



Tortoise and the World's Wisdom

Yoruba People – Nigeria, Benin and Togo

When the world was young, Tortoise was busy for quite a long time collecting wisdom. His task took him a number of years, but at last, looking through all that he had gathered together, he discovered that he had all the world's wisdom there.

At first Tortoise was very happy with this discovery, and he put all the pieces of wisdom into a huge pot, which he hid in a corner of his house. But he was terribly afraid that someone might find out the secret and steal his pot.

He lay awake for three nights wondering where he could hide it in perfect safety.

'Now if I bury it,' he thought, 'someone may see me dig the hole and look there when I have gone away. And if I sink the pot into the sea, I may never find the place again, and all my work will be wasted.'

At last he found the solution.

'I will hide my pot at the top of a tree!' he cried joyfully. 'No one will think of looking up there for my treasure, and so it will be perfectly safe until I wish to use it.'

'What did you say, my dear?' asked Yannibo, his wife, waking up.

'Go to sleep, wife! I was only counting how many bunches of bananas we may expect to have on our tree,' he replied hastily, for he was so anxious to keep his secret that he had not even told Yannibo about it.

The next morning he tied a strong cord round his pot and suspended it in front of him. Then he went to the tallest tree in the district and, when no one was about, he began to climb the tree.

But the heavy pot suspended in front of him so impeded his movements that he found it almost impossible to make any progress, and after a while he slipped down to the ground again to rest.

Then he made another attempt, but again without success, and he was still only a short distance from the ground when his son came out of the house and stood watching him.

‘Go away,’ said Tortoise crossly. ‘Can’t you see that I am busy?’


But, father,’ cried the son, ‘you will never get to the top of the tree if you carry the pot in front of you. Why don’t you hang it behind you, and then it will be out of your way, and the climbing will be easy?’

Tortoise stopped climbing and thought:

‘Well! I have all the world’s wisdom in my pot, and yet I am so foolish that my own son can instruct me in climbing a tree. I have put my pieces of wisdom to very poor use!’

He was so disgusted at the thought that he dropped the pot, and it crashed into many pieces, while all the wisdom it had contained was scattered far and wide. And that is why fragments of wisdom are now to be found all over the earth. □

Adapted by Margaret Irene Ogumefu (1929).

Public Domain 

Comments

It is our policy at The Earth Stories Collection not to adapt traditional stories from Aboriginal peoples of the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa and Australia. The fact that we who manage the Collection are European means that we look very carefully at these stories to try not to fall into

the trap of *cultural appropriation* of which we Europeans and the descendants of European colonisers have been rightly accused.

However, in the case of this story we have made a slight exception which we think will be understood. The author of the adaptation was actually British, but was the wife of a Nigerian citizen, so she adopted her husband's surname, as well as having an in-depth knowledge of the cultures of the region, having lived in Nigeria for a long time.

The author, born in 1905 in Manchester, was originally named Margaret Irene Sarah Baumann, and took the surname Ogumefu after marrying Michael Gladstone Ogumefu from Lagos, Nigeria. From her relationship with her husband and her stay in Nigeria, Margaret would compile a collection of traditional stories from this African region, which she would publish in 1929 in two books, one under her name as a married woman, *Yoruba Legends*, and the other under her maiden name, *Ajapa the Tortoise*.

Subsequently, Margaret would go on to write more than 40 more books under the pseudonym Marguerite Lees, mainly romance novels mostly in hospital settings with nurses as the main characters.

It should be noted that in this adaptation by Margaret Ogumefu we have changed the name of Tortoise's wife, Nyanribo, to Yannibo, in order to make the story more faithful to Yoruba traditions, according to Victoria Ibiwoye.

Sources

Baumann, M. (2003). Tortoise and the world's wisdom. In *Ajapa the Tortoise: A Book of Nigerian Folk Tales* (pp. 53-54). Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Ogumefu, M. I. (1929). *Ajapa the Tortoise: A Book of Nigerian Folk Tales*. London: A. & C. Black. Available on archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.54438

Pszczolińska, M. (2021). *Margaret I. Ogumefu (Baumann) [Marguerite Lees], 1905-1990*. Our Mythical Childhood Survey. <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/creator/1369>

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 8. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.

Other passages that this story illustrates

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

Principle 8b: Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

Principle 8c: Ensure that information of vital importance to human health and environmental protection, including genetic information, remains available in the public domain.

The Way Forward: Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.

