

Folktales from Abomey
Gathered and Translated by Sophia Hounton

Archive Hwènuxó
2026

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Acknowledgements

Dr. Romain Hounzandji, Professor and Advisor, Université d'Abomey-Calavi

Jerry Adjahi, EV Exchange and Alumni Coordinator, U.S. Embassy Cotonou

Afdal Oladikpikpo Tchoubade, Fongbe to French Written Translator

Mathieu Hounkandji, Abomey Region Guide and Cultural Mediator, Museum of Abomey

Hounon Alexandre Adohoukpla, Abomey Region Translator and Cultural Mediator, Museum of Abomey

Lorentus Houedote, Allada Region Guide and Expert

Françoise Hounton, Dédomè Region Guide and Expert

The Storytellers

Louise Agbo

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The Co-Wives

Once upon a time in a small village nestled in the hills, two women were united by the same destiny: they were the co-wives of a hunter known for his courage and skill. The first wife felt a profound and tenacious jealousy for the second wife. She couldn't stand her presence, nor her voice, nor even the shadow of her footprints in the courtyard. The second wife, sweet and determined, tried to complete her duties without ever responding to the hostility thrown at her. Every day, their husband would go hunting. And every night when he returned, covered in dust and exhaustion, one of the wives would prepare his meal. However, each time the second wife was ready to serve the meal to her husband, an unknown bird perched itself on their hut and began singing in a shrill voice:

*Mă dú ó
Mă dú ó
Núdúdí ɔ nyɔn ă*

*Don't eat!
Don't eat!
This food is not fit for eating.*

Troubled by this repeated warning, the hunter paused, put down his calabash, and let his gaze follow the bird without touching the meal. This would happen so often that worry began to grow in his heart. The second wife, hurt and perplexed, couldn't understand why her husband unyieldingly refused the food she had prepared with such care.

One day, she made a rich, fragrant sauce from the most beautiful pieces of meat. But the first wife, hidden behind the partition of the hut, observed each of her movements. Seizing the moment the first wife was distracted, the second wife discreetly emptied the pot and, in an act of unimaginable cruelty, substituted its contents for the flesh she had cut from her own body and roasted for the occasion. Unaware of this villainous act, the second wife served the meal when her husband returned from the hunt. The hunter had barely moved his hand towards the calabash when the bird reappeared and sang, even more urgently, the same song of warning.

This time, doubt became certainty. The man, overwhelmed, asked if one of his wives was looking to poison him, and if the bird was sent to save his life. He then called together the entire village so that everyone would bear witness to what would take place. Before the gathered people, he declared a test would distinguish the innocent from the guilty. A large hole was dug in the ground, and they lit a blazing fire inside it, its flames licking the walls. The proof was simple and terrible: each of

his two wives must cross the burning hole. She who couldn't brave the flames would be known as the one responsible. The second wife went first. She crossed the flames without being consumed. Then came the first wife's turn. She barely placed her foot on the flaming coals when she faltered, lost her balance, and fell into the blaze. The flames engulfed her. The hole was filled in with sand, her body inside it.

With time, at the same spot where she had disappeared, grew a termite mound. They say that, ever since that day, the jute mallow plant grows on termite mounds. It was born from the consuming jealousy of a wife's heart, consumed by hate, and delivered into the fire.

The Antelope Wife

My short folktale flies, soaring over rivers, valleys, and plateaus, and lands on the head of a revered hunter. His hunt was often fruitful. His bow and arrow always found game, and his name was respected. Yet, he married late in life. For a long while, he lived alone, until the day he took a wife.

They loved each other sincerely and got along well. But the seasons passed, and their union was not blessed with a child. The wife, an akassa¹ seller in the village market, carried the weight of her barrenness in silence. Despite this hardship, their home remained peaceful.

One morning, the hunter went out to hunt as he did every day. Upon arriving in the forest, he climbed to the top of a great tree to scan the clearings for the smallest movement.

That day, his eyes found an unexpected sight. Not far from his tree, in the heart of the forest, was a carefully tended field of okra. An antelope approached the field with caution. She barely reached the edge of the okra field when she transformed: she laid down her animal skin and took the form of a woman with striking beauty. In this human form, she harvested the okra, placed it in her basket, and then went to the market to sell it. When she returned to the field, she picked up her antelope skin and turned back into a wild animal before disappearing into the trees. The hunter observed this scene many times. He followed this mysterious creature, confirmed her secret, and, little by little, an idea began to grow.

One day, when the antelope had just transformed into a woman to sell her harvest, he silently climbed down from the treetop, seized her abandoned antelope skin, and hid it in his hunting bag.

When the young woman returned from the market, she looked for her skin at length in the okra field. She scoured the grass and scanned the surroundings but found nothing. Her face twisted in agony. The hunter then emerged from his hiding spot and approached her.

“What is a young woman such as yourself searching for in this deep forest?” he asked her.

She hesitated, “I came to gather firewood.”

The hunter reflected for a moment.

“You possess great beauty. Would you follow me back to my house? I would like to make you my wife, and afterward I will go and meet your family.”

Deprived of her deerskin and any means of returning to her animal form, the young woman had no other choice than to accept his offer and follow the hunter.

¹ A medium-sized ball of gelatinous dough made from water and corn flour, traditionally sold wrapped in leaves. A base most often eaten with various soups and meats.

When they arrived, the hunter's first wife welcomed the woman with curiosity. She questioned her husband about the origin of this woman who suddenly appeared in his arms. But the hunter evaded her questions and did not reveal the truth. Time passed, and the hunter's new wife became pregnant. She gave birth to four daughters, as beautiful and lively as fawns. The house filled with the laughter of children, and the hunter at last knew the joy of fatherhood. But jealousy grew in the heart of the first wife like a smoldering ember. She was never able to give a child to her husband, and she had seen how his new wife had filled this void in his life. Her bitterness grew. She threatened her husband that if he didn't reveal the origin of his second wife, she would ask for a divorce. The hunter hesitated a long moment, then conceded, but only on the condition that she would never reveal the secret to anyone. She accepted. Reassured by the soft and comforting manner of his first wife—who was considerate to the second wife despite her jealousy. The hunter told her the truth. He even told her where he had hidden the second wife's antelope skin: carefully concealed behind the hut.

"If this secret were to be divulged," he said seriously, "I would lose this new wife forever."

Days passed. One afternoon, while their husband was out hunting, a violent argument erupted between the two wives. Words were at first hurtful, then cruel. In a fit of irrepressible anger, the first wife spat: "Antelope! Antelope! Antelope! Go back to your true nature. Your skin is hidden behind our husband's hut!"

At these words, the antelope wife turned pale. Without hesitation, she ran behind the hut, found her skin, and put it on. In an instant, she turned back into an antelope. Her four daughters turned into antelopes as well, showing their true form. In a stroke of lightning speed, they reared over the barren woman and trampled her. Then, in a cloud of dust, they left the compound and fled deep into the forest. When the hunter returned from the hunt, he found his house quiet and his first wife lifeless. He found no trace of his second wife or his children, except for the distant echo of gallops in the forest.

Thus, it is understood that certain secrets should never be revealed, and that jealousy, once stoked, certainly consumes more than a fire.

The Two Twin Brothers

Long ago, there was a man and a woman who had been blessed with twin sons. One was named Zinsou, and the other Sagbo. But the happiness was short-lived. Death had struck their home, and the two children became orphans, though they were still only children. Left to their own devices, they knew from a very young age the bite of hunger and the humiliation of poverty.

Not far from their homeland, the *Adjanou*², who feared fishermen and untiring workers, possessed a lake abundant in fish. They would go there to fish each day, smoke their catch, and then sell it at the market. While the fisherman left their posts to sell their goods, Zinsou and Sagbo took advantage of their absence. They approached the unlit fire pits timidly and gathered forgotten scraps: crusts, small, burned fish, dried-out crumbs. This was their only meal.

When the *Adjanou* returned, they noticed that the bits of discarded fish had mysteriously disappeared. They asked themselves, what kind of soul would rummage through their garbage?

One day, pretending to leave as they normally did, they hid in the mangroves.

The twins arrived, believing the area to be deserted. They began to gather the meager leftovers. Suddenly, the fishermen appeared and seized them without hesitation. They treated the twins harshly. Then, in a moment of incredible cruelty, they decided to sell them. Zinsou was sold to the king of *Kétou*, who had no sons. Sagbo was given to a man from *Agla*, with no rank nor fortune. And thus, the two brothers were separated.

The king of *Kétou*, who had no male heir, adopted Zinsou and raised him as his own son. The child received an education fit for a prince, learned the art of governance and how to judge and defend a kingdom. When the king died, Zinsou ascended to the throne. Amongst his vast lands was a great field of millet. However, the birds and the rodents descended on it constantly, decimating the crop. The king ordered that a guardian be appointed to protect the field. Destiny, always a mysterious trickster, placed Sagbo on his path. Without either of them suspecting it, Sagbo was brought to the palace and tasked with observing his own brother's millet field. But Sagbo was only a malnourished and poorly dressed servant. The attendants neglected him. They barely gave him enough to survive. Soon, weakened by hunger, he no longer had the strength to hunt the birds nor to scare away the rodents. The red-billed quelea birds took over the field. They pecked at the ears of millet until they were empty, then they shamelessly perched themselves over the unfortunate guardian.

² The Adja people, an ethnic group inhabiting the south-west of Benin and the south-east of Togo.

When Zinsou sent his subjects to inspect the crop, they returned with terrible news: “Your Majesty, the birds have decimated the entire crop.”

The king flew into a rage and ordered the guardian to be brought before him for execution. When the soldiers neared him, Sagbo recited a song in a sigh of despair:

*Zinsou kpoḍo Sagbo kpo é, sa
Tò kù jo mi ḍo nyi gbẹ, ó sa
O nò kù jo mi ḍo nyi gbè, o sa
Mi wẹ do guelélé fun wẹ, sa
Adjanou le tɔ wu bo wi li mi, sa
Yé sɔ min dé sa ḍo Kétou, sa
Yé sɔ min dé sa ḍo Agla, sa
Nu wa nyɔn nu hwẹ bɔ awa xɔ mi, sa*

*Zinsou and Sagbo
Orphans of father,
Orphans of mother,
Left to our own devices in famine,
The Adjanou captured us,
One was sold to Kétou,
The other was sold to Agla,
And thus, destiny has raised you high, while you employ me to guard your crop.*

The soldiers, troubled by these words, reported them to the king. Intrigued and seized by a premonition, Zinsou left his palace with his court and went to the field himself. In front of him, Sagbo repeated his song. The king asked him to repeat the song once more, then again, and again. As the words rose, lost childhood memories struck the king's heart. The long miserable days, the lake of the *Adjanou*, the separation... At last, he understood.

“Sagbo!” he murmured.

He flung himself into his brother's arms. The two brothers cried for a long time. Sagbo told of his life of servitude and hunger. Immediately, Zinsou ordered that they bring Sagbo food, dress him, and that they treat him as a prince.

Later, Zinsou divided his kingdom into two equal parts and offered Sagbo half of his lands. The two brothers reigned side-by-side, united by blood and their trials. Sagbo took a wife and had children.

And never again could twins be separated. For although fate may lead brothers astray, it cannot break the mysterious connection that links souls born together.

The Water Source and the Secret of the Waters/The Two Cowives

A long time ago, in a small village surrounded by palm trees and red earth, lived two women united by the same husband, a man named Tchako. The first wife had shared her life with Tchako well before the second wife's arrival. When her husband took a second wife, the first wife appeared to accept her husband's decision. But in her heart, a deadly jealousy grew.

One morning, the first wife invited the second to accompany her to get water.

"Grab your water basin," she said in an even tone. "Let's fetch water."

The two women set off and followed the path that snaked to the sacred water spring. Upon their arrival, the second set down her basin and leaned over to draw water. But each time she chose a spot, the first wife said: "Not there. Go a little bit farther. Don't put your feet there."

Obedient, the young wife moved forward step by step. But the ground was slippery. As she moved forward, she lost her balance and slipped. In an instant, she had fallen in the deep water of the spring. The first wife remained motionless. Without shouting or calling for help, she filled her water basin and returned on the path to the village, leaving her co-wife submerged in the waters. Arriving at their house, she said nothing. She continued her household chores like nothing had happened.

Days passed and the second wife did not reappear. Neighbors began to worry. They looked for her in the fields, in the murmur of the wind, at her parents' house. All in vain. Tchako himself sank deep into grief. But in secret, the first wife was delighted. She thought to have reclaimed her husband for herself alone.

Nevertheless, in this village lived a woodcutter who was a loyal friend to Tchako. Every day he went into the forest to cut down trees and fasten the handles of hoes. One afternoon, after he had hit the trunk of a great tree, he heard a voice not far from the spring. A light and melodious voice sang from the depths.

*Alintin gbotɔ, Alintin gbotɔ
Nɔn té mǎ dɔ xó yɛ nú wé
Ayihún bo dɔ no Tchako, bo dɔ ji oun kpodo fi
Assissi cé kpo yinkpo wɛ zɔn wa sin dun gbé
Oun dɔ mǎ dun do fi ɔ é non dɔ jɛ kpedé
Oun do si sɛ wɛ kaka, afɔ cé wa jɛ lo tɔ mɛn,
So mǎ do nú bɔ dɛ mɔn lɛ ka dé alɔ bo yi mi,
Bɔ oun fɔn tɛgbɛ do tɔ hwé,
Bo do nú da nou tɔ wɛ
Bɔ tɔ do dúdú wɛ*

*Oh woodcutter, woodcutter,
I give you a message.
Tell Tchako that I am here.
My co-wife and I came to fetch water.
Every time I wanted to stop somewhere,
She interrupted me.
Step by step, I slipped and fell into the water.
The water spirits welcomed me.
I cook for them,
And they take care of me.*

The woodcutter, seized with terror, looked around. He saw no one. The voice began again.

This time, he listened attentively to the sound and, stupefied, realized it was coming from the spring itself. He left his hatchet and ran to the village to warn Tchako.

“Your wife is not dead,” he said, “I heard her. She is in the spring.”

Intrigued, the villagers followed the woodcutter to the spot in the forest. He asked them to remain quiet and started chopping the trees again. The voice began to sing again. Thus, everyone saw the truth: the second wife was living in the waters.

They went to the Fa³ to understand this mystery and how to bring back the second wife. The oracle prescribed sacrifices. Offerings were made according to ancient rituals. After these ceremonies, the waters trembled. The second wife emerged from the spring. But she didn’t return as a simple mortal; she had transformed in the waters. Transfigured by the depths, she appeared in the form of a *vodun*, a sacred spirit of the waters.

The elders recognized in her a manifestation of *Toxossou*⁴, a mysterious water divinity.

From that point on, the village honored and venerated her. As for the first wife, her secret was revealed, and her jealousy will remain engraved forever in the collective memory as a warning. No one can deceive the waters, and depths always keep the truth.

³ A divinatory system and means of communication with the spiritual world in Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Ghana. An oracle that provides guidance and often prescribes certain rituals and sacrifices. Also called *Ifa*.

⁴ A Vodun divinity of fresh water. Often associated with lakes or rivers, it’s also the divinity of stillborn or deformed births.

The King and the Two Twins

My tale flies, soaring over rivers, valleys, and plateaus, and lands on a man and a woman. They were married only a short time before joy entered their home: they had twins, a boy named Pipo and a girl named Pipa. After this double birth, the wife never had other children.

But happiness is sometimes fragile. Tragedy struck the family when both parents died, leaving their children alone in the world. Left to their own devices, Pipo and Pipa learned very early to survive. They took the work offered to them, exchanging their services for food, and were content with what nature provided them. They ate wild fruits, drank water from springs, and took shelter wherever night caught them.

Years passed; the children grew up.

Pipa became a shining beauty. The more she aged, the more her face was illuminated by a rare grace. All who crossed her path were stunned. The young men in the village nurtured hopes of marrying her. Having been homeless for a long time, the twins finally found a hovel on the side of a dusty road. They settled there. Passersby, affected by their conditions, often reported to the king:

“Your majesty, two twins live in a hovel, left to their own devices. They seem to be without protection.”

However, a hunter often passed through this land. He sometimes asked the twins for water to quench his thirst. Little by little, he became attached to them. He would share the bounty of his hunt, offer them meat, and help them as he could. Not daring to admit it, the hunter fell in love with Pipa. He admired her softness, her dignity despite her poverty. Pipa, likewise, felt for him a sincere affection, discreet but profound. But jealousy is a weed that grows fast. Some of her rejected suitors whispered to the king that a simple hunter was seeing the most beautiful girl in the land.

One day, King Dada Sègbo⁵ called the twins to his palace. When his eyes fell on Pipa, his heart was moved. He immediately decided to take her as his queen. He asked the twins about their story. The twins told him about how they became orphans, their lives spent wandering, their hovel by the dusty road. The king listened to them attentively, then declared to the young girl:

“I like you very much. Would you consider staying in the palace?”

Pipa responded calmly. “Your majesty, nothing can separate me from my brother. If I marry you, he will live alone and not be allowed to share my life here. I cannot abandon him.”

The king smiled. “Nothing is impossible,” he said, “I know what to do.”

⁵ An all-powerful Vodun deity seen as the “father” of the universe or all creation. In folktales, he manifests as an archetype of a king, taking the place of the story’s general sovereign figure.

The twins returned to their home, ignorant of the dark plan brewing in the mind of the king.

