

The Folklore of the Land: A sense of place through stories
in Chole, Tanzania

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The Storytellers of Chole

Mzee Issa Ally: 75, ex-large boat captain, born in Chole, absolutely charming

Mzee Issa Saalum (fundi wa zomari) 70, Zomari player / maker, ex-fisherman and farmer, born in Chagalama, Tz., moved to Chole as a child, loves kali cigarettes.

Abdullah Mohammed Kimbau 50, woodcutter, violinist, too wonderful for words, also loves kali cigarettes.

Kasim Mohammed Kimbau 50, king crab fisherman, farmer (peanuts, bananas, cassava, spinach, pumpkins), born in Chole, hell of a guy, he too loves kali cigarettes.

Abdullah Mohammed Mzee 80, ex-farmer, born in Kilwa, moved to Chole in the 1940's.

Saidi Mshangama 50, fisherman (small fish, octopus, and squid), village English language expert, Born in Chole.

Bi Halima Baacha 85, ex-farmer, fiery and wonderful, born in Chole.

Abdullah Nassoro 50, hotel maintenance man, farmer, born in Chole.

Mohammed Abdullah Nassoro 26, fisherman, clothing seller, night watchman, village strong man, born in Chole.

Kasim Bakari 28, artist, born in Chole.

Bwana Harusi Nimadi Moussa 80, rope maker, mat weaver, ex-farmer, born in Juani.

Ali Sikubali 21, luggage porter, fisherman, coconut exporter, born in Chole.

Hamida Kasim Kimbao 16, secondary school student, born in Chole.

Amina Abdullah Kimbau 12, student, born in Chole.

Fatuma Mohammed 15, student, born in Chole.

Issa Hassani 50, fisherman, born in Chole.

Johari Rajabu 30, chekechea teacher, cassava farmer, fisherman, hotelier, born in Chole

Asha Johari Rajabu 16, secondary school student, gardener, born in Chole.

Abstract

A two and a half week survey of environmental folklore was conducted on Chole Island in Mafia, Tanzania. Stories, environmental histories, *mafunzo*, and village perspectives on storytelling were collected and assessed in terms of their impact on the attitudes of the Chole villagers towards their environment and its conservation. The ways in which these stories explain, enrich, and influence Chole and its inhabitants were explored. Stories were taped, transcribed, and translated, and will be compiled into a booklet and integrated into the village's educational curriculum.

Introduction

“Ukitoa hadithi, nitakujua.”
“If you tell me a story, I'll know who you are.”

-Mzee Issa Saalum- storyteller, 70, Nov. 16, 2001

At its worst a story is merely wonderful - pure entertainment with no other purpose than to entertain. At its best a story can be a conduit for an all-encompassing worldview, a vehicle for a people's beliefs, values, problems and joys, deepest questions, darkest fears, and highest aspirations. A story can make the old boys down at the pub snicker, or put the baby to sleep, but a story can also incite a revolution, captivate a generation, begin a religion, or define an era. A good story can truly change the world. A story can illustrate a people and influence the way in which they travel through life and shape the way they view and treat their world. In The World of the Swahili John Middleton writes that stories and

myths...describe and validate the overall structure of Swahili society...These myths provide a categorization of Swahili social relations and the world in which they are situated, and also a morality by which conflicts and uncertainties in behavior may be resolved. They provide a moral schema or map of the society and its spatial, social and historical surroundings.

It is for this reason that when Bi Nimadi Moussa, a Chole village elder, says something like this following quote, one begins to worry:

This world doesn't work that way now...in the past our grandparents would tell stories, wonderful stories the whole night, but now it is not that way, we children

would sit there and listen the whole night. But now there is no storytelling...these children, they go from here, they go to school, they go over there, they pass here, they return, they go here, they go there. In the evenings they come back from school, they get their food, they get into their beds. What can you say to them? I don't see them. They get their stories from school now. We don't know the stories that they know. We don't know the songs they know. What can you say to them?

These stories and the lessons they carry lie at the heart of the attitudes held and decisions made by their culture. Stories organize the values, attitudes and beliefs of a culture and synthesize them into a wonderful fantasy, a "story of lies, full of truth" which will both reinforce and shape the culture out of which it was born (Abdullah Kimbao, taped interview). Stories teach; they "give people a sense of their history, their culture, their traditions, their origins, their environment, and their particular place in time and space" (Snyder, 46). They teach people how to pass through this world which they find themselves surrounded by – what to prize and what to scorn, what to cherish and what to squander, how to treat their fellow man, and how to treat their environment. This being the case, a study of a particular societies' stories can be a gateway to understanding their attitudes and beliefs towards their world, and infinitely valuable not just as a means of cultural preservation but as a means of environmental conservation. If one can dig into the stories of a culture he can find out their attitudes towards their environment and it's conservation.

With this in mind I hopped on a plane to Chole Mjini, a small island twenty miles off the east coast of Tanzania inhabited by about 800 Swahili people, to try to better understand the peoples relationship to their environment through stories. I was lucky to find that Chole is a place with a rich, but fading storytelling tradition. I was able to collect over a hundred stories, each one of which, I feel, has a bearing on their attitudes towards their environment and it's conservation, attitudes which it is vital to understand and keep in mind for any future conservation measures taken in the area. These stories work to explain, enrich, and influence the culture and the environment in which they exist. If their lessons are understood, these stories can become a key to understanding environmental attitudes and practices on Chole.

Aside from being an important gauge to environmental attitudes in the area, I feel that this study was urgently needed as a measure of cultural conservation. Chole Mjini

seems to have come to a dangerous crossroads in recent years. Chole, an island once at the crossroads of a major trade route, now finds itself at another crossroads of a major cultural route. A crossroads between a very rural, isolated and socialistic past, and a developing, globalizing, and capitalistic future. It is a place of great history rapidly losing its traditions and culture in the wake of recent developments. As tourists begin to stumble through the village with cameras in hand, and the village children begin to attend kindergarten at the age of three, the younger generation finds itself confronted with a radically different way of life from the life that their parents led.

In Chole, many of the things of the past are being lost or thrown away. The *wazee* of Chole have reached a near consensus, which Mzee Saidi Mshangama elaborated upon best: “there is none. There is no storytelling. In the past, it was here, it was very important; but now it is that there is none. I don’t know why. I think that they get their stories from books now. I don’t know. It is very bad.” Chole is an island filled with oral stories, histories, and legends that are being disregarded as “lies of the past” and replaced with textbook lessons, and radio news broadcasts. The people of Chole are the bearers of a very valuable, and sadly dying tradition of stories, “stories of lies, full of truth,” which are quickly fading away with the old men and women who know them best. Their preservation is important to both an understanding of a people’s environment and the survival of its culture.

