Eleanor A. Dasi, "Entry on: Lost in the African Forest of Zuki by Onyeka Opara", peer-reviewed by Divine Che Neba, Daniel A. Nkemleke and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1311. Entry version as of November 06, 2026.

Onyeka Opara

Lost in the African Forest of Zuki

United States of America (2016)

TAGS: African Traditions



We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Lost in the African Forest of Zuki
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom, United States of America
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Creators



Onyeka Opara (Author)

Onyeka Opara was born in Moore, Oklahoma. At the age of 5, she went back to Nigeria where she spent most of her adult life before going back to the United States. *Lost in The African Forest of Zuki* is her first book and was inspired by stories from her home country.

Source:

amazon.com (accessed: August 6, 2021).

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Additional information

Summary

Young Amira and her family live in the village of Zuki. She does all her house chores and equally assists her mother in the kitchen. She loves and is being loved by all in the house. She becomes a good friend of stubborn Bozo, when she challenges her. Bozo is so stubborn and hard-headed that no form of punishment from her parents can restrain her. Amira's parents do not like their daughter making friends with the disrespectful and hard-headed Bozo. But Amira admires Bozo for her adventurousness, and considering her self-confidence, remains friends with Bozo. They have their secret meeting place under a fruit tree. One day, Bozo convinces Amira to follow her to a place she once visited. They are attacked by bees on their way but finally reach their destination. Bozo climbs to harvest mangoes on a tree which does not belong to her but is caught by a strange and mysterious man called Atoko. Atoko is not from Zuki; no one knows where he comes from and why he decides to settle on forbidden land close to the forest. The people of Zuki consider him strange, mysterious and evil. He drags Bozo to his hut while Amira willingly follows. He forces Bozo to eat stale food as a punishment for harvesting his mangoes. The girls attempt to escape but are caught by him. He takes them along to the thick forest, to check his traps.

Amira’s parents are worried about her not coming home for lunch. Her mother goes to look for her in Bozo's house and is told, Bozo equally is not in the house. Bozo’s mother consoles Chira (Amara’s mother) that the children are fine and will come back home. Meanwhile, Bozo proposes that both she and Amira should escape but the latter refuses from the fear of not knowing where to go as it is almost dark. Bozo sneaks to another part of the forest, but Amira who by now regrets not listening to her mother, follows Atoko. As Atoko turns to chase Bozo, Amira seizes the opportunity to run. She is saved by Prino, a neighbour, while Bozo still wanders in the forest. Prino's wife, Ngo, takes Amira to her house. Her parents are grateful to Ngo for bringing their daughter home. Chira grounds Amira for not heeding her warnings about Bozo. Amira apologizes and promises never to disobey her again.

Her parents, hearing that Bozo is still in the forest, leave for the latter’s house to take her parents so that together, they will all go in search of her. Bozo’s father Tomtom confronts Atoko for what he has done to his daughter. The men (Prino and Obia) plead with Atoko, who

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knows the forest better, to accompany them to get Bozo. Atoko demands a ransom in exchange which they accept and set off to the forest. Bozo is frightened by Bula, the big snake that vomits a diamond light which brightens the forest for some days, then, the snake swallows it up again. This snake was talked about in Zuki but no one had really ever seen it, not even Atoko himself. Atoko intends to steal the diamond from Bula. The men still wander in the forest looking for Bozo. Tomtom finally sees his daughter and both embrace each other so hard and in delight after seeing scary things in the forest. Atoko, Prino and Obia attempt to steal the gem but Atoko is attacked by Bula's companion. Bula swallows the gem and the men run out of the forest. Atoko does not charge for his payment and advises Tomtom and Obia to teach their daughters good manners. He nonetheless tells them they are welcome to his garden if they ask for permission. Bozo and father get home and the former apologizes, promising to be a good girl. She changes and does well in school, obeying everything her parents tell her.

Analysis

The above story has two dimensions; one a moral tale about stubbornness and disobedience and the other a warning about the mysterious and dangerous nature of forests in Africa. With regards to the first dimension, this story is used as a medium of education, correction, and the upholding of socio-cultural mores. The price Bozo must pay for being disobedient is getting lost in the forest where she has frightening and horrifying experiences and is almost eaten by wild animals. From there, Bozo becomes obedient, respectful, and good mannered as is expected of every person her age. These virtues hold the social fabric of society and ensure cohesion amongst children and young adults. Bozo is opposed to her friend Amira, who is obedient, warm, and respectful. Though both enter the forest together, Amira succeeds in escaping because she is clever. Somehow, nature rewards her for her honesty and good intentions by providing her an opportunity to escape both from Atoko and from the scary forest.

As concerns the forest, it is known, in many African cultures as the abode of evil, a scary, terrifying and horrifying place, a negative space, a rubbish heap for disobedient people yet above all, it defines the people’s beliefs in diverse phenomena. Firstly, in the story, Atoko is believed to be strange and mysterious because no one knows his origin, and he lives near the forest, which to the people is forbidden.

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However, this belief turns out to be false when the men in the story find out that he is just as human as they are. Second, the story of Bula, the snake that carries a diamond gem, was before now considered made-up. The men witness Bula live, but the mystery remains because none can explain how a snake could carry a gem that lights up almost the whole forest. More to that, Atoko is unable to steal its gem as planned since it is guarded by some strange creature that attacks him. All these contribute to the forest's negative image that has always been associated with it in the African space. That is why in Nigeria particularly, stories of the evil forests are common.

Finally, the story exposes the communality of Africans. Bozo's father is helped in the search for his daughter by Prino, Obia and Atoko. Despite the dangerous nature of the forest, these men brave the odds to help a fellow clansman. Even Atoko, who asks for payment, does not push through with his demand. He rather asks for Bozo to be well trained. This further lays on parents a huge responsibility in raising their children to be cautious, respectful and obedient.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Traditions
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Child, children Disobedience Friendship Girls Nature Obedience Parents (and children) Supernatural creatures (non-classical)
Further Reading	Ikeke, Mark, "The Forest in African Traditional Thought and Practice: An Ecophilosophical Discourse", *Open Journal of Philosophy* 3.2 (2013): 345–350. MacDonald, Margaret Read, S*torytelling Today: An International Sourcebook*< London: Routledge, 2013.

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