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a researcher's trip to Africa to collect folktales

Folktales in Cameroon: From the Spoken Word to a Framework for Globalizing Afro centric Reasoning  
 Emmanuel K. Ngwainmbi

From July 30 through August 18, 2003, I started a special project of collecting and developing folktales from Cameroon and eventually publishing them, in order to use Afro centric reasoning tools to further creative learning and critical thinking among American students. Developed under the auspices of the K-12 International Outreach Program, established by the University of North Carolina International Programs Center, the project would involve narrating the stories to students, conducting workshops for Elementary and Middle School students on African folklore, and giving lectures. The project was endorsed by the Pasquotank Public School Foundation and partially funded by the Southern Education Review Board.

I have vehemently posited that globalization agents—transnational corporations, industrialized nations, governments, settlers, expatriates and the like--must implement measures that protect indigenous tangible and intangible cultural structures, in order to sustain the integrity of local institutions and to preserve and utilize local knowledge systems for the benefit of all. Since communities and nations have relied on indigenous customs, values and beliefs for community and nation-building, these very systems ought to be preserved and sorted out for the construction of sustainable national identities. Given the multi-ethnic composition of the American society, I am convinced that it would be a propos to carry out a culture-based research, with emphases on foreign customs and a repertoire of plura-ethnic sociololinguial expressions, in order to set a ground-post for the development of a transcultural program for American schools. And, a collection of short stories would serve as a proper template for the education of young minds in northeast North Carolina about Africa—which is generally represented as the forsaken land of beasts, of natural and manmade disasters, featuring famine and tribal warfare. Folktales can be an effective pedagogic tool for enabling young students to acquire the intellectual skills necessary for making better decisions in life and for appreciating the values of non-Western cultures in America. They can enhance tolerance for others, irrespective of political and economic disparities, instead of seeing things foreign as “inferior.”

For me, collecting tales from Kom was more than a passion--It was a mission. I wanted to give back to Jinkfuin, my hamlet, some of what it had given me as a young man—a place to call home, custom, friendship, trust, and love and respect for family. I focused on the rich folklore of the kingdom of Kom in northwestern Cameroon in West Africa. Hence, developing the manuscript “Folktales from Cameroon,” for K-12 readers, embodies my love for my culture and my goal of preserving and sharing its stories and folk wisdom with the rest of the world. Of Jinkfuin’s ever growing population from 10,000 villagers (my 2005 estimate), who live within six-square miles, 99 percent live far below the

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World Bank-defined poverty level and for these salt, two sets of clothes, and a bar of soap are luxuries. Jinkfuin, the hamlet I fondly write describe in my anthropologic-historical novel, *Rage in Okali* and other literary works, lies southeast of Laikom, the traditional capital of the kingdom of Kom in northwestern Cameroon in West Africa.

I stayed in our family compound throughout the project, where I received and entertained many guests everyday, which is typical in a communalistic society like Kom. I had not been home in fifteen years.

#### Background of Folktales in Cameroon

Storytelling for the typical rural African family is like watching a movie on a family channel for the American family. It involves interest, concentration, a good storyline, an excellent narrator with strong voice management skills. Like the main actor in a movie, the narrator must be agile and melodramatic—he must be able to move, use stunts, engage the audience in the action, sing, and raise and drop his voice according to the story. Because 99 percent of the characters—mainly heroes and villains—are animals, the narrator must imitate their sounds and actions, convincing the audience that he is in fact the animal. While the elders generally know more folktales and command a more ornate language than children, both narrate stories with equal finesse. In Severin Cecile Abega's *Contes du Sud du Cameroun: Beme et le Fetiche de son Père* (*Stories from Southern Cameroon: Beme and His Father's Fetish*), a strange hero imitates other animals and, through multiple personalities, begins to acquire human qualities, giving new meaning to objectification. The narrative tone of Peter Wuteh Vakunta's *Lion Man and Other Stories*, set in Bamunka, Ndop; Tortoise the Trickster and *Other Folktales from Cameroon*, collected by Loreto Todd and Geoffrey Whitam; and *Shadows in the Firelight: A Selection of Cameroon Folk tales*, by Patrick Mbunwe-Samba are authoritative, and the main characters are animals that are clever and highly persuasive.

