



The Stubborn Child

(A story from Cameroon)

This story took place in a village called Babessi in the North West of Cameroon.

There was a woman who had six children. She was a local farmer who cultivated her crops mostly for her family's subsistence, since she didn't have the sophisticated equipment needed for mass production. For years and years she produced her crops successfully, but one year the rain did not come as expected and so there was famine.

The famine did not last only for that year, but went on in the years following. So grain became very scarce. It got so bad that people would eat anything to survive – even human beings.


One day, this woman was in her house when she heard a knock at the door.

In that village, the houses are not modern in structure. They are built in such a way that the living room and the bedroom are the same room. The house is just one big hall, with shelves built in the local, traditional way. On these shelves the women keep their bowls and pots and water vessels. There is a ceiling usually built of bamboo and, above this, there is a barn which is used for storing foodstuffs.

The woman has to stay with all of her children and is supposed to visit her husband, who lives nearby, only on special occasions or when she goes to leave his dinner for him. Beds are placed in one corner, where all the family retire after their daily activities.

When the woman opened the door, she found two huge men standing there. They looked very exhausted, as if they had come from far away. She greeted them in the local dialect and beckoned them to come in and sit down.





It is the custom that, when visitors arrive, the woman is supposed to make a dinner for them. So, this woman placed a pot on the fire and poured some water into it. Then she climbed the bamboo ladder into the barn and got some grain, which she added to the water in the pot. Then she went outside and collected some twigs, wet ones, which she knew would not bring forth flames, only smoke. She took a fan and pretended to fan the flames to make a blaze. But, of course, it was all in vain.

Then she called out to her first son, 'Yarry oh!' and when he answered, 'mama?' she told him to go out to the farthest farm and collect some dry twigs so that she could put them in the fire and make the visitors some food.


Going to see him off at the door, she told him to go and not to come back, because she knew the two men had not come with good intentions.


Then she called out to her second son and told him to go and not come back. And then she did the same with her third son, her fourth, her fifth, and her last son.

But her last son, who was very stubborn, thought that his mother was sending him away so that she wouldn't have to give him any of the dinner she was cooking. So, in spite of what he had been told, he went out and collected some dry twigs and then decided to go back home.

When the mother saw him coming in the distance, she sighed and said to the visitors, 'these stubborn children of mine. I sent all of them to collect twigs for the fire, so that I could make dinner for you, but none of them have come back. Please allow me to go and check on them.'

The men accepted this, so she went out. She ran along a different path from the one her son was walking down. She disappeared into thick bushes and ran as fast as her legs would carry her to meet her other five sons.





The stubborn boy now arrived home. He put the twigs he had collected on to the fire and soon the pot started to boil. Soon, the dinner was ready, and the visitors wondered where the woman had got to. But by this time, they were very hungry and couldn't wait any longer. So they just served themselves with the food.

But, as night began to fall, they began to get hungry again. They had eaten everything in the pot and had given up hope of the woman returning. They didn't know what they could eat next. So they decided to kill the boy and cook his flesh.

When they had made another late night dinner out of the boy, they hung his skull up on the wall. The next morning they left to continue their journey.

About one week later, the woman decided to return home with her five sons. When she arrived at her house, she saw a skull hanging on the wall. She knew at once that her son had been killed. When she took the skull down, it started to sing:

'Npa mu nyiaga nyinga nyinga, mu nyinga chop ma coco. Npa mu nyiaga nyinga nyinga, mu nyinga chop ma coco.'

Which means: 'I was very, very stubborn and I didn't know my mother knew better than me. I thought she didn't want to give me the dinner. But I was wrong, and this is my reward.'

Anyone who hears this story should remember: Every stubborn child is paid back in his own coin. Always listen to the advice of your elders.

From *Buffalo Horns*, published by *The Village Storytelling Centre*
(www.thevillagestorytellingcentre.com)

