TYPES OF TRADITIONAL TALE

‘It is because they are alive, potent to revive themselves, and capable of an ever-renewed, unpredictable yet self-consistent effectiveness... that the images of folklore and myth defy every attempt we make at systematisation.’ Heinrich Zimmer, The King and the Corpse

The majority of the narrative forms of oral literature come under the generic category of ‘traditional tales’ and have exercised an enduring appeal since humanity evolved speech. This repertoire thrives on community and continuity. It is popular, accessible and transmissible material that can penetrate and feed the imagination to such an extent that it can linger for a lifetime in the mind, binding generations and bonding peers. Certain core aspects could even be said to form the DNA of the imagination and, like DNA, are subject to constant reproduction, evolution, adaptation and renewal. In the hands of inspired artists who know how to hone it, oral literature has evolved a cutting edge sharp enough to cut through the transient fashions of time.

Academics have many ways of defining the various branches of traditional tales that form this collectively owned heritage of (originally) orally transmitted narrative whose creators are anonymous. However the most common practical system used by front-line Professional Storytellers throughout Europe is generally determined by content. Therefore:-

**FOLK TALES** are the tales of the folk, i.e. me, you, we and they. They are tales about the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor, men and women, the old and the young, the brave and the cowardly. They are often humorous involving trickery or foolishness. They can also be serious tales of heartbreak and romance. They include Urban Legends – the most popular living oral tradition – humorous or grim tales that play upon the neuroses of life in the developed world. They also include Tall Tales or Lies, extravagant stories which though often nonsensical are highly entertaining – the exploits of Baron Munchausen present a good example of this.

**TRICKSTER TALES** form a strong subset of Folk Tales in which the wits of ordinary people are tested by Trolls, Devils and Fairies. There are also Culture Heroes who are Tricksters or wise fools, such as Nasreddin Hodja and variants of the name, such as Juha, Guifa, Geha etc, – throughout the Islamic world. Tricksters include ‘Jack’ in the English Speaking World; ‘Ananse’ in Jamaica and Ghana; Hare/Bre’r Rabbit in Nigeria and Southern States of America; Iktome, Coyote, Raven and Crow amongst the American First Nations, Tyl Eulenspiegel in Holland and Germany, etc.

**NOODLE TALES** form another subset of folktales. These are tales of exemplary fools – often there are whole villages or districts of them, for example in Chelm (Poland), Gotham (England) or Jutland (Denmark).
**FABLES** are stories about humanised (anthropomorphic) animals and are often didactic in nature, imparting values, morals and ethics.

**NURSERY TALES** are specifically designed for very young children, and often have cumulative ‘runs’ (often in verse or song). They build on very strong repeated patterns, demonstrating language and causality. ‘The House that Jack Built’ or ‘The Gingerbread Man’ are examples from English folk culture.

**TEACHING TALES** are from the great religious traditions of the world and include Zen stories, Sufi stories, Saint’s tales, Jataka tales, Taoist Tales, etc. They impart specific values, attitudes and ethics according to specific mythological or spiritual worldviews.

**WONDER TALES** is the preferred term for what were once known as Fairy Tales. These involve wondrous things and marvels such as speaking animals, magical objects, the power of wishes, and spirit helpers such as genii and fairy godmothers. Their distinctive structures tend to open with ‘Once upon a time’ or a similar ritual utterance; they often have a crisis near the beginning and then someone has to set out on a journey to resolve it. They are very ancient in their origins, the narrative pattern going back to hunter/gatherer times and the narratives of shamanic journeys. These are the dreamlike stories that psychologists such as Jung and Freud were particularly interested in.

**LEGENDS** are fantastical stories attributed to actual places or figures from history. They have a toehold in time and place and can range from local Fairy Legends and Ghost Tales to legends of such people as Dr Faustus, Robin Hood or King Arthur.

**EPICS AND SAGAS** are extended episodic narratives in which the lives of mortal heroes and heroines interact with ‘Higher Forces’ such as Gods and ‘otherworld’ beings – Beowulf, The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, Sunjatta, The Old Testament, The Iliad and the Odyssey are examples of these.

**MYTHS** are stories in which the dominant characters are deities, they may interact with humans, but the Gods are definitely the central focus of the tale, The Yoruba Orisha stories are myths, as are the Scandinavian, Eddas and most of the Greek stories.

**CREATION MYTHS** are immense stories, telling of how the world and cosmos came to be, why humans were put into it and why they die. They have an often humorous set of little cousins, known as Aetiological or ‘How and Why’ stories which, in the form of fables and folk tales, explain the origins of things...

This is a far from perfect schema. It is also incomplete and some stories fall into several of these categories – whereas others refuse to be categorised. It is interesting to note that although these stories are often seen as being children’s stories, the main protagonists are rarely children. This sets them significantly apart from children’s literature, whose main protagonists are generally children. Traditional narratives when presented to children are, on one level, entirely about the socialisation and preparation of the child for the transition to responsible adulthood, a process sometimes called initiation.

‘A study of the oral literature of those portions of the Old World where writing was unknown until our own day leaves little room to doubt that the poetry of the seer has been the most important factor in the history of human thought.’ N.K.Chadwick, Poetry and Prophecy (1944)