



The Ants and the Treasure

Yoruba People / Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, Togo

There once was a poor man who was very kind to animals and birds. However little he had, he always spared a few grains of corn, or a few beans, for his parrot, and he was in the habit of spreading on the ground every morning some titbits for the industrious ants, hoping that they would be satisfied with the corn and leave his few possessions untouched.

And for this the ants were grateful.

In the same village there lived a miser who had by crafty and dishonest means collected a large store of gold, which he kept securely tied up in the corner of a small hut. He sat outside this hut all day and all night, so that nobody could steal his treasure.

When he saw any bird, he threw a stone at it, and he crushed any ant which he found walking on the ground, for he detested every living creature and loved nothing but his gold.

As might be expected, the ants had no love for this miser, and when he had killed a great many of their number, they began to think how they might punish him for his cruelty.

'What a pity it is –said the King of the ants– that our friend is a poor man, while our enemy is so rich!'

This gave the ants an idea. They decided to transfer the miser's treasure to the poor man's house. To do this they dug a great tunnel

under the ground. One end of the tunnel was in the poor man's house, and the other end was in the hut of the miser.

On the night that the tunnel was completed, a great swarm of ants began carrying the miser's treasure into the poor man's house, and when morning came and the poor man saw the gold lying in heaps on the floor, he was overjoyed, thinking that the gods had sent him a reward for his years of humble toil.

He put all the gold in a corner of his hut and covered it up with native cloths.

Meanwhile the miser had discovered that his treasure was greatly decreased. He was alarmed and could not think how the gold could have disappeared, for he had kept watch all the time outside the hut.

The next night the ants again carried a great portion of the miser's gold down the tunnel, and again the poor man rejoiced and the miser was furious to discover his loss.

On the third night the ants laboured long and succeeded in removing all the rest of the treasure.

'The gods have indeed sent me much gold!' cried the poor man, as he put away his treasure.

But the miser called together his neighbours and related that in three consecutive nights his hard-won treasure had vanished away. He declared that nobody had entered the hut but himself, and therefore the gold must have been removed by witchcraft.

However, when the hut was searched, a hole was found in the ground, and they saw that this hole was the opening of a tunnel. It seemed clear that the treasure had been carried down the tunnel, and everyone began hunting for the other end of the tunnel. At last it was discovered in the poor man's hut! Under the native cloths in the corner they found the missing treasure.

The poor man protested in vain that he could not possibly have crept down such a small tunnel, and he declared that he had no notion how the gold had got into his hut. But the rest said that he must have

some charm by which he made himself very small and crept down the tunnel at night into the miser's hut.

For this offence they shut him up in a hut and tightly closed the entrance. On the next day he was to be burnt alive.


When the ants saw what had come of their plan to help him, they were sorely perplexed and wondered how they could save their poor friend from such a painful death

There seemed nothing for them to do but to eat up the whole of the hut where the prisoner was confined. This they accomplished after some hours, and the poor man was astonished to find himself standing in an open space. He ran away into the forest and never came back.

In the morning the people saw that the ants had been at work, for a few stumps of the hut remained. They said: 'The gods have taken the punishment out of our hands! The ants have devoured both the hut and the prisoner!'

And only the ants knew that this was not true. □

Adapted by M. I. Ogumefu (1929).

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Comments

We do not have information on the adapter of this Yoruba story, M. I. Ogumefu, although we know that his surname, Ogumefu, comes from Nigeria. In this country, the Yoruba people make up 30% of the population, occupying the south-western region, where the capital, Lagos, is located. However, the Yoruba are also found in countries neighbouring Nigeria, such as Benin and Togo; and, sadly, they are in many other countries in the Americas, to which they were brought in the dark era of transatlantic slavery.

In many areas of the Americas, the epidemics brought by the Europeans and the brutality of the colonial invaders caused an immense death toll among the native population. This led the European

powers to seek new slave labour, taking advantage of the technological developments in navigation to bring them from Africa. Also it must also be said that, for this, they had the collaboration of many African kings and merchants, who became wealthy with the money and merchandise with which they were paid.

Thus, members of the Yoruba ethnic group would end up entering in large numbers in what are now Cuba, Brazil, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, Guadalupe, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Honduras and the United States (North Carolina). In many of these countries, their cultural footprints are visible, not only in terms of art, dance, gastronomy and linguistic expressions, but also in their spiritual practices, with the cult of the Orishas and systems such as Candomblé, Sango and Umbanda in Brazil.

Sources

Ogumefu, M. J. (2007). *Yoruba Legends*. Forgotten Books, pp. 19-21.
Available on
http://www.forgottenbooks.org/ebooks/Yoruba_Legends_-_9781605060170.pdf

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 15c: Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

Principle 15a: Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.