There is a rich flavor in the folktales collected and retold by both Cameroonians and foreign nationals, especially in the considerable amount of animistic and shamanistic experience, a feature that is germane to the folklore of sub-Saharan Africa. Take Eugenia Shanklin's *Exploding Lakes and Maleficent Water in Grassfields Legends and Myth* in which the veteran cultural anthropologist explores the mystical and fetishistic-cum-unnmistakable malevolent beliefs that surround the volcanic activity in Lakes Nyos and Oku in the Grassland region of Cameroon, or "The Track of the Python". Not only do the "visiting" researchers describe the vivacity of storytelling that is marked by metaphysics, they become participant-observers, narrating with biased interest the devoutness with which the indigenes relate to their customs and beliefs. Immersed in the power of the word—that is, the lexical, semantic, and socio-linguistic climate of the tales they are collecting—their own sensitivities are inserted in their narrative. This is not surprising, because some researchers and story collectors spend years onsite learning and speaking the vernacular of the villagers; observing and participating in the customs, food, and beliefs of "characters"; and learning the context in which the stories are told and as well as the interactive nature of the tellers and the audience. Shanklin, for example, who has spent over twenty-five years studying the culture and customs of the Kom people and of others in the northwest region of Cameroon, engages local narrators in the construction of the modern tale involving the region around Kom, "Beautiful Deadly Lake Nyos", accepts a title given by the people of Belo and attends rituals, some of which are intended for men only. This sense of 'commitment' has allowed her to be a good listener and fervent teller of the Kom tale, as we further see in "The Odyssey of the Afo-a-Kom," "Avi-a-Ngvim," and "The Path to Laikom: Kom Royal Court Compounds".

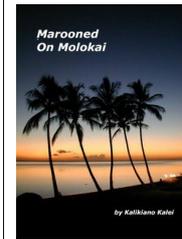
The tales collected are set in the remote villages. Flutes, town criers, and word-of-mouth are the key agents of communication in the kingdom. People transport food crops and wood to their homes on their heads or backs, and depend on dry wood flames for illumination at night. The stories are usually narrated by old people, some of whom are griots, who help to transmit village tradition from one generation to the next.

Around the sixteenth century, Kom villages were independent villages in the grasslands and mountains where the migrating Bantu groups lived. The political structure was monarchical, but, for the most part, the citizens were independent. Their kings demanded little in the way of tribute or tax. The king's role was that of father, mediator, and leader. He was commander-in-chief of the army, judge, and distributor of real estate. His advisors lived in separate houses within the palace, so that they would be readily available for regular and emergency meetings. This grassland kingdom defined by cartographers is a part of the Northwest Province Cameroon, Sub-Saharan Africa.

#### Data Collection

Collecting the stories was both challenging and interesting; it involved assembling tellers in a house and recording their stories with battery-operated tape recorders. John Ful Ngwainmbi (my father; d. 2005) made an invaluable contribution to the success of the project. A retired school headmaster, he was the oldest educated person in the village and the first parent to send his daughter to school. He had served as chairman of the Jinkfuin Parent-Teacher

#### Marooned on Moloka'i: Coconuts, Dreams & Death by Kalikiano Kalei



A 30 day log (2005) of life on Moloka'i (HI), the last of the 'befoh time' Hawaiian holdouts, for a haole malihini.