Later, Dada Sègbo announced that a new hut would be built in the palace. He ordered that each subject bring grass to build the roof, including the twins. Pipo prepared rations and water for their journey. Together, they left to harvest grass for the palace.

Seven days later, the king again demanded vines to tie down the grass. He sent them even farther. The twins obeyed and brought what was asked of them.

But the king was after a different project. He secretly instructed his men to undertake another expedition to get rid of a young boy and thus separate the sister from her only confidant.

Seven days later, the king ordered the subjects to bring wood to finish the construction of the hut.

For each trip, the twins took the path to the forest. The sun was high in the sky when they completed their task. On the way back, they had to, as usual, stop near a stream to quench their thirst.

That day, Pipo walked with a livelier step. He reached the stream before his sister. Pipa, weighed down by her bundles of sticks, dragged her feet. Taking advantage of the moment when the young man found himself alone on the bank, the king's subjects who followed them at a distance silently arose. Without a second to think, they pushed him into the deep waters of the stream, then fled as if nothing had happened.

Some moments later, Pipa arrived on the bank of the river. She did not see her brother. Believing he had gone past the stream, she followed the path, questioning those she passed about her brother.

"He's walking behind you," they responded with indifference.

But evening approached, and Pipo never came back. Pipa, dejected, began to call his name in a shaky voice. From the bottom of a spring rose a weak reply. She heard her brother without understanding where the voice came from.

The hunter joined her, brought her back to the stream, and dove in to save the young man. Together, they pulled him from the water. The hunter then hid Pipo in his own home, in the heart of the forest.

Pipa returned alone to the palace with her bundle of sticks. The king, convinced the boy had perished, voiced his request again:

"Are you ready to become my queen?"

She bowed her head. "Your majesty, since my brother is dead, I can no longer refuse you anything."

But her heart hatched a plan. She demanded a ritual the night before the wedding: she and the king would each empty a large gourd of palm wine. Dada Sègbo readily agreed.

However, Pipa replaced her gourd with another filled with water. Night came, and the king drank, certain that his future wife did the same. Little by little, drunkenness overcame him. Pipa alerted the hunter. That night the king disappeared, consumed by his own excess. In the morning, the people, lacking a king, recognized the truth of the matter. Pipa reappeared. The twins were praised, and the hunter, for his courage and his loyalty, married Pipa.

Thus, cunning triumphed over injustice, and true love prevailed over tyranny. And my tale flies again... flies until it reaches the next attentive ear.

The Hunter and the Deer

My story rises over time and ages, crossing ancient forests and resting on the tale of a hunter and his wife, Agbalilé.

The hunter left every day for the brush and almost always came back with a bag full of game. His reputation grew; no one else returned from the hunt with such abundance. Agbalilé admired this but was also stunned.

One day, in the deep heart of the forest, the hunter made a discovery: a house of deer. The deer had a home hidden between the great trees. Even more shocking, they themselves were hunters. They would bring back an abundance of meat and roast it. The hunter observed them for a while, then devised a plan. Every time he went into the forest, he climbed a tree not far from the deer's home and patiently waited. When the deer left to go hunting, he descended from his hiding spot, entered their home, and used their hot grills. He filled his hunting bag and then returned home as if he had come back from a glorious hunt. And so he lived for a while.

But Agbalilé was shocked.

"Where did you get these grilled meats? In the past you spent whole days in the forest without bringing home anything like this. Take me to the place where you find this meat."

The hunter refused at first. He wanted to keep his secret. But Agbalilé insisted with such ardor, even threatening to leave him, that he had no choice but to accept.

"I found them in the home of the deer," he admitted.

She demanded to accompany him into the forest. Reluctantly, he brought her. They both climbed the tree and waited for the deer to leave for their hunt. When they thought the area to be deserted, they climbed down and entered the house. They helped themselves. The hunter filled his hunting bag, and Agbalilé, even more greedy, unwrapped her skirt to fill it with even more meat.

"Let's go," said the hunter. "This is enough. The deer could come back at any moment."

"No," she replied. "I can't leave all this meat behind."

He insisted. She refused.

Fearing the deer's return, the hunter decided to leave without his wife. Before leaving, he revealed to her the secret of a magic portal.

"To enter, you must say 'Ablélawun'. To exit, you must say 'Azangandangankou'. Remember this: the portal always remains closed without these words." Then he departed, leaving Agbalilé alone. Soon after, she heard the deer approaching in the distance. Panicked, she wanted to flee and said the magic words to leave:

"Azangandangankou!"

But the portal didn't open. In her panic, Agbalilé forgot that she must first say the magic words to enter: 'Ablélawun'. The deer arrived. Agbalilé hid behind a large clay pot, but one of the deer caught the scent of humans. They searched the house and found her. Some of them wanted to kill her then and there; others proposed keeping her captive. They ultimately decided to spare her life and keep her.

"If one day the hunt isn't good," they said, "we will kill her. She will live with us while we wait."

In the following days, when the deer went hunting, Agbalilé prepared a dish she knew well: amiwo⁶, red pâte. When the deer returned, she served them. They tasted the meal and were amazed. They had never tried such a dish. From then on, they kept her safe and had her cook amiwo every time they came back from the hunt.

During this time, the hunter, having returned alone to his village, had to face the anger of his in-laws, who demanded their daughter back. He went to consult the Fa. The Bokonon⁷ prescribed that the hunter buy a drum, a bell, and castanets. He had to return to the forest, stand in front of the door of the deer, and, when they opened it, play the instruments and sing. But before this, he needed to construct a new hut at the entrance to his land and place cold water and the deer's favorite meal there.

The hunter obeyed. He went into the forest. When the door opened, he began to play and sing:

*Yehwé zōgbannōn mā dú kaka ya ja glé
Adjā guélé, Ayō guélé, mā dú tchobo wa*

The rhythm drew in the deer. They came outside, fascinated, and began to dance. One by one, entranced by the music, they left to hunt. When the last had disappeared, the hunter entered the house, found Agbalilé, and left with her discreetly. As the Fa had instructed, a new hut was ready. Amiwo had been prepared there, and water had been set down.

Upon their return, the deer discovered their cook had disappeared. They sang while looking for her:

*Edō Agbalilé, gba wε hwε wa gba mi do,
E mā nyi Agbalilé wε kplōn Amiwo nen dú nã yehwé
O gbō sa Agbalilé
Gba wε hwε wa gba mi do*

⁶ A classic Fon dish also known as pâte rouge, a thick dough made of corn flour, spices, and tomato paste.

⁷ A Vodun priest, a conduit of the Fa that interprets signs and messages from the Fa received in ceremony and shares them with the inquiring party.

E mǎ nyi Agbalilé wε kplɔn Amiwɔ nen dú nǎ ahwanjɔ
O gbɔ sa Agbalilé
Gba wε hwε wa gba mi do
E mǎ nyi Agbalilé wε kplɔn Amiwɔ ne dú nǎ yehwé

They sang as they followed the path the hunter and his wife had taken to their new hut. Guided by the bewitching smell of amiwo, they approached the new hut and entered with curiosity. There, they ate heartily and drank their fill, the fatigue of the journey fading with each bite. Then, full and heavy with the meal, they slept, lying down in the hut, under the protection of the silent night. When the sun rose, the hunter, having learned from what had happened, wove a mat that he laid with care at the entrance of the hut.

It is since that time, the elders say, that we remember the mystery of the Vodun *Yehwε*⁸, born of the meeting of human cunning, gluttony, and the sacred power of the forest.

⁸ A vodun deity.

The King and his Two Wives

Once upon a time, in a vast palace with ochre walls, there lived a king named Dada Sègbo. He lived with only one wife, shocking in an era when kings willingly took multiple wives.

The king possessed an immense field of millet that his subjects cultivated for him. At each harvest, they reported to the palace the expected harvests for their king. However, despite the extent of the field, Dada Sègbo was often unsatisfied with the quantity of millet that was presented to him.

One morning, deciding to observe the field himself, the king left the palace. With his scepter in his hand, he took the path to the field. On the path, he glimpsed three jars placed on the ground. Each appeared to contain something. The king approached the jars slowly. As he neared, the jars seemed to mysteriously move towards his feet, as if pushed by some invisible force. Intrigued, the king lifted his scepter and shattered the first jar on the left: it was empty. He shattered the jar on the right: it contained coal. Finally, he shattered the center jar. Before his eyes, a young woman with blinding beauty emerged.

The young woman looked at him for a while and then asked, “Who are you?”

“I am a man,” responded the king.

“Where are you from? Why did you break us?”

The king, surprised by the woman’s confidence, replied: “Tell me first where you are from, and I will follow you.”

At these words, the young woman turned and motioned for him to follow.

The king followed her until he reached her parents’ home. There, he greeted them as was customary, stated his intentions, and, after agreeing to his terms, brought the young woman back to his palace, where she became his second wife. He gave her to his first wife and asked her to help the young woman adapt to the court's traditions and the queen's duties. The first wife did so. Together, the two went to wells, collected wood, and pounded millet. The young wife always remained next to her older co-wife. At first glance, there was nothing but peace between them. However, in the heart of the first queen, a silent bitterness took root. She found it difficult to share her husband, and even more difficult to be overshadowed by the newcomer's youth and grace.

One day, the two women took their basins and went to the spring to fetch water. There, taking advantage of a moment of distraction, the first wife pushed the young woman into the deep waters. Then, alone, she filled her basin and returned to the palace.

When she arrived, the king was shocked:

“Where is my second wife? Didn’t you leave together?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” she replied in a measured tone. “But she told me she wanted to visit her parents, so I let her go.”

The king sent out a search party, but no one could find the young queen. The king called the town crier, who ran through the whole kingdom announcing the disappearance of the second wife. He proclaimed that whoever found her would receive a royal reward.

A few days later, the farmers going to the fields passed by the spring. They heard a voice rising from the water. It was a mournful song, carried by the wind and the reeds.

*Assissi cé wégɔ,
Kpo nyi kpo wɛ zɔn yi tɔto
Oun dɔ man dun do fi, e dɔ nyen ni sɛ yi ga
Bɔ oun do si sɛ wɛ a, afɔ cé wa jɛ lodo de men
So man do nu bɔ de mɔn, é wɛ de alɔ bo yi mi
Bɔ oun fɔn tɛgbɛ do tɔ hwe
Bo do nu da nu tɔ wɛ*

Intrigued, the farmers approached and glimpsed the young wife below the waters, weak but alive. They pulled her out, covered her to warm her, and brought her immediately to the palace. When the king saw her, he ran to her and embraced her tightly.

Turning then to the farmers that found her, he asked:

“Where did you find her?”

After having heard their story, he ordered the town crier to call together the whole kingdom the following day.

The day came, and the palace courtyard was filled with an attentive crowd. The king was accompanied by his first wife.

“Tell the truth about what happened at the spring,” he said in a firm voice. “Know that lies will be immediately punished.”

The first queen, trapped, confessed her mistake.

“If I acted thus,” she said, “it’s because since the arrival of the young wife, I no longer recognize myself. She received more attention than I.”

A heavy silence fell over the crowd. Thus, the kingdom learned that jealousy, when left unchecked, can drive a person to the worst extremes. This tale teaches that he who chooses to have a union with multiple people must maintain a balance of the heart, give each their rightful place, and govern their home with as much wisdom as they would govern their kingdom.

The Two Calabashes

A long time ago, there lived a fair and respected king. He had two sons. In those days, each child was obligated to have a nickname, because the nickname revealed one's soul as much as a name revealed one's birth.

One morning, the king called his eldest son and asked him, "What is your nickname?"

The young man confidently responded, "My name is Mindokpozonminyinnoi, which means 'alone, one is self-sufficient.'"

The king, intrigued, looked at him for a long while. "Is that a good nickname?"

"Yes, father," he responded without hesitation.

The king dismissed him, then summoned his younger son. "And you, what is your nickname?"

The younger son responded, "My name is Minwézonminyinnoi, which means 'together we are wiser.'"

The king did not comment. He kept his thoughts to himself, waiting for the opportune moment. Later, he called his two sons. Before them, he set down two calabashes. In each, he placed two live pigeons—a male and a female—and then carefully covered the openings with a tightly tied white cloth.

He gave a calabash to each son, then declared in a serious voice, "One day will come when I ask you to bring these calabashes back to me. Under no circumstances must you open them. He who undoes the cloth risks death. Go, and keep them as they are."

The eldest, Mindokpozonminyinnoi, took the calabash and placed it in the ceiling of his room. He did not touch it again. The younger, Minwézonminyinnoi, took his and went to find his friends. He showed them the calabash and explained his father's instructions.

His friends listened attentively.

"Why don't you check what is inside?" they suggested. "Maybe your father wants to test your intelligence rather than your obedience."

After a moment's hesitation, they opened the calabash together. Inside, they discovered the two pigeons, a male and a female. An idea took hold amongst the group: they would raise these birds. They built a shelter, fed the pigeons, and cared for them. The birds reproduced. Soon, they had a brood, then multiple. Their numbers grew, and with them their prosperity.

They sold some pigeons and bought chickens with the money, then roosters, then goats. Their business prospered. The modest beginning became true wealth. During this time, the eldest never dared touch his calabash. Faithful to his father's words, he left it intact. Seasons passed, and one day the king summoned his sons.

"The moment has come. Bring me your calabashes."

The eldest brought his. They untied the fabric. Inside, the two pigeons were long dead, dried out and without life. The youngest caught two robust pigeons from his flock and placed them in the calabash. He then closed it carefully, as his father had done before. He presented it before his father, along with a few roosters, goats, and other pigeons from his flock.

The king asked him to open his calabash. Two pigeons flew out.

“How did you manage to keep them alive?” asked the king.

The younger son told him everything: how he opened it, the help of his friends, the breeding, patience, and work they shared.

The king turned to his eldest son, “And what did you do with your calabash?”

“Father,” he responded, “I didn’t touch the calabash. You forbade us to open it or else risk death.”

The king was quiet for a moment, then declared: “My sons, remember this: wisdom is not always found in blind obedience, nor in proud isolation. He who keeps everything for himself may find what he wanted to preserve dead in his hands. But he who shares, reflects, and acts with others will take what is given to him and multiply it.”

Thus, they understood that, alone, one may believe they are sufficient, but together, many become stronger, more inventive, and livelier.

Since that day, the kingdom has told the story of The Two Calabashes to remember that true wealth is born of collective intelligence.

The Rabbit and the Spring

A long time ago, in a vast forest, all the animals lived together, but suffered from great thirst. Each meal left their throats burning, and water was rare.

One day, the lion and the panther, seen as chiefs of the forest, summoned all the animals together. The subject: how to find water and regularly quench their thirst.

The wild hog spoke first: “We the prey animals can find a source of water in this forest, but only on the condition that the carnivores stop devouring us.”

All the animals accepted and promised not to eat them if the wild hog could find water.

The wild hog, with the help of some of the other prey animals, began to dig all over the forest. He dug and dug until he was far away from their burrows. Then, water suddenly sprang forth from the ground. The prey animals were filled with joy, but the fear of the carnivores remained. Even after finding the water, they waited until after the carnivores had drunk before approaching for their turn.

The rabbit, having refused to follow the group in the search, feared being eaten. But at night, he secretly came to drink and wash himself in the water.

“I did well to not follow them,” he said, “and yet I’m enjoying the water freely.”

He came, drank, and left without anyone sensing his presence. But one day, the other animals noticed paw prints around the spring. Someone had been there before them.

Worried, they visited the Bokonon, the master of wisdom, to know how to trap the animal that secretly came to drink. The Bokonon recommended that they buy two small drums and one large drum called kpézin⁹, on which they would perform rituals before placing them at the edge of the spring. Thus, they would know who was secretly coming to drink. All was done according to the Bokonon’s advice. When the rabbit returned to the spring, he began to play the small drums, then the large kpézin. To his surprise, his right paw became glued to the drum. He tried to remove his left paw, then his feet. All were stuck. He became a prisoner of the drum.

Soon the other animals came to understand that it was the rabbit who secretly drank the water. Luckily, the Bokonon gave them the means to free him. They freed the rabbit, and though they would have thought to kill him, they decided to put him in a cage.

While they were feeding him, the rabbit made them a proposition: “Organize a dance competition for all the animals. We will need tam-tams for the party and the dances.”

⁹ a traditional southern Beninese drum made from a clay base in either small or large sizes. Notably used for popular traditional rhythms like “zinli.”

The animals enthusiastically accepted the idea of a dance competition. The rabbit asked them to be released the day of the competition and promised not to flee. Thus, they released him.

The day came, and each animal danced in a long line, taking steps forward, then returning after a couple of feet. When it was the rabbit's turn, he suggested making three full rounds. He danced the first, then the second, and then, on the third round, he launched into the air and disappeared into the forest.

Ever since that day, we say that the rabbit is the most cunning and intelligent of all the animals.

The Prenatal Oath

My tale walks, runs, and stops near a hunter and a woman. Once upon a time, in a village surrounded by a vast forest, there was a woman followed by unrelenting misfortune. Each time she found herself with child, the pregnancy was difficult. The child turned around in her womb and, when born, didn't survive for long. None of her newborns had the luck of a long life—more sobs than lullabies were heard from the woman's house.

Not far from her lived a hunter. He was a patient and observant man. Almost every day, he entered the forest, climbed to the top of a tree, and listened for the smallest rustle, the lightest step of an animal he hoped to hunt.