Study Area

Chole Island is one of the smallest (about one kilometer long, and half a kilometer wide) of the twelve islands that comprise the Mafia Archipelago, and are located within the Mafia Island Marine Park. This grouping of islands, some 20,000 years ago joined to the Tanzanian mainland, now lies off the eastern Tanzanian coast, eight degrees below the equator, twenty kilometers east of where the Rufiji river delta empties into the Indian Ocean, and about one hundred miles south of Unguja Island (Iles, 6). Chole is relatively flat, and is composed mainly of sandstone and coral deposits (Iles 6). Mangrove forests, stands of Baobab and palm trees, coral rag, numerous sea grass beds, and teeming coral reefs are characteristic of the island’s geography. Chole is the home to at least 83 species of birds, 24 species of butterflies, and 2000 Comoros Flying Foxes (Iles, 98, 100, 65). Giant monitor lizards and other lizards, Black mambas and other snakes, giant millipedes,

African Killer Bees, Sea Turtles, Hermit crabs, countless fishes, and many other animals also populate the Chole landscape. This is the landscape that forms the backdrop for all of their stories.

Chole has a long and storied history, which its inhabitants are quick to expound upon, and its ancient ruins divulge upon first glance. It is a history that figures prominently into the stories that the island's inhabitants tell.

The original inhabitants of Chole migrated from the African mainland well before the 10th century and were followed by subsequent waves of immigration by Shirazi Persians, Indians, Omani-Arabs, MaShatiri Arabs, and other trading peoples of the Indian Ocean, and East African coast, resulting in an incredible mix of cultures, languages, ideas, values, and stories (Iles, 8).

Current Chole inhabitants refer to the period dating from the 15th century to the 19th century as “The Arab period.” It was during this period that the Mafia Archipelago became a major trading post of gold, ivory and slaves between Kilwa and Zanzibar (Sigman, 10). Near the end of this period, in 1840, when Sultan Seyyid Said moved his capital from Oman to Zanzibar, Mafia came to be more and more under the control of its northern neighbor, and Chole island emerged as Mafia's most important city. At this point Chole became a vital link in the Arab slave trade as both a selling post and a destination for incoming slaves from places such as Nyasa, Yao, and Ngindo (Iles, 9). The ruling Arabs choose Chole as their home while sending their slaves to work the huge coconut plantations on Mafia Island. These Arabs built large stone houses, mosques, and wells, which still haunt the Chole landscape. Their incoming slaves represent yet another immigration into the Chole cultural melting pot. The Arab influence is thick throughout East Africa, and is extremely apparent in the stories of Chole, as are the lessons they learned from the days of slavery.

The “Arab period” was quickly ushered out in 1890, when, following the Berlin conference, Africa was divided between the European powers and the “German period” began. In my interviews I found the relatively short-lived “German period” to be the period most vividly and bitterly remembered by Chole inhabitants.

“There was one man, one German soldier” said Saidi Mshangama “...he was very fierce, he would take people and beat them. He would take them and beat them or hang

them, he would kill people without a reason.” The Germans continued the trade in slaves and imposed unfair taxes on their subjects. They built a school, a customs house and a jail, and are said to have made the city look very beautiful and clean due to their strict, hard-nosed and violent rule of the people.

In 1915 the brutal “German period” was brought to an end when English captured Chole at the onset of World War One, and after the war it became a British territory under the League of Nations (Iles, 13). Built on the trade of slaves, in 1922, when the British ended slavery in Mafia, Chole lost its strategic importance, and the British moved their capital back to Mafia Island (Iles, 12). After this, Chole fell into a rather odd and mysterious period. “Everyone left,” says Abdullah Kimbao “there was no one here, there were only pigs, in the past there were fifteen thousand people here, but then there were none, There were less than one hundred people here, there were only forest pigs.” This strange and empty period was brought to an end when Tanzania gained its independence in 1961 and Julius Nyerere’s Ujamaa Socialism came into effect, allowing people to farm and own any land not in use (Iles 13). Thus the island of Chole was, for all intents and purposes, up for grabs, and many of the original inhabitants returned accompanied by others from the African mainland (places such as Kilwa and Tanga) setting out to find a better life.

And so we find Chole, now, this once bustling center of gold, ivory, and slave commerce between Kilwa and Zanzibar, this once German colony, this one time English military stronghold, a rather sleepy and isolated electricityless rural village, which, stretched across the entire island of Chole, is inhabited by about 800 Swahili people of diverse origins, socially organized around numerous compounds of thatched houses based on family units, and lines of patrilineal descent. Out of these centuries and centuries of mixing and remixing these people of diverse origins have come together around a fabled history, a common language: Swahili, and a unifying religion: Islam. Today Chole is nearly exclusively populated by Swahili-speaking Muslims. Swahili is a Bantu language sharing much in common with many mainland African languages but has been heavily influenced by Arabic and English. Islam, brought by the Arabs, met with traditional African religions and beliefs in East Africa came into an interesting synthesis. The people of Chole are devout Muslims who also show tremendous deference to the

shamanistic tradition of mainland Bantu Africa. The women bathe their young children in special herbs, and clothe them with owl bone amulets to keep *mashetani* spirits away at night, and visit *waganga* to reverse a curse, before their nightly prayers to Allah. It is this sort of synthesis that allows the creation stories of Allah, to coexist with the creation myths of “The Animals of Chole.”

For their livelihoods, the people of Chole have relied heavily on their environment. Most villagers survive by a combination of fishing and subsistence farming. Most families cultivate crops such as cassava, potatoes, beans, peanuts, bananas, coconuts, papayas, jackfruit and oranges. In addition to fishing and farming many village men raise livestock (goats, sheep, cows), or cut mangroves to sell as building materials or firewood. Others build boats from local trees, export fruit, farm seaweed, or work as boatmen or carpenters. Mat weaving, coconut-fiber rope making, farming, gardening, collecting food (octopus, shellfish, razor clams) from the intertidal zone, and sewing are the chief economic activities of the village women. The people of Chole have relied on their small island for nearly all of their needs. They eat fruit from the trees, farm vegetables from of their ground, eat fish from their ocean, and build houses, boats, and mats out of their trees. The example of the coconut *vitendawili* is the best one I know to explain the Chole villagers’ connection to, reliance on, and ingenuity with their environment.

Vitendawili : Matumizi tumizi na mizi tumuzi matumizi tumizi na mizi tumizi

Riddle: use after use after use after use, after use after use after use

Jibu lake: dafu

Answer: a coconut

This *vitendawili* was later explained to me by the teller, Bi Nimadi Moussa: “the husk to make rope, the fronds to make mats and brooms, the shell to make bowls, the meat to eat, the coconut water to drink, the coconut juice to cook with, the branches to make roofing.”

This reliance on the natural environment is still strong in Chole but has decreased significantly in recent years as the culture of Chole seems to have come to a cross roads. In 1990 the Tanzanian government designated Chole for development and today it is home to a new primary school, kindergarten, and hospital, and a socially and ecologically responsible tourist hotel. English language classes are being offered, health care has been

improved; the villagers are meeting and interacting with tourists from all over the world and finding a new way to live at the same time.

The hotel was opened to the public in 2000 and a significant segment of the younger population has found work there. Stores selling cookies, sodas, and bottled water are becoming more and more common as tourists' numbers increase. Plans have been made for a new backpacker camp as people try to capitalize on their islands imminent popularity as a vacation spot. With this new wave of development, the village community has been faced with the new pressures, hardships, and benefits that come with tourism.

