Culture Sustainability through Storytelling:

A Study of Patricia Riley's "Wisteria" and "Damping Down the Road"

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Abstract

In the late 1980s, the United Nations introduced a comprehensive vision of sustainable development, encompassing economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental balance. However, the crucial role of culture within development has very often been overlooked. Contemporary insights emphasize that culture is integral to sustainable development. This paper, through an analysis of two short stories by Native American author Patricia Riley, sheds light on the significance of storytelling as a fundamental element of culture. It explores how these narratives emphasize the need to cultivate a culturally aware society and how 'storytelling' contributes to cultural preservation and identity. Focusing specifically on the Native American worldview, the article underlines the significance of storytelling as a dynamic tool that bridges cultural traditions with sustainable development, promoting cultural resilience, community well-being, and fostering awareness.

Keywords: *Sustainable Development, Storytelling, Culture, Native American*

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Introduction

Sustainable Development is increasingly becoming the preferred mode of development at the global and local levels. The concept of Sustainable Development is multi-faceted and is defined by the Brundtland Commission Report (1987) as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Anon, 2011). Sustainable development includes society, environment, culture and economy as a whole. It has emerged as a crucial issue that necessitates prompt action and reforms on the part of governments, businesses, and society as a whole (Silvester &Tirca, 2019). The word 'sustainability' is often used interchangeably with sustainable development (Ruggerio, 2021). Sustainability is frequently conceived of as a long-term goal (i.e., a more sustainable planet, sustainable business), whereas sustainable development refers to the various processes and methods that can lead to it (e.g., sustainable agriculture and forestry, sustainable production and consumption, good government, research and technology transfer, education and training).

Culture and Sustainable Development

The contribution of the cultural sector to the economy and sustainable development is particularly important. Culture can be a powerful driver for growth, with social, economic, and environmental implications for an entire community. Lifestyles, individual behaviour, consumer patterns, environmental stewardship beliefs, and our interactions with the natural world are all influenced by cultural variables. Non-monetary benefits of culture-led development include increased social inclusion and rootedness, resilience, innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship for individuals and communities, as well as the use of local resources, skills, and knowledge (UNESCO, 2012).

Culture can extend the scope of the present development debate and make development more relevant to people's needs. The most effective development interventions are those that respond to the cultural context, place, and community specificities, and promote a human-centered approach to development. Encouraging intercultural discussion, preventing disputes, and protecting minority groups' rights both within and between states can help achieve development goals. Culture helps to create vibrant cities and communities in which people may live, work, and play an important role in promoting social and economic well-being (Opaku, 2015). Culture, in this sense, aids development.

Our culture links the present to the past and the imagined future. Culture connects us in time, space, and community through creating meaning and value networks. Our culture describes how we tell our stories, comprehend ourselves, remember who we are, envisage who we want to be, rest, celebrate, dispute, raise our children, and build our own space. Our culture reflects our need to be happy, to belong, to survive, and to be creative (Sazonova, 2014). People's connections and attitudes toward the built and natural environments are framed by culture, which is a crucial component of the notion of sustainable development. Cultural sustainability looks at how to improve people's lives and leave a lasting legacy for future generations. If we want to give future generations the ability to meet their requirements, we cannot continue with our current approach toward resource exploitation. Cultural values impact society's way of life, and so have the power to bring about the mindset shifts required for long-term progress.

Cultural Preservation Through Storytelling

At the core of cultural preservation is the art of storytelling. Storytelling is a universal and timeless human practice that transcends geographical boundaries and ethnicities. In ethnic minority cultures across the world, storytelling takes on a particularly significant role (Kvam, 2012). In the context of Africa in the 80s, storytelling through different means was promoted for development reasons, " by means of storytelling, dance, drama, music, and songs people were encouraged to express themselves about problems in society. This included both mainstream and marginalized groups that did not usually take part in verbal discussions and express their opinions" (Kvam, 2012:44).

Storytelling serves as a vital conduit for preserving traditions, fostering cultural identity, and passing down invaluable knowledge. (Takashima, 2016) Fernandes- Llamazers and Cabeza (2017) highlight the importance of indigenous storytelling:

> Storytelling among IPs helps to forge a number of purposes, such as entertaining, passing down a repertoire of culturally built knowledge, maintaining a sense of community, and instilling moral values, all of which laid the groundwork for social collaboration. A key feature of indigenous storytelling is the intergenerational transmission of experience, allowing for human adaptation to different environments. Indigenous stories are made up of extremely complex, finely coded information on human subsistence and infused with dramatic elements that ensure their transmission, engaging the heart with the mind.