One day, while he was perched on the great tree, he witnessed a strange scene. A violent wind came suddenly, twisting with an unusual intensity. It swept up grass, shrubs, and dust. In its wake, it left only dirt and sand. The hunter, frozen in his high haven, observed this. When the wind eased, he glimpsed small beings that appeared in the center of the tornado's clearing. They looked like babies, but they sat together in a circle, legs crossed, like elders gathered in council.

Then one entered the circle and began to speak.

"Tell me," one said, "in what house would you like to be born? In what family would you like to come into the world?"

Each responded in turn, designating the home and lineage they had chosen. Then a small voice spoke in turn:

"I want to be born in the home of that woman where the children all die after their birth. I want to be carried in her womb."

A murmur passed through the circle.

"Did you choose her because she doesn't have the luck of keeping her children alive?" the others asked.

"Yes. But after my birth, I want to stay alive. I will grow up alongside her; I will become a woman and marry a man who will pay my dowry. And the day when I join my husband's family, you will send a snake to bite me, and I will die and rejoin you all."

The others silently accepted this. Then, as if dissolving into the air, the small beings disappeared. The hunter was shocked, having seen and heard everything. When he returned to the village, he began to spend more time with the unfortunate woman. He wanted to see if what he saw in the forest would come to fruition.

Time passed. One day, news spread that the woman was pregnant. The hunter never failed to tease her: "Woman," he'd say, laughing, "I will be the husband of the child you bring into this world."

She would respond with a sad smile, "Hunter, first pray that this child lives. If it lives and it's a girl, maybe you will have such an opportunity."

Months went by, and against all odds, the child survived. It was a girl. She grew in beauty and in grace. The hunter's light teasing became serious promises. He brought presents: game meat, animal hides, and food. Years passed, and when the girl was of age, he asked for her hand in marriage. He paid her dowry as was custom, and she became his wife. But in the back of his head, the hunter never forgot that day in the forest all those years ago.

He wanted to know if the prophecy would come true. The night his young wife was to join him in his hut for the first time, he prepared himself. Armed with his gun and his machete, he stood guard at the entrance of the hut while his wife waited inside.

After night fell, a snake appeared near the hut. The hunter lifted his gun to shoot it, and the animal disappeared immediately. It reappeared a second time. The hunter aimed again, and the snake vanished again into the shadows. Appearing a third time, the animal tried to slither into the hut. Moving fast, the hunter swung his machete and severed the head of the snake. In a last spurt of life, the sliced head threw itself inside the hut, biting the young wife. The woman collapsed. The venom had brought forth her destiny. She died that very night.

Her mother, stricken, cried for her only daughter. The only child she had managed to keep alive, just to lose her on the brink of happiness.

The hunter thus told her everything: the tornado, the mysterious small beings, the wish made before the birth, and the secret reason he had asked to marry her daughter.

Since that day, the elders say that human beings often walk on a path that they chose before entering this world. That which we ask for before our birth becomes the fabric of our life. They say that during storytelling sessions, destiny is an ancient promise that no one can fully escape.

The King Dada Sègbo and the Miracle

My story resounds and thunders in the heart of a palace. In those times, there lived a king named Dada Sègbo. He had married eight wives, eight queens with dazzling adornments and differing personalities.

Seven of them, after having each given birth, only had daughters. The king loved them dearly, but his heart had another desire: a male inheritor to carry his name and his throne.

The eighth wife, the youngest and the most recently arrived, hadn't yet given birth. She lived under the silent burden of her co-wives. United by blind jealousy, the other wives subjected her to humiliation daily.

One day, the king called on a great Vodun priest. He came to the palace, burned a sheep in offering to the divinities, and asked for forgiveness so that a son would finally be born in the royal palace.

When the moment came to prepare the sacrificial meat, the seven co-wives hatched a plan. They sent the youngest wife to gather wood in the forest, citing a lack of firewood, even though their wood reserves were full.

"Why should I go alone to gather wood even though we have enough at home?" she dared ask.

But the wives forced her to go. Obedient, she left. In her absence, the seven wives participated in the ritual, eating the sacrificial meat and leaving nothing but dirty plates. When the young wife returned, she found no food and that the ritual had been completed without her.

While she washed the dishes, she secretly gathered the crumbs stuck to the plates. As she ate, she recited, "Let what this meat gave to my co-wives be given to me as well."

Time passed and months went by. The seven queens fell pregnant, but despite the sacrifice, they continued only to give birth to girls.

The eighth wife, also pregnant, waited her turn to give birth. A little before her due date, the king left on an expedition. Before his departure, he gave his first wife a potion to aid in birth, with instructions to administer it to the youngest wife when her time came. Then he left the palace.

The day of the birth arrived. As was custom, the co-wives helped the youngest wife with her labor. But when the child arrived, they were shocked to discover it was a boy. Their jealousy, previously confined to the shadows, became ferocious.

They blindfolded the exhausted mother, took the newborn, and placed him in a calabash. They tied it shut with a white cloth and went to place it in the river, hoping the current would take him far away.

In his place, the other wives placed a large rock in the bloody cloth. They then unblindfolded the mother.

“This is what you gave birth to,” they said, laughing, “a rock! We give birth to children, and as your first act as a mother, you gave birth to a rock!”

They insulted, hit her, and filled her with shame.

Returning from his expedition, the king learned of the news that his youngest wife had birthed a rock. Filled with anger and incapable of understanding such an event, he exiled her from the palace. Beaten and rejected, she wandered outside the kingdom walls and succumbed to madness.

Not far from the king’s millet field lived an old woman. One day, while collecting firewood, she spotted a calabash floating down the river. Cries rang out from the calabash. She pulled it from the water and discovered an infant inside. She brought home the child and raised him as her own son. She named him Louis, the birth name of Dada Sègbo that no one dared say publicly.

Years passed, and the boy grew to work the millet field of the old woman, which neighbored that of the king. To chase away the millet-eating birds from the field, he clapped his hands and cried: “*Mi yi dú Louis tən do dən!*” which meant, “Go eat the millet from Louis’ field and leave this one alone!”

Passersby were stupefied to hear this sacred name spoken aloud without fear. They informed the king. Intrigued, Dada Sègbo called all the kingdom to the palace. The old woman came, finely dressed, accompanied by the young man.

When asked by the king, she explained how she had discovered the calabash and the child in the river that day. The king then turned to his seven wives.

“If you lie, I will have your heads,” he declared.

Terrified, the wives confessed to their crime: their jealousy, the baby thrown in the river, and the placement of the rock.

Horrificed whispers passed through the crowd.

The king recognized his son. He offered the old woman a part of his kingdom to repay her kindness. He then asked his son, “Do you recognize your mother amongst these queens?”

“Your Majesty,” he replied, “my mother is not amongst them.”

Three times he was asked the question, and three times he gave the same answer. His mother was not present.

The young man left the palace and returned with a haggard woman he had found near a pile of garbage. It was the eighth wife.

At the sight of his eighth wife, the king understood the magnitude of his injustice. At last, Dada Sègbo gave his judgment. Overwhelmed by the cruelty and betrayal of his seven queens, he declared the ultimate punishment. He gave the order to the Migan to carry out the royal decision to execute them.

As was tradition, each execution was accompanied by a sign to guide future generations.

The first executed wife was associated with the threshold of the palace. From then on, the elders say “*Assissi nyi kpokan bɔ afɔ vɛ gba*,” which means “the cowife is a threshold on which it is easy to stumble.”

The second wife was linked to the water basin, *dazin*, the symbol of reserve and unquenchable thirst. They say “*Assissi nyi dazin bɔ sin vɛ nu*,” which means “the cowife is a water basin in which thirst is difficult to quench.”

The third wife was linked to water, the element of purification, and insatiable rivalry. Thus, the proverb goes, “*Assissi nyi sin bɔ wulile vɛ lɛ*,” which means, “the cowife is a water in which it is difficult to rinse oneself.”

And thus, the sentences of the seven queens were carried out.

From then on, elders teach that jealousy is not born yesterday. It has lived in the heart since the dawn of time. That’s why, they say, certain men prefer today’s fragile peace of monogamy to the silent storms of polygamy.

The Inseparable Twins

My tale flies and lands on two twins, Zinsou and Sagbo.

They came into the world in a time of great distress. Famine was rampant, and hunger overwhelmed villages. Their parents, already poor, struggled to provide for the family. Every day was difficult, and each meal was a battle. The father and mother had the habit of going into the forest to collect palm nuts to make sauce. They lacked sufficient flour to make even a proper serving of pâte. To save money, they prepared a mix of palm nut sauce with flour. This resulted in a thick mixture that served as a meal. It was a miserable meal, shared in silence without complaint, for there were no other options.

One night, believing the children to be fast asleep, the parents hatched a plan: they would bring the twins into the forest under the pretext of teaching them to gather palm nuts, and then abandon them deep in the forest. They said they were exhausted from being unable to feed their children.

But Zinsou was not asleep. Hidden in the shadows, his eyes open, he heard every word. Meanwhile, Sagbo slept peacefully.

At dawn, Zinsou awoke first. Quietly, he filled a small sachet with ashes and slipped it into his pocket. Soon after, the parents announced to their children, "Today you will follow us into the forest. It's time that you know where we find palm nuts and vegetables."

They had never gone with their parents before. The twins looked at them with surprise, but they obeyed.

Traveling into the heart of the forest, Zinsou secretly sprinkled ashes behind him, marking a path invisible to inattentive eyes. In the heart of the forest, the parents announced, "Stay here. We are going to look for vegetables a bit farther. We will come back to get you."

They left and did not come back.

The silence thickened, and the shadows grew. Sagbo, worried, said, "Zinsou, our parents aren't coming back. We don't know the way home. What will we do?"

Zinsou replied calmly, "Last night I heard their plan. They wanted to abandon us. This morning, I sprinkled ashes on the way here. We only need to follow the ashes back."

The two brothers followed the gray path, faint but there, until they found the road that led to their house.

The parents, who were getting ready to eat, were shocked to see their sons return.

"We were just about to come get you!" they said, feigning innocence.

The children said nothing. They shared the meal, but the boys were mistrustful of their parents.

Night came, and the parents again lamented. This time, the father spoke, “Let’s sell them at the market. That way we will be able to survive.” The mother accepted.

The day of the market came, and they sold the two children. Zinsou was brought to *Agbaga* by a merchant. Sagbo was sold to *Kétou*, in a kingdom where a king without an heir raised Sagbo as his own.

Years passed. The merchant who had bought Zinsou lost his fortune. Overcome with misery, he sold Zinsou. Destiny, in all its silent irony, brought Zinsou to the kingdom of *Kétou*. There, a subject of King Sagbo bought Zinsou to watch over the kingdom’s fields and chase away the birds. No one knew that the king was born a twin. Every day at noon, Zinsou sang while clapping under the burning sun to chase away the birds.

Zinsou nɔnvi Sagbo é, lé fɔ̀è
Zinsou nɔnvi Sagbo é, lé fɔ̀è
Tɔ dokpo ɔ, nɔn dokpo ɔ wɛ ji mi lé, lé fɔ̀è
E sɔ Zinsou sa do Agbaga
Bo sɔ Sagbo sa do Kétou
Nou wa nyɔn Sa bɛ wa xɔ zin lé, lé fɔ̀è
Xɛ dé mǎ dú nɔn cé vi li o, lé fɔ̀è

His voice traveled far in the fields. The king's subjects reported that a new guardsman was working hard in the field and singing songs with strange lyrics. Intrigued by the contents of the song, Sagbo decided to see the fields for himself. Carried in his royal hammock and surrounded by his subjects, he arrived under the shining sun and asked the guardsman of the field to sing. Zinsou sang the same song again. The king's heart stopped. He asked his subjects to leave them be and told the young man, “Tell me your story.”

Zinsou told him everything: the famine, the forest, the marketplace, the separation from his brother.

And so Sagbo understood. “Zinsou... I am Sagbo.”

The two brothers looked at each other for a long time. They then embraced each other, finally reunited after so many years of separation.

Sagbo shared his kingdom and his riches equally with his brother. And so, he who was sold as property became a prince.

My story ends here. It teaches that the link between twins cannot be broken by misery, nor by distance, nor by destiny. Nothing can divide those who were born united in a single breath.

The Stepmother's Spatula

My story flies and flies and lands on Dada Sègbo.

Dada Sègbo had two wives. Each had birthed one daughter, but the second wife died soon after. The child grew up without a mother. The first wife became the orphan girl's guardian. But the woman's heart was not pure; she mistreated the young girl and made her do the hardest housework.

One day, the orphan forgot her stepmother's spatula by the well while washing the dishes. At the sight of this, the stepmother flew into a blind rage.

"If you don't bring back my spatula, I will beat you to death!" she threatened.

Terrified, the young girl left the house and took the forest path. The forest was deep, dense, and foreboding. No one dared to enter it alone, yet the orphan continued her path, pushed forward by fear.

Suddenly, a ferocious animal appeared before her.

"Young girl, what are you searching for all alone in this forest that no one enters?"

She responded in a trembling voice, "I forgot my stepmother's spatula near the well. She swore she'd kill me if I didn't bring it back."

At her word, the animal declared: "Come here. I'm going to bite you."

Without objecting, the young girl stepped towards the animal. The animal bit her lightly and said, "Continue your path this way. You will find what you're looking for."

She continued and soon glimpsed a needle on the path. The needle began to speak, "What have you come to do in this forest, girl?" She repeated her story.

"Come closer," the needle said, "let me prick you."

With courage, the orphan held out her hand. The needle pricked her, then murmured, "Continue on your path. What you are looking for is not far."

She walked further and found an old woman whose body was covered in broken glass.

"What are you looking for, child?" the old woman asked.

The young girl explained her misfortune again. The old woman said, "Massage my back."

Without hesitating, the orphan obeyed. The shards of glass cut her palms and drew blood, but she did not complain.

Touched, the old woman told her, "Dip your hands in this potion."

Immediately after dipping her hands in, the cuts in her hands closed and disappeared. The old woman gave her a last piece of advice: "Continue down this path. You will find fruit trees. Pick the fruit from the tree that keeps silent. Don't listen to those that yell '*Wa gbèmi! Wa gbèmi!*'" which means 'Pick me! Pick me!'

The young girl was loyal to the woman's advice. She found the trees. One of the fruit trees kept calling "*Wa gbèmi! Wa gbèmi!*" but the other was silent. She picked the fruit from the silent tree. Inside the fruit, she discovered the lost spatula. But that wasn't all—she also found gold, silver, and numerous treasures. She went home and returned the spatula to her stepmother with the riches.

From then on, the orphan girl's life changed.

The stepmother, enraged with jealousy, turned towards her own daughter, "You! Go into the forest too! Bring me back riches."

The young girl threw her mother's spatula in the water on purpose this time. Her mother scolded her and sent her to get it. She took the same path as her stepsister before her.

Once in the forest, the ferocious animal emerged.

"Where are you going?"

"I dropped my mother's spatula. She told me to go get it."

"Come here," said the animal, "let me bite you."

"Never!" replied the girl with disdain. "I'm too beautiful to be bitten!" The animal let her pass.

Further in the forest, the needle asked to prick her. She refused. At last, she met the old woman covered in shards of glass.

"Massage my back," the elderly woman said.

"Absolutely not!" the girl replied.

The old woman, unbothered, thus indicated to her the path and said, "When you see the fruit trees, pick the fruit of the tree that calls out, 'Come pick me!'"

The girl followed the old woman's advice. Arriving at the fruit trees, she picked the fruit from the tree that yelled the loudest. But inside the fruit there was neither gold nor silver. She only found weapons: knives, machetes, and guns.

Triumphant, she returned home. Her mother, convinced that she was bringing home treasures, called all the neighbors together to admire her riches. They were all shocked to find that instead of gold or silver, the girl had brought home weapons! And so, the story ends.

The tale teaches us that goodness opens doors, that humility attracts grace, and that nature itself aids those who are pure of heart, especially those who are orphans and misfortunate.

The Hunter and the Deer Woman

My tale soars and soars and falls on a hunter. He was a true hunter, formidable amongst his peers, who roamed the vast forest with confidence and expertise. No animal could escape him, so perceptive was his eye and silent his step.

One day, he ventured farther into the forest than normal. There, he glimpsed a deer with great beauty. As soon as he saw it, he climbed to the top of a mango tree to better watch the deer in secret.

In those days, deer possessed the secret art of shapeshifting. They could, as they wished, take the appearance of a man, a tree, a plant, and even another animal.

Perched at the top of the mango tree, the hunter followed the animal's movements attentively. But the deer had noticed the hunter. It pretended to be indifferent. The animal approached a termite mound. There, in an instant, it abandoned its deerskin in the hole of the termite mound and transformed into a young girl with rare beauty. She adjusted her clothes as if she were always a human girl, then headed toward the market like a simple village woman going to do her shopping. When she disappeared, the hunter climbed down the tree and headed towards the termite mound. Inside the mound, he found the deerskin carefully concealed and slipped it into his hunting bag. Then he climbed the mango tree again, silent and patient, waiting for the strange creature's return.

When the young girl returned to the termite mound, she frantically looked for her skin. Without it, it was impossible to return to her true form. She searched the hole but found nothing. The hunter then climbed down from the tree and approached her.

"What are you looking for, young woman?" he asked calmly.

"My animal skin," she replied in a trembling voice, "I hid it in this termite mound, but it's disappeared."

