



# **YORUBA LEGENDS**

**M. I. OGUMEFU**

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BY  
M. I. OGUMEFU

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Yoruba Legends By M. I. Ogumefu.

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## 17. ISOKUN AND THE BABY

A CERTAIN King Dekun had a wife named Isokun who bore him no children, on which account there was great unhappiness in the palace.

One day Isokun disappeared and was absent for many weeks, and though search was made, no trace of her could be found. The truth was that Isokun had set out to visit the shrines of all the gods, in the hope that one of them would promise her a child. But though she travelled far and wide, the gods of all the trees and streams and rocks refused her prayer.

When she was at last nearing home again, she came upon a poor woman asleep by the wayside with her baby two days old.

Isokun stole the baby and hastened to the palace, where she informed the King that she had disappeared in order to give him the joyous surprise of his little son.

There were great rejoicings in the palace, sacrifices were made, and the drums beat loudly.

Meanwhile the real mother awoke and discovered that her baby had been stolen.

She ran into the town distracted, and insisted on searching in every house, but without success.

At last she came to the palace and insisted on entering there also, which was possible at that moment because all were celebrating the arrival of the King's heir.

All this time the baby cried with hunger, and as Isokun could not feed him, she invented other reasons for the crying and sought in vain to pacify him without arousing suspicion.

Drawn by the cries, the mother entered and snatched the baby to her breast, where it was at once contented.

In a few moments the deception was made clear, the mother departed with her child, and Isokun, ashamed and fearing the anger of the King, fled from the palace and never returned.

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## 18. THE TWIN BROTHERS

A CERTAIN Yoruba King, Ajaka, had a favourite wife of whom he was very fond; but, alas for his hopes! she gave birth to twins.

At that time it was the universal custom to destroy twins immediately at birth, and the mother with them. But the King had not the heart to put this cruel law into execution, and he secretly charged one of his nobles to conduct the royal mother and her babes to a remote place where they might live in safety.

Here the twin brothers grew to manhood, and loved one another greatly. They were inseparable, and neither of them had any pleasure except in the company of the other. When one brother began to speak, the other completed his phrase, so harmonious were their thoughts and inclinations.

Their mother, before she died, informed them of their royal birth, and from this moment they spent the time vainly regretting their exile, and wishing that the law of the country had made it possible for them to reign.

At last they received the news that the King their father was dead, leaving no heir, and it seemed to the brothers that one of them ought to go to the capital and claim the throne. But which?

To settle this point they decided to cast stones, and the one who made the longer throw should claim the throne, and afterwards send for his brother to share in his splendour.

The lot fell on the younger of the twins, and he set off to the capital, announced himself as the Olofin's son, and soon became King with the consent of all the people. As soon as possible he sent for his brother, who henceforth lived with him in the palace and was treated with honour and distinction.

But alas! jealousy began to overcome his brotherly affection, and one day as he walked with the King by the side of the river, he pushed his brother suddenly into the water, where he was drowned.

He then gave out in the palace that his brother was weary of kingship, and had left the country, desiring him to reign in his stead.

The King had certainly disappeared, and as no suspicion fell on the twin brother, he was made King and so realized his secret ambition.

Some time later, happening to pass by the very spot where his brother had been drowned, he saw a fish rise to the surface of the water and begin to sing:

“Your brother lies here,  
Your brother lies here.”

The King was very much afraid. He took up a sharp stone and killed the fish.

But another day when he passed the spot, attended by his nobles and shielded by the royal umbrella made of the skins of rare animals, the river itself rose into waves and sang:

“Your brother lies here,  
Your brother lies here.”

In astonishment the courtiers stopped to listen. Their suspicions were aroused, and when they looked into the water they found the body of the King.

Thus the secret of his disappearance was disclosed, and the wicked brother was rejected in horror by his people. At this disgrace he took poison and so died.

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## 19. HOW LEOPARD GOT HIS SPOTS

AT one time the Leopard was coloured like a lion, and he had no dark markings; but he was pursued by Akiti, the renowned hunter, and feared that he might be slain.

To avoid this he ate the roots of a certain magic plant, which had the effect of making him invulnerable to any of the hunter's weapons.

Soon afterwards Akiti saw him as he slipped through the dense undergrowth of the forest, but though he shot his poisoned arrows, Leopard escaped.