Indigenous tribes such as the Jalis/Griots of West Africa, the Shamans of Central Asia, and the T'boli people in the Philippines underscore the importance of storytelling among minority communities. These groups use storytelling as a versatile tool to safeguard their cultural legacy, intergenerational knowledge transfer, conflict resolution, and the reinforcement of communal bonds. For instance, for the T'boli, an indigenous group in the southern Philippines, oral tradition and storytelling are integral aspects of its cultural identity and heritage. Passed down orally from one generation to the next, these traditions recount narratives that contain the religious, cultural, spiritual, and ethical principles of the tribe. Among these narratives are legends such as "Lake Sebu" and "Dyali and Ukuy," folktales like "The Monkey and the Betel Bird" and "Ulem, the Rooster," and myths including the "Story of the Sky." These stories often focus on the creation of the world, the spiritual beings in it, and the importance of living in harmony with nature. According to Carlo Domingo Casinto (2002).

> …the recurring didactic teachings in the themes of T'boli's oral traditions are devotion, altruism, and deference. These teachings have facilitated the assimilation of faithfulness as a religious value, generosity as a human value and respect and obedience to authority as cultural values personified in their oral traditions. Ultimately, these "collective unconscious" values form the T'boli's worldview in terms of their cultural and religious practices and traditions. (300)

In Africa too, oral tradition plays an exceedingly significant role in cultural preservation. More specifically, among West African communities, such as the Mandinka, the Bambara, the Wolof, and other ethnic groups, "…there are storytellers and oral historians, called 'griots', who hold the social memory of the community" (Stephenson). They are the living

archives of their cultures, responsible for orally passing down historical accounts, family histories, and life lessons when written records are absent. Their storytelling, including music and praise-singing, celebrates their people's achievements and fosters cultural pride and a sense of belonging. As keepers and narrators of history, Griots are "…expected to remind people of their ancestry, of events, places, migrations and traditional values which are important for shaping collective identities." (Dorsch, 2004). Their wisdom and skill are held in such high esteem that these storytellers are often called to mediate disputes, resolve conflicts, and maintain peace.

Similarly, among indigenous communities in other parts of the world including, Asia and America, "…oral narrative – storytelling - is the natural teaching medium about skills, the environment, or survival." (Rankin et.al, 2006). In Central and North Asia, for example, the role of traditional storytellers, Shamans, is deeply intertwined with their spiritual duties. Shamans are revered figures within their communities, serving as spiritual guides, healers, and intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. They are known for their ability to connect with the spirit world to seek guidance, healing, and solutions to various problems. Their role as intermediaries with the spirit world is especially valuable in a region where spiritual beliefs and practices are deeply rooted in daily life. In fact, "…it may probably be said with safety that no other single professional class whose intellectual life is carried on without the aid of writing has extended its influence over so wide an area of the earth's surface as the shamans" (Chadwick, 1936). As storytellers, they use narratives to connect with spirits, conduct healing ceremonies, and provide guidance to their communities. Their stories often revolve around encounters with spirits, mythical creatures, and the mysteries of the natural world. Central Asian shamanism is a dynamic and evolving tradition, adapting to changing social and cultural landscapes. Despite challenges from modernization and external influences, shamans continue to play a significant role in the lives of Central Asian communities, providing spiritual guidance, healing, and cultural continuity. While some, such as Kazakhs in Kazakhstan have maintained more traditional forms of shamanism, others like the Buryats in Siberia and Uighurs in China have adapted their practices to coexist with other belief systems, such as Islam or Buddhism, due to historical, social, and cultural influences.

In terms of the Native American people who have always believed that "mankind depends on the other beings for life, and they depend on mankind to maintain the proper balance" (Hughes, 1983), the culture of storytelling has played a significant role in embedding their relationship with nature. In this respect, storytellers have been held in high esteem in Native American culture and considered educators who educate people "about the – roles of trees, the – roles of medicinal plants, and the – behaviors of animals and people when they speak about nature" (Schulhoff, 2010). They helped young people in recognising "…what plants might be utilized at what time of the year, how they could be utilized and what amount you could use at one time" and thereby develop a sense of how to "carry on with nature" (Saddam, W. A., and Wan Roselezam W. Ya., 2015). Moreover, storytelling carries the weight of resilience, offering a sense of continuity and strength to these groups who have had a long history of being subjugated, uprooted, and exploited. Native American stories often encompass tales of endurance, adaptability, and connection to the land. They provide a source of inspiration, reinforcing a sense of unity and pride within tribal communities. In the face of social and environmental challenges, storytelling fosters a collective spirit of re-

silience, equipping Native Americans with the tools to address contemporary issues while remaining grounded in their cultural foundations.

