

WATER OR WINE?

In Africa, they tell of a tribal chief who summoned his Tribal Council (1) - the wise men of the village – and said to them like this: “We have had a good year (2) – a splendid harvest, good health, we are at peace with our neighbours. I propose we celebrate. As my lands are the largest, I will provide the dancers, the drummers – and of course the storyteller (3) and food for the feast.”

The Councillors were all nods and smiles.

“But (4) – but I would like each and every one of you to provide a calabash (5) of your finest wine for the celebration.”

All the Councillors agreed, but on the way home, the youngest of the Councillors was thinking, “Aiyah! A calabash of my finest wine? That will be very expensive!” (6)

Suddenly he had an idea. He would fill his calabash with water from his well, for the wine would be poured into one great communal pot, and no one would know if he brought water instead of wine.

So on the morning of the feast, he rose early, filled his calabash at the well, then bathed and dressed himself in his finest gebela (7) and balancing the calabash on his head (8) went to the Chief’s compound, where he poured the “wine” into the great communal pot. (9)

All the Councillors enjoyed watching the dancing, the drumming - and of course, the storytelling! Then the servants brought the food, and wine from the great communal pot.

But when the youngest raised his cup to toast the Chief (10) he tasted (11) not wine... but water – *for each and every one of the Councillors had had the same idea*: that no one will notice if I bring water instead of wine.

And since that day, there has been a saying in Africa:
if you wish to drink wine, you must bring wine, also.



The story in your classroom

- (1) Sounds rather like *The Amazing Race*, a reference which often raises a smile
- (2) an opportunity to refer to any bad things that have happened in global or local news – no SARS, no floods, no bush fires...
- (3) Storytelling is still very much a part of the African communal tradition, and I never miss the opportunity to remind audiences of the art form's universal appeal.
- (4) "But" is a big word for storytellers as it always signals a change in the direction of the story. Hence the repetition here!
- (5) A calabash is a gourd – a seed pod that provides a strong, cheap, bio-degradable (!) container. They can be very large. I have a small one I pass around the audience as I tell.
- (6) I usually add "It's a very Singaporean story, really" – hence the aiyah! – which gets a big laugh, even though such a money face is universal
- (7) A long flowing robe.
- (8) I mime putting it on my head and holding it there with one hand as I sashay down the road!
- (9) repetition of key descriptive phrases is a storyteller's trait.
- (10) I mime sipping with anticipation
- (11) I sip again, puzzled.

Learning Points

A favourite story of mine, which I often use to illustrate

- a) how different people respond to stories in different ways
- b) to talk about participation. If you think you can sit in my class (workshop) and let everybody else do the thinking, responding – you'll walk away with only water.

If you ask your class "what does this story mean to you?", you'll get many answers! The most common responses I receive are:

- do unto others what you want them to do to you
- be honest
- cheats only cheat themselves.

Kids often surprise me with their insight. While conducting a workshop for all the first year classes at Kent Ridge Secondary School in 2013, one boy —Yen Kai – responded by saying the story was *about trust and responsibility*. When I pressed him, he explained: *A Councillor is an important position. I assume he was elected, or chosen by the Chief. But he betrayed the Chief. If I was the Chief, I'd fire him. In fact, I'd fire the entire Council! The Chief provided all the food, but they cheated on the drinks. So now, instead of being Councillors, important people, they're just poor, ordinary farmers, aren't they?*