Granny Chioma's Stories
Author:
Fumilayo Johnson Sopale
Reader's name:
Margaret Carson

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ON A SCALE FROM 1 - 10 (10 being the highest score) how would you rate this book? ***My rating=10***

This delightful middle-grade book ("Stories of Grandma Chioma"), illustrated by the Manchegan artist Pedro Xavier Cervantes, draws on the rich storytelling traditions of Equatorial Guinea, a Spanish colony until 1968. (Of all of Spain's former colonies, it is probably the least known despite Spain's long colonial presence there and the fact that Spanish is still the official language of government and education.) Its young and engaging author was born in Spain to Equatorial Guinean parents and grew up near Alicante. As she explains in a YouTube video,1 she took stories told to her by her mother, which in turn had been told to her by her grandmother, and cast them as tales for children, adding two of her own in the process.

The book is made up of four tales and a brief introduction. In the intro ("A Bit of History"), the author touches on the history of Bioko, a large island located northwest of mainland Equatorial Guinea, which has always been a crossroads for different African peoples and languages. In fact, the "Chioma" of the title, her storytelling great-grandmother, was a Yoruba who migrated there as a child from the south of Nigeria. (A separate question that could be discussed with children who read this book is the role of migration and diaspora—not necessarily voluntary—in the spread of folktales and stories.)

The first two tales were the ones passed down from "Grandma Chioma." "The River of Truth" tells the story of a young, motherless girl, Ajua, who wishes that her father would remarry. Soon after, he meets a beautiful widow with three children and they come together to live as a family. Problems ensue. The new stepmother turns out to be a scold and is jealous of the attention paid to Ajua by her father. Ajua now has to take care of the household, and cannot daydream and play as before. One day she returns home and finds the kitchen in chaos with half the pot of rice eaten. Who did it? The father tells them that they must each cross the river of truth and the liar will be revealed. A sequence begins in which each child steps in the water while Ajua chants in Pichinglis (creole English): *If na me chop that rice, make the carrosin pam coba me, and the river care me go"*—basically, if I ate the rice, may the lid of the pot cover me and the waters carry me away, which is the fate of the youngest son, who is turned into a pufferfish. Ajua and her father go home alone and live in peace as before.

The second tale, “Pikanchus” (“to pick something unfamiliar”) has a devil-in-disguise character eventually revealed by the superior cunning of the villagers. A young girl yearns to leave her village and go to the city. She rejects many fine but humble suitors. The devil hears her and borrows body parts and an elegant car to court her. As they go on a stroll through the village, however, the *pueblo* chants a refrain (in Pichinglis) that makes his body parts fall off. The devil turns out to be a mere shadow. Moral: Don’t judge people by their appearance!

The third and longest tale, “Dahomey,” tells the story of King Kojo, who discovers (through spirits invoked by traditional healers) that he must break a spell cast on him in order to continue the royal line. The spirits assign him a multi-step task: to trek through the forest by the light of a full moon, to immerse himself in the River Ebong, and to bring back a white stone with which to rub himself. There are setbacks and accidents narrated along the way, but the King (with the help of the villager Abi) frees himself from the spell, and Abi is promoted to courtier. The plot and resolution may seem familiar, but several story elements break from the European folktale/fairy tale mold.

The final tale, “The Secret of the Ocean,” is about the fisherman Kon, who lives on Tinhosa Island (a real island in the Gulf of Guinea). One day he returns from fishing with an enormous catch. He goes to the mainland to sell it and on the way meets a beautiful siren who tells him to find a special buyer when he reaches shore. Success. The fisherman looks again for the siren, this time half in love. There’s no moral here, only an open ending suggesting there’ll be future meetings between them.

The book most definitely has a unique appeal. It helps fill a gap in the titles being published in Spain and elsewhere: where are the books reflecting the cultural and literary traditions of Equatorial Guinea? Another distinctive touch is that it occasionally uses actual speech (Pichinglis) in the narrative. Children’s book publishers in the US will surely be interested in learning more about this project. I recommend this book (and its enthusiastic, first-time author) highly.

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