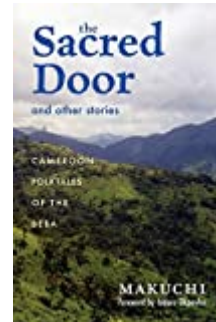




Makuchi. *The Sacred Door and Other Stories: Cameroon Folktales of the Beba.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008. 205. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89680-256-8.



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A Tale is a Message from Yesterday, Transmitted Today for Tomorrow

The Sacred Door and Other Stories is a collection of thirty-three oral narratives of the Beba of Cameroon retold by the Cameroonian writer and academic, Makuchi. The volume itself is divided into three parts organized around the type of narratives presented in each. Each of the stories in part 1 have animals as their main characters and are tales that explain the origin of certain phenomena or the origin of the characteristic behavior of certain animals. For instance, "The Story of Cat and Rat" recounts how cats came to hunt and eat rats, while the "Story of Hawk and Hen" tells us how hawks came to hunt chicks. In this first section, Makuchi uses animal characters to talk about friendships and relationships and how they disintegrate in the face of certain conflicts and issues. Most of the tales here begin with a strong relationship between animal characters, though in these worlds of perfect harmony, there is always a souring of that relationship, as one friend tries to either outsmart the other or break the rules of social conduct in order to achieve his/her own selfish end.

Although all of the stories in this first part take place

in the animal world, the animal characters are stand-ins for humans and communicate and explore existential issues that we are faced with. The tales here are moral tales, teaching acceptable and unacceptable social conduct, behavior, and expectations in Beba society. Indeed, these folktales teach children about the social values they need to situate themselves in their culture and environment. They are stories loaded with symbolism, imagery, anecdotes, and proverbs that are designed to stimulate the intellectual, psychological, and cultural growth of children. They promote acceptable and valued social codes of conduct—by teaching the values of social responsibility, courage, sacrifice, hard work, obedience, honesty, humility, respect for elders, patience—while discouraging behaviors such as envy, selfishness, wickedness, greed, dishonesty, deceit. The main lessons that most of these stories carry is that those who do not abide by the social rules will pay a hefty price for their disobedience and seeming cunning. This lesson is driven home time and again, as we see good animals rewarded for their virtues and bad ones punished for erring.

The stories in part 2 explain the origin of certain phenomena. For example, "The Flutes" explains how diseases like measles, chickenpox, cholera, malaria, yellow fever, and many others were introduced into the world. The characters in the stories in this second part are mostly young boys and girls who interact with animals and/or spirits. These are tales about jealousy, envy, wickedness, evil, polygamy, stepmothers, animals, spirits and encounters between humans, animals, and spirits. The youngsters also always end up finding their way out of life-threatening situations by their intelligence and wit, outsmarting more powerful people and/or animals. Such tales not only entertain children but are also meant to awaken their curiosity, imagination, and creativity.

"The Girls who Refused Suitors" and "Metse-Tsate Nfo" represent two poignant examples of Makuchi's recreation of traditional Beba folktales in order to deal with contemporary issues. "The Girls who Refused Suitors" explores the theme of the corruption of African values as a result of the internalization of Western ideals by Africans during and after colonization, marking it through references to such things as "the land of the whiteman," and the bike (p. 96). In "Metse-Tsate Nfo" Makuchi explores the impact of the rise of individualism in a society that has always praised communality, especially when it comes to marriage. In so many ways a satire about dictatorship, despotism, and the cult of personality in Africa, the king in the story becomes emblematic of African leaders who become so powerful that they alienate, terrorize, and intimidate their own people.

The primary target audience of the stories in part 3 seems to be a more adult readership, with tales such as "Penis, Testicles, and Vagina" and "The Greedy Mother." These stories deal with the issues of sexuality, polygamy, injustice, impatience, stubbornness, greed, selfishness, envy, kindness, and power relations between stepmothers and children. However, these stories also make the point that everyone in the society, no matter what their age, gender, or social status needs to be continually reminded about their society's expectations in terms of good behavior and respect for established social norms.

Makuchi's stories are replete with many characteristics of orature, most notably the liberal use of proverbs. Indeed, Makuchi embellishes each of her stories with a plethora of traditional Beba idioms that are appropriately used in each situation to teach the right lesson at the right time. Although these proverbs and sayings are typically Beba in nature, the author translates them so accurately and beautifully into English that they have largely

retained their original and intended meaning. These proverbs give readers an insight into Beba sociocultural life. They additionally enhance the beauty and music of the stories: "The eye that sees the lion flees from it" (p. 60); "A wise man never urinates against the wind" (p. 112); "Follow a river and you'll find the sea. And if you follow bees you cannot miss honey" (p. 113); and "two hands must wash each other" (p. 125), among many others. While Makuchi uses Beba words and expressions that may not have any English equivalents—such as *ghee* (p. 4) and *nsaa* (p. 7)—she also blends Beba names and expressions with and into English beautifully: "Ankwunyab-the Pig" (p. 8), "Magheb-the-Hawk" (p. 15), and "Bitter-in-the-throat" (p. 22). Makuchi does an excellent job providing the readers with contextual clues to the Beba utterances that she uses in a way that their meaning is always readily understandable by those who don't speak Beba. The use of some of the most fundamental stylistic and aesthetic elements of storytelling in Africa (call-and-response, proverbs, songs, chants, dialogue, repetition, symbolism, imagery, satire, irony) not only shows Makuchi's mastery of both Beba and English, but also the fact that the English language can be bent in order to accurately translate Beba realities. Her use of language is a combination of artistry and mastery that provides young readers with accessible insights into Beba oral tradition.

Furthermore, Makuchi's thematic and stylistic exploitation of the myths, legends, and folktales of her Beba oral culture through a written (and English-language) medium is yet more proof that traditional African oral culture can be tapped and passed on, without compromising either the spirit of its oral performance or the sociocultural dimension of its mission: to use the past to inform the present and guide toward the future.

The book does have some shortcomings, however. While Makuchi mentions in both her preface and afterword that riddle sessions are usually warm-ups intended to test children's wit and knowledge of their culture and environment and also prepare them for the storytelling session itself, she rather perplexingly chooses to invert the rule by putting the riddle session at the end of her book, at the close of the storytelling session. Moreover, the background material on the Beba, their social organization, as well as the social function and meaning of storytelling would have been better placed in the preface, rather than in the afterword. Furthermore, there is the occasional dropped word, incomplete sentence, and typo.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, Makuchiâs ingenuity in translating Beba folktales loaded with proverbs, metaphorical meanings, and references constitutes an engaging and thought-provoking contribution to an ever-growing body of scholarship that promotes the sociocultural and aesthetic relevance of African oral literature to contemporary realities. The book is highly recommended to readers interested in African, African-American, and Caribbean literatures and cultures, childrenâs literature, and folklore.

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