection and teaching that storytelling – as a tool of interpretation – appears to show optimal promise, and that is primarily because of the didactic nature of storytelling in the African context.

Again, scholars have noted that for ancient Israelites, their ethics just as their God is universal.⁴⁰ I have reiterated the importance of stories in the ethical vision of the Old Testament. But ethics itself as a cultural ideal is universal, that is, in the sense that common ground abounds when it comes to ethical issues. Remarkably, stories are also universal – they serve as mirrors into the worldview and ethos of a people; and while some characteristics of stories transcend cultural boundaries, some characteristics only make sense in a specific cultural context. The crux of my argument is that in interpretation, in teaching, in preaching, in the practice of spirituality, the ethical content of the unique stories of different peoples, especially of indigenous folks could make a difference in the global search for social justice, equity and human dignity.

Perhaps someone is asking: are you trying to make a case for indigenous knowledge systems in theological discourse? The answer would be a resounding YES – if the relevant research in this regard is taken into account.

⁴⁰ Mafico, “Ethics”, 647.