But where each arrow struck him, there appeared a dark mark, and now, though hunters still pursue him, he is rarely caught, but his body is covered with the marks of the arrows, so that as he goes among the trees he looks exactly like the mingling of the sun and shadow.

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## 20. ANOTHER STORY OF LEOPARD'S SPOTS

ACCORDING to another story, Leopard once had a very dark skin. He was prowling one day in a beautiful compound, when he noticed a little hut in which a lady was taking her bath.

Round and round the hut Leopard walked, waiting for an opportunity to spring into the hut and seize his victim, for he was hungry.

But as he passed the opening of the hut, the lady saw him, and, uttering a scream of terror, she threw at him her loofah, which was full of soap.

“She flung it at him and he fled,  
But to this day the Leopard still  
Is flecked with soap from foot to head!”

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## 21. THE HEAD

THERE is a certain country where the inhabitants have heads but no bodies. The Heads move about by jumping along the ground, but they never go very far.

One of the Heads desired to see the world, so he set out one morning secretly. When he had gone some distance, he saw an old woman looking out of the door of a hut, and he asked her if she would kindly lend him a body.

The old woman willingly lent him the body of her slave, and the Head thanked her and went on his way.

Later he came upon a young man sleeping under a tree, and asked him if he would kindly lend him a pair of arms, as he did not appear to be using them. The young man agreed, and the Head thanked him and went on his way.

Later still he reached a river-bank where fishermen sat singing and mending their cone-shaped net. The Head asked if any one of them would lend him a pair of legs, as they were all sitting and not walking. One of the fishermen agreed, and the Head thanked him and went on his way.

But now he had legs, arms, and a body, and so appeared like any other man.

In the evening he reached a town and saw maidens dancing while the onlookers threw coins to those they favoured. The Head threw all his coins to one of the dancers, and she so much admired his handsome form that she consented to marry him and go to live with him in his own country.

Next day they set out, but when they came to the river-bank, the stranger took off his legs and gave them back to the fisherman. Later they reached the young man, who still lay sleeping under the tree, and to him the Head gave back his arms. Finally they came to the cottage, where the old woman stood watching, and here the stranger gave up his body.

When the bride saw that her husband was merely a Head, she was filled with horror, and ran away as fast as she could go.

Now that the Head had neither body, arms, nor legs, he could not overtake her, and so lost her for ever.

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## 22. OLE AND THE ANTS

THERE was a certain lazy and disagreeable man whom everyone called "Ole," or "Lazy one." He liked to profit by the work of others, and was also very inquisitive about other people's affairs.

Once he saw that the ants had begun building a pillar in the compound of his house. But though the ants destroyed all the plants in the compound, and stripped all the trees, Ole would not trouble to kill them, or to break down their pillar.

Instead, he thought to himself: "When the ants have made this pillar very high, I will sit on the top of it, and then I shall be able to see all that my neighbours are doing without leaving my compound."

This thought pleased him, and he was glad that the ants swarmed in his compound. Each day the pillar grew higher, and at last the ants ceased their building and began again elsewhere. Ole then climbed up on to the pillar and spent the whole day observing the doings of his neighbours, and laughing at their activity.

"Here sit I like a great Chief,  
And I see all things!"

sang Ole.

But while he sat on the pillar, the ants began to demolish his house and all that it contained, and in a short time there was nothing left of all his food and possessions.

Ole thus became the laughing-stock of the village, and everyone who saw him cried: "Ku ijoko!" or "Greetings to you on your sitting!"

Soon afterwards he died, and it is not known to this day whether he died of shame or of laziness.

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## 23. THE BOA-CONSTRICTOR

OGUNFUNMINIRE, the famous hunter, lived to such a great age that he was no longer able to go into the forest and chase the deer and the leopard.

Life had no other pleasure for him than hunting, so he went to a magician and asked for some charm which would enable him to continue his occupation.

The magician gave him two pots, each containing a charm. Every day Ogunfunminire dipped his head into the first pot and was at once transformed into a boa-constrictor, in which form he glided into the forest and hunted to his heart's content. At night he returned and dipped his head into the second pot, and so became a man again.

This went on for a long time without the knowledge of the old hunter's family, but when at last they chanced to discover the secret, they were filled with horror, and his son in a rage kicked at the pots and overturned them both.

