

## How Rain Became Man's Friend: A Story From Africa

John Adeleke

Tonight, the moon was out as usual. However, not many villagers observed the intermittent flashes across the sky and the rumbles that followed since the moon and the stars had remained impervious, beaming as ever.

Actually, it had been a placid evening. Many families had finished their evening meals while many were still eating. Men and women lay stretched out on mats, outside, in their house fronts, enjoying the cool breeze and the moonlight. But the flashes across the sky and the gentle rumbles had continued. Heavy rain was likely coming. But then, the round moon and the twinkling stars were still there, visible in the sky. And there was sporadic rise of rolling wind from the streamside through the village, sweeping light sands, specks and flakes of dry leaves along its path.

Down, down on the horizon, over the mountain, overlooking the village, columns of black clouds like ridges were gathering.

In spite of the threatening rain, parents could not hold back their children. The children were really hungry for stories. Since the last moon, only twice had they gathered round Baba Alawiye to listen to his stories.

It was as though the old man had been expecting them. He had taken his seat under the *odan* tree in his house front. That for several nights now, he had not told stories to the children, whom he called my children, did not make him comfortable. Something was definitely missing in him. He felt heavy, both in the body and in the heart. Any time he felt this way and he told stories to the children he felt relieved elated. Watching the children arrive one after another from the web of footpaths in the village brought a deluge of delight on his wrinkled face. He knew every child by name. And as they arrived and greeted, he called them by their names and asked after their parents.

Like every other farmer, the old storyteller had come to Aure in search of greener pasture several years back. He had two wives and three children, two boys and a girl. The two wives had died, one about ten years ago, and the other, about five years after. His daughter, the

eldest, had married and gone away with her husband who was a city dweller. One of the two boys, the younger one, had also left the village for Osogbo where he was a mason. The third, took after him; he farmed in Aure and also looked after his father's big farm.

A few years after the death of his younger wife, a strange disease that took strength away from his left arm and leg had struck him. Consequently, he had remained at home ever since, bored and dispirited. To him, life had become monotonous. But storytelling broke the boredom and enlivened his spirit. He also drank a lot of palm wine, which many villagers felt was not good for his age for by his grizzled looks he should be well over eighty year old.

Aure village was not as big. You could count the houses and the huts on your fingertips. Families knew one another let alone the children who played and went together to the only primary school in the village.

The old bearded storyteller did not start his story until the last child had arrived. As they came, one after another, each child went flat on his belly and the girls on their knees to pay homage to the old man. His son brought a gourd of palm-wine with a calabash bowl for him. The young man shook the gourd before filling the small calabash with the frosty palm wine. The old man sipped into the wine and smiled. 'Aha, this one is better than that of yesterday. Did you buy it from Noah?'

'Yes, this is Noah's palm-wine.'

The old man nodded his appreciation. 'Yes, I told you, Noah has the best palm-wine in this village. He does not mix his palm wine with water. I trust the old Noah,' said the old man with a grin.

The young man took a seat in the ring of other children, sitting round the old man, his father.

The old man gulped down the frosty palm-wine and coughed to clear his throat, wiping the white frost of the palm wine trapped in his mushroom moustache with the back of his right palm.

'So, my children, you are welcome,' greeted the old man. 'This night, I'll tell you the story of how rain became our friend and drought, our enemy....'

The children screamed in frenzied excitement and joyously clapped their hands, anticipating.

'So, listen carefully and no one makes any noise....'

'Yes, Baba,' answered one of the children.

'Once upon a time,' commenced the old man, 'there was a rich king in a faraway land. This king was very wealthy but unlike many other kings he had only one wife. Although he owned many houses, several goats

and herds of sheep, he had only one daughter who was fairer than any other girl in the land.'

'Only one child?' asked a girl, one of the listening children excitedly.

'Oh, be quiet,' others shouted at the small girl.

'O yes, the king had only one child,' replied the old storyteller, waving at others to be quiet and he resumed his story. 'So, this king loved his only daughter so dearly like one loves one's eyes. Then came one hot afternoon a young man came to visit the king in his palace. The young man was handsome, tall and strong. When he had paid homage to the king by falling flat on his chest, he said, 'Give me your daughter to marry. I shall be a good husband to her...'

'Ah a tall man, wanting to marry a small girl?' screamed another child from the crowd of the children.

This time, others burst into crackled laughter and the bearded old man, too, grinned, pulling at his long beard.

'No,' replied the storyteller, 'the girl was now big.'

'Big like my mother?' asked the girl again.

