

Joseph Akono Ateba

Why Awae People Marked their Children

Cameroon

TAGS: [African Mythologies](#) [African Storytelling](#) [African Traditions](#) [Gods](#)



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General information	
Title of the work	Why Awae People Marked their Children
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Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
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Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
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Creators



Joseph Akono Ateba (Storyteller)

Age of Narrator: 71 (in 2019)

Social status: Notable of the village

Profession: Farmer

Language of narration: Ewondo

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating Cultural Background: See [Abobo Ndene and Otene Nka'a](#).

Summary

In the distant past among the Ewondo people, the myth goes that the wife of God gave birth to a child and the child fell from the sky to the earth. God and His wife came down to look for the child. Before their arrival, they sent a message to the chief priest of the Awae land to announce that their time of arrival would be at mid-night the message also instructed everyone who had a baby aged between 0 - 3 days old to put a mark on the child's forehead with a sharp object, in order to differentiate it from the missing god-child. It warned that if someone put a mark a child that was not theirs, the mark would disappear in 3 days. Furthermore, anyone who disregarded the above instructions would be the target of the wrath of God. Everybody did as the chief priest instructed, except the woman who had actually picked up the child that fell from the sky. Another group of women who failed to mark their children were those who were in the farm at the time the chief priest gave the announcement he received from God.

Then shortly afterwards, God and his wife began their journey to earth. While on earth, they decided to punish all the families who according to them had disobeyed them. So they plagued these families with sleeping sicknesses and other diseases. However, the family of the woman who had actually picked up God's child was not affected. The logic was that God's plague could not possibly affect God's own child. Eventually, God and his wife did not find their missing child and returned to heaven.

This child lived with the woman and grew up to become an adult. In the course of his growing up, he was maltreated by the woman's biological children, since they did not consider him their sibling. One day, he told them that he is indeed the son of the first woman (i.e. the wife of God) on earth, and that his presence among them was protection for that family, but that he realized that he is not welcome. For this reason, he said he would go back to his father in the sky and that at any time they are in trouble or need help they should just call his name. After this revelation, he disappeared from sight, and only later appeared in spirit whenever his name was invoked, even by the common person in the

Awae land. The family later realized that indeed he was the son of the wife of God, and wanted him back physically, but it was not possible.

Analysis

The myth presents two distinct qualities: the nature of the gods and second, the reason for a particular cultural practice. In the above myth, the god-family is depicted as having both healing and destructive powers, but also depicted like a human family that has lost a child. Today in the village of Akekela when somebody is sick they invoke the spirit of this god-child by pronouncing his name while holding any object of choice selected in the natural environment (e.g. a tree, an onion, a piece of stick, a cup of water, a piece of rock etc.), and immediately that object would become a healing tool. In fact, during the narration of this myth, Aïcha Saïd Larissa, the researcher, was taken to the forest to illustrate how this happens (see Fig 1). In this photo, Aïcha Saïd Larissa is drinking directly from a tree stem that her narrator has just cut, after invoking the spirit of the child of God to provide them with drinking water. The intriguing thing is that pure water flowed out of the branch cut in her presence.





Fig. 1: Aïcha Saïd Larissa is drinking directly from a tree stem in the Ngat forest in Awae, Nyong-et-Mfoumou Division, Centre region of Cameroon (photo courtesy of Aïcha Saïd Larissa, December 1, 2019).

Also, the deities are depicted as knowledgeable but not all-knowing; and are supernatural but not omni-present; “powerful but not all-powerful” as noted by Hansen (p. 92)*. Just like humans, they sometimes act out of ignorance. In the narrative structure through the use of dramatic irony, the god-couple is not even aware that some of the women did not get their message because they were far-off afield working in the farms and second they are unable to find the missing child. Moreover, sometimes deities come to live among humans and

could either reward or punish them depending on the latter's treatment of them. There is also a possible link with the Biblical story of God instructing his people to mark their doorposts in order to save them from an oncoming disaster. In this case, a possible answer to God's seeming inability to distinguish his people from the others is that myths were also told to teach moral lessons and so in this case just as in the case above, the gods also wanted to reward the obedient and punish defaulters. This claim is supported by the fact that the missing child later on reveals his true self and returns to live as a spirit with its family. This indicates the fact that the gods sometimes take human form and dwell among humans in order to test, protect or bless them. As with most cultural practices, the Ewondos use this myth to explain why they mark their children.

* William Hansen, *Classical Mythology: A Guide to the Mythical World of the Greeks and Romans*, Oxford: OUP, 2005.

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

[Child, children](#) [Disobedience](#) [Obedience](#) [Parents \(and children\)](#)
[Relationships](#) [Religious beliefs](#)

Further Reading

Hansen, William, *Classical Mythology: A Guide to the Mythical World of the Greeks and Romans*, Oxford: OUP, 2005.

Addenda

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