

THE SNAKE WITH SEVEN HEADS

A tale from the South Africa

Long ago there lived a woman named Manjuza who was a very talented singer and dancer. People loved to hear her strong, vibrant singing voice; but even more they came from near and far to ask her to dance for them on important days of celebration. She danced for birthdays, anniversaries, and all sorts of special occasions, but she was especially known as a wedding dancer.

Manjuza lived in a small village where humble, hardworking people and brave hunters also lived. Eventually Manjuza married the leader of her village's hunting band. Over the years, the couple had three children; two boys and one girl. Sometimes Manjuza's husband would be off doing his job of hunting for weeks at a time.

On one of these occasions, Manjuza was preparing a special meal for his homecoming. As she worked an old woman came to ask her to dance at her granddaughter's wedding. Manjuza had to refuse because she already agreed to dance at another

wedding that same day. The old woman tried to persuade Manjuza to cancel the other appointment but Manjuza refused. She always honored her commitments. In an effort to compromise, Manjuza asked the old woman to change the date of her granddaughter's wedding so she could dance at it but the old woman refused. The two were at a standstill.

The old woman became so angry that she threatened to cast a curse on Manjuza's husband so he would turn into a terrible, ugly monster. Manjuza became more and more frightened as she waited anxiously for her husband's return. When he finally arrived, he looked very strange. As the night wore on, he turned into a snake with seven heads. Manjuza hid her husband in a shed so the children wouldn't see their father in this state. She fed him to keep him healthy.

A few nights later, Manjuza's grandmother came to her in a dream. She told Manjuza that she needed to dance at seven weddings in order to break the curse. She was also told to keep this a secret, even from her curious children.

After that, every time someone asked Manjuza to dance at their wedding, she gladly accepted. Between wedding engagements, Manjuza fed her husband and kept him locked in the shed. Her children asked her why she set food aside. She told them it was for their father, in case he came home from hunting. The children also noticed that she kept the

shed locked. They wanted to get the key to see what their mother was hiding but Manjuza kept the key with her at all times.

Months passed by as Manjuza danced at first one, then two, then three, then four, then five, then six weddings. On the day of the seventh wedding, Manjuza was so excited she forgot to lock the shed before going off to dance. When her children realized that the shed door was open they went inside to investigate. When they saw the snake with seven heads, they screamed and ran out to tell their friends. They left the shed door open.

As soon as they left, the seven-headed snake slithered out of the hut and over to the river. There it lay, sunning itself when the children came back with their friends. This was such an unusual thing to see that the village children ran home to tell their parents about it. The men wanted to leave the snake alone but the women wanted it dead. They poured pots of boiling hot porridge over the snake and it began to moan in agony.

As Manjuza returned from dancing at the seventh wedding she heard the village women singing about killing a seven headed snake. She ran toward the river as fast as she could. She was afraid that her husband was dead. However, when she arrived, she saw the snake turn back into her husband. He

was dazed and confused but alive.

Manjuza was so happy to see her husband whole again that she began to sing and dance. Her children were so happy to see their father that they ran to him with open arms. How wonderful it was to have the family back together again. Once the villagers got over their shock, they too sang and danced. What started out as a frightful day, ended with much rejoicing.

Adapted by Kathleen Simonetta.

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“The Snake with seven heads” found in, Nelson Mandela’s Favorite African Folktales. NY: W. W. Norton & Company, c2002, pp 66-70