"If you have lost what is so precious to you," the hunter said, gazing at her, "know that your beauty has touched me. Will you be my wife and follow me?"

"You know my secret," she responded after a long silence. "If I agree to follow you, you must promise me you will never reveal my true nature to anyone. If this secret gets out, you will lose me forever."

The hunter swore, calling upon the heavens and the earth as his witnesses, that he would keep the secret. The young woman thus followed him back to his house. The hunter carefully hid the deerskin in a termite mound behind his hut. He presented the young woman to his parents. The hunter already had a wife, and thus the young woman became his second wife. At first, the two wives got along well, and the home was peaceful.

One night, while in the first wife's room, the hunter told her the story of how he found the second wife, revealed her true nature, and told the secret he had sworn to keep.

Another night, while he lay next to his second wife, he confided in her his own secrets: his strengths, his powers, his ability to transform to face wild beasts in the forest.

His mother, who heard his secrets, interrupted in a serious voice, "My son, must you really reveal everything?" At these words, the hunter shut his mouth and did not reveal the rest of his powers. Days passed, then months, then years.

One day, the hunter went hunting deep in the forest. In his absence, a violent fight erupted between the two wives. Words were at first difficult, then painful.

In her anger, the first wife cried, "You! Creature from animal skin. You'd be better off finding your skin that my husband hid in the termite mound behind the hut. You poor deer!"

At these words, the second wife paled, then reddened with shame and rage. Wounded at her core, she ran to the termite mound, found her deerskin, and immediately put it on. She took the form of a deer again.

In her rage, she transformed her and the hunter's children into deer as well. Then, blind with vengeance, she killed the first wife, the hunter's parents, and the rest of his children. She left no survivors.

In the company of her own children, she entered the forest to confront the hunter. She knew where to find him. When she got near him, the hunter sensed immediate danger. He prepared himself, and a battle of wit and power ensued. Each time the hunter transformed—into a lion, a panther, a wolf—the deer transformed into the same, and the fight continued with even greater intensity. Finally, using an ability that he had never before revealed to anyone, the hunter transformed into fire. In this intangible form, he escaped, and his life was saved.

He returned to his house, but it was empty. The hunter had lost his entire family.

And so the story goes. It teaches us that it is not wise to reveal everything. Some secrets are made to be kept, as careless words can burn more intensely than fire.

Dada Sègbo and the Sly Child

My tale flies, soaring over streams, lakes, rivers, and oceans, and lands on the home of Dada Sègbo.

Dada Sègbo was the village chief. He had a wife who gave him many children, boys and girls. Their home was peaceful, and people said they lived in true harmony with one another, born of respect and deep affection. They owned a vast farm that the wife and the children tended arduously. The land was generous, and the family prospered.

However, in time, Dada Sègbo took a second wife. Little by little, his heart turned from his first wife to the newcomer. He showered his new wife with gifts and attention, while the first wife remained in the shadows. When he went to the fields and slaughtered an animal, he gave the meat only to the second wife, and the first wife received nothing. When he wanted a savory soup, he entrusted its preparation to the second wife. The first wife was ignored. However, this did not sow jealousy nor revolt. The first wife remained silent and completed her tasks with dignity.

One day, Dada Sègbo went to the field. He captured a live rat and tucked it into a calabash. Then, he took a live snake and placed it in another calabash, which he also closed firmly. He gave the two calabashes to the eldest children of the first wife and said, “When you get home, give this calabash to your mother, and this one to your stepmother.”

The child placed the two calabashes on top of one another on his head and returned home. But curiosity got the better of him. He took the calabashes off his head and placed them on the ground, delicately opening the lids and looking inside. In the calabash meant for his mother was a snake; in the calabash meant for the second wife was a rat. He immediately understood his father’s plan.

When he arrived home, he secretly switched the calabashes. He gave the one with the snake to his stepmother and the one with the rat to his mother. The second wife, thinking that he had sent her game meat, hurried to open the calabash. Excited, she thrust her hand inside to grab the meat. The snake bit her immediately. She let out agonizing screams, alerting her neighbors, and began to roll on the ground. The neighbors came running. They wanted to kill the snake, but instead they trapped him in the closed calabash so that he couldn’t escape.

The neighbors questioned the child.

“How did you distribute the calabashes?”

He responded calmly, “I gave each person the calabash that my father asked me to give to them. I had nothing to do with it.”

They ordered him to run to tell his father in the field. The child took off. Before even seeing Dada Sègbo, he began to sing.

*Dah é, avi hoho é hwe ka nã ya é di a,
Menjotɔ dah cé,
avi hoho é hwe ka nã ya é di a,
Asi to we xóxó ɔ nyi dǎ du mɔn,
Asi to wé yɔyɔ nyi afin du mɔn,
Dah e, asitowe xoxo lɔ ku,
A nyi ó, guede hinyǎ hinyǎ guede nyǎ gue.*

Dada Sègbo heard the echo of the singing voice from afar. He raised his head, looked around, then continued his work weeding the field. As the child approached, he sang his song louder.

This time, Dada Sègbo stopped and yelled out.

“Who is singing this? Get away from my field!”

But when the child was only a few feet away, he raised his voice and sang even more beautifully. It was a message. Dada Sègbo dropped his hoe and ran towards the house in a flash. When he arrived, the second wife had already died.

Furious, he called out to his son.

“What did you do with the calabashes I gave you?”

The child replied without wavering.

“Father, I gave each person their calabash, as you had told me to in the field, without error.”

Dada Sègbo called the village together. The elders listened, weighing the words and understanding that jealousy and unfair preference had seeded the misfortune. The child, through his cunning, had acted to save his mother from certain death. The elders concluded that “sometimes, man himself becomes a source of misfortune for his home when he doesn’t know how to govern his heart equitably.”

Author’s Note: When my father, Ahossi Tebedehoun, gathered us under the moonlight to tell us folktales, he always reminded us that before any story is told, one must sing a song. And we would sing:

*Hwénuxó, min ka dɔ bɔ aka yi sé,
O hwénuxó, min ka dɔ bɔ aka yi sé,
A mã jɔ do hweninnu é,
Hweninnu xo, min ka dɔ bɔ aka yi sé,*

The Orphan Girl

My story lands on two young girls. One had lost her mother, the other lived with her own mother.

In this house, it was the orphan girl who carried the weight of the household chores. She was the one who fetched water from the well. She was the one who washed the dishes. She was the one who went to the market. Everything rested on her frail shoulders. Her stepmother overwhelmed her, taking advantage of the girl's mother's absence. Her father, absorbed with his work, saw nothing—or rather wanted to see nothing. The child withstood it all with patience. They gave her the most laborious of tasks.

One day, the young orphan girl went to the market as she often did. In the middle of the mixed voices and the yelling vendor-women, she met a young man of rare beauty, elegant and charismatic. He approached her gently.

“Where are you from, young girl?”

“I am the daughter of Dada Sègbo.”

“Will you marry me?”

The young girl lowered her eyes, then responded wisely.

“If I am to marry you, you must first speak to my parents. I can't follow you without their consent.”

“I understand,” he replied. “I was afraid you would refuse to see me again.”

“No. But I must ask my father's and mother's opinion. If they agree, the next market day, I'll let you know, and I will be able to follow you.”

When she returned from the house, she told her stepmother about the encounter. The woman, indifferent, said dryly, “That doesn't concern me. Go and ask your father.”

The young girl fell quiet.

At the following market, they sent the young girl again, and she found the young man.

“Did you tell your parents? Did they agree?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Then follow me. You'll follow me all the way to my house.”

After finishing his shopping, the young man returned home. The young girl walked next to him. But the farther they walked, the more the path disappeared behind them. When she turned around, there was no trace of their steps. There was only the path before them. Impossible to turn back, the young man then sang a strange song.

*Lele ka yi hwe ahwilitogbe, atilitó,
Lele ka yi hwe ahwilitogbe, atilitó,
Afɔtin mã ɔo afɔtin tómen mi hwe, atilitó,*

*Alɔvi mǎ do alɔvi tómen mi hwe, atilitó,
Ta de mǎ do ta de kɔ nu wɛ mi hwe, atilitó,
Lɛlɛ ka yi hwe ahwlitogbe, atilitó.*

He sang. The young girl remained silent. They finally arrived in a vast courtyard where the parents of the young man lived—beings with an almost supernatural allure. They welcomed the young girl with kindness.

In the courtyard stood an old woman. She greeted the young orphan girl and called out to her.

“My daughter, do you want to stay with us?”

“Yes, grandmother.”

“You have entered a home ruled by prohibitions and totems. If you respect them, you will live peacefully. I often stay at home alone; from now on, there will be the two of us. Your brothers-in-law are farmers. Listen to my advice...”

“Yes, grandmother.”

The following day, the old woman served the young girl a meal. She ate humbly. Later, the old woman called her to her room. She gave her specific instructions.

“Tomorrow morning, before your brothers-in-law go to the fields, they will give you a grain of corn. You will grind it to make pâte and prepare soup before they return. You will reserve a portion for each person. When they return, you will tell the first brother, ‘Welcome home, Gandjayigbévé.’ Then you will tell the second brother, ‘Welcome home, Zinflèkpon.’ Then you will tell the third, ‘Welcome home, Noutanou.’”

The old woman taught her all the names and the customs to be respected, down to the smallest of details.

“Then, they will ask you for tobacco. I will give it to you. You will offer it to them without hesitation.”

The young woman listened attentively and did exactly as she was told. When her brothers-in-law returned, she welcomed them with respect and pronounced each name correctly. Amazed by her wisdom and obedience, they asked her to go into a hut where they kept several calabashes and to choose a calabash amongst them.

The old woman had warned her, “Choose the oldest calabash, the most used. The one that has lost its shine. Don’t take the one that gleams.”

She entered and obeyed. She selected the dullest calabash and came back out. They asked her to carry it on her head. She obeyed. Suddenly, a tornado appeared. In an instant, she found herself thrown before her stepmother’s house alone.

The stepmother, surprised, yelled at her.

“Where have you been all this time?”

“Forgive me. I met someone at the market who took me on an adventure. I lived through a strange voyage,” the girl replied simply. “Here is what I brought back.”

They opened the calabash inside the house. To their great surprise, it contained innumerable riches: precious textiles, gold, refined tools, pieces of gold, and many other treasures. From then on, the orphan girl wanted for nothing. The stepmother, seized with envy, began to scold her own daughter, who had never had to work before. Nonetheless, she sent her to the market.

The day came, and the girl met the same young man. But, unlike the orphan girl, she agreed to follow him immediately.

“I can follow you.”

“Don’t you have to let your parents know?” asked the young man.

“No need. They already know that I’m of marrying age. I can follow you now.”

They took the same path. Like before, the trail disappeared behind them. But the young girl, talkative and careless, cried:

“What kind of path erases itself? What have I gotten myself into!”

She whined. The young man, indifferent, began his song without responding to her.

They soon arrived in the courtyard of mysterious beings. She murmured with disdain.

“What bizarre beings... what vile creatures!”

The old woman greeted her.

“Welcome.”

“Ah! At least there’s an old woman here!” she replied arrogantly.

They laid out a straw mat for her.

“I am to sleep on that? Never!”

The old woman tried to give her advice, as she did with the orphan girl. But the young girl refused the advice, ignored their customs, and despised all of it.

When they asked her to enter and pick a calabash, she rushed towards the shiniest one, thinking she would find even greater riches inside. They asked her to open it.

But when she opened it, she only found sharp and deadly objects: a penknife, machete, and various blades. The supernatural beings, offended by her insolence, punished her severely for her arrogance. They put her decapitated body in the calabash and closed it. In a tornado, she reappeared before her mother’s hut.

The mother, full of joy, called over her neighbors.

“Come look, come look! My daughter has returned with an even more beautiful calabash!”

They opened it in the hut. The stepmother discovered the body of her daughter inside, lifeless, and cut into pieces.

This tale teaches that a stepmother must care for her stepchildren as if they were her own, with fairness and kindness. It reminds us too that envy and arrogance lead to loss, while wisdom and obedience open the path to blessings.

The Youngest Son and the King of Riddles

My tale crosses over hills, traversing plains and dusty paths, then lands before the home of a couple: a man and his wife.

They had several children until the youngest child was born. This child had a rare intelligence: quick-witted, perceptive, and fearsome in the art of reasoning. Very early on, a special destiny was seen for him.

In those days, they say there existed, not far from their village, a kingdom where there reigned a king who loved riddles. Whoever dared to try could challenge him to a perilous game. The rule was rigid: if the king found the answer to the riddle given by his adversary, the challenger's head was immediately cut off. But if the king failed, he showered his rival with riches and honors.

When the youngest child learned of this, he announced to his parents that he intended to go to the kingdom and defeat the king. His mother was upset. She begged, protested, and cried. She didn't want to risk losing her son. But the child, stubborn and self-assured, was unconvinced. She understood that no words could restrain him. So, with a broken heart, she resolved to let him go.

However, in the shadow of her anxious love, she came up with a terrible plan. She was a seller of lio, a white paste made from corn, also called akassa.

Before her son left, she slipped a ball of lio into his sack, carefully wrapped and poisoned. She added a gourd full of water and a calabash. The young man, for his part, added three other balls of lio to his supplies. So, he had four for the road.

In the tormented mind of his mother, dying on the voyage was better than perishing by the king's blade.

The son left, accompanied by three large loyal dogs who followed him like guardians. Halfway there, hunger seized him. He stopped, opened his bag, and pulled out a ball of akassa that he ate without suspecting the trap. He generously shared another ball with his three dogs. Alas, it was the ball that his mother had poisoned. The animals devoured it with relish, then collapsed, dead only a few seconds later. The young man, afraid, at last understood the truth. His mother did not wish his death out of cruelty, but out of despair. She wanted to save him from an even more excruciating destiny.

While he reflected on this tragedy, three starving leopards rushed forth and ate the dogs. A bit later, they succumbed in turn to the poison. Then three vultures came and fed on the leopards, dying in the same way.

The son, witness to this deadly chain, etched the scene into his memory. This tragedy sparked a riddle in him. He continued on his path. While walking, he met a Fulani woman who, touched by his exhaustion, offered him fresh milk that she poured into his gourd to quench his thirst. Refreshed, he continued his journey before eventually reaching the kingdom.

At the entrance to the palace, he caught sight of the displayed heads of those who had lost the game. He felt the air around him go cold.

“Here is a young man who has come to challenge the king!” exclaimed the members of the court.

They brought him before the king. The young man bowed and stated his riddle, born from his journey.

“I am what we share by three, but I shorten nine. I’m born of water that didn’t come from the ground or the sky, and I saved man on the day of his distress. What am I?”

The king reflected for a long time in vain. Incapable of responding, he demanded that the young man be kept in the palace until the following day. But the king didn’t like to lose. He sent his daughter, the princess, into the young stranger’s room to extract the answer.

The princess was strikingly beautiful. The young man, troubled, asked her:

“Are you a princess of this kingdom?”

“No,” she answered with a smile, “I’m only a humble servant.”

She was lying.

Through her charms and promises, she obtained from the young man the answer to his riddle. But the young man, though enamored, was not fooled. While the princess slept next to him, he secretly untied the beads¹⁰ she wore around her waist and kept them.

At dawn, the princess joined her father and gave him the response to the riddle: lio, akassa. The following day, the king, confident, immediately answered when the young man repeated his riddle. A murmur went through the crowd. The game seemed to be over. But the youngest son only smiled.

“Your Majesty, permit me to tell a second riddle.”

He declared, “The king’s guest touches a palace pigeon and takes a feather. Who am I?”

The king paled. He understood the insinuation. He thought, reflecting on the riddle, but he found no response. Silence overcame the room as the young man had just revealed, without naming it, the betrayal of the princess and the trick of the king. This time, the king could neither cut off the man’s head nor save his honor by any other way except recognizing his defeat.

Silence weighed heavily in the throne room. Thus, the youngest son triumphed through his intelligence, while others had perished. And it was long remembered in this kingdom that no trick could defeat a perceptive mind.

¹⁰ Many West African women wear strings of beads around their waist. These beads are a very intimate adornment, a symbol of sexuality, and are generally only to be seen by one’s intimate partner.

The king, fallen into the trap of his own trick, understood that the riddle of the young man revealed the truth without saying it directly. The stranger had “touched the pigeon of the palace” and had taken a sign; the beads were missing from the princess’s waist. There was no way out.

The king rose and stated in a low voice:

“I recognize my defeat. You have won with your intelligence, wisdom, and self-control. Such a man does not warrant a blade nor humiliation, but honor.

According to the law of the land, he was brought chests of gold, rare fabrics, precious jewelry, and flocks of animals. Then, turning towards his daughter, he added, “And since you were able to see beyond appearances, I offer to you my daughter’s hand in marriage. May this marriage not be a defeat, but an alliance between wisdom and royalty.”

The princess, who could no longer ignore the value of the one she had tried to trick, raised her gaze to the young man. There was no longer trickery between them, only mutual admiration.

The youngest son bowed.

“Your Majesty, I accept gratefully.”

The wedding was celebrated with great pageantry. The kingdom, which had cowered many times in the shadow of decapitation, finally knew true joy. They sang the story of the young stranger who became the king’s son-in-law. They danced until dawn. They praised his mind and foresight.

Years passed. The young man became a respected advisor, then a pillar of the kingdom. He governed at the king’s side with discernment. The princess, who became his wife, revealed herself to be a wise and loyal woman. Their union, born from a test, transformed into a profound bond. In time, they had children.