On top of economic changes the village is undergoing idealistic changes as well. Many of the other young men of the village have opted out of the traditional village life, and have rejected the work of their fathers. Many now work as goods traders between the islands of Mafia and the Tanzanian mainland, luggage porters, or have left Chole all together to find a new kind of life elsewhere. Since 1992 the village children have been attending the new Chole primary school and many have emerged and will continue to emerge from school with new expectations and aspirations for the future.

It is important that in the face of all this sudden and drastic change the ways of the past are not forgotten. A harmony can be reached between the past and the present if efforts are made to keep them together, interacting with each other and learning from each other. My ISP was an attempt to do just that. Chole turned out to be the ideal location.

Maps



Methodology

I set off for Chole wanting to do one thing and one thing only: collect as many stories as was humanly possible in a two and a half week period of folklore collection. I tried to become a folklorist in every sense of the word. My aim was to gather as many different kinds of stories about as many different subjects as I could. I wanted to try to understand the people through the stories they tell and find out about their relationship to their environment while doing so. To achieve this goal I required a very simple methodology. I would wake up and make sure that I had the following things in my backpack: my tape recorder, all three of my microphones (two of which broke in the first week), a sufficient supply of audio cassettes, a sufficient supply of 200 speed film, a sufficient supply of double A batteries for my tape recorder, a sufficient supply of single A batteries for my microphones, a Swahili dictionary, my ISP journal, two pens, a bottle of water, a pack of cigarettes for the storytellers who required cigarettes in return for stories, and enough money to buy a couple of packs of biscuttis for lunch.

Once I was satisfied that I had all of these things in my back pack I would begin to wander the village paths telling people who I was, what I was doing, and asking them if they had any stories to tell. If they had a story to tell I would show them my tape recorder and tell them what I would do with the story that they were about to tell me (record it, transcribe it, translate it, and eventually make up a Folklore of Chole booklet [“complete with pictures, even yours”]). I would ask the necessary questions to fill out the following:

Storyteller: (full name, age, job, place of birth, other interesting personal facts)

Story Title:

Story type: (etiological myth, trickster tale, moral tale, quest tale)

Date / time:

Place: (where it was told, front porch, under a tree, etc.)

Audience: (how many people)

Performance: (in Swahili, length of performance)

Tape data: (Tape #, side A, number – on side A, story # of total, tape time (000–201))

I would then listen to, and record the story. After the story had been told I would usually conduct a very informal interview asking things like:

What is the meaning/moral of this story? (not because I hadn't understood, but because I thought that it would be good to know why the storyteller thought that this particular story was important).

What do you think that stories can do / why are stories important?

How can stories influence the way which people travel through life?

Do you tell stories to other people?

Where did you hear this story or other stories when you were a child?

Who tells stories?

Are there different kinds of stories?

Do you have any more stories? Will you tell me them? (if yes) When should I come back?

Then I would thank them very much and would generally go back out walking the paths to repeat this line of questioning until I got hungry or thirsty and then go eat or drink.

After eating or drinking I would go out and begin it all again.

After the first few days of wandering and asking everyone I saw about stories I started to find out, through word of mouth and dumb luck, who the storytellers of the village were and began to set up daily interviews with them. I would still wander looking for new storytellers but there were five men and one woman whom I would go to almost daily for stories at prearranged times. These prearranged meetings proved to be marvelous because the village children would get wind of one and show up and it would turn into a very large and wonderful storytelling session. I took stories wherever I could get them. Some interviews and storytellings occurred in one on one settings, with just me and the teller and my tape recorder, others with groups of adults on front stoops, others over plates of beans and rice in tiny restaurants, others at family gatherings, still others standing on dirt paths with a crowd of interested passers by, and even one on the back of a moving bicycle. I would also ask permission to take pictures during the storytelling sessions, a request that was never denied. I was very careful about when and how to take pictures without interrupting the telling of the story, but of course there were several instances where I did just that.

The village children proved to be an invaluable resource. They would lead me around and run screaming to all of the village wazee asking them for a story and making my job extremely easy. I would continue to gather stories until the last willing storyteller

had told his or her story for the day (this was usually about six o'clock pm due to Ramadan and the hunger of the storytellers). Most of the stories were collected during the day and at my request, as I discovered Chole to be a village without a thriving culture of storytelling. The stories were there and were wonderful but the storytelling sessions were usually arranged by myself, and would not have taken place had I not been there.

After the stories had been told I would go back to my tent and begin to translate them. Translation was a major challenge. I had no translator and was relying on my eleven months of Swahili experience to pull me through the translations. After much debating, I decided to attempt for word for word translations rather than brief overviews of each story. I decided that once I had the stories fully translated, word for word, then I could edit if I needed to. I also felt that I would be doing a disservice to the richness of the tales if I summarized them into my own words. There is no way to capture the oral tradition on paper, but a word for word written translation with photographs seems to be the closest that one can come. A majority of the stories had been taped so I would listen to them on my Walkman and stop after every sentence to write it down. It was tedious, and I was very dependent on my dictionary, but I am very happy with my translations.

This was my bare bones day-to-day methodology in the field. My short term goal was to write a paper on the environmental folklore of Chole but I figured that the more stories I got the better off I would be so I asked for any sort of stories and taped everything. This is not to say that I did not focus on environmental folklore. I, in fact, on numerous occasions, asked people for stories specifically related to Chole, or the animals of Chole, or the ocean, or the fruit bats, but it turned out that almost all of the stories that were told had an effect on Chole and its environment so I stopped asking and I don't feel that it made a difference.

In addition to story collection I would also informally interview people about Chole history, their environmental perceptions, environmental uses, attitudes towards specific animals and views on storytelling as a means of environmental conservation, in an attempt to further understand what the villagers understand their place in their environment to be.

Despite its informality, my methodology worked very well for they type of project that I wanted to do. If one is willing to make a fool of himself in front of a

village, drastically improve his or her Swahili, spend hours upon hours sweating in the hot sun while being followed around and tugged on by screaming children before returning home to stick plastic in your ears and begin tedious translations, and try to remember hundreds upon hundreds of Swahili names so as not to offend, then this informal brand of methodology will suit you perfectly. If not then I wouldn't recommend it.

Results

In two and a half weeks of story collection on Chole Island I listened to one hundred and nineteen stories from twenty-one different storytellers in forty-nine storytelling sessions. The average storytelling session drew an audience of seven people including myself, and lasted for over an hour. Story lengths varied from three minutes to eighty-six minutes. Storytellers ranged in age from 12 to 85 years old. One hundred and one of these stories were audio recorded onto eighteen audiocassettes (Cassettes 0 – 17, Chole series, November 2001) and now comprise over twenty-three hours of tape. Of the one hundred and nineteen, I have been able to translate twenty eight of these stories, which now make up appendices A, B, C, and D. Appendix A contains the etiological myths. Appendix B contains the moral tales. Appendix C contains the trickster tales. Appendix D contains the adventure / quest tales. When possible these stories were listened to repeatedly and were translated as precisely as I could translate them, which has resulted in a nearly word for word translation in many cases. Others, due to tape recorder malfunction, or my own idiocy (forgetting to plug in the microphone, etc) have not been taped and therefore have been written from what my admittedly less than reliable memory can remember. Still others have been significantly altered by a combination of my insufficient grasp of the Swahili language and the fact that many of my storytellers were toothless. Nearly all of the stories' titles were the creation of the tellers themselves and in only a few cases have I titled the story myself (these instances are noted with a * next to the title). I was able to spend over eighty hours on story collection and fifty hours on translation.