Now the storyteller laughed aloud while other children were irritated that the small girl had broken the thread of the story again.

'No, she is not like your mother, but big enough to become a wife.'

The small girl was quiet and the storyteller picked up the thread where the girl had broken it.

'Yes,' he continued, 'the king called his daughter and told her what the young man had said.

'The beautiful princess nodded her consent. She would marry the handsome young man.

'Now, the name of the young man was Mr. Drought...'

'Ah, Mr. Drought?' asked a voice from the crowd, again interrupting the old man.

'Yes, he was Mr. Drought,' replied Baba with a grin.

'But drought is not a human being?' asked a young boy.

'Yes, but then, in those days, he was a human being, a very strong man before what happened to him happened...'

'Be quiet and listen with your ears only,' yelled a child among them.

Then the old man continued. 'Mr. Drought left for his house but promised to return in two moons' time to pay the dowry on the damsel.

'However, no sooner had Mr. Drought left the palace than another young man came. This young man was Mr. Rain....'

The audience roared in laughter with many clapping their hands in excitement.

‘Mr. Rain also wanted the king’s daughter for a wife. But Mr. Rain was not particularly handsome like Mr. Drought. He had a crooked nose and bulging eyes like those of a toad....’

And the children laughed rowdily.

‘The king,’ resumed the storyteller, ‘was very reluctant to present him to his daughter. But the young princess confounded her father when she jumped at Mr. Rain. ‘I will marry him,’ she told her father, the king.

‘You know that you could only marry either of them. So, choose, which of the two you would want to marry,’ said the surprised king to his daughter.

But the princess was confused. She could not make her choice. She loved Mr. Drought just as much as Mr. Rain.

‘But why couldn’t she marry the two men?’ asked a curious boy.

‘A girl could marry only one man at a time,’ explained the old man.

‘But a man?’ asked a girl.

‘Yes, a man might marry as many wives as he could feed.’

‘Ah, I’d marry twenty!’ shouted a boy and all roared in laughter.

‘Now listen,’ continued the old man, ‘the king, seeing that his daughter was confused decided what to do to choose one from the two suitors for her. He would put the two suitors to a test of strength. Whichever one of them displayed greater valor he it was that would have his daughter’s hand in marriage.

So, he sent words across to the suitors, inviting them back to the palace.

Each of the suitors ran back to the palace, anxious and unsure of why the king had sent for him.

‘Young men,’ said the king to the two suitors, ‘both of you want the hand of my beautiful daughter in marriage. I am sure you are well aware that she could only marry either of you. Moreover, it is not my wish to give my only daughter to a weakling, but to a man of might and riches. By this, you would display your might one after the other, seven days to each man. To this end, I ask that for seven days, one after the other, you show us the measure of your strength.’

It was agreed that Mr. Drought should start the contest.

Within the first two days when Mr. Drought began the show of his valor, all the farm crops of the villagers had withered away. The rivers also dried up. There was no water and food for the cows and other animals. Very soon, the king and his people ran out of food. The

Princess herself, the main kernel of the contest, took ill. Epidemics broke out in the village. Before the end of the third day, many children had died so also were several animals. There was great noise of mourning in the village. By the fourth day, the death toll had risen to two scores. Many prominent elders in the village had either died or taken ill...

'Two scores?' screamed one of the children and pity showed on his face. Others too wore sad expression.

'In haste,' resumed the story teller, 'the king sent for Mr. Drought and said to him in an angry voice, 'enough of this! See the misery you have brought upon my people just because you want to marry my daughter. As wicked as you are, you did not even spare the girl you claim to love so much...'

'Yes, Mr. Drought was wicked,' chipped in a child.

'You are right, Drought was a wicked man,' others agreed with the child.

'Illness had reduced the girl to a broomstick,' continued the old man. 'The king said to Mr. Drought, 'enough is enough. We have seen enough of your strength,' said the great king to suitor Drought.

Suitor Drought beamed with smiles, robbing his chest as he went back to his house. He felt great and was very sure he had won for himself the heart of the king and his people.'

The old storyteller paused and fondled a little with his long grey and black moustache. And the children, sitting in a ring round him, hissed at Suitor Drought and pity was on their faces for the villagers of the story.

'Ah, Mr. Drought was a wicked man,' commented again one of the children.

'No, he's not. He's only showing his power,' observed the other, demonstrating the power of Mr. Drought by folding and straightening out its right arm and making the veins to stand out.

'I like Mr. Drought. He's very powerful,' cut in another child.

'Me? I don't like him at all. He killed many people,' said yet another.