It wasn’t until years later, when their situation was stable and peace reigned in the kingdom, that the couple decided to return to the man’s native land. The trip was formally organized. This time, he no longer walked with three loyal dogs but was escorted by his cavalry and servants. After many days of travel, he finally caught sight of his village.

In his village, time had dug its furrow. His parents had grown old. His mother especially still carried in her eyes the shadow from the day when she had let him leave. When she saw the arrival of the royal procession, she didn’t recognize her son under all his regal clothing. He dismounted, approached her, and knelt as he had done before.

“Mother, do you recognize me?”

She raised her trembling hands to his face.

“My son.... You’re alive?... Is it really you?”

He gently helped her to her feet.

“Yes, mother. It’s me, Sêflinou. Your poison didn’t take my life but instead taught me a lesson. I understood how far the anxious love of a mother can go. Your love protected me, even in its clumsiness. Without what I lived through on my journey, I wouldn’t have won.”

She erupted into sobs and hugged him tightly. His father, dignified and silent, placed a firm hand on his son's shoulder. The youngest son then told the whole story: the death of the dogs, the deadly chain of animals, the riddle, the king's trick, the princess, the snatched beads, and the victory.

With the riches he had won, he constructed a large house for his parents. He shared his goods with his brothers and sisters. He honored the memory of his dogs by erecting three small stones at the entrance of the village. Thus, in the region, it is said that “intelligence without prudence is a flame in the wind. But intelligence allied with vigilance becomes a sun.” The youngest son didn’t seek excessive glory or vengeance. He lived a long time and was respected for his wisdom.

Since that day, it’s said that a mother never wishes harm to her child; and that even apparent harm can actually be for the child’s true happiness.

The Hunchback and the Oath

My tale flies and flies and lands before the house of a man and his wife. This man was a formidable hunter whose bravery and courage were known in all the land. However, despite the passing years, the couple never had children. Their home was quiet, without the laughter and cries that make a home's heartbeat.

One day, the hunter went into the forest. Deep in this forest, there was a mysterious place called *Sekoxodji*. In this place, no plants grew. No one had ever swept there, but the ground was always tidy, as if cleaned by an invisible hand.

During a hunt, the hunter came upon a strange spot. Guided by sacred intuition, he made a wish.

"If this place really is *Sekoxodji*, may it grant me a child."

Having barely spoken this wish, an invisible voice replied.

"You will have a child. But this child will be born with a severe disability. You are never to insult them because of this disability. The one who will heal them will come when the time is right."

The hunter, troubled, accepted. He saw no one around him. The voice added, "Close your eyes."

He obeyed. A presence placed leaves in his hands.

"When you go home, look for the plants I will indicate to you. Add them to these leaves and prepare a potion for your wife to drink."

He was then asked to open his eyes. He was alone. Clutching the leaves to his chest, he went home, prepared the tea as he was told, and had his wife drink it.

Two months later, his wife became pregnant. The time came, and she brought into this world an extraordinarily beautiful baby girl. But the baby was born a hunchback. Despite this deformity, the young girl grew up admirably. Her grace, her kindness, and her glow made people forget her hunchback.

Years passed, and she reached marrying age. A young hunter, valiant like his father, fell under her spell and asked for her hand. Her father told him, "My daughter is a hunchback. If you marry her, you must never make fun of her nor insult her for what she carries on her back."

Her suitor accepted without hesitation. He paid her dowry and promised to respect their union. But before going to find his beloved, he decided to hunt. As his father-in-law had done, he reached the *Sekoxodji*.

There, he too made a wish.

"If only my wife could be healed of her hunchback, my joy would be complete."

The invisible voice replied to him, "I can help you. Your wife will be healed. But what I am to give you must be used for her alone, and you must keep it a secret."

The hunter agreed. He closed his eyes. Leaves were placed in his hands, and other plants were indicated to him. He was to make a powder of them and regularly massage his wife's back.

Before sending him away, the voice specified: "Your wife should never gather firewood, fasten them with rope, carry them on her head, and roughly throw them on the ground. If she does, her hunchback will return."

The hunter returned home and faithfully followed the instructions. Day after day, he massaged his wife's back. Little by little, the hunchback disappeared. The young woman regained a straight back and a perfect silhouette. Joy filled their home.

However, the husband told her, "If you ever gather firewood and throw it to the ground, I will die."

He did not tell her the whole truth, believing she would not take his words lightly. Years passed, and they had three children. But one day, the hunter proposed taking a second wife to help him cultivate their fields. His wife refused completely. They fought. Tension in the home grew. When she learned that he was readying himself to pay the dowry of another woman, jealousy blinded her judgment. She went to the field, gathered firewood, fastened it with rope, and carried it on her head. Arriving at her house, she intentionally threw it to the ground.

Her husband ran out to her.

"No! Don't do it!"

But it was too late. Immediately, the hunchback returned. The woman realized her mistake and regretted it.

"Why did I do such a thing?"

The hunter, wounded and angry, said, "I forbade you to do it. You defied me."

He wanted to send her back to her parents. But the neighbors intervened in her favor. She was still a mother to his three children. Desperate, the hunter returned to *Sekoxodji* to ask for forgiveness.

The voice replied:

"No matter what you do, your wife will remain a hunchback until the end of her days. She knowingly did what was forbidden."

The hunter went home, devastated.

Since that day, they say, the hunchback became an irreversible disability. A hunchback will remain a hunchback until their death, and no remedy can change this.

The Totem of Jealousy

My tale flies and flies and lands before the home of a praised hunter. This valiant man had two wives who lived under the same roof. Amongst them, one was expecting a child. Every time the hunter returned from the bush, carrying game meat, he reserved the best piece of meat that he would smoke and preserve with care. He was saving it for his pregnant wife so that after the birth they would have everything they needed to properly celebrate the newborn's arrival. Tradition said that the day following the birth, the mother is to prepare a hot corn paste that she must eat to regain her strength and honor ancient custom. The time came, and the pregnant wife gave birth to a beautiful baby.

The corn flour was kept in the room. But her co-wife, eaten by a silent jealousy, refused to give it to her so that she could perform the ritual and nourish herself as dictated by tradition.

So, the young mother remained hungry throughout the day after the birth.

The following day, weak but determined, she sorted some beans. She cooked them without salt and ate them as is. This meal, poor and unsuitable, upset her already fragile body. Later in the day, she ground more beans to make flour, with which she prepared a paste and a sauce of ironweed plants, also without salt. She ate it, for lack of anything better.

During this time, the hunter was gone on a long expedition. When he returned, he learned that his second wife had given birth. But he also discovered, with anger and shock, the cruel demeanor of the co-wife who, by jealousy, had deprived the young mother of care and the necessary food after giving birth.

The co-wife's jealousy went even further: she wished that the child, weakened by the poor diet of his mother, would refuse to breastfeed and that the milk would become unfit for his innocent mouth. She wished, in the darkness of her heart, that the infant would not survive. But nature, stronger than wickedness, was merciful and the child lived.

However, words thrown in bitterness took root. The co-wife, in her resentment, spoke words that became custom. From then on, newborn mothers are to eat beans cooked without salt, then bean paste with a sauce of ironweeds, also without salt.

And so, a totem was born.

Since this day, they say, because of the jealousy between co-wives, certain newborn mothers must still submit themselves to a strict diet: beans without salt, then bean paste and a sauce of ironweeds, without the smallest pinch of salt, a bitter memory of an old rivalry.

My tale ends here. It is up to you to carry it farther.

The Hunter and his Dog

My tale travels over paths, crosses trails, grazes bushes, then lands on a lonely hut.

In this hut, there lived a hunter and his dog. The dog was the loyal companion of the hunter. Wherever the hunter went, to the field, in the forest, the animal followed. Never did he miss his prey. He always caught game animals and brought them proudly to his master.

One day, the hunter and his dog went to the field. There, in the middle of the crops, the hunter had constructed a small hut where he would rest after long days of work. That day, as he often did, the dog let his master work until he was exhausted. When the sun set, the hunter went into the small hut, ate the meal he had brought with him, and saved a portion of it for his loyal companion. But the dog did not return.

Night fell. The hunter, worried, prepared to go home without him. However, when he was going to leave the field, he stopped still. The silence of the bush weighed on his heart. So, he began to sing a song:

Avún cé nyi kinkouin, kinkouin mã jrɔ mən
Avún cé nyi kinkouin, kinkouin mã jrɔ mən,
Avún cé hú azúí, avún cé mã kú nən
Avún cé hu xɔ, avún cé mã kú nən
Avun cé wa do asɔklé nyonú bo wa yi dɔn é ji

He had barely finished his song when a voice replied to him from the bush, not far off.

Sewadé, sewadé, sewadé, loha sewadé wa dɔ
Sewadé mã sɔ mən hú nu cé, ba do hú wé
Mã sɔ mən sa nú cé ba do sa wé
Man sɔ mən sin nú cé ba zin gblogwe

The hunter shivered. He searched for the source of the mysterious voice and approached it carefully. As he moved forward, he sang his song again. Then a third time. And three times, the voice replied to him.

Guided by this strange encounter, he finally discovered the origin of the song: under a large tree rested an animal of an unknown length, whose winding body seemed to be unending. Without hesitating, the hunter shouldered his rifle and shot. The animal broke into three pieces. But something extraordinary happened: not a

drop of blood flowed from the wounds. In its place gathered a liquid of blinding whiteness, similar to breast milk.

Intrigued, the hunter gathered the pieces and brought them to his home. Upon his arrival, he looked again at the strange liquid. Pushed by his curiosity, he tasted a few drops.

Since that day, they say, women began to notice their breasts swell and produce milk for their expected child; thus was born the mystery of breast milk.

My tale ends here, but its echo lives in the song of the bush.

The Two Moons of the Hwægbonú

A long, long time ago, in the Hwægbonú family, tradition was sacred. No one dared to go against it, as it was the voice of the ancestors and the breath of former generations. In this lineage, when a child is born, he is not to be shown to the world before the moon appears. The nocturnal light marked the rhythm of steps, and each movement obeyed a precise order. They say that this rule came from a story of jealousy between two co-wives.

When a woman gave birth, her body, exhausted by the ordeal, did not permit her to fetch water or finish her chores. Thus tradition instructed her cowife to assist her: the cowife would fetch water for her, observe her well-being, and help her regain her strength.

But it happened that at that time lived two cowives who did not get along well. When one brought her child into the world, the other, full of bitterness, refused to help her completely. She didn't want to fetch water, nor aid her in the slightest.

The young mother, weakened but forced out of necessity, had to use the last of her strength. According to an old custom, she placed a leaf in her mouth to remain silent—for a woman who had just given birth was not to speak to anyone during this period—and went to the well herself to fetch the water she needed.

However, tradition dictated that after birth, the woman was to remain alone in her room until the child's umbilical cord fell, an event that came many days after the birth. It was only with the permission of the family's midwives that the mother could cross the threshold of the home. Otherwise, she had to wait patiently for the cord to fall.

Once this step was completed, another tradition began: that of the two moons.

When the first moon appeared, the young mother was taken to the fields the very next day by the midwives. There, she worked the earth as a sign of rebirth and renewed strength. All the teas used for the care of the child were then buried in the field, mixed with the earth, so that nature might reap its benefits.

That very same day, a ritual would be performed with bean and corn seeds. The woman would plant them in the ground, a symbol of fertility, continuity, and prosperity.

It was only when the second moon appeared that the woman was officially authorized to go out with her child. However, she could only carry him on her back, cross the limits of the concession, and go to the fields with him, under the careful gaze of the elders. Thus, the rule of the two moons was sealed.

So they say she who does not respect these does not give in to tradition and breaks the connection with the ancestors.

Since then, in the Hwægbonú lineage, the birth of a child is not only a miracle of life; it also follows the lunar cycle, the silent guardian of ancient laws.

My tale ends here, under the light of the second moon.

Dada Sègbo and the Forty-First Wife

Once upon a time, there was a powerful king called Dada Sègbo. His riches and his authority extended over a vast kingdom, and it was said that no one questioned his word. He had forty-one wives, all living in the royal quarters according to rank conferred upon them by their order of arrival. However, despite this abundance of wives and formality, a silent evil weighed on the palace: Dada Sègbo had no children.

Amongst his wives, the forty-first was the youngest. She was also the most neglected. According to palace tradition, each night, a designated wife would share the king's bed. The first wife, guardian of customs and night routines, was tasked with choosing who would join the king. But out of jealousy, she never selected the last wife.

Years passed, and none of the forty favored wives gave birth to an heir.

Tormented by his lack of descendants, Dada Sègbo summoned all the nobles and a Bokonon, a Fa priest. The priest consulted the sacred symbols and revealed to the king that amongst his many marriages, there remained a conjugal duty to be done with one of his wives. The sacrifices prescribed by the Fa were done rigorously.

The king understood immediately who it was.

A few days later, without asking the first wife, he decided to spend the night with the forty-first wife secretly. Then he left on an expedition, as was his habit, leaving the palace behind him.

When he returned, news was stirring the court: the last wife was pregnant. Dada Sègbo pretended to be surprised. The child had already been carried for four moons. Fearing the jealousy of the other wives and dreading the trouble this unexpected pregnancy might cause, he accused the young wife of infidelity. He refused the child and exiled her from the kingdom.

The unfortunate woman wandered for a long time on dusty paths, her heart broken and her stomach heavy. After several days roaming the bush, she strayed deeper into the forest, intent on dying far away from prying eyes.

On the seventh day, she discovered a great baobab whose trunk emitted white smoke. Intrigued, she approached the tree. Suddenly, a man appeared before her. It was no ordinary man: it was a divinity transformed into human form.

He asked her where she was going, pregnant and alone. She told her story, her shame, and her exile.

The divinity brought her under the protection of the great tree. There lived other similar beings, divinities who, one by one, took human or animal form. Every day, they asked her to prepare dishes for them: *pâte rouge*, beans, and various sauces. She obeyed without complaining, serving each according to their desires. At first, some of them thought to devour her. But her patience, her kindness, and her

generosity disarmed them. They decided to protect her and watch over her pregnancy.

Moons passed. The child was soon to be born.

One day, the divinities revealed their true forms to the woman. Then they went to the market, adorning themselves in their finest clothes, each according to their rank and power, and they came back to get her. Singing and dancing, they escorted her to the gates of Dada Sègbo's kingdom.

At the sight of these supernatural beings, the king trembled and bowed.

"We have brought back your wife," they said. "She whom you exiled and whose pregnancy you rejected. We found her wandering in the forest. She is about to give birth, and we will stay here until the birth of the child."

Dada Sègbo, hypocritical and fearful, replied:

"I was looking for her myself to bring her back to the palace."

The divinities did not reveal his lie. They remained in the kingdom until the birth. The forty-first wife brought into the world a healthy baby, awaited like rain in the dry season.

Since that day, they say, the divinities remained tied to the kingdom. They became the protectors of the king and his descendants. The elders teach that it is thus the divinities began to live amongst man, and that the kings learned that no earthly power could prosper without obeying the invisible forces.

Destiny's Tail

My tale walks, my tale runs, and my tale falls on two children—a boy and a girl—who grew up together like two young shoots born of the same soil. Seasons passed, and their childhood bond transformed into love. They were eventually engaged. Their union bore a son.

The mother loved her son excessively. She protected him from everything, even from work. The child grew up without ever learning to sweep the courtyard, fetch water, or farm the land. His father proposed sending him to school so he could learn and get a job. But his mother was completely against this: her son, she said, should not know tiredness nor duress.

So, the young boy didn't know how to do anything with his hands. He lived in the comfortable shadow of rich parents, abandoning himself to games and distractions.

Years passed. His parents died, leaving him the only inheritor of their goods. Now an adult, he impregnated a young woman whom he had taken as a companion. When the time came, he had a child. But lacking discipline and foresight, he squandered his heritage. The attics and coffers were emptied, and soon misery knocked on his door.

Not knowing how to farm nor how to sell, he turned to his old friends. They were hunters. He decided to follow them into the forest to learn their work. But hunting cannot be improvised. When his friends returned with full game bags, he almost always came back empty-handed.

One night, he returned without a single catch. His exasperated wife chastised him, "Your friends always bring back meat to their wives. But you never cross the threshold of the home with the smallest catch. If you return empty-handed again, I will leave you."

The threat weighed heavily on his heart. Especially since his wife was pregnant and expecting another child. In the following days, he turned to the forest. He walked for a long time, hunting without success, exhausted. On his way home, overwhelmed by the fear of losing his family, he glimpsed a wild animal sleeping deeply in the grass. Desperate, he neared stealthily and managed to cut off his tail before fleeing. He brought this trophy home to his wife.

At last, she rejoiced. She carefully seasoned and prepared the tail. The meal was hearty, and she ate it gratefully.

But in the forest, the animal woke up. Sensing the absence of his tail, he let out a fearsome roar that shook the trees. In the olden days, animals had abilities like humans: they listened, understood, and followed signs. Every time an animal roared, the wife felt a deep rumble in her stomach—like a living echo of the beast's anger—as she had consumed what belonged to him. Guided by this mysterious grumbling,

the animal followed the sound until it reached the young man's hut. The young man had gone hunting. In his rage, the beast broke into the home and killed the pregnant woman, enacting his revenge.

When the husband returned, he found a silent home and his lifeless wife. The tragedy hit him hard. And so, he understood: his ignorance, laziness, and lack of foresight had brought him to this unreflecting deed. To avoid shame and threats, he had chosen trickery over study. This choice had brought irreparable loss.