Ogunfunminire was at that moment hunting in the forest, and when he returned to his house and found the magic pots overturned and empty, he was filled with dismay, for he had no means of regaining his human form. For some days the boa-constrictor glided about near the house, seeking for a few drops of the charm, but in vain, and at last he disappeared into the forest and was never seen by his family again.

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## 24. OLURONBI

IN a certain village no children had been born for many years, and the people were greatly distressed.

At last all the women of the village went together into the forest, to the magic tree, the Iroko, and implored the spirit of the tree to help them.

The Iroko-man asked what gifts they would bring if he consented to help them, and the women eagerly promised him corn, yams, fruit, goats, and sheep; but Oluronbi, the young wife of a wood-carver, promised to bring her first child.

In due course children came to the village, and the most beautiful of all the children was the one born to Oluronbi. She and her husband so greatly loved their child that they could not consent to give it up to the Iroko-man.

The other women took their promised gifts of corn, yams, fruit, goats, and sheep; but Oluronbi took nothing to propitiate the tree.

Alas! one day as Oluronbi passed through the forest, the Iroko-man seized her and changed her into a small brown bird, which sat on the branches of the tree and plaintively sang:

“One promised a sheep,  
One promised a goat,  
One promised fruit,  
But Oluronbi promised her child.”

When the wood-carver heard the bird's song, he realized what had happened, and tried to find some means of regaining his wife.

After thinking for many days, he began to carve a large wooden doll, like a real child in size and appearance, and with a small gold chain round its neck. Covering it with a beautiful native cloth, he laid it at the foot of the tree. The Iroko-man thought that this was Oluronbi's child, so he transformed the little bird once more into a woman and snatched up the child into the branches.

Oluronbi joyfully returned home, and was careful never to stray into the forest again.

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## 25. THE STAFF OF ORANYAN

ORANYAN, a brave and warlike King, founded the city of Oyo. As it was necessary for him to lead an expedition to a distant part of his kingdom, he left his son in charge of the capital during his absence.

But the King was away for such a long period that it was thought he and his soldiers must have perished, and at last the people made his son King, and for some time he ruled them wisely and happily.

However, Oranyan was not dead, and after many delays and hardships he again drew near to Oyo with his few surviving followers.

As he approached the city he was startled to hear the notes of the Kakaki trumpet, which is sounded for the King alone.

Feeling sure that nobody could be aware of his return, he asked a man working in the fields for whom the trumpet was being sounded.

“For the King,” replied the man.

“Yes, but which King?” asked the travel-worn stranger.

“Do you not know that the son of Oranyan is King, and rules over us wisely and well? His father was killed in battle many months ago.”

Desiring his son’s happiness more than his own, the old King retraced his steps, and settled down with his few friends in humble retirement in a remote part of the country. Only at Oranyan’s death was his presence made known to his son.

The young Prince, now King, grieving at his noble father’s sacrifice, erected an obelisk over the spot where he died, and the monument, which is known as the Staff of Oranyan, is still to be seen.

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## 26. THE ELEPHANT'S TRUNK

NOW it is a matter of common knowledge that Elephant has a long trunk, which he uses both as a nose and as a sort of hand—a very useful trunk indeed. But he was once without it, and had a very ordinary short snout like other animals.

Elephant was always inquisitive and went sniffing about the forest, prying into the secrets of the other animals. One day he came across a dark hole in the ground, and into this hole he poked his nose, to see what was there.

He at once regretted his curiosity, for a large snake, who lived in the hole, seized him by the nose and tried to swallow him. At this, Elephant made a great uproar, and his wife came rushing to his assistance. She seized his tail and pulled and pulled, and Elephant himself also pulled and pulled, but the snake would not leave go.

And as a result, Elephant's nose was drawn out into the long trunk which he still has.

At first he was ashamed to appear in the forest, on account of his trunk, but now the other animals envy him.

One day the monkey, which imitates everybody, looked down the same hole, thinking it would be good to have a long trunk so as to be able to swing from the trees by his nose. But the big snake who lived in the hole swallowed him, and since then nobody else has tried to imitate Elephant.

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## 27. THE SECRET OF THE FISHING-BASKETS

ACROSS a certain river a poor fisherman set a row of stakes, and on each stake was fastened a basket in which he hoped to trap the fishes as they swam down the river.

