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Mama Asanatou

The Jealous Woman Who Became a Snake

Cameroon

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Metamorphosis





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Jealous Woman Who Became a Snake
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	Baba
Country of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Cameroon
Full Date of the Recording of the Story for the Databasey	May 9, 2020
More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Yaoundé, Mfoundi, Central Cameroon
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
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Creators



Mama Asanatou (Storyteller)

Age of Narrator: 77 (in 2020)

Social status: Housewife, matriarch

Profession: Housewife

Languages of narration: Bamun, Baba

Bio prepared by Amshetu Melo Forchu, University of Yaoundé, meloamshetu@gmail.com

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating	Background of Ndefang-Pinying: Ndefang-Pinying constitutes one of the villages in Ngemba. Ngemba lies between Longitude 100 12’ and 100 47’ East of Greenwich Meridian and latitude 50 45’ and 60 18’ North or the Equator. Asobo Pius in “Mother Tongue Influence on English Language in Cameroon: A Case Study of the Pinyin Language” notes that the Pinyin people serve as universal sets of the Ngembas of the North west region and the Bamboutous of the Western region. Thus, the Pinyin language, accordingly shares some intelligibility with the Bamboutous Language because of family and trade links. Like most Ngemba people, they believe in God, divinities, spirits, ancestors and the practice of magic and medicine. For them, as it is the case with most Ngemba villages, there is nothing like natural death.

Summary

“Kesasahooo”! “Kesasahooo”!* [Can I tell you this story! I tell you this story!]

“Wooo”! “Wooo”! [Yes! Yes!]

A long time ago, there lived a hunter who had many wives in an unknown village. He could stay in the forest for many years hunting. In his absence, his wives would always fight and quarrel among themselves. Whenever he returned with gifts and game, he did not share equally among his wives. The second wife was always given the biggest share. This ignited the jealousy of the first wife, who thought she too deserved special treatment.

When the man went for another long hunting expedition, his first wife decided to consult a trade-practitioner to seek for a magic potion that could transform her co-spouse into a snake. The magician accepted and gave the potion and advised her to tie it around her neck in a small bundle. Then she should fetch some water in a calabash, carry it on her head and ask her co-spouse to help her put down the calabash. When she does, she would immediately be transformed into a snake. The deal was sealed and she paid off the trade-practitioner for his job. However, the magician had secretly revealed the secret to the second wife and warned her never to help anyone put down a calabash of water from their head no matter the pressure. He told her that if she ever does such a thing she would be transformed into a snake.

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On the day the first wife was supposed to execute her evil plan, she asked all her own children to leave the house and go search for food in the forest. Hence, she was left at home with her co-spouse. Later, she gave the excuse that she had no more water and rushed to the stream with a calabash to fetch some. She hung the magic potion on her neck in the hope that when she returns, her co-spouse would help her put down the calabash of water.

Unfortunately, when she returned from the stream, the co-spouse had disappeared from the house. In fact, she was hiding in the corner of the old house, because she knew what was going on. The first wife called for her to no avail. Eventually, she got tired and exhausted with the heavy calabash of water on her head. She decided to put it down herself. Suddenly, her neck turned round and the lower part of her body turned into a big snake. Out of humiliation and guilt, she moved into the river and each day she would come out to sing:

"A jealous woman attempted to kill her co-wife, but rather harmed herself"

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"A jealous woman attempted to kill her co-wife, but rather harmed herself"

She regularly came out from the river to sing this song and children would throw stones at her. Ultimately, she spent the rest of her life between the river and land as a half-human and half-snake.

* Local Bamun language.

Analysis

Polygamy is an accepted way of life in many African societies and goes with its own problems. It is frequently characterised by animosity, rivalry and jealousy, which breeds chaos as each wife longs to be the husband's favourite. In the myth the husband "did not share equally among his wives*" which caused the first wife's jealousy to be so strong that she got a magic amulet to harm the second wife. Generally, talismans and amulets are used in African traditions for

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either protective or destructive purposes and are prepared for particular individuals. But it is believed that if by chance or mishap, someone for whom it was not meant touched it, that person might be either inflicted with evil or benefit from protection as the case may be. Thus when the first wife puts down the pot of water meant for the second wife, she immediately activates the curse.

It is also believed that gods have their way of averting evil particularly when it is directed at the innocent. This goes with the general belief of the triumph of good over evil in many world cultures from ancient to modern. The myth thus emphasizes the consequences of uncontrolled jealousy and planning evil against the guiltless. The first wife in the story becomes herself the victim of her evil plans and ends up being subjected to the fate she wished for her co-spouse – becoming half human, half serpent. The shapeshifting motif is employed in this story as punishment and not a security device as common in many myths. The protective and punitive roles of magic cannot therefore be overemphasized.

* See Summary.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Metamorphosis
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Conflict Emotions Magic Transformation

Further Reading

Jankowiak, William, Monika Sudakov and Benjamin C. Wilreker, “Co-Wife Conflict and Co-operation”, *Ethnology* 44 (2005): 81–98.

Kachuba, John, “Entering the World of the Shapeshifter”, (accessed:

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September 27, 2020).

Lynch, Patricia Ann, *African Mythology A-Z second edition,* London: Chelsea House Productions, 2010.

Addenda

Researcher: Amshetu Melo Forchu

Assistant researcher: Seidou Melo (trans.)

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