These examples of storytelling in minority communities highlight the versatile role of narrative discourse in cultural preservation, knowledge transmission, conflict resolution, and community cohesion. They underscore the essential function of oral traditions in preserving cultural identity and heritage among marginalized groups. However, as a consequence of enhanced globalisation and the impact of the media, the practice of storytelling and passing on of sagas and village folk tales from one generation to another is dwindling in the majority of indigenous cultures (Vorreiter, 2014), including Native America. Nonetheless, many contemporary Native American writers and poets such as Joy Jarjo, Paula Gunn Allen, and Patricia Riley have through their writings reiterated the importance of storytelling and underlined how culture has played a significant role in shaping the natives' relationship with nature. This paper attempts to study two such short stories, "Wisteria" and "Damping Down the Road" by Patricia Riley and analyse their significance vis-a-vis culture and sustainable development.

"Wisteria" and "Damping Down the Road"

In the introduction to the anthology, *Growing Up Native American* (2009), Patricia Riley emphasizes that as a child growing up in the second half of the twentieth century, she had never contemplated the difference between the life, and the reality she witnessed in her neighbourhood and the ones projected in the history and other books about Indians that she read in her school. It was only later, through various experiences and through her attempts to reclaim the native identity that she realised that both commonality and diversity lie at the heart of the experience of 'growing up Native American'. And, the question of what it means to grow up a Native American perhaps has innumerable answers. She examines, "Certainly there are as many stories. Stories of oppression and survival, of people who grew up surrounded by tradition, and people who did not. Stories of pressures of forced assimilation and stories of resistance, of heritage denied and of heritage reclaimed. A multiplicity of stories." (Riley, 2009). It is perhaps these stories that Riley believes are essentially significant to the Native American identity and worldview. Stories as her contemporary Joy Harjo suggests, "… create us. We create ourselves with stories. Stories that our parents tell us, that our grandparents tell us, or that our great-grandparents told us, stories that reverberate through the web." (Sweet Wong, Muller and Magdaleno, 2008). The significance that both stories and storytellers hold within the Native American culture and worldview also reverberates through the two stories that this paper analyses. The former being partly autobiographical is borrowed from a childhood incident while the latter is a fictional account of a family "torn by the opposing notions of Indianness" (Sweet Wong XVII).

In 'Wisteria', Riley's paternal grandmother is portrayed through the character of Eddie T. who is considered a 'heathen' by her daughter-in-law, Jessie. Both Eddie T. and Jessie had shared a rather calm relationship until the day the latter was attacked by flu. After the attack, there was suddenly a religious growth in Jessie wherein she had "converted to three-times-a-day Bible study and absolute churchgoing on a strict Sunday basis" (167). Therefore, now, Eddie.T who according to her daughter-in-law did not even pray to God and instead stood in the woods, "waving her hands about and calling on the sun and the moon and stars…" (168) is considered a threat for the sound development of her granddaughter,

Justine. However, despite Jessie's efforts to keep her daughter away from her mother-in-law, the two find great pleasure in each other's company, "Eddie T. always looked forward to Justine's visits. She enjoyed the little games they played together. They kept her on her toes and let her know that even though she was almost eighty-seven years old, she still had her wits about her" (168). And it is during one of these visits that Justine is told for the first time about the existence of the "little people." the *Yunvi Tsundi*. With immense excitement, her grandmother shows her the bush that the little people, the guardian spirits, had trampled when they had held one of their dances in her yard the previous night. Justine is initially reluctant to believe in what her grandmother showed but after Eddie T. narrates the stories from her childhood, Justine immediately develops a liking for the little people. She curiously enquires about everything her grandmother had known about these creatures that sang and danced in her yard. By the time Eddie T. finishes her stories, Justine had promised her grandmother to always remember the little people and just like her grandmother had she would fulfill all her duties towards them.

