Egbe Ifie

Iseregwe

Nigeria (1999)

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Gods



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

General information	
Title of the work	Iseregwe
Country of the First Edition	Nigeria
Country/countries of popularity	Nigeria
Original Language	Unknown, but presumably the local language of Ujevbe people
First Edition Date	1999
First Edition Details	Egbe Ifie, *Marriage with Gods and Goddesses*: *In Classical and African Myths*. Ibadan: End-time Publishing House Ltd, 1999, 199 pp.
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
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Creators



Egbe Ifie (Author)

Egbe Ifie was a teacher of Classical Mythology and African Cultures in the University of Ibadan, where he taught for several years. He is the author of several books, including on mythology. His date of birth is not available. He died some years ago.

Bio prepared by Carine Fonyuy, University of Yaoundé 1, lifotercarine@yahoo.com

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating

Place of collection: Ujevbe area of Urhoboland, in the Niger Delta.

Background*: The people of the delta region of Nigeria are generally migrant fishermen who migrated from Sierra Leone and Gabon. These people are used to water in a way, so much so that it is commonly said that wherever there is a river someone from the Delta region is not far. These fishermen practice two forms of marriages: a big dowry marriage (wherein tradition demands that the groom offers much payment to the wife's family) and a small-dowry marriage, (in which much money is not paid by the groom but succession is matrilineal). The small dowry marriages are the most frequent The populace venerate their ancestors and belief in the water spirit, Owuamapu part of their pantheon. Further, they practice divinations to interrogate the causes of death, and also perform rites that initiate members of different communities that are inserted in certain practices.

Sources:

A brief walk into the lives of one of the world's most ancient people, pulse.ng (accessed: May 6, 2019).

Abi Alabo Derefaka, *Archeology and Culture History in the Central Niger Delta*, Onyoma Research Publications, 2006, summaryat africanbookscollective.com (accessed: May 6, 2019).

Summary

This myth is found in: *Marriage with Gods and Goddesses* (*in Classical and African Myths*) by Egbe Ifie, published in Ibadan by End-Time Publishing House in 1999 (pp.1–4), ISBN: 978-2163-01-5. This is only a brief summary of the story. The full text of the myth and others can be read in the book cited above.

The myth of Iseregwe is about a couple who lives in a distant village and has two beautiful daughters: Omokatifi and Iseregwe. The older one, in spite of her pompous and unpleasant behaviour, remains their father's favourite child. The latter is very hardworking, humble and obedient to her parents as well as to other elders around her. In this village, there is an annual festival during which all maidens are called

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upon to present their would-be husbands to their various families and to equally parade the wealth of their spouses.

During one of such festivals, while all the maidens of marriageable age are busy preparing for the festival, Iseregwe remains unconcerned. Her lack of interest in such an important event becomes a cause for concern to her sister. So, one Iseregwe did not go shopping in preparation for the festival a day before the event. Instead she goes to the river side to meet her husband, the river-god (in the form of a python), who gives her all she needs for the festival. On this big day, Iseregwe comes out dressed in an amazing outfit, all made of gold, and everyone is astonished. Her sister becomes jealous and is determined to unravel the mystery behind Iseregwe's golden dress. On the second day of the festival, as Iseregwe goes to the river side early in the morning to meet her lover as was always the case, her sister follows secretly from a distance and receives the greatest shock of her life when she discovers who her sister's lover is.

Omokatifi then decides to reveal the secret to their father who finds it difficult to believe. He decides to visit the place one early morning to see for himself. When he becomes certain, he comes up with a plan to kill this python who he believes has hypnotized his daughter. The next morning, he sends Iseregwe on an errand and takes some armed men with him to the river side. When they arrive at the spot, Omokatifi simulates her sister's voice and invokes the python-river-god who immediately comes out of the deeps of the river. Iseregwe's father and his men then jump on the animal and kill it. They take the dead python home, prepare it and Iseregwe blindly eats part of it. Her sister makes her to understand that it was her lover's flesh (i.e. the river god) which she has just taken part in eating. Furious, Iseregwe decides to turn into an electric fish and gets into her father's net the next morning, when the later goes fishing. Her father brings the fish home and when everyone eats of it, they all transform into different types of electric cat-fish.

Analysis

Myths related to marriage between mortals and Gods, mortals and animals, their therianthropy (i.e. transformation of humans to beasts), and shapeshifting are popular among residents of riverine regions in Africa. Among the people of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria, it is commonplace that mortals marry water Gods or closely interact with them on different issues in life on daily basis. These interactions either

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	bring joy or pain to individuals or the society at large. More often than not, when the covenant between both parties is respected, the result is joy and when the covenant is bridged, suffering and tribulations set in. Such relations are facilitated through transformation or shapeshifting. The empowered mortal, as is the case with Iseregwe, sometimes transforms to attain her objective, or the immortal subject to a lower status (metamorphose into human) to reach out to humanity physically. Another instance of such amorous relation between the mortal and the immortal is recorded in JP Clark's *Song of a Goat*, wherein, Orukorere, one of the main characters, finally rejects her water god partner and is cursed with epileptic seizures.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Gods
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Appearances Character traits Death Parents (and children) Relationships Religious beliefs Revenge Tradition Transformation
Further Reading	Bell, Robert E., *Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Ripinsky-Naxon, Michael, *The Nature of Shamanism*, New York: University of New York Press, 1993.
Addenda	Classical and ancient motifs: • Marriage between mortals and the gods; • Relationship between the gods and man; • Therianthropy (i.e. transformation of humans into beasts); • Cinderella stories in Western culture (interaction between humans and animals);

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- Shapeshifting in ancient cultures, also related to the practice of totemism and shamanism among indigenous people.

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