A hard cough from the old man put a halt to the growing argument among the children.

'Now it was the turn of Suitor Rain,' said the old man as he resumed the narration. 'Also, like his friend, Suitor Rain would show the people the measure of the valor in his arms. It seemed Suitor Rain was not in a hurry for he started his show of valor very slowly with dews and cool wind that blew gently across the length and breadth of the village. Then, the villagers trooped out of their huts and hovels. They stretched out themselves in the open so that the dews and the wind could fall and blow on them. The neighbors helped the infirm among them. They brought

and stretched them out under the falling dews. The dews fell on them. The cool wind blew them. And gradually, they rose from their infirmity and became strong again. Then, the villagers clamored for more of the dews and the wind. The following day, it began to drizzle. For another two days and two nights it drizzled and drizzled. At the dawn of the third day rain came, pouring down heavily. The heavens were opened! And it rained and rained for two days and two nights. Then suitor Rain stopped to take a breath.

In no time, joy and peace returned into the village. The Princess recovered from her illness. The only stream in the village, which had dried up began to flow again. The thirsty earth drank the rainwater in gulps and brought out fresh vegetation. People got water to drink so also the animals. People rushed to their farms to deposit grains into the womb of the earth, and plenty of food followed.

Not only did Suitor Rain win the contest and marry the princess; it also won the hearts of the people. He became an indispensable friend of the villagers. On the other hand, Suitor Drought was banished from the village. He became a forest wanderer and the enemy of the people.'

'That's good for Mr. Drought,' observed a child.

'Yes it's good for him. The villagers should have killed him.'

'If I were them, I would have killed him... because he's not good.'

'But, Mr. Rain was kind.'

'Yes, I like him.'

'Me too, I like him.'

They still argued among themselves, when a fearful lightning flashed across the sky. A rumble like a thousand rock explosions followed. And slowly but surely, the moon and the stars were swallowed up by the heavy black mass of the cloud. The rain approached.

'The stormy rain is here,' said the old man to the children. 'You must leave for your homes, now,' he ordered.

And the children scampered away in excitement back to their houses, singing along joyously.

Many mothers stood on the doorways of their houses, calling out to their children and anxiously looking out into the murky darkness of the rain.

Little Joseph and his half brother, Deji, did not take the familiar footpath that ran through the centre of the village. Instead, they took the short cut by the straw palisade of the only primary school in the village. The track was quicker but the fear of snakes and other reptiles often made people shun it at night. Once, a young man, returning from the farm late at night and walked along the footpath, had been struck by

*agbadu*, the dreadful and wicked black snake with a flaming red comb on its head. No snakebite remedy could save the man from the death that killed him just before the first cockcrow the following morning.

For the village women, the track was a forbidden one, either in the day or at night.

However, as Little Joseph and his half brother ran in the dark, they were singing on top of their voices to scare away the evil that might lurk around the route. It was believed that snakes and other wild animals feared human beings. Many of them only strike in defense if they were caught unaware while a few of them hit unprovoked. Yet many of them could actually smell man at a long distance and so hid themselves ahead of his approach. However, if man disturbed them in their hideouts even without knowing, then they attacked in defense.

As the two brothers paced away hurriedly in the drizzle, they could still see the flashes of touch light at the teachers' quarters across the school field.

Finding their way through the cluster of houses was not a problem even as it was stark dark. After all, they had grown up in the village.

\*

\*

\*

#### **The International Association of Paremiology (AIP-IAP)**

The 8th Colóquio Interdisciplinar sobre Provérbios / 8th Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs (ICP14) – <http://www.colloquium-proverbs.org>– will be held in Tavira, Algarve, Portugal, 02-09 November this year 2014.

The AIP-IAP and the Organizing Committee of the ICP14 wish to encourage academics, researchers, paremiólogos, ... to present at the Colloquium in Tavira their latest research, and enjoy the scientific, cultural and social environment that has been the hallmark of the seven previous events. With our proverbial greetings Rui Soares, President of AIP-IAP and co-organizer of ICP14.

See <http://www.aip-iap.org> and <http://www.colloquium-proverbs.org>

For more details you can contact the organizers of the ICP14: Dr. Outi Lauhakangas, AIP-IAP, Helsinki (Finland) – [outi.lauhakangas@sci.fi](mailto:outi.lauhakangas@sci.fi) – or Dr. Rui Soares, AIP-IAP, Tavira (Portugal) – [runo\\_mari@yahoo.com](mailto:runo_mari@yahoo.com) – or by email [icp14.tavira@gmail.com](mailto:icp14.tavira@gmail.com)