In addition to stories, I collected eighteen *mafunzo* from three different individuals. Seven of the eighteen were audio recorded. Ten of these eighteen *mafunzo* make up appendix E. Five environmental histories, and numerous perspectives on

storytelling were collected, taped and translated as well and are interspersed throughout the paper. All of the translations have been done solely by me, a person with less than a year of Kiswahili training, and are therefore subject to all of the general flaws of translation (incompatibility of languages, colloquialisms, etc.), further compounded by inexperience and sub-par language skills. This being said I stand by my translations and feel that many of them do justice to their original tellings. The remaining eighty or so as of yet untranslated stories will be transcribed and translated in the future.

Discussion

Hadithi za Uongo : The Storytelling Tradition of Chole Mjini

Hadithi, hadithi

Story, story

- Chole Storyteller's announcement of intent to begin a story

Lete hadithi bring us a story

Utamu kolea enhance the sweetness

-The Chole children's call for stories

My first morning on Chole I woke up at sunrise and set off with my a tightly packed backpack, full with tape recorder, tape player, camera, all 18 of my tapes, five rolls of film, six packs of batteries, one bottle of water, three microphones, two pens, and my isp journal. I wandered and wandered, half aware of what I was doing, wondering if I'd find stories, and, if I would, what they would be about. At the outset of my project the prospect of my finding many stories looked grim. For the first couple of days, many of the village elders of Chole were reluctant to tell these "*hadithi za uongo*," "stories of lies" as they are called by almost everyone on Chole. "In the past," Abdullah Kimbao told me,

it was understood by everyone that these were 'stories of lies' but that underneath these lies there was truth, there were instructions for life; but now it is different. If a child hears a story like this and goes to tell his father; his father will hit him or tell him, 'don't believe those stories of the past like these!' Now, they think that these stories don't work anymore. They think that the only stories that work are the ones that the teachers teach in schools. No one wants to listen to these stories of lies anymore. They don't see the truth inside of them.

Sentiments nearly identical to this one were expressed to me numerous times by numerous different storytellers who felt that the tradition of storytelling was now being

thrown to the wayside in the wake of the recently built kindergarten, and primary school. The first couple of days were discouraging at best as I listened to rather emotionless stories in one on one settings while children ran in and out of the room screaming with storytellers looking at me as if to say I told you so.

However, after those first two days, the word had been pretty much spread throughout the village that a strange man with a tape recorder was wandering the paths looking for stories. I was soon found by a giggling and screaming band of village children who took me by the hand and lead me to storytellers yelling “*Hadithi njoo! Uongo njoo! Utamu kolea!*” or simply shrieking “*hadithi, hadithi, hadithi, hadithi.*” They would argue about which storyteller to take me to, and which stories to ask to hear when we got there. They would lead me to this man or that woman and call for a story. If this man or woman consented, we would all sit down wherever we could and listen to this storyteller unwrap a fantasy before our eyes. I know that this is supposed to be a scientific paper but these storytelling sessions can only be described as magical. The children would stare wide-eyed listening transfixed to the stories, giggling and making sounds of excitement. Great stomping dancing songs would break out in the middle of the stories. All would rise and start singing along with the entranced storyteller. The children knew the songs.

It was clear that these children had not been as deaf to the stories as many of the village elders had believed. In fact, in some cases, when a storyteller was at a loss for a story a tiny voice would shoot up from the audience suggesting “Sultani Paka” or “Punda Wadobie” and the storyteller would commence. It was then that I knew that I hadn’t made a mistake. These children were as hungry for stories as I was, and it was clear that whatever stories they had heard in the past had made a lasting impression on them. They would even tell stories to each other although they would usually shyly refuse if I asked them to tell them to me. But the fact remained that these children knew the stories. This was a tremendous surprise in a village where I had been told

In the past the whole village would come together for stories. All the people came...but now, sometimes after dinner I will tell a story to my family, to these kids, but it is now, that they don’t want to listen. They go off and don’t listen. They laugh and mess around. These days they don’t want to listen to stories.

The truth was that these children knew the stories inside and out. They had heard them, remembered them, and undoubtedly been influenced by them. After two days of dejection I had been delivered, I had been saved by a merry band of children who had put the storytelling bug into their grandparents. When these children and I would show up at a doorstep we would be greeted with a smile and an announcement: “*Hadithi, Hadithi*” they would call. “*Hadithi njoo! Utamu kolea!*” could have been heard throughout the compound.

Some of the wazee even began to make lists of stories to tell me. Whenever they would think of another one they would write it down. The next time they saw me they would show me a piece of paper and ask me if I had collected “*Hadithi ya Mfalme wa Kunguru*” or “*Nuru*” with looks of expectant pride on their faces.

Where once the village elders had said, when asked about stories, “*Hamna*” (“there are none”), they now began to say “*zipo*” (“Yes, they are here”). If I had really come to an island with a dying storytelling tradition, then it was a changed place by the end of my two and a half week stay. The people Chole have an amazingly rich storytelling tradition, a tradition with tremendous influence and appeal.

The stories people tell

“There are different stories. There are stories of cleverness, there are stories for children like Mafunzo or Paukwa – Pakawa animal stories, there are stories to teach people good manners, there are stories that teach people how to become big. There are simple children’s stories to teach them to listen to their parents, and then there are these adult stories, these long stories about kings and travels which can teach you everything about life.”

-Mzee Abdullah Nassoro

There are three basic types of stories. There are myths, epics, and tales. Myths are stories that seek to explain the natural world. They take place at a time outside of the time and space that we know. They occur in “myth time”, a time when animals could speak to people and people could communicate with gods, a time when the world was yet to take its present shape; a time when monkeys lived in the ocean and people could climb to heaven on spider webs. In myths there is often a differentiation between people and humans. All creatures are called people, and humans are a subset of people just as slugs are. It is emphasized that all these “people” have yet to be differentiated from each other or come into their present niches. Myths often involve gods or goddesses, creators

and creation. There are etiological myths, which seek to explain the origins of natural phenomenon, and the existence of certain environmental realities. They aim to explain the same types of things that science and religion attempt to teach: Where did the world come from? How were human beings made? How was this island formed? Why is the Paradise flycatcher's tail so long? Why are a hyena's hind legs so short? Myths like these were commonly heard on Chole.

Epics are stories of heroes and adventure where the hero comes to carry on his back the fate of an entire country or world. These are stories like The Odyssey or Sundiata and are generally extremely long, with tellings usually lasting for days, weeks, months, or even years. On Chole I heard no epics so I will not go further to define them.

