

The Bachelors and the Python

There were only two unmarried men in the village. All the rest had found suitable partners, but Kalemeleme was so gentle that he would not stand up for his own rights, or anyone else's, while Kinku was so bad-tempered that no one could stand his tantrums for long.

Thus these two lived in unhappy loneliness, until one day Kalemeleme took his bow and arrows and going into the forest in the early morning, when the dew was on the grass, he shot a grey wild-cat and a brown wild-cat.

On his way home he met Moma, the great rock python, mightiest snake in the forest, and was about to shoot when Moma pleaded, "Gentle one, have mercy on me, for I am stiff with cold. Take me to the river where it is warm." Touched with pity, Kalemeleme took the great reptile on his shoulders to the stream and threw him in.

Moma lifted his head above the reeds and said, "Thank you, gentle one. I have seen your loneliness. Throw in your grey wild-cat and your brown wild-cat and take what the water-spirit gives you." Kalemeleme threw his grey wild-cat and his brown wildcat into the river.

Immediately the water began to ripple and grow redder and redder until beneath the surface there appeared a great, red, open mouth. He put in his hand and pulled out a gourd. He took it home and opened it, when out stepped . . . the most beautiful girl that was ever seen, and she was as good as she was lovely.

She could weave mats, plait baskets, and make pots; she kept the house so neat, and cultivated the garden so well, she prepared the food so carefully and helped her neighbours so willingly, that soon Kalemeleme and his beautiful wife were the favourites of the village.

Kinku came to him and asked, "Tell me, Kalemeleme, where did you get your wife?" "The water-spirit gave her to me," Kalemeleme replied, and he told him the circumstances. "Well, I want a wife too," said Kinku, so he took his bow and his arrows and went off into the forest when the sun was boiling hot overhead. He killed a grey wild-cat and a brown wild-cat.

On his way home he too met Moma, the mighty python, wilting with the heat under a bush. He was about to shoot when Moma pleaded, "Mercy, Kinku. Have mercy on me for I am suffocated with this heat. Take me to the river where it's cool." "What! Take you, a loathsome reptile? Find your own way to the river!" "Very well. Come along."

And the snake glided through the undergrowth, while Kinku followed. Moma plunged into the water and, lifting his head above the reeds, he called out, "Kinku. I have seen your loneliness. Now throw in your grey wild-cat and your brown wild-cat and take what the water-spirit gives you." Kinku threw in his grey wild-cat and his brown wildcat.

At once the water began to ripple and became redder and redder, until beneath the surface Kinku saw a huge open mouth. He put in his hand and drew out a pumpkin. He staggered home with it. It became heavier and heavier as he went, and at last he dropped it. It cracked, and out stepped . . . the ugliest woman that ever was, and before he could recover from his shock she boxed him soundly on the ears, and taking him by the nose she said, "Come on, Kinku. I am your wife." She didn't give him the chance to say "no", but pummelled him and biffed him, bullied him and blamed him.

She led him a dog's life, for she was as lazy as she was hideous. "Kinku, carry the water! Kinku, cut the firewood! Kinku, cultivate the garden! Kinku, cook the meal!" while she simply lay about and abused him. Of course Kinku blamed the water-spirit, but had he only known it, he had nobody to blame but himself.