Divine Che Neba, "Entry on: The Chimpanzee and the Orphan by Hypolithe Annicete", peer-reviewed by Eleanor A. Dasi and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1283. Entry version as of November 07, 2026.

Hypolithe Annicete

The Chimpanzee and the Orphan

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	The Chimpanzee and the Orphan
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	Bamenyam
Country of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Cameroon
Full Date of the Recording of the Story for the Databasey	February 5, 2019
More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Bamenyam, Ngalim, West Cameroon
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
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Creators



Hypolithe Annicete (Storyteller)

Age of narrator: 69 (in 2019)

Social status: Commoner

Profession: Livestock Farming

Language of narration: Bamenyam

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating

Bamenyam* is situated in Ngalim, between latitude 5.75720 N and 10.32170E, West Region of Cameroon. Its main religion is Animism and its language is Menyam. Politically, the chief is at the pinnacle followed by his notables. Some traditional days are sacred and are set aside for sacrifices and worship. The Bamenyams believe in the worship of ancestors, and their funeral ceremonies are usually very elaborate. They have dances that are only reserved for those initiated into different cults.

* See: Warnier, Jean-Pierre and Ian Fowler, "A Nineteenth-century Ruhr in Central Africa", *Africa* 49.4 (1979): 329–351.

Summary

In the days of our forefathers, there lived a man called Məkwŏcwà. He was married and had two sons namely: Mwōfɔ and Nəbwâsyâ. His wife died during childbirth, leaving Məkwŏcwà, now a widower, to bring up their two sons single-handedly. One day, Məkwŏcwà became sick and sensed he was going to die. He called Mwōfɔ, his elderly son, and told him, “My son, I have lived in this world and have known no joy. But as I am on my journey to the land of the ancestors, I give you my blessing. You will inherit all my wealth. My hunting equipment will be yours. When I die, spend six days before visiting your traps.”

When Mwōfɔ’s father died, he buried him and grieved deeply. Six days later, the orphan took a spear and left to visit the traps as his late father instructed him. Once in the forest, he found a big chimpanzee on his path, and as he was about to strike it with his spear, the chimpanzee jumped up, held the spear and asked Mwōfɔ the following question: “Which part of my body would you like to strike: my head, chest, or back? Tell me”. The young orphan hesitated but did not have an immediate response. So, the chimpanzee held him and whipped him mercilessly before releasing him. Mwōfɔ went back to the village not knowing what to do next.

Mwōfɔ was already grown up and was ripe for marriage. He had been admiring Maffo, a beautiful maiden in a neighbouring village, but was afraid to make a love proposal to her. One day, he mustered courage,

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moved up to her and requested her hand in marriage. When he got to his intended bride's village, he met another suitor; a notable from a royal background. This suitor was handsome, strong, well-bred and wealthy. When Maffo's mother met them (both suitors and the daughter), she asked the daughter to go and sleep and gave an appointment for the next day to the suitors.

At dawn, the Maffo's mother called both suitors and told them, "I have not yet had a farm to cultivate groundnuts for this season. Let each of you take part of the forest and clear it so that I can do farming there this year. He who clears the greater portion will be my daughter's husband."

Immediately, Mwōfɔ brought out his machete and went straight to the forest. He had hardly started clearing when the same chimpanzee that had whipped him mercilessly came up and said to him, "You wanted to strike me with the spear, didn't you. What part of my body did you want to strike? The head, the chest, or the back?" Still, the orphan could not provide an answer. The chimpanzee whipped him again thoroughly. When he got tired of flogging him, the chimpanzee ordered Mwōfɔ to sit down, which he did without arguing. The chimpanzee took the orphan's machete, cleared the forest, cut down the trees and the place was all clean. When that portion of the forest was neatly prepared for cultivation, the chimpanzee gave Mwōfɔ his machete and disappeared into the other part of the forest.

In the evening, both suitors went back to the village. Maffo's mother served them some food and told them, "Go and sleep, the head of the family, my daughter and I will go and check your cleared portions tomorrow."

They all woke up very early in the morning and visited the notable and wealthy man's portion. They were all happy at the man's work but when they arrived at the orphan's farm, they realised that his portion tripled that of the notable. The issue of marriage was no more raised. No sooner had they got back to the village, the head of the family declared to the two suitors: "Here is your wife, your property. Take her away with you. You two will decide what to do about her there. Leave my house." They were both confused. However, both men held the lady by the hand and left with her. They arrived at a crossroad after walking for a long time and an argument sprung up between them. The notable wanted them to go right but the orphan preferred left. They started quarrelling over who is who as far as the lady is

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concerned. Suddenly, the chimpanzee appeared and asked the orphan the same questions, yet he could not provide a response. It fell on Mwōfɔ again and whipped him mercilessly. The notable and the lady were afraid. Then the animal stopped beating Mwōfɔ and asked him to sit down. The chimpanzee turned and took a leaf and gave the notable and told him, “Use this leaf to fetch some water from the nearby stream quickly. Make sure you do not return here without the water”.

Once at the stream, the notable fetched the water but it all leaked out. He wondered what he could do to fulfil that assignment, and made every effort to no avail. He thought he would be flogged to death if he went back to the chimpanzee without water. So, he ran into the bush and escaped to his village.

The chimpanzee, the orphan and the lady waited for the wealthy man in vain. Then, the chimpanzee told Mwōfɔ, “Here is your wife, take her along with you”. The young orphan joyfully took his wife to his village. When he got to the village, he narrated his experiences with the Chimpanzee to Nəbwâsyâ, his younger brother, and they both concluded that it was the spirit of their late father manifesting in the animal. Both brothers then organised a great feast to celebrate the wedding. From then the chimpanzee became a sacred animal and totem of many people in Bamenyam.

Analysis

Issues of reincarnation are prevalent, and have been perceived in different ways, in different societies. In some societies, reincarnation manifests spiritually while in others it takes on the physical form. Among the Bamenyams of the West Region of Cameroon, both forms manifest. Physically, the soul of the departed sometimes transmigrates and sojourns in objects of nature or other human forms (ghost or spirit children). Spiritually it hovers around and appears in dreams and visions.

The Bamenyam affirm that the soul, after separating from the body, can settle in animals or other objects of nature. The Chimpanzee, which is considered the reincarnated soul of the orphan’s father, as the above myth purports, appears not only to caution, bless, and protect, but also as a source of providence. Besides the above form of reincarnation among the Bamenyams, they also believe in different shapes and forms that humanity can take after death. These shapes include: ghosts, invisible voices, living in trees and some beings living

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	in a new location.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Child, children Heritage Love Orphans Reincarnation
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.
Addenda	Researcher: Divine Che Neba Assistant researcher: Piere Roderigue Fouguap Method of data collection: Tape recording and note taking

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