

Children's Book Review

Makuchi. (2008). *The sacred door and other stories: Cameroon folktales of the Beba*. Athens, OH: Ohio University. 176 pp., ISBN: 0-89680-256-6 (pbk), \$16.95 (10-Adults).

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This work is a delightful and engaging collection of tales from West Africa. Presenting folktales from her homeland, Makuchi offers readers a glimpse of the culture of Cameroon. The simple tales are easily understood, but they include nuanced presentations of Cameroonian customs and even vocabulary. The tradition of storytelling was disrupted for Makuchi herself when she came to the United States, because the stories ceased to be part of her daily routine. She now recaptures the tradition in this collection by passing on to us the stories she grew up with. These tales are reconstructed from childhood memories of the stories her mother told.

Even while entertaining listeners, folktales play an important role in society, since they pass down creation stories, cultural values, and explanations of why things are the way they are, and they warn of the consequences for bad behavior or dissidence. Though it is traditionally men who record the facts of civilization, the telling of folktales, with their transmission of embodied tradition, is often the domain of women. This pattern of transmission is found in nearly every society, as women often work communally, whether it be tending children, working in the home, or working in the field; they tell stories not only to pass the time, but also to entertain and teach. Because of the important cultural values in folktales, such men as the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault have memorialized the tales that women tell. However, Makuchi, who is also known as Dr. Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi, professor of English and Comparative Literature at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, plays both roles. She has already published a monograph, *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (1997), as well as a collection of her own stories of Cameroon, *Your Madness, Not Mine* (1999). In this new work, Makuchi combines the tasks of storyteller and academic recorder in order to preserve folktales of the Beba region, located in the North West Province of Cameroon.

Though *The Sacred Door* is intended for a universal audience, it could easily be incorporated into middle and high school Language Arts classes or adapted into a picture book format. This work features 34 stories, all etiological to some extent, divided into three parts. The first part, with 11 stories, features animal characters and explains "why this or that phenomenon has come to be the way it is today" (193). The second and third parts, consisting of 12 and 11 stories respectively, also feature explanatory tales, though these present human characters and often disclose a piece of history or present a problem to be solved in the story. Most of the stories in this collection seek to instruct the

listener on respect, knowledge of Beba culture, patience, and obedience. Many also warn against vices, such as conceit, excessive pride, foolishness, and sloth.

Part One begins with several stories that emphasize the behavior or appearance of certain animals. "The Race," much like the Aesop fable, is a tortoise-and-hare story, though this version presents more than just the arrogant, overconfident hare, with which Western audiences are familiar. In the Beba version, the deceitful tortoise exploits his family members' resemblance to each other for his gain, strategically positioning them along the race route so that he is always in the lead and eventually wins.

Humans are the central characters in the stories in Part Two, which begins with the tale, "Metse-Tsate-Nfo, (Sense-Pass-King)," about a boy who must outwit an arrogant king. The king, who becomes angry when he learns that the boy has taken such a presumptuous name, which also means "Intelligence-Greater-Than-the-King's," determines:

to teach this unrepentant, pretentious sapling a lesson. This so-called Metse-Tsate-Nfo had to learn that he wasn't above the law of the land—*his* law. The punishment for this upstart was death, ... He had to make an example of him. (p. 54)

As part of his plan to kill the boy, the king invites Sense-Pass-King to give him a haircut. Sense-Pass-King knows something is amiss when he, a commoner, is asked to perform such a task. Upon his arrival to the palace, Sense-Pass-King offers the king some corn he prepared. When his hair is cut, the king demands the boy's death if Sense-Pass-King cannot reattach the shorn hair. Sense-Pass-King agrees to return the hair to the king's head on the condition that he return the kernels to the ear of corn the king enjoyed. By this, the king is not only deprived of his revenge for the boy's name, he is also made a fool of. But there is another, more subtle message about unjust leaders in this tale. The boy asks himself, as he observes the king's men blindly obeying orders while refusing to think for themselves, "What is a king worth without his sycophants" (p. 58)? The question is answered in what the tyrant king becomes: nothing. He loses his throne to the boy with the prophetic name. The story underscores how leaders gain and hold power over those who are too willingly subservient.

Part Three features several stories about greed, jealousy, and the consequences of these vices. The book's title tale, "The Sacred Door," is the story of a poor man, without family or companions, who, as a reward for his kindness and generosity, is granted happiness and prosperity in an unfamiliar land. There is only one condition: he must never open a particular sacred door. He lives long in opulence, even ruling the land he entered so mysteriously. But like many rulers, even honorable ones, he feels entitled to know everything. He thus passes through the sacred door and finds himself as he once was: poor and

alone. The teller then asks the audience, "What would you have done?" (p. 172), encouraging the listener to reflect on the story and what it teaches about human nature.

Because Makuchi is reconstructing these tales from both childhood memories and graduate research, it is impossible to know if they are complete or told in exactly the same way she learned them. But, even if they have been altered since the time Makuchi was a child, the nature of the folktale is fluid, subject to change (as opposed to texts preserved in writing or print), and so these printed tales are as near to authentic representations of Cameroonian folktales as we will read. They are also beautiful and necessary ones as well.

Most children in US classrooms are far more familiar with the folktales of Europe and North America, and many US students lack basic knowledge of world and cultural geography outside the continental US. This collection affords children a chance to learn about Cameroon and to see that many of the traditional tales found in Cameroon have common characteristics with tales they already know, thus creating a sense of shared humanity on a global scale. These similarities might also allow students to move beyond xenophobic attitudes or linguistic differences that might otherwise preclude interest in stories of other societies. Exposure to Cameroonian folktales in the classroom will encourage dialogue about the importance of respect and understanding for those who are not "just like us." This work can be used as a foundation for understanding African culture and history. It may also offer some students a link to a history and culture from which their ancestors were stolen.