Divine Che Neba, "Entry on: Siebanzhi by Etienne Nguelo", peer-reviewed by Daniel A. Nkemleke, Eleanor A. Dasi and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/623. Entry version as of November 03, 2026.

Etienne Nguelo

Siebanzhi

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	Siebanzhi
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	Fe'efe'e
Country of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Cameroon
Full Date of the Recording of the Story for the Databasey	November 31, 2017
More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Bafang
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
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Creators



Etienne Nguelo (Storyteller)

Age of narrator: 73 (in 2017)

Profession: Retired Accountant

Language of narration: Fe’efe’e

Bio prepared by Divine CheNeba, University of Yaounde 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating

Background*: Bafang is a village situated on the geographical coordinates Latitude 5° 9' 31.1904" North and Longitude 10° 10' 47.0928" East, in the Haut-Nkaam division of the West region of Cameroon. As part of the Bameleke people of the West region, the Bafang people are deeply rooted in their traditional rites, though some of the people have embraced the Roman Catholic Church. The Bafangs worship ancestral skulls. Their indigenous priests and trade-practitioners prepare charms, perform incantations and consult the oracle in order to solve individual and community problems.

Occasion: staged

*Source: *Bamileke*, britannica.com (accessed: January 16, 2019).

Summary

A long time ago in the Banka community, there lived a child named "Siebanzhi", which means "only God knows." He was special. His birth and deeds clearly made him outstanding. In fact, he was born seven times in different years. The first time he came to the world, he died two months later and before he was buried, a mark was put on his stomach. The next year, the mother of the house gave birth again, but to the utter dismay of the villagers, they realised that the baby had the same mark on the stomach as that put on the dead baby a year ago. As was the case with the other baby, the new born child died within two months. The bemused family put another mark on it, but this time, the mark was on it forehead. The following year, the mother gave birth to a baby boy and noticed that the new born child had both marks on the stomach and on the forehead. This precarious situation occurred seven times in the life of Siebanzhi's parents. Since it was already clear that the mother of the house has been giving birth to this cursed child and losing it always, they named the child "Siebanzhi" because only the gods knew why they chose to torment them this way.

The seventh time was different; even Siebanzhi' parents were surprised when after two months Siebanzhi did not die. The child grew up with the six marks that have been inscribed on him each time he died. That is, one on the stomach (the first death), one on the

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forehead (the second death), one on the neck (the third death), one on the back of the head (the fourth death), two on the two cheeks (the fifth and sixth deaths).

As a youngster, Siebanzhi was special in everything he did. Indeed, his mother did not need to call him when she needed his help, for she always discovered him standing beside her asking "mother, do you need my help?" He seemed to have been embellished with an omniscient touch such that he could communicate in telepathy with his mother. He was doing so, not only with his mother, but also with other people around him.

One day, he accompanied his father to the farm to collect palm wine. When they reached the farm, the father used a strong cord to climb on the palm tree. Once he got up and started collecting the wine, the cord inadvertently fell, making it impossible for him to climb down. Worse still, the village was too far off for Siebanzhi to go and call for help. To his father’s surprise, the seven-year old Siebanzhi climbed the palm tree with the cord in order to save his father and enable him to climb down. When he got up, he gave the cord to his father and went down without any support. When they returned home, Siebanzhi's father recounted the strange occurrences in the bush to all his kin and kindred and everyone was filled with awe.

Among his age-mates, Siebanzhi was still quite different. Though he was the youngest, he used to do things that were more than his age and size. He used to take a long stick, place it horizontally on his friends’ heads such that it formed a line, and jump over it. This was his favorite way of having fun, but his friends were always amazed because none of them could jump over such a great height.

Usually, elders and notables were the ones who played the drums during special traditional ceremonies, for the sounds they produced had particular messages addressed to the ancestors. Such people had to undergo a special training to perform this task. Strangely enough, Siebanzhi did not undergo any training, but mastered all the codes of drumming, even more than the elders. He played the drums with so much dexterity, as if he had learnt it from his mother's womb. His skills were unrivaled in the land.

The elders of the land, together with the notables, as well as the Chief used to tell him that his time had passed already*, and that they were the ones in charge of the kingdom for the time being. To them,

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Siebanzhi was the reincarnation of an ancestral spirit.

* This is an idiomatic expression among the Bafang people, which means he is of the foregone generation.

Analysis

The spirit child, otherwise known as *Obanje* or *Abiku* (in Nigeria) is a common phenomenon within African society. Such a child, as the people believe, is reborn several times to its mother, usually as a form of punishment to parents. As many a traditionalist attests, it is usually on rare occasions that spirit children resolve to stay in their homestead. Their constant admission by their parent stems from the universally-acclaimed world view of Africans that the dead are not really dead. Within this same prism, J. S. Mbiti in *African Religion and Philosophy* views the ancestors as the living dead, since they have an important role to play in the lives of living. Thus, the spirit child, to the parents, is the one whose soul has been rejected by the ancestral spirit, and the only safe haven to sojourn in is the mother's womb. This issue of reincarnation or transmigration of souls is an ancient concept. Transmigration from various philosophical standpoints is seen as a process of purification of the soul. The above myth singles out the migratory process from the mother back to the mother. Here the process is cyclical.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions

Further Reading

Atkison, Willam Walker, *Reincarnation and the Law of karma: A Study of the Old-New World Doctrine of Rebirth and spiritual Cause and Effect*, WhiteFish Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 1997.

Fooltz, Richard, *Religion and the Silk Road*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

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Leland, Kurts, *The Unanswered Question: Death, Near Death and the Afterlife*, Massachusetts: Hampton Road Publishing, 2002.

Mbiti, J. S., *African Religion and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann, 1969.

Addenda

Researcher: Divine Che Neba

Assistant researcher: Wansi Leuga Carine Marcelle

Method of data collection: Tape recording and note taking

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