

**WHERE ANIMALS  
TALK; WEST AFRICAN  
FOLK LORE TALES**

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Where animals talk; west African folk lore tales by Robert H. Nassau

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**ROBERT H. NASSAU**

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# WHERE ANIMALS TALK

*West African Folk Lore Tales*

*By*

ROBERT H. NASSAU

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"The Youngest King," etc.*



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## PREFACE

**T**HE typical native African Ekano or legend is marked by repetition. The same incidents occur to a succession of individuals; monotony being prevented by a variation in the conduct of those individuals, as they reveal their weakness or stupidity, artifice or treachery.

Narrators, while preserving the original plot and characters of a Tale, vary it, and make it graphic by introducing objects known and familiar to their audience. These inconsistencies do not interfere with belief or offend the taste of a people with whom even the impossible is not a bar to faith; rather, the inconsistency sharpens their enjoyment of the story.

Surprise must not be felt at the impossibility of some of the situations; *e. g.*, the swallowing by an animal of his wife, baggage and household furniture, as a means of hiding them. The absurdity of such situations is one of the distinctive attractions to the minds of the excited listeners.

Variations of the same Tale, as told in different Tribes, were inevitable among a people whose language was not written until within the last hundred years; the Tales having been transmitted verbally, from generation to generation, for, probably, thousands of years. As to their antiquity, I believe these Tales to be of very ancient origin. No argument must be taken against them because of the internal evidence of allusion to modern things, or implements, or customs of known modern date; *e. g.*, "cannon," "tables," "steamships," *etc.*, *etc.* Narrators constantly embellish by novel additions; *e. g.*, where, in the original story, a character used a spear, the narrator may substitute a pistol.

Almost all these Tales locate themselves in supposed prehistoric times, when Beasts and Human Beings are asserted to have lived together with social relations in the same

community. An unintended concession to the claims of some Evolutionists!

The most distinctive feature of these Tales is that, while the actors are Beasts, they are speaking and living as Human Beings, acting as a beast in human environment; and, instantly, in the same sentence, acting as a human being in a beast's environment. This must constantly be borne in mind, or the action of the story will become not only unreasonable but utterly inexplicable.

The characters in the stories relieve themselves from difficult or dangerous situations by invoking the aid of a powerful personal fetish-charm known as "Ngalo"; a fetish almost as valuable as Aladdin's Lamp of the Arabian Nights. And yet, with inconsistency, notwithstanding this aid, the actors are often suffering from many small evils of daily human life. These inconsistencies are another feature of the Ekano that the listeners enjoy as the spice of the story.

From internal evidences, I think that the local sources of these Tales were Arabian, or at least under Arabic, and perhaps even Egyptian, influences. (Observe the prefix, Ra, a contraction of Rera equals father, a title of honor, as "Lord," or "Sir," or "Master," in names of dignitaries; *e. g.* Ra-Maränge, Ra-Mborakinda, Ra-Meses.)

This is consistent with the fact that there is Arabic blood in the Bantu Negro. The invariable direction to which the southwest coast tribes point, as the source of their ancestors, is northeast. Such an ethnologist as Sir H. H. Johnston traces the Bantu stream southward on the east coast to the Cape of Good Hope, and then turns it northward on the west coast to the equator and as far as the fourth degree of north latitude, the very region from which I gathered these stories.

Only a few men, and still fewer women, in any community, are noted as skilled narrators. They are the literati.

The public never weary of hearing the same Tales repeated; like our own civilized audiences at a play running for a hundred or more nights. They are made attractive by the dramatic use of gesture, tones, and startling exclamations.

The occasions selected for the renditions are nights, after the day's works are done, especially if there be visitors to be entertained. The places chosen are the open village street,



or, in forest camps where almost all the population of a village go for a week's work on their cutting of new plantations; or for hunting; or for fishing in ponds. The time for these camps is in one of the two dry seasons: where the booths erected are not for protection against rain, but for a little privacy, for the warding off of insects, birds and small animals, and for the drying of meats. At such times, most of the adults go off during the day for fishing; or, if for hunting, only the men; the children being guarded at their plays in the camp by the older women, who are kept occupied with cooking, and with the drying of meats. At night, all gather around the camp-fire; and the Tales are told with, at intervals, accompaniment of drum; and parts of the plot are illustrated by an appropriate song, or by a short dance, the platform being only the earth, and the scenery the forest shadows and the moon or stars.

The Bantu Language has very many dialects, having the same grammatical construction, but differing in their vocabulary. The name of the same animal therefore differs in the three typical Tribes mentioned in these Tales; *e. g.*, Leopard, in Mpongwe, equals Njégá; in Benga, equals Njá; and in Fang, equals Nzě.

## PRONUNCIATION

In all the dialects of the Bantu language, consonants are pronounced, as in English; except that *g* is always hard.

The vowels are pronounced as in the following English equivalent:—

- a as in father *e. g.*, Kabala
- â as in awe *e. g.*, Njâ.
- e as in they *e. g.*, Ekaga.
- ě as in met *e. g.*, Njěgâ.
- i as in machine *e. g.*, Njina.
- o as in note *e. g.*, Kombe.
- u as in rule *e. g.*, Kuba.

A before *y* is pronounced *ai* as a diphthong, *e. g.*, Asaya. Close every syllable with a vowel, *e. g.*, Ko-ngo. Where two or more consonants begin a syllable, a slight vowel sound may be presupposed, *e. g.*, Ngweya, as if *iNgweya*.

Ng has the nasal sound of *ng* in "finger," as if *fiŋ-gŋer*, (not as in "singer,") *e. g.*, Mpo-ngwe.

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