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Madeleine Matandjong

The Origin of Family Altars among the Ngomba

Cameroon

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Origin of Family Altars among the Ngomba
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Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	Ngomba
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More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Mbouda, West Region, Cameroon
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
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Creators



Madeleine Matandjong (Storyteller)

Age of Narrator: 76 (in 2022)

Social status: seer/sacrifice performer

Profession: retired teacher

Language of narration: Ngomba

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating

The Bagam people are found in the Western region of Cameroon. They are either called “Bagam”, “Ghap” or “Eghap”. They migrated from the Adamawa region of Cameroon during the time of population movements in Cameroon. After a long walk from the Adamawa region, they were first sheltered by the Bamoun people of the West Region of Cameroon. Due to their fast growing population and insubordination, they were evicted by the Bamoun and they later moved to the far west of the territory. They crossed the Noun River and occupied the empty territory, which today is called Bagam. The Bagam people are ruled by a Paramount chief called “Fong,” who is assisted by a council of chiefs, the sacred society (Ngengong) and quarter heads. Over the years, the Bagam people have had a good number of rulers. However, with the demise of the last ruler, the chiefdom has been in great chaos, since the sacred society and king makers are unable to select a new chief. For over a year now (2022) the village is run by the council of chiefs, elders and the sacred society. The people have a strong belief in God, ancestors, spirits, and divinities.

The language spoken by the Bagam people is Məngákà. This language was scripted by the very first Paramount chief, Fong Pufong. This original script was very similar to that of the Bamoun people. However, given that the village is bordered by the ancient great Bali Kingdom (before its split into the seven different subgroups), the original script was greatly affected by the “Mungaka” of the Bali Nyonga people.* This explains why there is a high degree of intelligibility between the Bagam language and that of Bali Nyonga of the North West region.**

* See The Bali Creation Myth.

** Writing about the Bagam people is rare. The information obtained here resulted from interviews and an unpublished script handed to us by one of our informants, Esther Monstengap, purportedly written by the husband before his death. The script itself had no title.

Summary

Long time ago, there lived a tribe in a beautiful village called Mbouda.

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These people lived in perfect harmony with the gods, the divinities and the deities. The young girls of this village were often given in marriage to men of neighbouring villages in appreciation for some good deed or when a young man declared his intentions. All these happened in peace and joy.

One day, one of the families of this village was preparing for the marriage of one of their daughters. During the nuptial ceremony, the groom discovered that his wife-to-be was absent. He informed the family. The girl in question had run away to get married to a man in another neighbouring settlement thereby creating a scandal in both families and the community at large. The family head, consumed by anger, went to the poultry, picked out the biggest and most beautiful rooster, took it to one corner of the house to offer it as sacrifice to the gods since that was the custom in those days. This sacrifice was to invoke the gods to provide a solution to the problem. but in his anger, the family head made a pronouncement that none had ever done before. He said, “in this place, on this day, through this sacrifice and imploring the supreme god of our ancestors, I declare and bless this place which will henceforth serve as an altar for all rituals and sacrifices of the family.” Then he slaughtered the rooster. Thunder roared and there was a heavy downpour. After that, he invoked the deity of marriage and declared, “no girl of this family will find peace if ever she gets married out of this family.” Once again, thunder roared as a sign that the deity had accepted his sacrifice.

The runaway girl was happy in her home for some time until the husband started beating her because she could not have children. Her mother-in-law decided to take her to a diviner, who told her to return to her father as she was under a curse for something she did sometime ago. It is then that she recalled how she left her family and her supposed family-in-law in distress. She then left for her village and on arrival, found out that all but one of her sisters were not married because no potential suitor came. Even the one who was married was in an incestuous union. She begged for forgiveness from her father and all those she offended. She was forgiven. But the curse was not broken; and for this to happen, a stronger altar had to be built. So in addition to a rooster, the father sacrificed a big goat and made pronouncements that countered the first. Again, thunder roared. After that, the girls found husbands and had many children.

Some years later, problems of illnesses, accidents, sudden deaths, of mystical origins plagued the village. It needed an enormous sacrifice

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to avert these plagues. After deep reflections, the father in this story decided to sacrifice himself by abstaining from women and alcohol (things he loved so much). This time, his pronouncements were generalised to all problems that his family might face. This is why altars have remained integral among the Ngomba. But anytime that the altar does not respond favourably, a sacrifice bigger than the previous one had to be offered and it reached a point where human sacrifices were offered. Human sacrifices have continued to this day not for appeasement of the gods but for material enrichment. This is popularly known as “Famlah.”

Analysis

Altars are common in many world societies that have a religious leaning. In Africa in general and among the Ngomba in particular, these altars serve as meeting points of humans and the gods and divinities either of the community or of the individual family unit. Whatever pronouncement, whether good or evil, made on these altars are believed to be heard by the gods who then grant the wishes of the intercessor. The story traces the origin of family altars among the Ngomba and how these altars function and are restructured with the passage of time. The nature of the sacrifices follows a hierarchical structure depending on the enormity of what is demanded of the gods.

Generally, pronouncements that are made to ask for something small do not demand much. But when such pronouncements are made in anger may have disastrous consequences, an enormous sacrifice is needed to reverse them. In the story, the head of the family, out of anger, places a curse on his daughters using a rooster, which was reversed using a goat.

The story also evokes a mysterious connection between the humans, the gods and the forces of nature. This is noticed in the roaring of thunder as a sign of acceptance of a sacrifice. In some situations, lightening accompanies thunder.

One other major issue which the story addresses is the “famlah” phenomenon, which is common among the Bamilekes of the Western Region of Cameroon among whom are the Ngomba. It is generally believed in Cameroon that these people use humans as sacrifices for financial prowess. This is however limited to family altars as many of those sacrificed are family members and as the story intimates, this is

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	to solve a larger problem of poverty in the family by way of material gain.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Emotions Religious beliefs Sacrifice
Further Reading	Ngwaimbi, Kombem Emmanuel, *Bamileke Mythology* at Occult-world.com., posted: July 26, 2019, accessed: September 18, 2022.
Addenda	Researchers: Eleanor A. Dasi and Tchio Kengne Cathy Michele

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