The story about the *Yunvi Tsundi* not only establishes Justine's belief in something which owing to her Christian mother's teachings she had grown up not believing in but also brings her in contact with her tradition, the tradition that her grandmother had always been proud of and for so long held intact. Unlike her mother, Justine's father, Tom had always believed in his mother's ability to instill faith in Justine about her people. As a young boy, Tom had listened to the "disparaging things his school teachers had said about his people and their ways" and as a result of which he had felt "ashamed of who he was and where he came from". He did not want his daughter to grow up the way he did and "he knew his mother had a lot to offer on this score" (167). And what Eddie T. offers to Justine-the story of the little people, on her last day is perhaps the most important lesson in bringing her closer to taking pride in a truth in which her people had always had conviction. For example, when Justine informs about her mother not believing in the existence of the little people, Eddie T. reasons,

> That's 'cuz they let them die inside their minds a long time ago, I expect. But there's always been little people livin' in these old woods since time immemorial. That's what the old folks told me when I was a girl and I know it's true. Sometimes late at night I could hear them singin' songs. They must have been dancin' back then, too. Those old-time Cherokees always said they was there. They called them the Yunwi Tsundi (170)

Through her grandmother's memories of the little people, Justine not only acquires a new identity, that is, her Cherokee identity but also a worldview that demands forging a relationship with nature. She promises Eddie T. to remember the little people and offer wisteria flowers to them once in a while to the little people. The identity she acquires is brilliantly portrayed through the symbolism of the quilts. The narrator informs that later that night when she was "safe at home, Justine stretched and snuggled, warm beneath the quilts her grandmother had given her" (171). The 'quilts' are the lessons and knowledge about her culture and her duties that her grandmother had enlightened her with which henceforth after her grandmother's death will continue to warm her.

Stories also shape the identity of yet another of Riley's characters, Nettie. In 'Damping the Road' Riley's fictional character like herself is also a 'mixed blood'. As a child, Nettie

loved the times when her Cherokee relatives would visit the family because "that meant it was a storytelling time. She'd curl up in her Grandma Mary's lap and listen quietly as all the aunts and uncles told their favourite stories, filling the air around her with words and laughter" (158). She would always look forward to these sessions but the joys of the storytelling sessions unfortunately end when Nettie is sent away to a Catholic boarding school. However, despite the loneliness she encounters in the new surroundings of her school these stories continue to give her solace. "She thought about the stories, and how it was when the family was all together" (158) to console herself against the solitude and interestingly enough, with time it was these stories that allowed her to forge a friendship with the other girls of the school. When the other girls found Nettie lonely and withdrawn, they began inquiring about her home and family and it was then that she began sharing her stories with them,

> She told them how Corn Woman made food out of her own body. How she loved the Cherokee people so much that she gave her life so that they could live, and that she came back to life again so that she would always be there for the people to talk to and ask for help. She painted word pictures for them so that they could see the wonderful magical lake where the animals went to bathe when they were sick or injured and how they came out of the water whole and healed again. Sharing these stories with her roommates made Nettie feel closer to her home and family. (158)

Along with making her feel closer to her home and family, these stories also gave her a new identity, that of the storyteller. Nettie's friends found immense joy in listening to the tales from her land and soon these storytelling sessions became a business that was carried out every night. However, these sessions were doomed to be prohibited. Owing to the staunch Catholic principles the school followed, these stories were considered filthy and evil by the upholders of the 'religious standards' of the school and therefore Nettie was thrust into detention when she was caught narrating these stories.

Paradoxically, the stories that had throughout been a constant source of joy and had brought solace even in isolation become a source of grief for Nettie after her detention. Although nobody had much knowledge as to what Nettie had to undergo in the three days of detention, the event certainly changed her drastically as "…she was a completely different person when she came back from that place. She seemed sad all the time, and nervous, jumping at every little sound…Nettie hardly smiled at all and when the storytelling session began, she ran to her room with her hands clapped over her ears. She refused to speak to anyone, or to come out again." (160)

Stories had made Nettie but as Jefferson Currie II has argued, "When someone ceases to tell a story, part of the cultural knowledge is gone" (Currie II, 2005). And, after the detention, the absence of stories in Nettie's life had taken away her real identity and moulded her into someone she could not identify with. Therefore, her new identity which demanded her to surrender her beliefs in the 'Corn Woman' and the 'Magical Lake' was nothing beyond a source of sorrow for Nettie. Growing up with this sorrow affected her in many ways. She had to constantly struggle with the conflict within herself, in being the Nettie she wanted to be and the one that her Catholic school principles expected her to be. The crisis she suffers due to this conflict manifests itself later in her marital life. She was mar-

ried to 'a head-in-the-clouds dreamer', a man who had a great longing for 'home' and who took immense pleasure in narrating stories to his daughters. Nettie however detested this quality of her husband. Having now completely adopted the Catholic identity, the stories that her husband, Eli narrated to their daughters were painful reminders of the past which she had been trained to leave behind. Hence, they did not receive much appreciation from her and instead, Nettie warned her daughters against these stories and eventually made Eli stop narrating them.