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Association and Chairman of Jinkfuin Primary School Development foundation. Due to his high standing in the community, he was able to assemble some of the best storytellers for my project, some from as far away as twenty miles. Located at tvaubar (Jinkfuin three corners), approximately seven miles south of Anyajuah, the site of Bobe Kah-lietu (tr. Don't Hide it) the world renowned seer, Mr. Ngwainmbi's compound is set in a thirty square-foot courtyard, with four houses to accommodate his wives and children. Each house contains three bedrooms, has a zinc roof, cemented floors, and only one entry and one exit door, with the exception of Mr. Ngwainmbi's house which has a front and back door, allowing direct access for visitors and the family. The storytelling sessions were conducted in my father's house, which faces the road that links the towns of Belo, Oku, and Ndop. The parlor had five big sofas but normally takes five times as many people, especially when I am around. Yes, there was standing room and everyone felt invited.

Helping us was Phillip Ndah, a 50-year old Jinkfuin-born bricklayer-turned pastor. Every day, Phillip rose at 3am and traveled the length and breadth of the villages, trekking as far as Anjin, Ashing, Njinikom, and Fundong to catch the storytellers before they dispersed to their farms. For those unable to come, he recorded their tales with tape-recorders and batteries that I had given him. The task of assembling people was daunting because heavy rains fall in July and August and the footpaths are slippery all over the hilly and mountainous terrain of the kingdom. Although the tellers are accustomed to narrating stories mainly at home, they did not seem disturbed when invited to assemble in my father's home. Children, parents, and grandparents sat in the living room, and one by one I invited them to my corner in the parlor to record their stories. I ushered them in starting with older persons first—not on a first-arrival basis. Everyone understands and respects this custom. Even though I had been away for fifteen years, the village residents cooperated because they had known me since childhood. As a child I used to play soccer, go hunting, and even participate in bush whacking and other community work. And they liked my father, the teacher who sponsored other people's children through primary school on his meager pension, who undertook the non-salaried task of cleaning up the open marketplace before the first petty trader arrived at 6 a.m. Prior to recording the stories, I obtained a K-12 reader from a local school teacher in Kom to note the titles and narrative styles of previously recorded stories. To ensure that there was no reproduction, I counted on the expertise of Pastor Ndah and my transliterator, Peterson Yuh, a published linguist with a Master's degree in English and a specialty in African languages. I instructed the storytellers that I did not want any story which had been published, warning that they would not be compensated if they failed to comply. To avoid repeating interviews or re-recording the same story, I noted each teller's name, village of origin, age, story titles, and date of recording. I was curious to find out whether tellers from other villages would be bolder or more timid than those from Jinkfuin, because they did not know me well. A timid teller might miss significant details. So, in a bid to increase their participation level, I told them I would provide them with food, beer (a luxury), and money to compensate them for the days they would have spent on their farms—so that they could spend more time or feel more relaxed.

During this week of story collection, I learned that they remembered more stories while eating and drinking! Some recalled the source and place they first heard a story. For instance, many stated that they heard the stories from their grandmothers at dusk during the harvest season in the farmland. Several children said their own father had told them a story one night while in a drunken stupor. Fathers, in this culture, are feared and respected and there is a vast emotional distance between a father and a child. Story-telling is usually the domain of mother and grandparents who feel a closer and stronger attachment to younger children. Hence, a child considers announcing its father as the source of a story a great honor. In some cases, the oldest storytellers mentioned a relic or actual place where the story had taken place. They started like this: "In the first [ancient] days, there lived...." Each teller concluded the narrative with "This is the end of the story."

One teller began as follows:

"My name is Bobe Yibain. I was born in Anjin, just across the valley there [pointing]. This story was first told by the king's nchinsendo" [housekeepers, around

the late-sixteenth century].

The narrators ranged from seven to eighty, an estimate I easily determined by looking at their siblings and grandchildren or by asking them. There were twenty-five tellers. The two seven year olds were in Class Two (Second Grade), but their knowledge of the Kom language seemed as smooth as the frequency with which they remembered the characters' names. The remaining storytellers were adults—six women and seventeen men—who spoke no English. The level of intensity was high because the narrator easily blended songs into the narration, halting ever so purposely to introduce the verse. As with all storytelling sessions, the crowd (both children and adults) gathered in the parlor as well as curious onlookers girded across the front door, chanted in frenzy along with the narrator, even participating in the refrains. There were no arguments about semantics, only sporadic issues with pronunciation of terms.

