Folk stories from Southern Nigeria, West Africa

Dayrell Elphinstone
Title: Folk stories from Southern Nigeria, West Africa

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BY ANDREW LANG

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JU-JU MASK FROM IBO COUNTRY, SOUTHERN NIGERIA
FOLK STORIES
FROM
SOUTHERN NIGERIA
WEST AFRICA

BY
ELPHINSTONE DAYRELL, F.R.G.S., F.R.A.I.
DISTRICT COMMISSIONER, SOUTHERN NIGERIA

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ANDREW LANG

WITH FRONTISPICE

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CONTENTS

Frontispiece from a Drawing in Colour by
Major G. M. de L. Dayrell

Introduction ........................................... vii
I. The Tortoise with a Pretty Daughter .......... 1
II. How a Hunter obtained Money from his
Friends the Leopard, Goat, Bush Cat, and
Cock, and how he got out of repaying them . . 6
III. The Woman with two Skins .................... 11
IV. The King’s Magic Drum ........................ 20
V. Luen and the King’s Wife ........................ 29
VI. Of the Pretty Stranger who Killed the King 33
VII. Why the Bat flies by Night .................... 36
VIII. The Disobedient Daughter who Married a Skull 38
IX. The King who Married the Cock’s Daughter 42
X. Concerning the Woman, the Ape, and the Child 46
XI. The Fish and The Leopard’s Wife; or, Why the
Fish lives in the Water ............................. 49
XII. Why the Bat is Ashamed to be seen in the
Daytime .............................................. 51
XIII. Why the Worms live Underneath the Ground 56
XIV. The Elephant and the Tortoise; or, Why the
Worms are Blind and the Elephant has Small
Eyes ..................................................... 58
XV. Why a Hawk kills Chickens .................... 62
XVI. Why the Sun and the Moon live in the Sky 64
XVII. Why the Flies Bother the Cows ............. 66
XVIII. Why the Cat kills Rats ......................... 68
XIX. The Story of the Lightning and the Thunder 70
XX. Why the Bush Cow and the Elephant are bad
Friends ............................................... 72
Contents

XXI. The Cock who caused a Fight between two Towns ........................................ 76
XXII. The Affair of the Hippopotamus and the Tortoise; or, Why the Hippopotamus lives in the Water ........................................ 79
XXIII. Why Dead People are Buried ........................................ 81
XXIV. Of the Fat Woman who Melted Away ........................................ 83
XXV. Concerning the Leopard, the Squirrel, and the Tortoise ........................................ 86
XXVI. Why the Moon Waxes and Wanes ........................................ 91
XXVII. The Story of the Leopard, the Tortoise, and the Bush Rat ........................................ 93
XXVIII. The King and the Ju Ju Tree ........................................ 98
XXIX. How the Tortoise overcame the Elephant and the Hippopotamus ........................................ 104
XXX. Of the Pretty Girl and the Seven Jealous Women ........................................ 107
XXXI. How the Cannibals drove the People from Insofan Mountain to the Cross River (Ikom) ........................................ 115
XXXII. The Lucky Fisherman ........................................ 119
XXXIII. The Orphan Boy and the Magic Stone ........................................ 121
XXXIV. The Slave Girl who tried to Kill her Mistress ........................................ 126
XXXV. The King and the 'Nsiat Bird ........................................ 133
XXXVI. Concerning the Fate of Essido and his Evil Companions ........................................ 135
XXXVII. Concerning the Hawk and the Owl ........................................ 142
XXXVIII. The Story of the Drummer and the Alligators ........................................ 145
XXXIX. The 'Nsasak Bird and the Odudu Bird ........................................ 153
XL. The Election of the King Bird (the black-and-white Fishing Eagle) ........................................ 156
INTRODUCTION

Many years ago a book on the Folk-Tales of the Eskimo was published, and the editor of The Academy (Dr. Appleton) told one of his minions to send it to me for revision. By mischance it was sent to an eminent expert in Political Economy, who, never suspecting any error, took the book for the text of an interesting essay on the economics of "the blameless Hyperboreans."

Mr. Dayrell's "Folk Stories from Southern Nigeria" appeal to the anthropologist within me, no less than to the lover of what children and older people call "Fairy Tales." The stories are full of mentions of strange institutions, as well as of rare adventures. I may be permitted to offer some running notes and comments on this mass of African curiosities from the crowded lumber-room of the native mind.

1. *The Tortoise with a Pretty Daughter.*—The story, like the tales of the dark native tribes of Australia, rises from that state of fancy by which man draws (at least for purposes of fiction) no line between himself and the lower animals. Why should not the fair heroine, Adet, daughter of the tortoise, be the daughter of human parents? The tale would be none the less interesting, and a good deal more credible to the mature intelligence. But the ancient
Introduction

fashion of animal parentage is presented. It may have originated, like the stories of the Australians, at a time when men were totemists, when every person had a bestial or vegetable "family-name," and when, to account for these hereditary names, stories of descent from a supernatural, bestial, primeval race were invented. In the fables of the world, speaking animals, human in all but outward aspect, are the characters. The fashion is universal among savages; it descends to the Buddha's jataka, or parables, to Æsop and La Fontaine. There could be no such fashion if fables had originated among civilised human beings.

The polity of the people who tell this story seems to be despotic. The king makes a law that any girl prettier than the prince's fifty wives shall be put to death, with her parents. Who is to be the Paris, and give the fatal apple to the most fair? Obviously the prince is the Paris. He falls in love with Miss Tortoise, guided to her as he is by the bird who is "entranced with her beauty." In this tribe, as in Homer's time, the lover offers a bride-price to the father of the girl. In Homer cattle are the current medium; in Nigeria pieces of cloth and brass rods are (or were) the currency. Observe the queen's interest in an affair of true love. Though she knows that her son's life is endangered by his honourable passion, she adds to the bride-price out of her privy purse. It is "a long courting"; four years pass, while pretty Adet is "ower young to marry yet." The king is very angry when the news of this breach of the royal marriage Act first comes to his ears. He summons the whole of his subjects, his throne, a