The Catholic school training did not barely take away her stories from Nettie but also trained her to reject all her Indian characteristics. Therefore, unlike her husband, she later fails to appreciate the straight Indian hair of her daughters and instead prefers perms for them. And, more than anything her dislike for the road outside her house becomes telling of this. On one hand where the red soil of the road reminds her husband of home, on the other Nettie merely considers it as a 'red mess' which she wants her husband to keep away from the house. However, Nettie's hatred for the road perhaps expands much beyond it being a source of dirt for her. Her despise for the road is similar to her dislike for the stories that her husband narrated. The road too is as painful a reminder of her identity crisis as are the stories. And she is adamant in changing it. The narrator throws light on Nettie's reasons for the same,

> Nettie was on a mission. It was her own private battle against the natural world. Against the way things were. Against the way things wanted to be. She was a devotee disciple of change. A true believer. To Nettie, if you didn't like a thing, you changed it somehow so that it would suit you better. It didn't matter what it was. If Nettie didn't like it for some reason it got on what she called her "bad side", she was going to change it, and that philosophy extended to everything in the world around her… there was no mistaking the fact that the road had most definitely gotten on Nettie's "bad side" (155)

The road perhaps symbolises that part of Nettie's identity which existed before she was sent away to the boarding school and before she was forced to adopt Christian principles. It resembles the old Nettie which "had a life of its own" and "could dream". However, Nettie was forcibly changed. And since she was forcibly changed, against what she wanted to be, she had begun believing in force being the natural order of things, the principle of existence. Her training and her own experience could not allow the road to be in its natural form, that of the dreamer.

Nettie's enmity with the road had begun when its red dust had settled on her favourite Irish tablecloth. This incident brings Nettie into close contact with her complex identity. The red soil over the Irish cloth perhaps symbolises both her mixed blood and her identity as formed by her Christian training and her Indian origin. Unable to come to terms with this, Nettie declares war against the road. She decides to tame the road by damping it down. Although Nettie religiously upholds this enmity, it is the road that ultimately helps her come to terms with her fragmented identity. For example, after her husband's death, Nettie mends the broken pieces of the turtle that he had made out of the red soil and hands it to her younger daughter, Carnel saying, "This is for you. I was wrong, Baby. I was so completely wrong". Carnel had throughout been the recipient of all the stories that her father had narrated and the red soil had given shapes to the characters that had populated

not only her father's stories but also those stories that her mother had grown up with. And, it is perhaps why Nettie never allowed those clay creatures to be placed in her room. However, by mending the turtle, which is considered a symbol of creation in the Cherokee culture, Nettie not only embraces her Indianness but also puts an end to her war against nature.

Conclusion

Patricia Riley's "Wisteria" and "Damping Down the Road" effectively underline how storytelling has been an integral part of Native American culture. Both these stories also reinstate that the Native American worldview demands an "…environmental way of seeing the world". The faith in a sentient, living environment is not merely an intellectual concept for most Native American cultures. Self-perception of most individuals is largely determined by how they perceive their surroundings. The culture and legacy of Native Americans are grounded in the land, with their lives inextricably linked to it.

Significantly, both 'Wisteria' and 'Damping Down the Road' end with the death of the storytellers, Eddie and Eli respectively. However, the authors opine that the death of these characters is justified in terms of the message that their deaths drive home to the listeners of their stories. Through their deaths, they bind their listeners to the tradition they had been holding strong for so long and encourage the newer generations to ensure its survival. This aspect is best encapsulated in the words of Eddie T. who gives the last lesson to her granddaughter, "Things got to grow old and die when their time comes, just like them wisteria…It's all a part of the cycle. What's old just naturally got to make room for them that's new…If it weren't there'd be too many things walkin' around chokin' up the earth" (170). For ages, lessons like these have been passed from one generation to another in the Native American culture. They not only help younger generations identify with their tradition and culture but also encourage them to adopt ways of conscious and harmonious living.

Culture's transformative power for social inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development is becoming more widely acknowledged as a critical enabler for Sustainable Development (Sawangchot, 2016). Culture is also an important part of human growth, serving as a source of identity, innovation, and creativity for all people, as well as providing long-term answers to local and global problems (Yoopetech, 2022). Patricia Riley's "Wisteria" and "Damping Down the Road" also reaffirm the importance of culture. Culture can contribute to both the social and economic components of sustainability, enhancing the impact on local development by responding to local conditions and requirements. Storytelling, as an important facet of culture, can turn public spaces into sites of dialogue, eliminating inequities and promoting social inclusion.

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