Tales are the stories of everyman and everywoman. They take place in real time in the world of time and space that we inhabit. Humans, animals, and gods can no longer intermingle, although animals can talk and gods can intervene. There are adventure tales dealing with natural quests that play themselves out in both natural and supernatural environments. The difference between adventure tales and epics is that the fate of something larger than himself does not lie upon the hero's shoulders. Tales can have mythic fantasy elements but deal with the exploits of a person similar to ourselves who normally resides in a world much like our own. Fantasy elements in tales almost always can be seen as metaphors. Tales may or may not have to do with heroism or adventure. There are moral tales that are told to imbue their listeners with some ancient wisdom or moral ethic. There are also trickster tales; these are tales of tricks and cleverness, tales of deception and ingenuity. Tales and myths often intertwine and the profane trickster stealing bananas from the hyena can become a divine trickster and create the sun and the moon. The boundaries are not uncrossable and elements from each type of tale and myth commonly come together and swirl. There are trickster tales with etiological endings and adventure quests with moral endings. The categories like the stories themselves are fluid; they just serve as a basis for understanding basic types of stories.

All of the Chole stories are called "*Hadithi za Uwongo*" or "Stories of lies," by the villagers and are then further demarcated into four basic categories. There are what the storytellers call "animal stories" which are etiological myths. They consist of stories like "The Birds Save the Animals of Chole" and "Shark and Dugong" which seek to

explain why the world is the way it is. There are “stories of cleverness” or trickster tales. In the Chole tradition these tales revolve around two characters: Abu Nuwasi, and the hare, and usually involve other animals. These two tricksters are infinitely wise and clever; they are ruthless and ingenious. They constantly take advantage of people and trick them into serving their purposes. There are “moral stories,” or moral tales such as “The King of the Crows,” which is told to teach children to respect the wisdom of their parents and the “Plover and Reef Heron” is told to instill a sense of generosity in its listeners. And finally, there are “adventure/travel stories” or adventure/quest tales. These are the long stories of kings and heroes, men and women on quests for some new understanding, some new mode of life. They are stories such as “Bwana Hairudiki,” and “The Youngest Daughter and Sisters and her Parents” Within them lie lessons about how to come from one state of being into another, how to break with ones childhood past, and how to travel through life.

Aside from stories there are other pieces of oral wisdom passed down from generation to generation in Chole. There are *mafunzo* a word that literally translates into “teachings”. It seemed that every villager had his or her own definition of *mafunzo*, but they were explained to me by the village kindergarten teacher, Johari Rajabu, most clearly as “short teachings of the past...untruths full of truth...usually used by parents to keep their kids from doing bad things.” They are short warnings or cautions, usually to small children, about why or why not to do certain things. They play upon the fears and hopes of their listeners in order to keep children from doing one thing or another.

There are also *vitendawili*, which serve the same purpose as riddles do in English. They are also called *chemshabongo* or brainboilers. They are short phrases asked to cause thought and discussion.

The stories, tales, myths, teachings, and ideas cannot be traced back to a single origin or source. They are the result of thousands of years of history, and countless cultural mixings. Like all stories, these seem to be as old as time itself, and parallel stories can be found in every corner of the world. This being said, even though these stories might not have originated in Chole, they have been molded into something distinctly Cholean, have been tweaked and tinged to serve the needs and become relevant to the lives of the people and environment of Chole. Regardless of where they came

from, these stories now play a major role in the decisions, attitudes, and day-to-day actions of the people of Chole.

What Stories can do

Stories teach many things. They teach children why not to eat sugar on the way home from the store. They teach why not to throw garbage in the ocean. They teach why not to sit in the sun for a long period of time. They teach why not to hurt people. They teach why not to cut down big trees like mango trees and baobabs. They teach good manners. They teach about life. They teach everything, stories teach everything.

-Joahri Rajabu 30, Chole kindergarten teacher

Until 1992 Chole Mjini was a village without a primary school, and, up until even more recently, without a kindergarten. To go to school before this, the children of Chole had to walk across the intertidal zone at low tide to attend the Juani primary school, which suffers from lack of faculty and insufficient resources. Many children of Chole simply did not attend school until the very recent past. Clearly, before very recently nearly all early age learning was completely informal. What education children had access to was to be gotten in the home from their family members, and was often transmitted through oral tales. “These stories can truly teach children many things about life,” Bi Nimadi Moussa remembers,

every night we would listen to stories, when grandmother would return home from farming we would all sit down on our butts like this, on mats like this, and she would talk and tell stories. We would hear these stories that I am telling to you now...then after eating and resting a little bit she would come back and tell more. Every day she would tell stories. She would tell them over and over...this is how we learned in the past.

The myths, tales, *mafunzo*, and *vitendawili* of Chole compose the accumulated wisdom of generations upon generations of people and have been used as teaching devices since their first tellings.

People use stories not only to teach but to entertain as well. Not that these things must be separate, on the contrary, the story that teaches the most will be the one which can keep the listeners interested and stay with them in their memories long after the end of the telling. As a matter of fact, that is the exact reason for stories in the first place. Telling a child that sharing his food is a nice thing to do versus telling a child the story of “The Hyena Who Lost His Skin” is the difference between forgetting and remembering.

Stories give the messages which they carry within them a memorable and wonderful wrapping. A story is the carrier of the message; its job is to deliver the message in a digestible and pleasing fashion.

A people's relationship to their environment both shapes and is shaped by the stories that they tell. Stories can explain how the environment came to be the way it is just as environmental features can dictate the kinds of stories which come into being. A certain common feature of a given environment, such as a well in the Chole landscape, can become a significant motif in a storytelling tradition, such as the well motif in the stories of Chole. Stories can enhance an area with an element of mystery, just as a unique geographic area can prompt a story to be told concerning it. A story can influence the way that people treat their environment just as the way that people wish to treat their environment can influence a story.

Stories can teach histories, social lessons, moral ethics, and acceptable environmental practices while thrilling their listeners with fantasy. They teach their listeners what is expected of them how to travel through their world. They provide people with rules to live by which in turn shape their lifestyle and shape the way they treat and utilize their environment. I will now explore the ways in which the stories of Chole explain, enhance and influence Chole's environment.

The Chole Backdrop

"Then, in the past it happened here, on Chole..."

-beginning of "The King of the Crows" by Issa Ally

The landscape of Chole plays a major role in every story that has been included in this collection. An overwhelming majority of the stories that I heard on Chole used Chole as their backdrop. These stories are populated by the animals of Chole, and surrounded by the physical features of Chole, and as a result, teach lessons specific to Chole. The characters live "right over there, near Johari's house" or "way over there, on Juani island," or are trapped "in that well, that well right here." The characters cultivate bananas and cassava, eat taambi and maharage, and drink chai. They go fishing in ngalawas, wear kangas, and suffer through rainy seasons just like their tellers. All of the characters are Swahili, they speak Swahili, and live in or near Chole. It is nearly

impossible to trace these stories back to their origins but they need not be traced back. These stories are the result of diffusion from the furthest reaches of the globe, yet have been customized for an exclusively Cholean audience, and teach distinctly Cholean lessons. As they are now, they have been synthesized into Cholean stories, and, as a result, because of their familiar mannerisms and characteristics and surroundings, the people who hear of these characters and tales are able to relate to, sympathize with, and learn from them. These are truly the stories of Chole, they speak directly to the Chole people in a language they can understand and reside in their midst. It is for this reason that these stories can be so effective in teaching. They were constructed around a place, a place that they were custom-made for, a place they continue to shape and be shaped by.