And so, the elders say: the one we overprotect grows up without roots; and the man who refuses to work will end up paying the price of his carelessness.

The Hunter, the Stubborn Woman, and the Three Hyenas

My story flies and flies and lands on a couple and hyenas. The wife of this couple was very stubborn. She loved her husband, but she rarely listened to his advice. Together, they farmed a field. They would go there to work, sow, and tend to the young shoots. The man was also a hunter and sometimes went into the forest to bring back meat.

One day, before leaving on a hunt, he expressly advised her not to work in the field before his return.

“Wait for me,” he told her. “We’ll go together.”

He had barely left the house when the wife, loyal to her stubbornness, balanced a basin on her head, tied her baby to her back, and set out for the field, disobeying her husband’s advice.

However, the husband knew his wife’s stubbornness. Instead of heading directly to the forest, he went to the field, climbing a large tree and hiding in its leaves, his gun in his hand. Soon after, he saw his wife come into view. She set down her basin, placed her child in the shade, and began to work, unaware that her husband watched her from the treetop. While she worked, a hyena transformed into a young man and approached her.

“Woman, give me water to drink,” he told her.

“I don’t have any water,” she replied. “I only brought akassa to feed my child.”

“Ah! How thirsty I am... I don’t want akassa,” he said, refusing the food.

Despite this, the young man began to work next to her. A little bit later, a second hyena, also transformed into a young man, appeared and asked for water. The woman replied again that she didn’t have any. She then began to sing in a plaintive voice.

*Vié sú, vié sú, vɛ wa sé xó yɛ xa mi,
Yin wɛ da zin kin wɛ, nyǎ wa bo jɛ azin kin ji,
N’nan vigui bɛ dɔ, tótó mã do vigui ba wɛ,
N’nan guisin bɛ dɔ, tótó mã do guisin ba wɛ,
Akor’tɛ núnú vi ba nú,
Mi vɛ sún vú dé nú mi,
Mi bo ba vú dé mã dú...*

When she finished her song, he, too, refused the akassa. The woman was surprised when a third hyena appeared, also transformed into a young man. He asked for water and refused food.

Thus, the woman found herself faced with three strangers. They exchanged a few words. Then, suddenly, the three young boys returned to their true forms: ferocious hyenas. Their eyes were blazing. They circled the woman and her child, ready to devour them. It was then that the hunter emerged. He jumped down from the tree where he had been hiding, aiming his gun and shooting the three hyenas one by one, who then collapsed into a cloud of dust.

And so, the hunter saved the life of his wife and his child.

The woman, shaking, understood how her stubbornness had almost cost her life.

The elders say, he who refuses to listen exposes himself to danger; but he who watches wisely protects his own.

The Orphan and the Doblígodo¹¹

My story flies, flies, and lands on a young boy who had lost his mother. After the death of his wife, the young man's father remarried. From then on, the child was placed under the custody of a harsh and unjust stepmother. She had herself a son whom she cared for and protected. The orphan carried the burdens of the household: fetching water, sweeping the courtyard, grinding millet, and washing dishes. Nothing was spared for him.

One day, he went to the water spring to wash the dishes. When he was washing the plates, the wooden spoon used to stir the pâte slipped from his hands and fell into the murky water. His heart pounding, he went home and confessed what had happened to his stepmother. Furious, she hit him violently and ordered him to go back and find the wooden spoon at all costs. Crying, the boy returned to the spring. He dove in, searched, and swam for a long time for the lost object.

It was then that a Doblígodo, a strange creature without hands or feet, appeared and came to drink. He saw the child in the spring and called out to him.

"Young boy, what are you looking for in these waters?"

"I'm looking for my mother's wooden spoon. It sank to the bottom of the spring."

The Doblígodo helped him to find the spoon but did not immediately give it to him. He asked him for a favor first.

"Carry me on your back, cross the spring with me, and accompany me to my home on the other side of the forest."

Despite his exhaustion and fear, the orphan agreed. He carried the creature on his back until they reached his home in the heart of the deep forest. There, he discovered other beings that resembled the Doblígodo, as well as strange animals he had never seen before. They gave him a grain of corn to grind into pâte to feed them all. The boy did so without complaint. He pounded the corn with care and cooked the meal.

The Doblígodo then said to him, "Serve my brothers by calling each one by name."

The boy replied humbly, "I don't know their names."

At that moment, a bird landed near him and sang.

*Mèn núnkòntòn, é nyi hlogbé-hlogbé,
Odé ɔ nyi hlogbé sènagnon,
Odé ɔ nyi atinmando-kpɔnoumin,
Odé ɔ nyi kpornoumin-atiogbe,*

¹¹ A Beninese and Nigerian mythical creature without limbs, often described as completely round.

*Odé ɔ nyi somandjègbé,
Odé ɔ nyi gbémandjèsrorsa...*

The boy carefully remembered the names the song gave and served each brother, calling them by name with respect. The creatures were amazed by his politeness, his memory, and his humility.

“Where did you find such a helpful and attentive child?” They asked the Doblígodo. “We like him.”

“I met him at the spring. He was looking for a lost wooden spoon. I helped him, and he helped me in return.”

After a few days, the Doblígodo returned the wooden spoon to the boy, along with a large crate of riches. The orphan returned home, carrying the spoon and the crate. When he opened the crate, he and his stepmother discovered gold, diamonds, silver, and many other treasures inside.

Her expression changed immediately. Envious, she urged her own son to leave on the same adventure. The young boy obeyed and went to the spring, where he, too, met the Doblígodo.

But instead of greeting him, he cried out.

“What an ugly creature that lurks here!”

The Doblígodo offered to help him on the condition that the boy would carry him on his back.

The boy refused with disdain.

“I would never carry such an ugly creature.”

The creature asked him then to follow him, despite his insolence. They crossed the spring and reached the forest. They gave him corn to grind into flour. He did so without any real care. When he went to serve the pâte, he didn’t know the names of the Doblígodo’s brothers. Too prideful to ask, he served them without calling their names. This failure sealed his fate. The creatures, offended by his arrogance and disrespect, punished him severely. They placed his body in a crate and had it carried to the threshold of his mother’s house. The stepmother, believing to have received riches like the orphan’s, eagerly opened the crate. There she discovered the lifeless body of her son. Her cries echoed for a long time in the courtyard.

And so, the elders say, humility opens doors that pride closes; and the orphan, tested by pain, can find favor where the spoiled child fails.

The Saving Bottle

My tale flies, flies, and lands on a man and a woman who were a poor couple. They owned almost nothing, except for their courage and their love.

One day, tired of living in need, they decided to leave their homeland to try their luck elsewhere. They walked a long time, crossing plains and forgotten paths, until they reached a vast bush, far from the eyes and tumult of humans. There, they settled down. With patience and determination, they cleared the land, built a house, and cultivated a field. Seasons passed, fruitful and generous. The couple started a large family. The granaries filled up, the livestock prospered, and poverty was soon nothing more than a memory. They had succeeded in life through their hard work.

However, in their homeland, some men hatched a dark plan against them. They spoke of war. They wanted to find the couple, take their riches, annihilate them, and seize their lands. Spies were sent to find them. After a long investigation, they discovered the place where the couple had settled. One day, strangers arrived on their land. The man and the woman welcomed them hospitably, as befits travelers. They offered them food, drink, and shelter for the night.

“Where are you from?” asked the head of the house.

“We are only passing adventurers,” they responded evasively.

Before leaving, they declared, “We will return soon.”

Their visit left a bad taste in the mouth of the man and his wife. After they left, the wife confided in her husband.

“It’s strange that strangers were able to find us here, so far from everything. We must consult the Fa.”

The husband, this time, didn’t argue. He went to the Bokonon and explained the situation to him.

After consulting the Fa, the Bokonon said in a serious voice, “The men you hosted are spies. They were sent to find your home. Soon, an army will arrive. They will kill you, your wife, and your children before leaving with your possessions.”

The man paled.

“What must I do?”

The Bokonon replied, “Bring me your whole family. I will shelter them.”

The following day, the man returned with his wife and his children. The Bokonon performed a powerful ritual. At the end of the incantation, the whole family found themselves mysteriously confined in a large bottle. The Bokonon gave the bottle to the man and said, “Take this and leave immediately. On your path, you will meet animals. Sing. Your song will make them believe that those who seek you are behind you. Don’t stop. Before you, a river will rise that no one has ever been able to cross. Don’t be scared.”

The man took the bottle. To the outside eye, it was just an ordinary bottle. He walked for a long time. Soon, he met the first animals, posted like guardians. So he began to sing.

*O gbé kanlin dé mɔn go, énon dɔ go fi a sɔn
Go gosin gbé wémen, dahwin hwinsú ja,
Bo le da se do
E ve mɔn nú go, go sún je alidji
Gɔngɔnnɔn gɔn sú mǎ dɔ nú mi
Bo la hwǎ do*

Each time he met an animal, he repeated the song. The animals, tricked by the melody, believed that those who were going to attack the man were right behind him. Reassured, they let him pass. At last, he reached the famous river, large and fearsome, that no one had ever crossed. On the riverbank stood the chief of the animals. He seized the bottle and threw it violently to the other side of the river. The bottle broke. Instead of becoming lost, the man found himself immediately reunited with his wife, his children, his possessions, and all his riches, already reconstructed on the other side of the river. The river had protected them. Behind them, the spies, the invaders, and everyone who wanted to cause them harm remained stuck on the other riverbank. The river remained impassable.

And so, the man understood two things; he understood that he should never disregard the intuition and the advice of a wise wife. And he also understood that the Fa, when we consult it with faith and respect, can prevent danger and save lives.

The Little Brother and the Night Beast

Once upon a time, a couple lived peacefully with their two sons. Years had passed in happy simplicity when the mother fell sick and died. Time passed again and the father, weakened by a long illness, felt his strength abandoning him. Before dying, he called his eldest son to his bedside.

“My son,” he said in a weakened voice, “your brother is stubborn and headstrong. When I’m no longer here, watch over him. Protect him, even from himself.”

The eldest son promised. Soon after, the father died, and the two boys found themselves alone in the world. In the kingdom where they lived, a strict law forbade anyone from touching the king’s child. Anyone who dared raise their hand against one of them was punished by death. The little brother, true to his fiery nature, dared to slap one of the young princes during a fight. The situation reached the palace. The king, furious, summoned the boy. But the little brother did not come. He knew that this summons meant his death.

No longer having a parent to defend them, the elder brother remembered the promise he made to his father. He took his brother’s hand and fled from the kingdom under the cover of night. They went deep into the forest, walking without stopping until exhaustion forced them to halt under a large tree.

As they were catching their breath, a bird landed on a branch above them.

“What are you doing here, young boys?” he asked.

The elder replied respectfully, “We are orphans. My brother recklessly slapped the son of the king. To avoid death, we fled. We have nowhere to go.”

The bird, touched by their distress, declared, “I can take you to a faraway land where you will find refuge. But remember this: my totem is sacred. No one can pluck one of my feathers.”

They agreed. The bird took them on his powerful wings and flew over forests and hills.

However, having barely arrived in the new land, the little brother, curious and unthinking, plucked a feather from the bird’s plumage. The bird cried out in anger and, wounded in his totem, dropped them suddenly at the top of a tree before disappearing. The two brothers climbed down with difficulty and resumed their wandering until they reached a modest home where an old woman lived. After hearing their story, she agreed to house them.

“Here,” she told them, “We live under threat of a wild beast. When night falls, everyone closes their doors. No one stays outside.”

After dinner, as night fell, the old woman invited the boys into her home. The eldest obeyed. But the younger, true to his rebellious nature, refused.

“I will stay outside,” he declared.

They begged him in vain. In that era, every night, a small bush fire was kept burning in front of the homes to light up the compound. The young boy gathered three large stones that he placed in the fire so that they reddened in the embers.

In the dead of night, when silence weighed heavily on the land, the beast emerged, massive and terrifying, ready to devour his prey. The boy, calm and determined, grabbed the three glowing rocks. When the animal opened his mouth wide to eat him, the boy threw the burning rocks into the back of his throat. The heat pierced him, tearing him apart from the inside. The beast fought for a long time before succumbing. The young boy, careful, cut off the left ear and the tail of the animal, which he kept as proof. Then, he went to bed as if nothing had happened.

At dawn, the old woman discovered the beast's body before her home. The news spread quickly. The king of the land summoned all its inhabitants to find who was responsible for this feat. Many came forth, pretending to have killed the beast. But the king noticed that the animal had its left ear and tail cut off.

"May he who really killed the beast bring me its parts," he ordered.

The imposters were unable to produce any proof. Someone in the crowd then suggested, "What if we called forth the newcomers? The young boys staying with the old woman?"

Emissaries were sent. They mocked the little brother.

"This little boy? He's too frail for such a feat!"

But the younger brother arrived, calm. He presented the ear and the tail.

"If you open the beast's stomach," he said, "you will find three rocks inside. That is what killed him."

They verified it to be so. The rocks were found inside. The king, impressed by his courage and intelligence, congratulated him in front of everyone. As a reward, he shared his kingdom and gave the young orphan a part of his land, on which the young boy reigned with wisdom.

And so, the chaotic younger brother, who was thought to be doomed to fail, fulfilled his destiny. For there is no such thing as a little boy when courage meets the hour that God had written for him.

Awadagbé, the Wise Fool

A long time ago, in a peaceful village, lived a man called Awadagbé. He was said to be half-mad, but those who knew how to listen to him understood that his madness was perhaps another form of wisdom. He begged to survive. In wandering the streets, he tirelessly repeated:

“Awadagbé ɔ, alo wa nú hwuidé; awa nyǎnyǎ alo wa nú hwi dé”

Which means, “if you do good, you do it for yourself; if you do evil, you also do it for yourself.”

The village children followed him, laughing and chanting his name. They loved him, because when he was given something, he always shared it with them.

Awadagbé carried an old satchel within which he placed everything he was given: bread, cooked yam, gari, cookies, some change, or simply water. He never ate immediately what he received. He thanked them gratefully, put the gift in his satchel, then continued on his way singing.

*Awadagbé ɔ, alo wa nú hwuidé,
Awa nyǎnyǎ alo wa nú hwi dé
Acé fúnmi fúnmi, acé fúnmi fúnmi layé.*

Wherever this melody was heard, it was known that Awadagbé was passing by.

However, in the village lived a man who harbored a deep hatred of Awadagbé. Annoyed by his songs and his daily presence, he decided to make him disappear. One day, he bought a loaf of bread and carefully poisoned it. When Awadagbé passed by his house singing, the man called him and, feigning a caring demeanor, placed the bread in his satchel. Awadagbé thanked him as he always did and continued on his way. Other villagers offered him goods that he placed inside his bag. Later, when school had finished, the children ran to him. As always, he clung to his bag, laughing. Always generous, Awadagbé handed out candies, cookies, and pieces of bread. Without knowing it, the son of the man who poisoned the bread took a piece of it in the satchel and eagerly ate it.

Having barely returned home, the child was seized by violent stomach pain. His parents, worried, asked him what he had eaten.

“Like always,” he replied weakly, “Awadagbé gave us some of the bread from his satchel... I took some.”

Despite the care provided, the child did not survive. The news thrust the village into mourning. The father, broken by grief, understood the magnitude of his act immediately. The bread he had meant for Awadagbé had taken the life of his own son. A gathering was called in the village square. Before everyone, the man

confessed to his crime. He admitted to wanting to poison Awadagbé to shut him up forever. But the evil he had done was returned against him. So, in the heavy silence of the assembly, the words that Awadabgé repeated every day resonated with new meaning: If you do good, you do it for yourself; if you do evil, you also do it for yourself.

And so, the village understood that no one can sow evil without harvesting its fruit.

As for Awadagbé, he continued to roam the streets, singing his truth, while the children, a little bit wiser, walked behind him.

The Singing Pot

My tale takes flight, crossing countries and landing atop a humble hut in the middle of a peaceful village.

In this hut lived a hunter and his wife. They lived well and got along. Their home exuded harmony and simplicity. Seasons passed smoothly until the day, years later, when the hunter took a second wife.

The first wife was a merchant. Each morning of the market day, before arranging her goods, she prepared the soup for that night's meal. Then she left to sell with courage and dignity. But one day, upon her return, an unbearable sight awaited her: the soup was soiled with human excrement. The pot, although clean and steaming when the wife had left, was now inedible. Her heart aching, she was forced to throw out the soup. She looked in vain for who had done such a thing, but the mystery remained unsolved. When it happened a second time, she informed her husband.

Troubled by these inexplicable acts, he decided to consult the Bokonon with his first wife to seek the Fa's advice.

The Bokonon consulted the sacred signs. After the rituals and the sacrifices required by the Fa, he gave the hunter a consecrated calabash. The Bokonon told him, "If your first wife prepares soup again, place this calabash in the pot. When the soup disappears, sing the song I'm going to teach you. The truth will reveal itself."

The hunter returned home with the calabash. The following day, the first wife prepared soup as normal. She secretly placed the calabash in the pot and then left for the market. When she returned, the kitchen was empty. The pot and the soup had disappeared.

Stunned, she cried out.

"Who took my pot and my soup?"

Remembering the Bokonon's instructions, she sang the sacred chant.

*Oún súnnú gbă cé, jélé jélé é,
Oún súnnú gbă cé, jélé jélé é,*

To everyone's shock, a voice replied.