Most stories were based on animal-animal and animal-human relationships. Some were single tellings about other forms of natural existence. The stories

were told in Itangkum, the main language of the people of Kom Kingdom, of which Jinkfuin is a clan. The average length of a story was five minutes, but some stories were prolonged with repetitive singing and dancing, with the audience actively involved.

The pre-recording tutorial proved fascinating. I showed them the tape and said, "When you see the red light on this machine (signaling recording in progress), start telling the story. When your story finishes, say 'This is the end of my story.'" They giggled and smiled amusingly. Some started telling their stories and then hesitated because, as one told me, they were not sure if their voices were being recorded, so I had to stop and assure them. During the recording sessions, people strayed in to welcome me, as is the custom, interrupting the process and prompting me to rewind and re-record. These interruptions resulted in the arduous task of having the tellers re-start a story.

Before recording the started, I did not realize that the tellers had about ten famous stories in their repertoire, and that the various versions of each story had a different beginning, different character names, and, in some instances, a different setting. Interestingly, there was no difference in the plot, nor did it reflect the experience of the teller or the village from which he/she had come. Hence, several hours into the recording, I had to curb the redundancy by asking all tellers not to narrate these ten stories. Later, this would make the task of re-recording and/or editing tales for consistency and accuracy very difficult and time consuming. In any case, my instruction resulted in the dismissal, without incident, of thirteen narrators from the compound who only knew the ten famous tales.

By the end of the first day of recording, that is, when darkness fell (because this was the rainy season, it got dark by 5 PM), I had only filled six 90-minute tapes out of the twenty tapes I had purchased for the collection. So I asked my father to visit other villages and bring as many tellers as he could find, prompting him to screen the storytellers. I gave Phillip a tape recorder and two sets of batteries with the same instructions and dispatched him immediately. I only had three days left in Cameroon. Phillip returned the night before my departure with four completed tapes and "dead" batteries. Needless to say I could not review the tapes then. Although my father's house and several neighboring homes were wired for electricity, electricity in the village is as scarce as winning 10 million dollars in the lottery in the United States. I only operated the equipment when I returned to the United States, where I realized the last tape was almost inaudible, and I believe I must have lost ten to fifteen stories. Also lost were certain parts of the last story on another tape, especially toward the conclusion of the story as it coincided with the running out of the tape.

The noon before the final day of recording, my batteries were no longer able to function due to repeated rewinding and replaying of tapes in order to ensure accurate recording. On this day, I served the tellers rice, beef with well-spiced peanut stew and beer and, while they were enjoying themselves, I trekked down to Belo, a small town about six kilometers from Jinkfuin, to purchase batteries.

News of the party had spread all over the kingdom, so that when I returned to the compound, more persons approached me volunteering to tell lesser-known stories. One elderly man wanted me to record three stories that his 108-year-old father had told him and which he had never told anyone. Although I was not sure of the latter part of his testimony, I gave him a chance, relying on the body language of the audience to endorse his claim. It turned out that the stories he told—"Children Who Went to Watch Over a Farm," "Bo Kibam," "Why the Tiger Has Marks," "Why the Tortoise's Body Is Segmented," which inform listeners about the natural world, "The Boy Who Outclassed the King," and "The Woman and the Salt"—are among the stories most liked by seventh to tenth graders in schools here in northeast North Carolina.

