Eleanor A. Dasi, "Entry on: Koi and the Kola Nuts: A Tale from Liberia by Verna Aardema, Joe Cepeda", peer-reviewed by Divine Che Neba, Daniel A. Nkemleke and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/583. Entry version as of September 14, 2026.

Verna Aardema , Joe Cepeda

Koi and the Kola Nuts: A Tale from Liberia

United States of America (1999)

TAGS: African Storytelling African Traditions Hero(es)

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

General information	
Title of the work	Koi and the Kola Nuts: A Tale from Liberia
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1999
First Edition Details	Verna Aardema, *Koi and the Kola Nuts: A Tale from Liberia*. Ill. by J. Cepeda, New York Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1999, 32 pp.
ISBN	0689856776
Genre	Folk tales, Illustrated works
Target Audience	Crossover (children and young adults)
Author of the Entry	Eleanor A. Dasi, The University of Yaoundé 1, wandasi5@yahoo.com
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This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators

Verna Aardema , 1911 - 2000
(Author)

Verna Norberg Aardema Vugteveen was born in New Era, Michigan on June 6, 1911. She taught elementary school in Michigan from 1934–1973. She is known for her ability to adapt and retell traditional tales and folklore from distant cultures (usually Africa and Mexico) to children. She published her first collection of stories, *Tales from the Story Heart* in 1960 and in 1976 her book, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* earned her the Caldecott Medal. She died on May 11, 2000 and was buried in Fort Myers, Michigan.

Sources:

en.m.wikipedia.org (accessed: July 29, 2021).

booklogymagazine.com (accessed: July 29, 2021).

Bio prepared by Eleanor A. Dasi, University of Yaoundé 1, wandasi5@yahoo.com

Joe Cepeda (Illustrator)

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Joe Cepeda began college life with engineering at Cornell University and ended with a BFA from California State University in 1992. Upon completion, he took up a career as an illustrator and has been one since then. He has illustrated more than thirty books for kids, some of them award-winning. Some of his illustrations have appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *Buzz*, *Inc. Magazine* and *Latina Magazine*. In 2000, he received

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the Recognition of Merit Award from the George G. Stone Centre for children's books. He is a member of the Graphic Artist's Guild and president of the Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles, SILA. He currently lives in Los Angeles with his family.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: July 29, 2021).

scholastic.com (accessed: July 29, 2021).

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Additional information

Summary

Chief Ogumefu dies, and his youngest son, Koi, does not get a share of the royal possessions when the old Wise Man divvies them up. Being a hunter, Koi arrives from the forest and finds his three older brothers hurrying off with their inherited animals and ivory. Koi asks the old Wise Man for his share, but the older man just stares at him. Then, he finds a little kola nut* tree and hands it over to Koi. Koi, at first, feels cheated but soon realises that he can make something out of the kola nuts. So, he picks the kola nuts from the tree, wraps them in a mat, ties the mat on a *kinja*** and sets out on the path that leads north from the village. During his journey, he helps a snake, an army of ants and a crocodile who all desperately needed kola nuts – the snake needed kola nuts for its sick mother, the ants needed them to replace the forest Devil's nuts they ate, and the crocodile needed them to pay for the rainmaker's dog it ate. Feeling happy to be relieved of his burden, Koi jauntily climbs over the mountain and finds himself in Chief Fulikolli's kingdom.

He introduces himself as the son of the great Chief Ogumefu. Chief Fulikolli concludes that he is one of the numerous suitors who want to win over his beautiful daughter, Fula, and half his kingdom. Thus, Koi seizes the opportunity and complies with the Chief's conditions to complete the three tasks required of every suitor. While at the tasks, Koi solicits the help of the animals he had helped during his journey. Koi finally earns Chief Fulikolli's trust, the beautiful Fula's love and half of the kingdom as promised him. He is declared "Chief Koi," a grand wedding ceremony is organised in honour of him, during which he says to himself, "Now I know it to be true: Do good, and good will come back to you in full measure and overflowing."

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* A wild West African bitter fruit, eaten for its flavour and medicinal properties.

** A *kinja* is a carrying frame made of sticks or bamboo. It is worn upon the back and held in place by straps across the shoulders. It is common in most parts of Africa.

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Analysis	The story introduces readers to the injustices that sometimes accompany the distribution of an inheritance. The old Wise Man who doles out Chief Ogumefu's property, in his wisdom, does not put Koi, the youngest son, on the inheritance list. Since older people in Africa are seen to be endowed with much wisdom, the Wise Man must have known, based on Koi's skills, that he would make a fortune out of any little thing he is given. Koi, for his part, does not give in to despair but makes the best out of what he is given. This demonstration of optimism motivates him to venture into the unknown. The help he gives to the serpent, the ants and the crocodile along the way are repaid to help him accomplish the suitor tasks, which he would not have been able to do by himself. He acknowledges that it is because of his goodness that he gains the trust of Chief Fulikolli and dominion over half of his land and wins the love of beautiful Fula as his wife. The illustration on the cover shows a little boy sitting under a shrivelling little kola nut tree, with serpents, ants, and a crocodile, looking like all hope is lost. However, in the other illustrations inside the book, optimism sets in when we see him offering kola nuts to these animals. In many West African traditions, kola nuts are sacred and are used for purposes such as accompanying libation to the ancestors, soothsaying and pacts of peace. That is why the Igbo people of Nigeria say, "He who brings kola, brings life." Koi's story encourages young adults to be optimistic about life and expect little or nothing from their parents through inheritance. They can build their legacies by being self-reliant. But they should also strive to maintain positive values like helping those in need without expecting anything in return. Nature will always find a way to reward them.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Storytelling African Traditions Hero(es)
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth	Animals Family Good deeds Heritage Heroism Self Values

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Culture

Further Reading

Abiodum, J. O., *The Aged in African Society*, Lagos: Nade Nigeria Ltd & F.B. Ventures, 2002.

Sundstrom G. L., “The Cola nut. Functions in West African social life”, *Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia* 26 (1966): 135–146.

Addenda

Country of origin: Liberia

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