*Nyɔnwé ké, nyɔnwé ké,
Nyɔnwé dié ké do hwinnɔn migo nú é.
E sɔ wɔtin nă do gba nyɔnwé,
Nyɔnwé dié gbɛ gbigba é.
E sɔ kpókă nă do gba nyɔnwé,
Nyɔnwé dié gbɛ gbigba é.*

*Nyindesú hwinnɔn tité nyɔnwé wɛ ba,
Gbelenú, gbelenú, gbɛlɛlɛ, nyɔnwé wɛ ba.*

The voice came from the pot itself. The first wife held her breath. Then she began to sing again. The pot replied again. The second wife, who observed the scene, was filled with fear: the pot was found mysteriously lodged in her vagina, revealing her guilt. And so the truth came to light.

When the hunter returned home, his first wife explained what had happened. Without waiting, the hunter went to inform the village king.

The king immediately summoned the village. All the villagers responded to his call, including the hunter and his first wife. Only the second wife did not come. She had tried by many means to remove the pot, but she was unable to. By the king's order, the guards went to find her. She arrived at the palace covered in a hastily tied heavy cloth and couldn't sit down without apparent discomfort. The king let the first wife speak. She explained everything: the excrement repeatedly found in the soup, the consultation with Bokonon, the sacred calabash, and the pot that sang in reply. The king asked the first wife to sing the song again. She sang. And then, before the stunned crowd, the soup pot replied again, its voice revealing its location.

A murmur erupted through the crowd. The mystery was solved.

Cornered, the second wife confessed: because of her jealousy, she relieved herself in the soup of her co-wife to keep her husband from eating it, as he preferred the meals of the first wife.

The king, outraged by such baseness, condemned the second wife to death for her jealousy and her shameful act. The punishment was carried out according to the laws of the village, so that no one would forget that jealousy, when unmastered, leads to humiliation and the loss of one's dignity.

Thus, the singing soup pot had exposed the truth. And my tale gently takes flight again, leaving behind it a lesson: jealousy is a fire that always ends up burning the one who lights it.

The Saxèfa Spring

My story flies, flies, and lands on a hunter who had two wives. The first, disabled and forced to walk with crutches, was called Saxèfa. Weak in body but strong in spirit, she was the mother of two children. Her disability kept her from doing domestic chores. Before gaining hunting land, her husband oversaw all her needs: he fetched water for her, did her chores, went to the mill, and ensured, with constant vigilance, that nothing disturbed the peace of their home.

The second wife, Yongnoui, had no disability. She took care of herself but harbored no compassion nor care for her co-wife.

One day, the hunter left on a long expedition. Days passed. In Saxèfa's water jar, water was running low. The sun was strong, and the two thirsty children begged their mother for water. Helpless, Saxèfa sent her children to Yongnoui to ask for some water.

Yongnoui refused dryly, "If I were like your mother, I wouldn't have water either. I have nothing to give you."

The children returned to their mother in tears, telling her the stepmother's cruel words. Her heart broken, Saxèfa wept over her disability, regretting that she was unable to get up and go to the well herself. Hoping to soften Yongnoui, she sent back her children to beg her a second time for only a calabash of water.

The reply was even harsher, "Go tell your mother to grab a basin and go fetch water herself!"

The kids returned to their mother; their faces wet with tears. This time, Saxèfa cried with them. Then, gathering what strength she had, she began to crawl, dragging her bruised body, her children behind her. Slowly, with difficulty, she reached the bush. In the shade of a large tree, she rested.

Suddenly, a miracle occurred. Saxèfa's body transformed into rushing water. There, where she lay, a clear and cool stream sprang forth. The children, shocked, drank from this new stream and quenched their thirst. But when they looked up, their mother had disappeared. They cried for a long time on the riverbank, then returned to their village with heavy hearts.

When he returned from his hunt, their father found them silent and grief-stricken. They told him everything: their thirst, Yongnoui's refusal, their mother's miraculous transformation. The hunter, shaken, went to find his second wife and ask her why she had refused to give the children water.

Yongnoui replied arrogantly, "If you knew that your children would be thirsty, you should have left them water in their mother's jar before leaving."

At these words, the hunter's blood ran cold. He then asked his children to take him to where their mother had been transformed into water. Arriving there, he looked at the clear stream that rushed beneath the trees for a long time. Then he asked his

children to return to the village. He placed his gun on the ground. And then, in solemn silence, he too transformed into water, joining Saxèfa in fluid eternity.

The following day, seeing her husband had not returned, Yongnouï asked the children. They indicated to her the place where their parents had transformed. She went there. There she found two distinct rivers: one, clear and pure, glimmered in the sunlight; the other, darker, mingled with the shadows of the undergrowth. Seized by the power of the miracle and the weight of her guilt, she too transformed into water. But her water was neither clear nor peaceful. It was cloudy, soiled, full of darkness, as if her jealousy had left a mark on it.

Since then, it is said that the river of Saxèfa has become a source of water for the whole village. Its water is clear and generous. Everyone goes there to drink and remember the mother who gave her life to quench her children's thirst. As for the other two bodies of water, they remain separate: one, silent and serious; the other, troubled and somber, reminds us that a hardened heart always bears the mark of its own acts.

And my tale gently takes flight again, leaving behind it a lesson: goodness becomes a source of life, but a hardened heart turns into bitter water.

The Secret of the Iroko¹² Tree

My story flies, flies, and lands on an iroko tree. They say in the villages that border the forest that the iroko was a unique tree, embodying a mysterious power. To those who approach it with faith, the tree can give them that which they desire most in the world.

The man in question lived alone. He had neither a wife nor a child, and loneliness weighed heavily on his days.

One day, he went deep into the forest. There, standing in all its majesty, he saw the iroko. Its immense trunk seemed to touch the sky. Seized with a surge of emotion, he murmured,

“If only this iroko could transform into a woman for me to marry. My joy would overflow.”

To his shock, a low voice rose from the trunk.

“If I became your wife, wouldn’t you reveal to your family that you married an iroko?”

The man solemnly swore that he would never betray this secret. He promised to remain silent, whatever happens.

And so the iroko told him,

“Circle three times around my trunk, then turn your back to me.”

The man obeyed. When he finished the third circle and turned around, the tree disappeared. In its place stood a woman of striking beauty, surrounded by many children. Amazed, the man brought her to his home. In the village, everyone was shocked. How did this man, who lived alone and without much to his name, manage to obtain such a beautiful wife, with such gracious children? People began to talk, and their curiosity grew.

The man had a close friend, a trusted companion with whom he shared everything. One day, succumbing to the pressure and the quiet pride of his extraordinary happiness, he revealed his secret.

“My wife... she’s an iroko.”

He made his friend promise not to speak of it to anyone. He believed in his friend’s loyalty. One afternoon, the woman spread out millet in the sun to dry it. The neighboring roosters approached to peck at the grains, and she chased them away. They came back immediately. The husband’s friend, present at their home that day, observed the scene. Annoyed by the comings and goings of the roosters, he cried out, laughing.

“Look at these iroko roosters!”

He mocked her multiple times, without considering the weight of his words.

¹² A tropical central African tree, highly sacred tree in Vodun. For the Fon, it is the site of many rituals and is believed to house spirits.

The woman heard. Then, in a deep and sorrowful voice, she sang,

*Hwé dido, nú xɔ dido,
Vi dido nú asi dido,
Nú mã yi é.*

Her husband, understanding that the secret had been revealed, replied in a shaky voice,

*Sèsúmi, mã yi ó,
Sèsúmi mã yi ó,
Xó dɔ nú gbeto wɛ nyi ahwanhúnfɔ.*

But it was too late. To the horror of all, the woman and the children disappeared. Where she had stood just a moment ago, there remained only heavy silence. Deep in the forest, in the same place where the man had made his wish, the tree stood once again, immutable and majestic. Thus, the man understood that one's word is a sacred pact. He had let his secret pass through his lips, and their trust had been broken.

Since that day, it has been taught to children that some gifts require silence, and that betrayal of a secret can make one lose the most precious of treasures.

And my tale gently takes flight again, in the shadow of the iroko tree, guardian of promises and silences.

Lassi and the Hunter

My tale flies, flies, and lands on a hunter and an extraordinary animal called Lassi. They say that Lassi was a unique animal. No forest inhabitant dared to kill him, because it was he who beat the ground with his tail every morning, waking all the forest animals so that they could eat. As long as Lassi lived, the forest maintained its rhythm and balance. The hunter, despite his efforts, never managed to find prey on his expeditions. The animals seemed to disappear all at once when he approached.

One day, deciding to end his poor luck, the hunter went deep into the forest. He spotted Lassi and, without hesitating, shot him. The animal was hit but managed to flee, leaving his tail behind. The hunter took the tail as a prize and returned home, satisfied.

Lassi, now lacking his tail, could no longer beat the ground to wake the animals. He walked to a riverbank and began to sing a strange and melancholic melody.

*Ană gbo Lassi, ană gbonnin,
Ană gbo sisi, ană gbonnin,
Ană gbo tékéle ja sia,
Hwe nă gbo tékéle lé ja sia,
Si cé nen do gbelele men nen,
Osi do yoéyoé mă sé.*

But something strange happened. Lassi's tail, lost in the hunt, began to echo in the stomach of the hunter's wife, who was pregnant. The tail emitted a mysterious "yoé". Lassi left the river and followed the sound of the "yoé," repeating his song, until he reached the hunter's house.

The hunter and his wife were in a deep sleep. They had eaten and gone to bed. But at the threshold of the house, Lassi sang his song again. The tail, still in the pregnant wife's stomach, replied again, "yoé". In a movement at once terrifying and necessary, Lassi slammed open the door. Then, in a calculated act, he disemboweled the woman and reattached the tail to his body, thus restoring balance. He fled into the forest. Three successive hits of his tail on the forest floor managed to wake all the animals, who resumed their travels and their morning meal.

Since that day, the hunters are reminded that not all animals are meant to be killed. Some animals, like Lassi, play an essential role in the world order. To respect their lives is to respect the forest itself.

The Young Girl and the Seven Atangoué¹³

My story flies, flies, flies, and lands on a young girl. Her father had many children, but he cherished his young daughter most of all. When a man dared to court her, he completely refused to let her marry. The young girl was of marrying age, but each suitor was met with her father's absolute refusal.

One day, she went to the market. There, a young man spat in the air, and his saliva landed on the breasts of the young girl. Shockingly, she knew at that moment that she had found the love of her life. Curious and intrigued, she asked herself, “Who is this person who has touched me in such a way?”

The young man came to her to apologize, and in a silent embrace they drew closer. The young girl decided to follow him home, convinced he would be her husband. On the way there, a creature suddenly appeared and spoke to the young man.

“Young boy, where have you been? You have my feet; I need them to go shopping!”

The young boy returned the borrowed feet, and they continued on their way. Soon after, another person came forth and took back his arms.

“Young boy, where have you been? You have my arms; I need them to go out!”

The young boy gave them back to their owner and continued on. Later, another person asked for his head back. Without hesitation, the young man took off his head and returned it to its owner. The young girl then regretted having chosen¹⁴ such a strange husband. She had pledged herself to a limbless man, and yet, she continued on the path with him. They finally arrived at the young man's home. There, they were surrounded by extraordinary beings with animal voices. At first, these creatures wanted to eat her, but they decided to keep her amongst them. She was the only human among such a wild group.

One day, one of the creatures advised her.

“Pick some Atangoué. If you break open seven, you can disappear from here and find your freedom.”

The young girl obeyed. She broke open the first Atangoué and found herself atop a large tree. The animals gathered around her and said,

“If you're looking to flee, know that you can never escape us.”

She continued her mission and, breaking a second Atangoué, she found herself amongst humans. By repeatedly breaking the Atangoué, she reached an old woman in the forest. The old woman asked her,

¹³ Atangoué: a small, hard shelled, calabash used to hold water or powder. It plays an important role in traditional culture.

“What are you looking for here?”

The young girl told her story: how she had followed the young man she met at the market, believing she had found her husband, but that he had belonged to a group of supernatural, wild animals, and how she had managed to escape them.

The old woman took care of her, offering her food and drink. Refreshed, she continued her mission, breaking another Atangoué. She found herself in a vast and welcoming home, where a man treated her with respect and kindness. She felt reassured and decided to stay with him. The man sought to marry her, but she discovered he was only a hyena in human form. She then knew that she couldn't be the wife of an animal. With courage, she broke open the last Atangoué and found herself in a safe place, far away from the forest, supernatural beings, and wild animals. There she regained her senses and could at last breathe easily.

She then understood the lesson: when parents' advice is ignored, life's paths can lead to the worst outcomes. Listening to and respecting one's parents is wisdom that no one should forget.

The Sun and the Moon

A long time ago, in the beginning of time, the sun and the moon lived in perfect friendship. They visited one another, shared their joys, and together they regulated the rhythm of the days and nights. But when the sun appeared in the sky, shooting its burning rays, the heat became overwhelming for the men of the Earth. The harvests withered, the rivers receded, and the inhabitants begged for a cool breeze.

One day, in a senseless impulse, the sun and the moon made a terrible pact: each would sacrifice their children and throw them in the river. So they thought to appease the world's anger and restore balance. They set a date.

The day arrived. The sun, loyal to his word, gathered all his children in a large bag and threw them in the river. The waters swallowed them, and they were never seen again. But when it was the moon's turn, she did not have the courage to make such a sacrifice. In secret, she filled her bag with simple stones that she threw in the water to appear as if she had sacrificed her children. When the Sun discovered her trick, his rays burned even more. He realized he had lost his children while the Moon had kept hers, sparkling around her in the night.

Since that day, their friendship was broken. The moon appeared in the sky surrounded by her children, the stars that always faithfully accompany her. The sun shines alone, deprived of descendants. And when, by accident, their paths cross again in the sky, their fight reemerges. The sun tries to engulf the moon in his fervent anger; it is then that man, lifting their eyes, witnesses what has come to be known as a solar eclipse.

And so, the elders say: betrayal is more consuming than fire; and broken friendship leaves a light that no longer provides warmth.

The King and the Madman

My tale flies, flies, and lands on a king and a madman.

The madman often came to the palace to beg for food. The king, who had a generous nature, ordered that he be given his fill. Once satisfied, the man continued on his way, wandering from village to village.

One day, he came to the threshold of the palace, uttering outrageous words against the king, even insulting his mother and father, “*Ahɔxu, Ahɔsu e, atɔwe yɔmɛn, anɔwe yɔmɛn!*” The king’s guards, scandalized by such audacity, seized the madman. They brought him before the king, ready to execute him for such an unforgivable offense.

But when the madman was presented to the king, the king raised his hand and said calmly,

“Don’t kill him. A madman who speaks so is perhaps only hungry.”

The king ordered him to be fed. They settled him in the dressing room where the king would cut his hair. After having eaten his fill, the madman got up to leave. Before leaving the room, he wrote on the wall the following words: “*Ani we a ka nã sɔ do wa,*” meaning, “What are you going to do with it?” Then he disappeared.

A few days later, the king, whose hair had grown out, went to the palace barber to get a haircut in the same dressing room.

However, without the king’s knowledge, the barber had been approached by the kingdom’s enemies. For a few cowries, he had agreed to bring them the king’s hair so that they could carry out a dark plan against him. While he busied himself around the royal head, secretly slipping a few pieces of hair into his pocket, the king glimpsed the writing left by the mad man. He read it out loud.

“What are you going to do with it?”

At these words, the barber winced. Panicked, thinking that the king had discovered his betrayal, he replied hastily.

“Your majesty! I wasn’t doing anything with your hair! It was your enemies who asked me to harm you. I had just put a couple of strands in my pocket...”

The king was amazed for a moment. He had only read a phrase left on the wall, and then the truth burst forth all on its own.

“Show me the hairs,” he ordered in a low voice. The barber obeyed.

Immediately, the king summoned his court and explained the situation: the betrayal of the barber and the strange coincidence of the madman’s writing and the involuntary confession of the guilty party. The court, outraged, demanded justice. The conspirators were arrested and severely punished, as was the barber.

Since that day, they say in the kingdom that the words of a madman can sometimes reveal truths that wisdom ignores.

The elders add that a guilty conscience hears accusations where there is nothing but a simple word, as the truth, even when murmured, always comes to light.

The Rope of Sand

A long time ago, in a kingdom far away, there reigned a king named Dada Sègbo. He was powerful and feared, with a cold cruelty that inspired terror in all his subjects. No one dared go against him.

One day, he summoned all the strong and courageous young men of the kingdom. When they were assembled in front of the palace, he asked them a question that struck the hearts of the crowd.

“Who amongst you will kill his own father, bury him, and thus reap the reward of sharing half the kingdom with me?”

He was demanding patricide.

At these words, a silence weighed on the crowd. Then, one by one, driven by ambition and intoxicated by power, the young men raised their hands. All declared themselves ready to commit such an abominable act to reign as king. The king gave them a deadline and then sent them away. Blinded by their desire for glory, many did the unforgivable: some sliced the throat of their fathers, others poisoned them, and others beat them until they died. Everyone wanted a piece of the kingdom.

Only one young man, however, refused to give in to this. He took away his father in secret, hiding him, keeping him alive.

The deadline came. All the young men came back to the palace to announce they had completed their missions: they had killed and buried their fathers.

Dada Sègbo looked at them for a long time.

“You have all done so?” he asked.