While in Jinkfuin, I verified the authenticity of the narratives, especially character names and settings, by interviewing local elders, Peterson Yuh, and Kom anthropology student, Gilbert Mbeng, who had conducted patches of research on Afo-a-Kom, the deity reportedly stolen from the King's palace and sold to the Smithsonian Museum in 1966 and returned in 1973.[1] Peterson made sure the narrative approach and stories collected were not the same ones in the Primary School reader being used in schools around the kingdom. I relied on his professional expertise for this important exercise because he had been involved in the production of that collection of stories. There were no discrepancies; however, the greatest challenge arose from translating the stories. To ascertain that the proper meaning was conveyed, the linguist had to transliterate each story into "hearable" English before he translated it. It was impossible to retain original meanings in a story, because some Kom words do not have the same meaning, cannot be translated, or do not construct the same reality in the English language. For example, stories that began with "Na nyamsi leh mein na ghu"—translated literally as "That animals had once been"—would not make sense to readers of the English language, unless translated as follows: "Once upon a time, there were animals...." In this version the semantic meaning is compromised, because the literal meaning emphasizes place, while the second translation emphasizes time. To reach a compromise, the linguist made numerous suggestions until we could find English terms and phrases that were as close to the original text as our knowledge of the language would allow. Certainly, problems such as these consumed our time, prompting us to work into the wee hours of the morning.

While listening to the tapes, we realized that the most interesting stories—funny, laughter provoking, and witty—had been retold with additions, negating my previous warning and instructions. We sought to identify or trace the correct spelling of names and leave out interferences, like the infrequent greetings and noises from stray dogs, chickens, and cats. Typically, it took four hours to complete listening to and writing out three or four stories in a 90-minute tape.

#### Folktales of Kom

To show how the stories are repositories of African culture, we have to listen to the fluency with which the narrators (young, old, male, and female) recounted them, visualize their faces covered with smiles, facial muscles contracting when they sang the refrain or engaged in a dialogue, and the enthusiasm and anticipation that gripped everyone in the house. Among the Kom people, the atmosphere during storytelling is mystical and gallant. Picture a dark, single-room house after dinner, filled with children and adults including husband, wife, and relatives gathered around a blazing fire listening to the storyteller. The teller, who is often a guest or one who has spent much time listening to stories from elders, is visible and audible to everyone. Parents ask children to put out the fire in the hearth and to lie down on their bamboo beds and close their eyes, because stories are used to lure children to sleep after dinner. Some of the children will quickly fall asleep. Parents and older people then begin to tell tales. The narrator starts with a question: "Mongana?" ("May I tell a story?"), and the listeners reply "Sin ngayn" ("Yes, you may"). From the response, the narrator determines who is still awake. The call-and-response format suggests not only the participatory experience between the storyteller and the listeners, but, most importantly, it engages both parties in a pedagogic activity wherein the keen listener prompts, redirects, or corrects the teller when he omits a section or uses a term not known to the audience. That at least one person has heard the tale is no news, because storytelling is a nightly affair. Hence, when the teller reaches a point where a character communicates a message in a song, the audience promptly sings along with him.

From the sixty stories I collected, I compiled an anthology of eighteen stories, entitled "Folktales from Cameroon," that represent familiar situations young readers can relate to. These stories allow children to imagine a gorilla in the rain forest snatching away children, a bag turning into a lion, a monkey luring children with sweet songs, a farm that harbors tricksters, a house that is a trap for thieves, or going on exciting adventures with animals in the forest.

While tales like "Why the Tiger Has Marks" and "Why the Tortoise's Body Is Segmented" tell listeners about the natural world. They are mainly trickster tales about small but intelligent and wise animals, insects, and birds like the tortoise, lizard, rooster, and swallow, who outsmart the big, strong, and fast animals like the elephant, deer, lion, or hare. "The Boy Who Outclassed the King" and "The Woman and the Salt" narrate how people use their wits to live and achieve higher goals. This collection contains eighteen stories and an introduction. Some among them are suitable for younger children. "A Woman and Her Children" is appropriate for high school students and young adult readers.