The role of Myths in Chole - stories as a means of explaining natural phenomenon

“He never went back in the water again”

-Ending of “Shark and Monkey” by Ali Sikubali

Etiological myths are among the most commonly told stories on Chole Island. Nine of these myths comprise appendix A. They are stories, usually involving animals in the Chole tradition, which seek to explain why the natural environment is the way that is – why its creatures act the way they do, why it looks like it looks, and why it works like it works. They are not looked upon as being “true” but rather they are used to enhance the environment with a mythical element and also to teach people about certain environmental realities without relying on science or religion. They take concrete environmental observations and build a story around them.

“This story [Shark and Dugong] is not true, people don’t believe it...it just helps fishermen remember that where there is a dugong there is a shark near by, so that they can be aware and catch it,” says Ali Sikuabli of the etiological myth which he told me, “People don’t know why they are seen together, so they make up a story to explain it.” This story tells of the failed marriage of the shark and dugong and explains the scarcity of Dugongs and their close association with sharks.

There are simple etiological myths like “Hyena, Monitor Lizard and Chicken” which seeks to explain why monitor lizards eat chickens, and why hyenas don’t inhabit Chole, but then there are etiological myths that can truly shape peoples views and

environmental practices. “The Shark and the Ray” is an ingenious myth that not only shapes Chole-area fishing practices, but also gives people a reliable and easy way to remember the fluctuation between high tide and low tide. The shark and manta ray’s constant attempts to gain a step up on their prey plays itself out as an explanation of the complex relationship between the moon and the tides. These fish set out to hunt later and later so the prey fish will be surprised by their arrival every day, so they can’t time their arrival by the position of the sun. Their departure signals the coming of high tide because their quickly swimming tails push the water back towards the shore, and consequently, at high tide these large fish are easily available to fisherman farther out to sea, beyond what the people of Chole call Korongo Island. I was told that this myth was and is used to teach young fishermen about the tides and location of various big fishes. This kind of myth, regardless of its scientific impossibility or inaccuracy, carries an invaluable environmental lesson to its listeners.

In addition to these, I have collected etiological myths that seek to explain the formation of Chole island, the reason for the existence of present composition of flora and fauna on Chole, and the origin of land dwelling monkeys. The mere existence of such stories is evidence that the people of Chole pay close attention to their environment and its features, creatures, and cycles.

The moral lessons of Chole folklore and their effect on environmental attitudes and practices.

Most every story in the Chole tradition that I heard carries with it a strong moral lesson, which, in turn, instills its listeners with an attitude that will shape their treatment of their environment. These stories can shape personal beliefs, which in turn shape environmental conservation and utilization. Stories like “The King of Juani, the King of Chole, and the Sticks of Every Color” and “Hermaphrodite Child and Fruit Bat” teach acceptance of not only all people, but of all forms of life. In the former the birds are seen as the most reasonable of advisors to the King of Chole. While the people preach war, difference, and racial inequality, the birds urge peace, reconciliation, and acceptance. The king listens to the birds and creates a peaceful and harmonious environment of “all shapes sizes and colors.” It is stressed that all life forms are “people,” that Choleans,

Juanians, and birds are all “people” and should share the same liberties and freedoms and live in harmony. “Hermaphrodite Child and Bat,” similarly, teaches acceptance of difference and diversity in the creation of a harmonious environment. It stresses the need for all beings to live together without harming each other unnecessarily. The story turns on the idea that all beings can benefit and learn from each other, and therefore, any loss of diversity would be detrimental towards their situation within their environment.

Stories like the “Pole Pole Bird (version 2),” “The Craftsman of People,” and “The Chameleon and the Green Dove” teach the importance of honesty and staying within natural and societal constraints. When the father kills his newborn son in “The Pole Pole Bird” it represents a split from his society and from nature. He has stepped out of the bounds of his society and his nature and done something completely impermissible. The singing bird and subsequent singing dead child can be seen not only as extensions of his conscious, but as extensions of the natural world and his society, punishing him and eventually killing him for rejecting their laws; namely: a father does not kill his child. The craftsman in “The Craftsman on People” attempts to usurp the power of God and nature by dishonestly claiming ability to create people. When his dishonesty is discovered he too is killed for his crime. In “The Chameleon and the Green Dove” the animals that cooperate with the majority are saved from the devouring fire by their societal ties and allegiances. Those who attempt to go out on their own and act against the consensus, the chameleon and the green dove, are “charred.”

These stories reinforce natural and societal constraints and stress punishment for those who disregard them. They stress allegiance to community and remaining within one’s means. These stories reveal Chole’s dedication to cooperation, consensus, and reason. It is these kind of stories, which, if listened to and taken to heart could prevent things like the coral dynamiting, and poisoning which devastated local coral reefs in the early 1990’s. Local fishermen are quick to condemn actions such as the recent dynamiting. “These people have no sense,” said Saidi Mshangama, “they have killed all of the fish. They only thought of themselves but didn’t think of what would happen the next day. The fish still are less than they were before the bombing.” Many people suggested the strictest punishments for any fellow citizens, such as these coral dynamiters or poisoners, who decide to do something impermissible in and detrimental to their

society or their natural environment. The inhabitants of Chole see the environment as a thing to be utilized but not destroyed. Anyone within this society who thinks otherwise is out of joint with his society and might end up like the chameleon.

Generosity and kindness to ones neighbors is a common theme. The moral of universal sharing in “Reef Heron and Sandpiper” gets played out in the real time communal farming of some of the Chole villagers. Some villagers have worked out a trading network whereby one person is responsible for growing cassava and evenly distributing it between the other members of the cooperative and someone else is responsible for potatoes, and so on.

Strong family ties and respect for elders is another important lesson stressed in the stories of Chole. “The King of the Crows” which has not been fully translated and so has not been included in the appendix, stresses the importance of the wisdom of the aged. All of the young crows of the town decide to kill their parents except one crow who hides his father away. These crows flounder without the guidance of their elders and many die of starvation. They cannot figure out a way to get from Chole to the Tanzanian mainland to get food and many of them die trying to brave the journey until the lone remaining elder crow emerges and teaches them to fly high up in the air and then glide down rather than try to fly straight across.” This wisdom saves the society and the crows learn the importance of their elders. In “The Youngest Daughter,” after having been abandoned by her parents at the outset, the youngest daughter realizes the strength of family ties and blood relationships and in the end accepts her parents into her kingdom and forgives them for their mistake. Although this can be seen on a completely metaphoric level as the main character’s reintegration into the life of the family, or reconciliation with her past, it can also be interpreted literally as stressing the importance of healthy parent child relationships regardless of past disputes, and unconditional respect for elders. In a society where land is passed down through family lines and inheritances it is no wonder that strong family ties and respect for elders is such a central theme. These stories help to teach their listeners the importance of maintaining strong family ties as a means of ensuring their future success and access to land.

The Roles of Animals and places in Chole stories and their effects on people's attitudes towards them.