“Yes, your majesty,” they replied in unison.

The king broke into an unsettling smile.

“Here is your next challenge.”

The crowd tensed.

“In a few days, each of you will bring me a rope braided with sand.”

A shiver went through the crowd. A rope made of sand? Everyone realized, little by little, the task's impossible nature. Days passed. Anguish grew. Lamentations arose in the homes. Three days before the deadline, despair had taken over all the young men.

However, the young man who had saved his father went in secret to his hiding place. He explained the new challenge to his father.

The old man shook his head.

“What madness! If you had killed me like the others, you would be lost. The king, after getting rid of all the fathers, now wants to get rid of the sons. But listen to me closely.”

“Father, I beg you, enlighten me.”

The old man replied in a calm voice.

“When the day comes, before anyone is executed, nod your head. The king will give you the floor. You will respectfully ask him to give you the old rope of sand of our ancestors, so that you may braid the new one into it.”

The young man understood.

The morning of the set day, the young men arrived at the palace, accepting their deaths. None of them could accomplish the impossible.

Dada Sègbo appeared, surrounded by his guards.

“Where are your ropes made of sand?” he thundered.

The king ordered them all tied up. At that moment, the young man nodded his head. The king noticed his gesture and, intrigued, he let him speak.

“Your majesty,” he said with respect, “please give us the old rope of sand of our ancestors, the end of which you wished us to braid the new one.”

A crushing silence fell on the court. The king was unmoving. His scheme had been foiled. He understood that all the youths had killed their fathers except one. He ordered the young man to be untied.

The king approached the young man and asked him,

“Who advised you?”

The young man replied without trembling.

“My father, whom I kept alive.”

Dada Sègbo demanded that the old man be brought to the palace. When he saw him, he thought for a long time. Then he declared,

“Where the elders are listened to, the kingdom doesn’t perish.”

He renounced his previous cruelty. The young man and his father were brought to the level of chiefs and honored by the whole kingdom.

Since that day, it is taught that the wisdom of fathers is a treasure that no ambition should sacrifice. He who cuts himself from his roots condemns himself to fall at the first gust of wind.

Houé and the Spring's Shadow

My tale flies, flies, and lands on a woman. This woman was the mother of twins, Houé and Houéssè. But destiny had other plans. One of the twins died, and only Houé remained.

Every day, the mother sent Houé to fetch water from the spring. The child would go there with a large basin that he carefully filled. But once full, the weight was too heavy for him to carry alone. So, he stood at the water's edge, looking at the rippling water of the spring, and sang in a soft voice.

Nɔn é vi Houéssè ni wa didami yédé yédé...

He had barely finished these words when the air seemed to tremble. An invisible presence replied, as if carried by the echo of the reeds.

*Nɔn é vi Houé, oún dida wé hún mǎ yi dɔ ó,
Yé nǎ sé do Houé si bo sún cada yi hwé.*

It was the voice of Houéssè, the lost twin. When the spirit appeared, no one knew if it came from water, from the wind, or from a memory—and, with a silent kindness, he helped his brother place the basin on his head. And so Houé returned to his house, carrying the heavy spring water without difficulty.

Every time, his mother was shocked.

“How were you able to lift such a heavy basin?”

The child lowered his eyes.

“I’m strong, mother. I can carry it alone.”

But his mother wasn’t convinced. The mystery happened day after day. One morning, she decided to follow him secretly. Houé was unaware that she walked a distance behind him silently. When he arrived at the spring, the woman hid behind a bush, her heart pounding. Like usual, the child filled the basin. Then he stood at the edge of the water and sang his song. The wind rose, and the voice replied. As his mother looked on, shocked, a shadow appeared near her son. It was Houéssè, the dead twin. He came to help his brother. However, his mother, shaken, jumped out of her hiding spot and tried to grab the hands of the two children. But when she touched them, they both disappeared—the child and the shadow. There remained only the silence of the spring and the overturned basin on the bank. The mother was still, full of fear and confusion.

Since that day, they say that twins are not ordinary beings. They walk between two worlds. Their connection defies separation and death. And the elders whisper

that some mysteries must be respected. Wanting to grasp what belongs to the invisible is sometimes to risk losing it forever.

The Loincloth and the Forgotten Promise

My tale crosses times of old, eras, and millennia, before landing in a slum.

In this squalid home lived a destitute man in extreme poverty. He was a farmer. Each day, he went to his field with courage, despite the misery that overwhelmed him.

In those olden days, the men worked almost naked. The man wore nothing but a simple loincloth, worn and soiled by poverty. The fabric was so dirty that flies followed him everywhere.

One day, after having worked the field relentlessly, he collapsed from exhaustion under a tree. It was then that he glimpsed, not far away, a small sacred hut dedicated to the deity Dan¹⁵. Pushed by desperation, he approached the sacred site and made a wish.

“Oh, venerable Dan, if you give me riches, women, and children, if you allow me to prosper and to farm this field with abundance, I will offer to you a sacrifice of a white cow and a white rooster. I promise you.”

The deity heard his prayer. Soon after, his circumstances changed. He left behind poverty and came to know opulence. Money poured in. He proposed to several women and had many children. He came to own fertile lands, abundant harvests, and even a horse that he would proudly ride. He seldom went to the fields anymore. Others worked for him. But in his newfound ease, he forgot the promise made to Dan. One day, he sent his wives and children to work in the fields while he remained comfortable at home. They had barely arrived in the fields when the deity Dan transformed into a man. Staff in his hand, he approached them, singing in a powerful voice.

*Ato, atobologbé,
Ato, ato-ato, atobologbé,
O hwi ve se je fi ba dú ya wé ye mǎ kpɔn,
Atobologbé,
O kokolo adɔwé tété a dú do Dan ye tɔ fi,
O nyi gaga bú ye a dú do Dan ye tɔ fi,
Atobologbé...*

Seized with fear, the women and children fled. They ran back home, panting, to share the news of the disturbing encounter.

“What man could dare to chase you from my own field?” said the master of the house indignantly.

¹⁵ A principal Vodun deity represented as a snake. Associated with the rainbow, abundance, and prosperity and the element of air.

The following day, he sent them back to the field. But the same thing happened again: the same figure, the same staff, the same song. And again, the women and children fled.

Intrigued and irritated, the man decided to follow his family himself. He was richly dressed, perched on his horse, sure of himself. Barely having arrived at the field, before even getting down from his horse, the deity appeared again, staff in hand, singing the same incantation.

Suddenly, from the sky, something began to twirl like a leaf in the wind. It was his old loincloth. It descended gently and came to rest on his hip. At that moment, everything disappeared. His wives, his children, his horse, and his riches.

He found himself alone, clothed in his old dirty loincloth, even poorer than he was before. He had forgotten his promise. He hadn't sacrificed the white cow or the white rooster to Dan. The broken promise had brought back his misery.

And so the elders say that what the gods give by grace can be taken away by justice. Prosperity requires memory and loyalty. He who forgets his words ends up finding his old clothes.

The Hunter and the Betrayed Secret

Once upon a time, there was a hunter who lived with his wife. He only had one wife, and she was very arrogant. She often disrespected her husband, questioned his decisions, and procrastinated on the tasks he assigned her.

The hunter warned her, "If you keep this up, I will take other wives."

"If you want to take other wives, do it," she replied arrogantly.

His warnings multiplied, and so did her stubbornness.

One day, the hunter went into the forest on a long hunt. They say that in those times, the trees, the rocks, and the grass could speak. He stopped before a majestic palm tree and made a wish.

"If only you could become a woman, I would marry you."

The tree replied.

"If I become a woman, will you keep my secret? You won't reveal my true nature?"

The hunter solemnly swore. He promised that if he betrayed this secret, misfortune would befall him.

The palm tree asked him to turn around. When he turned back, a woman of great beauty stood before him. She followed him.

Further along, he passed a handful of rocks. He made the same wish, and he received the same warning, and took the same oath. The handful of rocks transformed into a dazzling, light-skinned woman who joined them. Finally, before a baobab, he repeated his request. The baobab accepted on the condition he would keep her secret. In an instant, she became a woman with a sparkling beauty, like that of polished ebony.

The hunter went home with his three new wives and a game bag full of meat. His first wife hid her jealousy in public, but at home, she was cold and distant. She even refused to share her bed. She demanded only one thing:

"Tell me where these women came from."

The hunter resisted for a long time. But, facing his wife's threats and the constant tension at home, he gave in. He told her everything: the palm tree, the rocks, and the baobab. He added in a serious voice,

"This secret must never be revealed. My life depends on it."

She promised to keep quiet.

Years passed. The three new wives had children. The first wife's jealousy grew.

One day, after giving many chores to her co-wives' children, she also asked them to help her wash her clothes. Exhausted, they asked for a short break. She saw it as an offense.

And so, in washing her own clothes, she began to sing loudly a song that revealed the true origins of their mothers.

*O é da si mã ylo asi nyi,
O yanxololobo we da si mã ylo asi nyi có be nyi nangué,
E da si mã ylo asi nyi,
O yanxololobo we da si mã ylo asi nyi có be nyi nanvo,
E da si mã ylo asi nyi,
O yanxololobo we da si mã ylo asi nyi có be nyi nanwi,
De nyi hetin, do gbé mã gbo dekpè cóbo nyi nangué
De nyi hêtin, do gbé man gbo dekpè tchobo nyi nanguè,
De nyi tókin, do gbé mã gbo dekpè cóbo nyi nanvo
De nyi zuntin, do gbé mã gbo dekpè cóbo nyi nanwi*

The words flew like arrows. The three wives, their pride wounded, understood that their secret had been betrayed. Without anger, but with resolute sadness, they gathered their children and left the house. They returned to the forest, each to the place they were originally found. The palm tree turned back into a tree. The rocks turned back into rocks, and the baobab grew back its roots.

When the hunter returned from the hunt, he immediately understood that misfortune had befallen him. He found only his first two children. His wife had gone to his parents', and he went to find her there. She confessed what she had done, and silence fell between them.

The hunter understood that his promise had been broken, his oath had been betrayed, and that the balance he had sworn to protect was forever shattered. They say he didn't live long after such loss. He shot himself in the head.

And so, the elders say, a confided secret is a life placed in the hands of another. One's word is stronger than stone. He who betrays his word destroys what he wanted to own.

The Queen of Two Natures

My tale flies, flies, and lands on Dada Sègbo, the powerful king of a vast kingdom where tradition was law. Every year, he organized a large party and invited everyone in the land. It was a lavish event, bursting with music, dances, and rejoicing. But behind the pageantry hid a fearsome custom: during the party, the king chose from the young women of the kingdom the one whom he liked and kept her in the palace as his new wife, without telling her parents. It was only after the festivities that the family would realize their daughter's absence and learn that she had become queen.

In this kingdom lived a man who had many children, mostly girls. Fearing the fate that the festival held for young women, he formally forbade them from going and went alone. Among his children was a unique child, born with the attributes of the two sexes. This androgynous child was the one he protected with the most care.

However, one year, the father went to the palace for the celebration. His children secretly followed him, curious about the event. Fate decided that day that the androgynous child caught the eye of Dada Sègbo. Unaware of her true nature, he chose her, and she was brought to the palace.

When the festival ended, the father realized his child was missing. Learning that she had been kept at the palace, he visited the following day to beg the king.

“Your majesty, leave me this child. Choose another one of my daughters; they are numerous and beautiful.”

But Dada Sègbo replied in a firm voice,

“I have chosen according to my desire. I do not take back my decisions.”

The father, resigned, said,

“Since such is your will, know that this child has certain totems that you must respect.”

Intrigued, the king asked what the demands were.

“She must never wash herself in the same place as the other queens. She must have a separate washroom. What’s more, she must never go into the kitchen; a servant must prepare her meals.”

The king accepted these conditions and made the androgynous woman his new wife. Time passed. However, the co-wives were shocked by the privileges given to the last queen. Why does she get her own bathroom? Why does she never cook? Curiosity spread. They decided then that the first wife, Ahwandossi, would solve the mystery. Ahwandossi pretended to be friends with the young wife. Patient and attentive, she observed the girl.

Finally, one day, she discovered the secret: the new queen had both breasts and a phallus.

The rumor spread like wildfire until it reached the ears of the king. Shocked, Dada Sègbo ordered that, on a set date, all of his wives would come before him nude. She who had both feminine and masculine characteristics would be executed.

As the fateful day neared, the last wife, full of panic, discreetly left the palace. To her servant, she left a message: if they asked for her, say that she had gone shopping.

On her journey, she met two rams fighting. They asked her where she was going. She told them her story and concluded,

“I want to meet the creator who made me so.”

The rams told her,

“Let each of us strike you with our horns; we will show you the way.”

She agreed. After they hit her with blows of their horns, they showed her a path. Further on, she saw two blades slashing one another. They asked her the same question. After having heard her story, they declared,

“Let us cut you; we will show you the next path.”

She agreed. The blades cut her lightly. They then told her that she would find a spring and must jump into it. She walked until she reached the spring and then plunged into it. The water spat her up on the shore. She jumped in again and again. On the third attempt, the water deity emerged, his body sharp with blades and machetes.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

She told him everything. The water deity ordered her to climb on his back and then plunged into the water with her. They reached a large court where the Creator stood. The water deity left her alone. The Creator listened to her in silence. Then cut off the phallus and formed in her the female sex. He had recreated her. The phallus was then cut. He roasted it, seasoned it like smoked meat, and gave it back to her.

“Upon your return, when the first wife comes to see you, give her this meat without tasting it yourself.”

She discreetly returned to the palace. Ahwandossi came to visit her. The queen served her a dish with the meat. The first wife eagerly ate it. Soon after, a phallus began to grow between her legs.

The day before the king’s examination, Ahwandossi was consumed by anxiety. The day came, and as was tradition, each wife had to tie forty-one cloths around her waist. Before untying them one by one, she asked,

“Torkpor, Méhou, Adjaho, Migan¹⁶, can I show my nakedness?”

The royal court replied,

“Yes, show yourself.”

¹⁶ Torkpor, Méhou, Adjaho, Migan: high ministers in the traditional royal court who carried out orders and sentencing of the king.

And each fabric fell, until she reached the last, white and transparent. All were there, except Ahwandossi. The guards went to find her despite her protests. Against her will, she submitted to the ritual. When the last cloth fell, the assembly discovered that she had a phallus. Dada Sègbo, merciless, ordered her execution.

And so perished she who had wished to reveal the secret of another.

And my story takes flight again, taking with it this lesson: he who digs a hole for another must take care not to fall into it himself.

The Voice in the Night

A long time ago, there was a couple that lived together in harmony. Days passed peacefully until the man took a second wife. And so, silently, jealousy came to live in their house. As was custom, the husband shared his time equally: one night with one wife, one night with the other, each in their own room. But the first wife's heart was troubled. Bitterness took root in her like a poisonous weed.

Every time it was the second wife's turn and their husband crossed the threshold of her hut, the first wife waited until late at night. Then, lurking in the shadows in front of the closed door, she put on a deep, inhuman voice, like that of the growling of a beast. She chanted:

*Enɔn dɔ, ɛnɔn dɔ,
Nyi do kponɔn gué nǎ da,
Enǎ da si do ji cé a,
Nni dokpo gué jɛn nǎ da*

These foul words pierced through the silence. They vibrated like a funerary drum in a still night. The second wife trembled. Despite his courage, her husband felt his heart pounding in his chest. Unable to sleep, unable even to speak, the voice seemed to feed off their fear; they heard their breathing behind the door. Their intimacy was disturbed, and their rest shattered.

It was strange. When the husband spent the night with the first wife, no sound disturbed their night. The evening was once again sweet, ordinary, and peaceful.

Little by little, the husband realized this and worried. Was this the work of a jealous spirit? Of a beast attracted by human presence? Or was it something closer, even human?

The second wife, tired of these haunted nights, finally begged her husband.

"This voice is not normal. Ask the Fa. If this continues, I will leave this house. I can't bear this terror anymore."

Together they went to a Bokonon. He consulted the sacred signs for a long time. His face turned serious.

"What is speaking at night is not at all an animal, nor a spirit," he said. "You must perform a ritual to uncover the truth."

He prescribed a sacrifice: a woven basket, some calabashes, secret powders, and sacred leaves. The ritual was performed in solemn silence.

Then he returned the basket to the husband.

"Tonight, leave the window half-open. If the voice comes back, throw this basket without hesitation. Don't look immediately. Wait for the cry. Only then you will know the truth."

Night fell. The husband and the second wife went to bed, but their eyes remained open in the dark. Then the voice came back. Deeper. Closer. It seemed stuck to the door like a living shadow. A chill traveled down the spine of the husband. The second wife, petrified, tightened her hands against her chest.

Without hesitating, the husband grabbed the basket and threw it through the half-open window. A howl tore through the night. It was not the cry of a beast, nor the breath of a spirit. It was a human cry. In the trembling glow of the lamp, they glimpsed the first wife. Her eyes were wild. The ritual had broken the mask. She spun around, hit by the power of the invoked forces. From then on, she lost all reason. She became mad.

Since that night, she wandered around the huts repeating in a deformed voice:

*N'dogbè ɔ nă hwi,
Oun gɔn gbè mǎ lɛ nɔn, nă hwi.*

“If I live, I will kill her; and even if I die, I will kill her.”

And so, the truth was revealed. The voice that haunted their nights was no other than that of the first wife, consumed with jealousy. Because jealousy, when left untamed, always ends up revealing its true face.