When the children go the farm to watch crops, they encounter a series of wonderful but educative events with the lion and other animals. "Bo Aku, the Owner of the Forest" (for ages 5-9) is full of humor, suspense and adventure. Bo Aku, a wily gorilla who is known to fear nothing, keeps a keen eye on the river and forest that surround his house. He lights a fire to lure children to his house. At first the children have fun looking for his hideout; they build a small raft, place masks on it and send it down the river into the rain forest. However, the jungle becomes a mysterious and fearful place once Bo Aku hides the children in a bag "deep in the forest so nobody would find them". Then, he snatches and hides each boy who comes looking for his mates. The rest of the children must come up with a plan to foil the gorilla's and bring things back to normal in the forest. They seek the help of one captured boy's mother, who follows them to the hideout and uses them as a decoy while she releases the boys from the bag. This story suggests that children can triumph or turn adversity into success through teamwork, reasoning, or sharing ideas.

One historical tale is set in the late-sixteenth century, when the Kom people settled in Laikom, the present location of the king's palace. "Avua Ngvum" ("the python's trail") tells about the suicide of the first king of Kom at Bessi, a neighboring clan, and how the Kom people followed the python up through the village of Nkar-Idien (Nso) and down to Laikom where four main families erected a palace, fought many wars with other clans, and built homes in what now constitutes the four main households in the kingdom: Titi-Chia, Itin-alah, Injin-a-sung, and Ikui. Readers will learn that the Ndoh titichia ("The House of Titichia") originated from Nso and became a clan when the Kom people migrated from Ndop, went through Nkar-Idien, and finally settled at the peaks of Laikom. Injin-a-sung are the aborigines of Laikom who crossed over the valley to the tall grass (and settled injinasung) when the ikui-itinalah-achaff settled in Laikom. According to Kom settlement history, the Ikui-itinalah-achaff are the aborigines of the Laikom settlement. One of the three families lived ikui, the up settlement in Laikom; the other itinalah, the down settlement in Laikom; and the next achaff, those who settled in the marshy area.

In "The Dreadful Forest Guard," Bo Kibam, the tortoise, detains a lizard who

has entered his house without permission and forces him to prepare dinner, while he watches from a high chair. After the meal, Bo Kibam asks the lizard to wash a pot and boil water. Secretly, he is planning to slaughter the lizard and cook him in water. The lizard puts the water on the fire, picks up Bo Kibam's guitar, and begins to play it and to sing. Bo Kibam likes the song so much that he jumps down and dances, mocking the lizard with his own song:

Oh, play on, my food, play on.

Oh play on my food, play on!

As he performs, the lizard digs a hole in the wall with his tail. When the hole is big enough for his body, he throws the guitar in Bo Kibam's face, dives through the hole, and scurries back to the village.

In "A Woman and Her Farm," it takes fearlessness, intelligence, and quick feet to stop a band of powerful thieves. Nanteh had a poultry and corn barn. She harvested corn, stored it in her farmhouse for future consumption and planting, and returned to her home in the village. When she went back to the farm she found out some of the corn had been taken away and some of her chickens had been roasted. This experience had occurred five times. One day Nanteh found a fresh trail and wet chicken bones on the floor of the farmhouse, and immediately sensed that the person stealing her property had just left. She made a fire, climbed up into the attic with pots of hot coal, and hid there. Soon, she heard people singing as they approached the farmhouse. She watched them file in led by a hyena whose face appeared to be blindfolded. She knew at once that the hyena was their servant. Next, they prepared a dinner of corn and three chickens from her barn and began feasting. When they had finished eating, they started to dance chong, a special dance for sacred men on sacred occasions in Kom. Nanteh poured the hot coal on their heads. "Who dropped that fire?" one of them asked angrily. Everyone replied: "The Hyena!" and continued dancing. The woman poured five buckets of hot coal and they escaped, leaving their drums behind. The woman came down from the ceiling and took the drums to the king's palace as proof of the theft. To honor her for her bravery and clever work, the king asked his servants to take a piece of cloth and oil and escort her back to her home. This is how the chong dance came into existence in Laikom, the headquarters of the kingdom.