The overwhelming majority of characters in the Chole stories are animals. These animals are completely personified – they talk, they farm, they cry, they get married, and they pray. The fantasy environments of the stories mirror the real time environment of Chole. Wells, coastlines, baobab trees, and ancient ruins appear in both landscapes. Most obviously, these stories serve to familiarize their listeners to their animal neighbors as well as their environmental surroundings. They give people something to associate various animals and places with and imbued the animals with fantasy personalities and exploits, and places with auras of unreality, and as a result, they can do very much to bias their listeners either towards or against certain animals or places.

The folklore of the sea - how stories teach and shape peoples interactions with the sea.

...He went to the ocean everyday, and every day he got one fish...this way, every day...

-Beginning of "The Fisherman and the Jinni Inside of the Bottle" by Issa Ally

Not surprisingly, as Chole is an extremely small island with a landscape dominated by water and heavily populated by fisherman, the sea and its inhabitants are a major motif in the Chole Storytelling tradition. Fishermen are common main characters and the sea is a common setting. The importance of the sea to the villagers of Chole is impossible to overestimate. Villagers rely on the sea for food, and income. People fish, and seaweed farm, build boats, and sail boats. The ocean provides them with their means of survival. Their treatment of the sea is incredibly important to the future of their environment. The ocean surrounding Chole is filled with very biodiverse plant and animal life. It is the home to such endangered species as Dugongs, and Sea turtles. By analyzing their stories one can gain an insight into their environmental attitudes towards their main resource.

The sea takes on many roles in these stories. In "Shark and Monkey" it is seen as the origin of all life. It is where "all of the animals" began their existences, and only after differentiation did some animals emerge from the sea and venture forth onto land. It is a danger in other stories. In "The Animals of Chole, it is that which drowns the large

animals and gives Chole its current animal composition. Most commonly it is a provider. It provides many characters, such as the six sisters in “The Youngest Daughter” and the fisherman in “The Fisherman and the Jinni Inside of the Bottle” with their livelihoods and their food.

At least eleven of the stories that I collected begin with a variation of this line: “There was a fisherman. His job was to fish. Every day he would go out to the ocean and catch one fish...” in each story that I have heard the sea is seen as a sort of plentiful and eternal cornucopia of offerings. It only gives one fish per day but in storytelling terms this one fish is a means of survival. I believe that stories like these promote a detrimental view of the sea as an undepletable provider, a thing out of which this fisherman will be able to continue this daily fish forever and ever no matter what. It is understood that this fisherman would be able to go on doing this for the rest of his life if something else would not have altered his destiny.

In numerous interviews, as I suspected after hearing the stories, it was seen as unquestionable by many interviewees that the sea was a thing which was given to human beings for the purpose of extraction. Out of seven fishermen asked their views on dugong and turtle catching for food or sale, five of them responded enthusiastically mentioning the wonderful taste of dugong meat or the high price a turtle shell could fetch for them. One refused to comment, and the other said that he had never been lucky enough to catch either species. These same fishermen were outraged by the coral reef dynamiting and poisoning of the recent past, but saw the killing of endangered species as a stroke of luck. It became clear to both through the lessons of the stories, and from the words of the fishermen that many people on Chole see the sea as a thing to be exploited for all it's worth as long as that exploitation didn't completely destroy the ecosystem and wipe out the supply of fish.

Folklore as anti-conservation - more negative effects of stories on environmental conservation

All he does, this human, is eat things and kill things. He takes my eggs; he eats them. He takes my meat and eats it. He cuts down trees and plucks my feathers. He chops my head off. He's gonna kill me soon..."

-Chicken in "Human Cow Goat and Chicken" by Abdullah Nassoro

The most obvious example of folklore that negatively influences the treatment of a specific animal can be seen in the case of the snake. Invariably, in the tales that I heard, the snake takes on the role of the villain. In the "50 to go and 50 to Return" the snake is an unnatural abomination, created out of spilled blood, an evil seducer, adulterer, and murderer. In "Human Cow Goat and Chicken" the snake takes the parallel role to the evil man-eating jinni in 'the Fisherman and the Jinni inside the Bottle,' being saved by the human but then turning on him and attempting to eat him. In these tales the snake is a thing to be killed at all costs. At the end of "Human, Goat, Cow and Chicken" the snake is put back into the well with no hope of escape but then is stoned to death by the title characters because it is understood that he is of an evil sort and will do these evil things again if given the chance. It is this kind of story that makes people loathsome of and hostile towards snakes, and causes the twenty five year old traveling-shoe-seller, whom I met on a path one day, to pick up a rock and hurl it at a snake more than twenty feet away – a snake posing absolutely no threat to anyone or anything. Every person interviewed about snakes either associated them with evil *shetani*, or expressed his or her hate for them in some other way shape or form. It is no wonder that many of the snakes of Chole have now moved into the tourist hotel's rock garden as a safe haven; many villagers proudly declared their intent to kill any and every snake on sight. The snake is just the most obvious example of stories biasing people against an animal.

The owl is another example of an animal hated and killed as a result of slanderous stories and folklore. The owl is said to be the bringer-of-death to the small children of Chole and is therefore universally hated on the island. The young children wear amulets and are bathed in herbs to be protected from the evil *degedege* (owl) spirit. These owls are killed whenever possible and their breastbones are used as *dawa* (traditional medicine) to be worn around the necks or wrists of young children. These stories bias people against animals for completely supernatural reasons. The unlucky creatures,

branded with evil reputations, are killed for no other reason than the stories people tell about them.

I have already mentioned the roles of fishes and the oceans in stories as inexhaustible resources put on earth for human consumption, but have not yet mentioned the similar role that livestock animals play in many of the stories. Most families on Chole own some sort of domestic animals that they use for either egg production or food. Chickens, guinea fowl, cows, and goats are the most common both in the landscape and in the stories. Like the many creatures of the ocean, these domestic animals are the slaughtered, butchered and eaten of the Chole stories, much like they are the slaughtered, butchered and eaten anywhere in the world.

The motifs of hunting and fishing pervade these stories just as they pervade the lives of the people of Chole. These people have been living off of their environment for years and years and have adopted or created stories which suit this lifestyle and allow for the continuation of a somewhat irresponsible degree of environmental exploitation.

Folklore as conservation – more positive effects of stories on environmental conservation.

Just as stories and folklore can bias people against certain animals, they can also bias people towards others. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen in the relationship of birds and people in both in the Chole stories and the Chole real time world. The birds of Chole are the recipients of a very fortunate characterization in the Chole stories. In “The Animals of Chole” the birds are the saviors of countless animals and plants. They are responsible for the survival of every living thing on Chole. They are often magical helpers, or advisors as they are in “The King Of Juani, The King of Chole and the Sticks of Every Color,” a story in which their advice results in eternal peace happiness and equality. Their beautiful songs are commented upon and appreciated in “The Animals and the Well” just as they are by many of the Chole villagers. They can serve as useful and wise message bearers as the goliath heron does in “Human Being: Give Him Two and He’ll Get Drunk.” Birds are studied so as to be trapped by young boys on Chole, but are generally appreciated and liked by the people of Chole. They seem to notice their bird neighbors more consciously than the other animals

of their landscape. Whereas they call all types and colors of snakes the generic term *nyoka*, nearly each of the more than 83 species of birds inhabiting Chole has its own individual name. Many people can identify them by their calls. Their amiability in the stories that people tell positively influences and is influenced by peoples' attitudes towards their place in the environment.