But his luck was very bad, and every evening, as he went from basket to basket in his canoe, he was disappointed to find that no fishes, or only a few very small ones, had been caught.

This made him very sad, and he was forced to live frugally.

One day he found a stranger lying asleep on the river-bank. Instead of killing the stranger, the fisherman spoke kindly to him, and invited him to share his evening meal.

The stranger appeared very pleased and ate and drank, but spoke no word at all, The fisherman thought: "He speaks another language."

Quite suddenly the stranger vanished, and only the remains of the meal convinced the fisherman that he had not been dreaming.

The next evening when he went to empty his baskets, he was astonished to find them overflowing with fish. He could not account for his good fortune, and his surprise was even greater when the same thing occurred the next day. On the third day the baskets were again quite full, and when the fisherman came to the last basket he saw that it contained a single monstrous fish.

"Do you not know me?" said the fish.

"Indeed no, Mr. Fish. I have never seen you before!" declared the fisherman, nearly upsetting the canoe in his astonishment.

"Have you forgotten the stranger whom you treated so courteously?" went on the fish. "It was I, and I am the King of the fishes. I am grateful for your kindness and intend to reward you."

Then the fish jumped into the river with a great splash. But ever afterwards the fishing-baskets were full every evening, and the fisherman became rich and prosperous.

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## 28. THE TEN GOLDSMITHS

A GOLDSMITH in a small village had ten sons, to all of whom he taught his trade. In time they became skilful craftsmen, and when the old man was dying he called the ten around him and addressed them thus:

“My sons, in this small village there is certainly not enough work for ten goldsmiths. I have therefore decided that the most skilful of you shall remain here in my place, while the rest must go out into the world and seek their fortunes elsewhere.”

At this all the sons exclaimed that the plan was good, but who was to say which of them was the most skilful? The old man smiled and answered:

“I have thought of this also. I shall allow you all a month in which to make some article of gold, and at the end of that time I will judge which has been most skilfully executed.”

The ten sons immediately set to work to fashion some article, and all displayed great industry during the allotted space of time. At the end of the month they came to their father, as he lay dying on the ground, and placed before him the articles they had made.

One had made a chain of fine gold, every link of which was the perfect shape of an elephant; another had made a knife, beautifully ornamented; another a little casket; another a ring representing serpents twisted together, with shining scales; another a water-pot of pleasing shape; and so on.

The old man smiled with pleasure to see what the industry of his sons had accomplished, but when he counted the articles before him, he found there were only nine. When he found that one of his sons had produced nothing, he was angered, especially when this proved to be the eldest son, whom he had secretly thought to be more skilful than his brothers. After bitterly reproaching this son, whose name was Ayo, for his laziness, the father prepared to give his decision on the work of the other brothers; but Ayo suddenly stepped forward and begged him to wait for another hour before making his choice.

“Meanwhile, Father,” said he, “let us sit round the fire all together for the last time, parching corn and telling stories.”

This was how the family spent their time in the rainy season, and all gladly consented.

As they seated themselves upon the ground, the father took up a full ripe ear of corn which lay near him. What was his astonishment when he tried to pick the grains to discover that it was made of gold!

For this was what Ayo had made, and he had prepared a little trick to test the perfection of his work. So skilfully was it executed that all had been deceived, thinking it a real ear of corn, and on this account the father and nine brothers all agreed that Ayo’s work was certainly the best.

Thus Ayo took his father’s place, and the rest set out in different directions to seek their fortune.

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## 29. THE COOKING-POT

A MAN once brought home to his wife a very old cooking-pot, and told her to use it every day when preparing the evening meal.

The woman was not pleased at the idea of using such a battered vessel, and feared that her friends would ridicule her, but she dared not disobey her husband, and began to use the pot as he demanded.

Little did she guess that the pot was a magic one, and had the virtue of turning the ashes of the fire, on which it rested, into gold. Every night the husband crept out, when all were asleep in the huts around the compound, and gathered together these golden ashes, which he stored safely away.

One day a young man in the village was about to set off on a journey; he came to the woman while her husband was absent, and asked a favour of her. He said that he had taken a fancy to her old cooking-pot, and would give her a fine new one in exchange for it. The woman hesitated, but she was ashamed of the ugly old pot, and was glad of an excuse to get rid of it.