In general, Cameroonian folktales deal with the agrarian community where labor is a communal activity and communication of important information like directions, advice, and decision-making is caste sensitive. Though women own farms, parents and their children plant and harvest the crops together. Children are expected to stay on the farm during the day, track and ward off birds and animals that come to destroy them. They may take their siblings and friends to spend the night on an elevated tree trunk from which they watch crops, especially during the planting season when most animals pose the greatest threat. Tracks along a furrow, chewed leaves, or bent corn stalks are a sign that animals have been to the farm. The children follow the sign to the animal's hideout and set up booby traps along the furrow, or they send dogs to sniff the animals and hunt them down. Any animal caught is taken home and handed over to their mother, who prepares a meal for the entire family. However, wild animals like the porcupine, gorilla, chimpanzee, or deer are slaughtered by the male or father, who must perform rites and must save the beast's horn and feet for medicinal purposes. The father gives the children the animal's head to place in the field in order to scare the birds and animals.

#### Globalizing Afro centric Logic

While the folktales described record universal human experiences with natural forms of existence, any study of aesthetics, phenomena, events, ideas, and personalities related to Africa that does not take into account principles of African reasoning lacks substance. Distinguished Afro centric scholars like Molefi Asante, Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Appiah, and Sulayman Nyang advance that religion, language, kinship ties in society and government, and evidence of history, archeology, linguistics, genetics, and philosophy define the Africanity of Africans. In his essay, "African American Studies: The Future of the Discipline," Asante states: "The Afro centric enterprise is framed by cosmological, epistemological, axiological, and aesthetic issues. In this regard the Afro centric method pursues a world voice distinctly Africa-centered in relationship to external phenomena" (23). The African sense of being is embedded in folklore—proverbs, folktales—and the indigenous communication and socialization patterns traceable in the tales that I have recorded. For example, when the boys in "Bo Aku, Owner of the Forest" realize they are losing their friends, they engage their parents' help in an attempt to find them by informing Bah's mother, yielding to her decision, and accompanying her to Bo Aku's hideout. Besides showing team spirit, this behavior acknowledges that age and authority, or delegation of power, are non-negotiable on the other hand.

Some tales, for example, had proverbs and riddles such as:

\* The one who lies on a borrowed mat should realize he is sleeping on a cold bed. \* Borrow my legs and you'll go where I want you to go.

\* Tickle me, I tickle you ("you make me feel good, and I'll do the same").

\* It swings forward and swings backward (answer: door).

These are the kinds of messages I sought to convey to readers of the folktales.

The K-12 graders were my primary audience, and they seemed increasingly fascinated by Kom customary laws and traditions. I wanted them to know that

the tales could teach good etiquette and enlighten them about Kom mythology and ways of reasoning. Clearly, these tales provoke critical thinking in the reader and the audience; raise consciousness, self-awareness, and wisdom; improve moral values; and teach good etiquette. They are eclectic and full of wisdom, humorous and full of suspense.

Ninety-eight percent of the stories contain mayhem and cannibalism, with the main characters and "bad guys" being harshly condemned, crushed, slaughtered, cut into pieces, eaten alive, or cooked and feasted upon. The dialogue in stories like "The Greedy King of the Jungle" and "Woin Mbong Kidia" ("The children of Mbong Kidia") is filled with mayhem and blood drinking. In "The Greedy King of the Jungle", a lion catches a woman's children who are watching a farm, while in the latter a leopard eats boys sent to fetch water and hoists their heads on a stick to scare other children. In my retellings, I softened the tone or developed the narrative differently, in order to produce stories suitable for the K-12 readers in the West, while retaining salient messages like good morals, etiquette, and cultural background. It should be emphasized, however, that the violence and mayhem in Kom folktales are meant to teach children and young adults that despite their direct access to humans, the world and the environment are not necessarily safe. Hence, youngsters should be mentally and physically prepared to withstand natural and made-made challenges.

As an educator, I believe that young students in the suburban environment need to cultivate an understanding of the thought processes of other cultures through folklore—a medium that communicates traditional wisdom and customs to the younger generation—in order to gainfully apply themselves in an ethnically sensitive society like America.

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