In "Human, Cow, Goat and Chicken" the human is put on trial for his crimes against his domestic livestock. The tables are turned and the animals get to play executioner to the human. His fate rests in their hands and he is held accountable for the mistreatment of these animals. It ends with the livestock saving the human from being eaten in return for better treatment. The human agrees and the story stresses the need for humans to treat their domestic animals humanely.

Just the fact that these animals are told stories about at all bodes well for their survival. These stories give these animals fantasy personalities and characteristics. They give humans things to associate these animals with and some sort of way of looking at them. After they have heard a story about an animal's adventures and charming personality he or she will undoubtedly feel somehow closer to or more familiar with this particular animal and might be less willing to mistreat it.

***Mafunzo* as Traditional Environmental Education in Chole - The use of *Mashetani* towards environmental conservation**

Mashetani have been described to me by Johari Rajabu as shape shifting supernatural beings that are, "always evil...totally bad luck. They can do bad things to your family, they can ruin your crops, they can poison your food; they can kill or eat your chickens. They can do anything. They follow you around and scare you. They are really dangerous." He went on to say that they can take the form of "anything...a lizard...with human hair or feet...a tree...a very white-skinned person walking towards you on a path who suddenly disappears...a bug or snake...a chilly section of air which suddenly makes you cold...[if you see one of these] then you know you've met a shetani." These *shetani* are believed to be "raised by certain people here on Chole." These *shetani*-makers "take sticks from different trees and soak them in...blood or spit, or pee, or beer, or seawater, or oils...sometimes they boil them and sometimes they just let them sit out in the sun.

Then they come back in seven days to see if the *shetani* is ready. If it is ready then they let it go and tell it where to go or who to find.” Chole residents nearly universally confirm the existence of these evil *mashetani* spirits and are truly frightened at the prospect of meeting one. These beliefs in *shetani* manifest themselves in many ways in Chole life.

Aside from the aforementioned medicinal amulets and herbal baths that are given to children toward off *mashetani*, there are special prayers that are said and rituals that are performed to prevent the coming of a *shetani* into ones life. *Waganga*, or traditional Swahili doctors, are hired to rid peoples homes and bodies of these *mashetani*. Recently, several village schoolchildren are said to have been possessed by evil *shetani* spirits that were loosed by those people of Chole who are opposed to the new ideas and ways of life that have been introduced by the primary school and *chekechea*. People are afraid to venture into certain areas called *sehemu za mashetani* (sections of the *mashetani*) which “people won’t go near for fear of being seen and followed by a *shetani* – the old cemetery, some of the other old ruins, specific trees – people won’t go near them because they are afraid of *mashetani*. It is said that the population of these *shetani* has greatly declined in the last fifty years or so “but they are still here,” assures Abdallah Kimbao.

It is clear that these *shetani* are greatly feared beings to be avoided at all costs. It is for precisely this reason that they can be used as a means of environmental conservation. People, especially children are so frightened of them that they will agree to do nearly anything to ensure that they don’t enter into their lives. Short teachings called *mafunzo* play a major role in early in home education of children of Chole. They are short warnings or cautions, usually to small children, about why or why not to do certain things. They play upon their listeners’ fears of *shetani*, in order to keep them from doing one thing or another. They are what Abdallah Kimbao calls

“lies full of truth...in the past these things worked completely. Grandmother would tell us that if we picked an unripe mango, then we would get a *shetani* because that is where they lived...It doesn’t matter if it is true or not. It teaches people good manners, keeps them from doing bad things, and keeps the environment clean and good...They used to say that if you threw garbage on the ground then you would get a *shetani* instead to fill your empty hand. We believed these things, and even those who didn’t believe them were to scared to disobey them...People, don’t believe them like they used to but they still do work.”

I found that *mafunzo* such as these are still being used effectively today, and many of them have been modified to meet current needs for environmental conservation. There are *mafunzo* which teach sea turtle conservation, responsible timber use, and kindness towards animals. They rely on the threat of supernatural possession to find validity but teach valuable lessons which might not be as convincing without these evil little beings lurking behind them.

Do these stories still work?

When asked this question, the majority of the Chole village elders answered with a straight, flat, and bitter “No.” The new village schools and the enticing ideas, games, stories, and songs introduced by them are seen to be overtaking the traditional stories of the children’s grandparents. It is a changing world and Chole is a rapidly changing place. Villagers now wait for dinner listening to Radio One and the World News of the Day rather than listening to stories of kings and ogres. They study English and Math rather than village history and family lines. However, this being said, the traditions of the past are not being completely forgotten in Chole, just modified. The kindergarten has begun to invite the village elders to come and tell stories to the children, teach village history and interact with the students. The progress is inevitable but steps have been taken to assure the survival of this vital and beautiful tradition of stories, and the children have been receptive to these meetings.

“They are here,” said Kasim Kimbao “– the stories are here - many of them. They are not gone. Never. People always think that children are not listening, but they are.” I had to agree. The fact was that these children knew the songs.

Conclusion

At the outset of my ISP I set out to discover the ways in which the stories people tell influence their attitudes and how these attitudes shape environmental conservation. After the first few days I just wanted to try to salvage what I could of a seemingly dying tradition of storytelling. By the end I was satisfied that I had come to a place and witnessed something incredible, I had watched the storytelling tradition of Chole be reborn before my eyes and collected some wonderful stories in the meantime. Although

my story collection was limited by time constraints and inadequate language / translation skills, I was able to find out several ways in which the stories of Chole work to explain, enhance, and influence the natural environment of Chole. They serve as explanations for the current geographical make up of the island and give their listeners a way to remember certain environmental realities. They give the land a fantasy element and imbued its creatures with personified characteristics that influence their treatment in the natural world. They reinforce or create certain existing moral ethics, which, in turn, affect people's lifestyles, and the way they interact with, and utilize their environment. They rely on fantasy and entertainment to deliver invaluable messages about the correct way in which to travel through the world. They can work to influence attitudes which can either help or hamper environmental conservation in various ways, and therefore are vital to take into account in any future conservation measures taken in the area.

Recommendations

To anyone interested in collecting storytelling as cultural preservation or for any other worthy reason: buy a Panasonic RX307 tape recorder, and a Radio Shack T102 microphone, and go somewhere, anywhere, asking for stories. At this moment, each of the hundred and nineteen stories that I heard on Chole along with countless others across the globe are being thrown out the window to make room for much less valuable things (TVs, movies, radios, magazines). Many storytelling traditions are fading quickly into the shadows as the too big world shrugs them off in its maniacal race towards progress and globalization.

Disclaimer: Be sure that is something that you truly want to do because it will be an awful lot of work, I repeat, an awful lot of work – much more work than can be squeezed into a one month ISP writing period. I would urge that the folklorist be committed to unfailing dedication as I found the life of a folklorist to be an incredibly difficult and frustrating one at times. Just keep on walking, keep on talking, and keep on taping. And for god's sake, after these people have been so kind as to share their stories with you, have the common decency to live up to the responsibility of giving the stories back to them in a form that is understandable to them.

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