When her husband found what she had done, he was very angry, and beat her soundly; but it was now too late to recover the pot, as the young man was already far away in the forest. Naturally he had not obtained the pot without knowing its secret, for he had observed the actions of the man who so mysteriously collected the ashes every night; and it is said that from that day the young man spent his life cooking, and so earned the name of "Chop," or "Food"!

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## 30. THE PARROT

THERE was a grey parrot which knew how to speak and had the habit of correcting anybody who did not tell the truth.

The parrot was the pet of an untruthful woman, and she found the bird's habit so inconvenient, that she at length decided to get rid of it.

One day a neighbour was passing her house, and the woman called out to him from the threshold to come and see the beautiful tame parrot which she intended to give him as a present.

The man asked her why she desired to part with so beautiful a bird, and to this the woman replied: "Because it eats a great deal, and I am poor."

The parrot cried out. "She lies!"

The neighbour took no notice, thanked the woman, and returned home with the bird on his shoulder. When he reached his house, his wife asked him where he had found the bird.

"As I came through the forest, it flew down and perched on my shoulder," replied the man, but the parrot quickly cried out: "He lies!"

The man soon discovered how awkward it was to have such a truthful pet, and he was often tempted to wring the bird's neck.

It happened that this man was dishonest, and stole a great many articles which he buried in a deep hole, unknown to anybody. He would have been quite secure but for the wonderful parrot.

When the thefts were discovered, a search was made in the man's house, but nothing was found there. The searchers were therefore forced to consider that he was innocent. As they went out, they said to him: "Are you sure you have not stolen these things?"

"I am sure!" said the man indignantly; but the parrot cried out: "He lies!"

The man was so enraged that he seized the bird and twisted its neck, but the suspicion of the searchers was aroused, and eventually they discovered the hole, which was marked with a little stake, and all the

stolen articles were found. Had it not been for the truthful parrot, the secret would never have been revealed.

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## 31. THE GHOST-CATCHER

KING ABIPA took a fancy to remove his whole court to a new capital, and for this purpose he decided to build a town on a certain hill which pleased him.

His nobles, however, did not at all desire the change, and some of them met together to make a plan which would turn the King away from his project.

They agreed to send certain slaves of repulsive appearance, whom they possessed, to haunt the hill after the manner of ghosts, so that the King would be afraid to build his capital there. One noble sent a hunchback, another an albino, another a leper, and a fourth a dwarf.

When the King's messengers arrived to survey the hill, they saw these strange apparitions leaping about with torches in their hands, and shouting with one voice: "Ko si aye! Ko si aye!" (No room! No room!).

They returned in terror to the King, and told him that the hill was haunted by ghosts.

However, one of the royal advisers suspected a plot, and advised the King to send hunters to the hill to capture the "ghosts."

The King took this advice, and the hunters returned with the supposed "ghosts," who were, of course, in abject terror at being discovered. Instead of killing them, however, the King kept them hidden and invited all his nobles to a banquet. When they had feasted merrily, he sent round to each noble a calabash of beer by the hands of a slave.

What was the dismay of the four rebellious nobles to receive the calabash, one from his hunchback, another from his albino, and the others from the hands of the leper and the dwarf!

Obviously the plot had been discovered, and all four nobles expected to be put to death for opposing the King; but the wise Abipa said no word about the matter, and the banquet ended in silence.

Soon afterwards the court removed to the new town without any opposition, and henceforth the King was known as “the Ghost-Catcher.”

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## 32. TORTOISE AND THE KING

ONE year the Elephant had done a great deal of damage, breaking down the trees, drinking up the water in a time of scarcity, and eating the first tender crops from the fields.

The King's hunters tried in vain to destroy him, for Elephant knew many charms, and always escaped from their traps.

At last the King offered the hand of his daughter in marriage to anyone who would rid the country of the pest.

Tortoise went to the palace and offered to catch Elephant, and then made his preparations. Outside the town a large pit was dug, and on the top of it was laid a thin platform covered with velvet cloths and leopard-skins, like a throne.

Then Tortoise set off into the forest, accompanied by slaves and drummers. Elephant was very much surprised to see his little friend Tortoise riding in such state, and suspected a trap; but Tortoise said that the old King was dead and the people all wished Elephant to rule over them, because he was the greatest of all animals. When he heard this, Elephant was flattered, and agreed to accompany Tortoise to the town. But when he went up on to the platform to be crowned King, the wood gave way beneath him, and he crashed down into the pit and was speedily slain by the King's hunters.

