Divine Che Neba, "Entry on: How Sickness, Old Age and Death Began by Joseph Ndipowah Teneng", peer-reviewed by Daniel A. Nkemleke and Katarzyna Marciniak and team members in Warsaw. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/162. Entry version as of November 02, 2026.

Joseph Ndipowah Teneng

How Sickness, Old Age and Death Began

Cameroon

TAGS: Aesop's Fables African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions



We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	How Sickness, Old Age and Death Began
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	Pinying
Country of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Cameroon
Full Date of the Recording of the Story for the Databasey	October 3, 2016
More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Ndefang- Pinying, North-West Region, Cameroon
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover (Young adults + adults)
Author of the Entry	Divine Che Neba, University of Yaoundé 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com Katarzyna Marciniak and team members in Warsaw, University Warsaw, kamar@al.uw.edu.pl

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Creators



Joseph Ndipowah Teneng (Storyteller)

Social status: Commoner

Profession: Farmer

Language of narration: Pinying

Age of Narrator: 68 (in 2017)

Bio prepared by Divine Che Neba, University of Yaoundé 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating

Background of Ndefang-Pinying: Ndefang-Pinying constitutes one of the villages in Ngemba. Ngemba lies between Longitude 100 12’ and 100 47’ East of Greenwich Meridian and latitude 50 45’ and 60 18’ North or the Equator. Asobo Pius in “Mother Tongue Influence on English Language in Cameroon: A Case Study of the Pinyin Language” notes that the Pinyin people serve as universal sets of the Ngembas of the North west region and the Bamboutous of the Western region. Thus, the Pinyin language, accordingly shares some intelligibility with the Bamboutous Language because of family and trade links. Like most Ngemba people, they believe in God, divinities, spirits, ancestors and the practice of magic and medicine. For them, as it is the case with most Ngemba villages, there is nothing like natural death.

Occasion: Staged performance

Summary

This story uses the motif of race between a fast and a slow animal, well known from the Aesopian tradition (*The Hare and the Tortoise*). Yet, here the consequences of the slow animal’s victory go well beyond the moral of the myth and explain why human life is ephemeral.

At the beginning of the world, there was nothing like sickness, old age, and death. People lived on and on forever. There was no pain, nor sorrow and everybody lived happily. But the world was becoming almost overpopulated or congested with people. One day, Dog and Chameleon had a heated debate on the issue of the world’s population. Chameleon held the view that when people are born, they should grow old or fall sick and subsequently die. When people die, this creates a chance for other people to be born to replace them. And the newborns will live on and subsequently die. This to Chameleon would guarantee the continuity of the cycle of death and life. But Dog held a contrary view. To him, people should never fall sick, grow old or even die because all these cause sorrow and pain to mankind. People should live on and on forever without falling sick, growing old or dying.

Neither Chameleon nor Dog gave in to the other’s point of view. Both

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strongly maintained their own opinions. No compromise. They took their case to God and asked him to say who between the two was right. Each of them defended his point of view so intelligently and well that God could not find fault in any of the two views. God, being just, told them that their case could only be settled through a contest. "Look at that drum on top of that hill! Whichever of you can reach it first, is the winner. He can then drum it and announce his own point of view. I shall with immediate effect adopt the point of view announced thereof," said God to the two contestants, Chameleon and Dog, in the presence of all the people in the world.

When the race began, Dog being a fleet-footed runner, ran as fast as he could, leaving Chameleon many, many miles behind. Chameleon did not surrender but crawled slowly and steadily towards the mountain on which the drum was placed. In the course of the race, Dog came across a dead buffalo. He did not hesitate in settling to munch this free meat. He ate and ate and ate until the Chameleon overtook him, climbed up the mountain and drummed:

"When people are born they should grow old, fall sick and die.

When people are born they should grow old, fall sick and die.

When people are born they should grow old, fall sick and die…"

Dog was stung by the drumming and the announcement made by Chameleon. He left the meat, gathered all his strength and ran "v-e-e-p" [sound made by narrator], up the mountain. But it was already too late. God remained faithful to his pledge and Chameleon's announcement was registered. Since then, when people are born, they are subject to sickness, old age, and death. This is the origin of sickness, old age, and death.

Analysis

Myths related to the origin of death are universal, with each region in the world adopting a specific take. This myth in Pinyin recalls an early Greek myth of the origin of death, wherein death is a consequence of the disagreement between Zeus and Prometheus. As a result of this quarrel, Zeus creates a woman, Pandora, and presents her to Prometheus' brother Epimetheus, with death being one of the results of her opening of the box, which she was given to bring with her.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aesop's Fables African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adversity Animals Death Humanity Old age (Old people) Race Religious beliefs Success and failure
Further Reading	Beier, Ulli, ed., *The Origin of Life and Death. African Creation Myths*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1966. *Medicine in Mythology and Literature: Homer, Greek Gods and Goddesses, and the Plague*, exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu (accessed: August 23, 2018). *Ancient Greek Mythology Diseases, Health, Illness, Infections, Conditions*, home-remedies-for-you.com (accessed: August 23, 2018).
Addenda	Researcher: Divine Che Neba Ndefang- Pinying, North-West Region, Cameroon. Research Assistant: Awah Celine (trans.). Method of data collection: Tape recording. Editor: Daniel A. Nkemleke.

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