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'But the tongue,' said the apostle James, 'can no man tame ...'

He might well have been thinking of the storyteller, who, in the world's oral traditions, has the power to breathe life and meaning into the past and vividly draw its connections with the present. For every society has a living traditional culture by which its people are governed – in South African societies and cultures it is as strong as elsewhere in the world.

This culture manifests itself in a vigorous oral tradition which has existed throughout South African history. Though we nowadays live in a world of Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonalds and Coca-Cola, the traditions of Southern African cultures still seem strong enough to offer a firm basis on which to build a sense of cultural cohesion and nationality. Thus the function of oral literature can bring great literary wealth and depth to our existence in the modern world.

Oral traditions can manifest themselves in varying combinations: spoken, sung, written, or even danced – all depicting the traditional cultures of the different societies, tribes, and ethnic groups living in South Africa.

Long ago, during the times of the

ancestors, the narratives were conveyed by the old people, who argued that these tales had been ancient even when they themselves were young. Children learned by listening to their gogos, and so every generation has grown up under the influence of these stories. Children who missed this will not know the culture of their people, and might grow up rootless and alienated from their traditions.

The gogos and praise-singers have mastered ancient memory systems and can thus recall, recreate and re-interpret past events and happenings for the benefit and survival of their people and their culture – they are like 'human libraries ...'

Picture this: adults and children sitting around a fire, listening to a grandparent or an older member of the tribe. Under the light of the stars, the old gogo sits, looking with rheumy eyes at the circle of eager faces before her. After taking a pinch of snuff from her snuff box and making an offering to the ancestors by sprinkling it on the ground, she begins the story, the ancient story that she herself was told long, long ago ...

Thus the storytelling heritage is perpetuated, even in our modern life, as another means of preserving history. It will continue to have a place in contemporary South African society.

The important role of oral traditions and its place in modern society can be studied further by consulting several titles available in SN – a selection of which is offered here: Abrahams, Roger D. **African folktales.**- Pantheon, 1983.

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 Okpewho, Isidore. **African oral literature: backgrounds, character, and continuity.**- Indiana U.P., 1992.
Oral tradition and innovation.- University of Natal, 1991.
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 Scheub, Harold. **The tongue is fire: South African storytellers and apartheid.**- Wisconsin U.P., c1996.
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 Sullivan, Brenda. **Spirit of the rocks.**- Human, 1995.
The Place of oral traditions in contemporary African society.- Univ. of Transkei, 1991.
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 Zenani, NM. **The world and the word: tales and observations from the Xhosa oral tradition.**- Wisconsin U.P., c1992.