All the people rejoiced, and praised the cunning of Tortoise, who went to the palace to receive his bride. But the King refused to give his daughter to such an insignificant creature, and Tortoise determined to have a revenge. When the new crops were just ripening, he called together all the field-mice and elves, and asked them to eat up and carry away the corn. They were only too pleased with the idea, and the farmers in distress found the fields quite bare.

Now there was prospect of a famine in the land, and the King offered the same reward as before to anyone who would rid the country of the pests.

Tortoise once again appeared in the palace and offered his help. The King was eager enough to accept it, but Tortoise cautiously refused to do anything until the Princess became his bride.

The King was thus forced to consent to the marriage, and when it had taken place, Tortoise, true to his word, called together all the mice and elves and showed them a platform loaded with dainty morsels of food. He then addressed them as follows:

“The people are so distressed at the damage you have done, that they have prepared this feast for you, and they promise to do the same twice every year, before the harvesting of the first and second crops, if you will agree not to touch the corn in the fields.”

The little creatures all consented, and marched in a great crowd to the platform, which they soon cleared.

The King and his people were not very pleased to hear of this arrangement, but they were so afraid of Tortoise that they could not complain, and after that the mice and elves never troubled the country again.

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### 33. TORTOISE AND MR. FLY

ONCE Tortoise and his family fell on hard times and had nothing to eat, but they noticed that their neighbour, Mr. Fly, seemed to be very prosperous and feasted every night.

Tortoise was curious to know how he obtained so much money, and after watching him for some days he discovered that Mr. Fly flew away every morning early with a large empty sack on his back, and returned in the evening with the sack full, and after that his wife would prepare a feast.

One morning Tortoise hid in the sack and waited to see what would happen. Soon Mr. Fly came out of his house, lifted up the sack, and flew away.

He descended at last in the market-place of a large town, where drummers were beating the tones of the dance, and maidens were dancing before a crowd of people.

Mr. Fly laid his sack on the ground, and Tortoise saw him standing beside one of the drummers. When the people threw money, Mr. Fly picked the coins up and hid them in his sack, and by evening he had collected a great quantity. Then he took up the sack again and flew home. Tortoise quickly got out and took most of the money with him, so that poor Mr. Fly was surprised to find the sack almost empty.

This happened several times, until one day as he put money in the sack Mr. Fly caught sight of Tortoise hiding inside it. He was very angry at the trick, and going to the drummer asked him if he had missed any money.

“Yes,” said the drummer. “For some days I have been losing coins.”

“Look inside this sack,” replied Mr. Fly, “and you will see the thief sitting among the money he has stolen.”

The drummer peeped inside the sack and saw Tortoise.

“How shall the thief be punished?” he cried angrily.

“Just tie up the sack,” said Mr. Fly, “and then beat upon it as if it were a drum.”

So the drummer tied up the sack and beat upon it until Tortoise was black and blue, and this is why his back is covered with bruises.

Then Mr. Fly picked up the sack, and flew high up in the air and dropped it. By chance the sack fell down just outside Tortoise’s house, and neighbours came to tell Nyanribo, his wife, that someone had left a present outside the door. But when she opened the sack in the presence of a crowd of people, she found only Tortoise inside, more dead than alive. Then Mr. Fly made a song and narrated the whole story, and the drummers also played it, and Tortoise and Nyanribo were so ashamed that they left the place and went to live in another country.

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But again he neglected to lay money on the ground and kept it all for himself. Soon, in this way, he grew rich and famous, and almost every day someone asked for fine or rainy weather. He stored many bags of cowries in his house and gave nothing to the Cloud.

When two people asked him for rain and sunshine on the same day, Tortoise pretended that he had grown tired with holding up the clouds on his back, and so the rain fell.

But after some time, seeing how rich Tortoise became, the hard-working Cloud was angry and decided to punish him.

One day Tortoise wished to set out on a journey with his family, so he stood outside his house and cried: "Pass! Pass! Let the sun shine on my journey!"

But as soon as he had set out, the Cloud rolled back again and rain poured down in torrents, causing a great flood in which Tortoise and all his family were drowned.

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