

The Story of the White Dove – an original Swazi Story

From the book *Hear the Voice of the Griot!: A Guide to African Geography, History and Culture*. By Betty K Staley.

There was once a young man by the name of Sanfu, who was always successful in hunting. Whenever he would go out and hunt some game, he would come home in the evening with a kill slung over his shoulder.

One fateful morning he left the kraal to go hunting. It was a perfect day, yet he could not catch any game, however hard he tried. Then he saw, rising up before him, two high twin mountains. Thinking that he might have some luck in that region, he started to climb the slope of the mountain. Again he could only catch fleeting glimpses of game without being able to hunt them down.

Finally Sanfu reached the pass in between the mountains. And while he still hoped that he might be lucky on the other side, he started to descend. But there were big boulders and loose stones, and Sanfu started to roll and glide down the slope. This is no good; he thought to himself, I must return home. But when he turned around, he only saw tall forbidding rocks that had risen up behind him and now were barring his way.

Now the only thing left for him was to continue into the valley. All of a sudden, he heard the soft mournful cooing of a dove.

“Where there is life, there must be water,” he said to himself. So he descended further down the path. Meanwhile the cooing became louder and louder.

Down below Sanfu saw a black and sinister river winding through the landscape. And at the foot of a tall dark rock, he saw a most beautiful White Dove sitting in front of a cave. It was she who had been singing and cooing in such a mournful way.

“Welcome to our country, good Sanfu. We have been waiting for your arrival for many years. We ask you, O Sanfu, to do us a great service. Only you can break the magic spell cast by the river on all the people of this country. Behind me in this cave, held in captivity, are all the young maidens transformed into birds. And in the other cave are the young warriors with the chief of the tribe. They have been changed into wild animals. We are asking a great sacrifice of you, Sanfu. You will have to stay with us for the passing of ten full moons. Do you see this pure clean spring water here? The source of it is in the depth of the earth. Your effort to carry this pure water to the dark river below can transform and bring healing to the dark forces of the river, who have cast a spell on all of us.”

“I see that I cannot refuse your request,” said Sanfu. “O beautiful dove, I give you my promise that I will do whatever I can to help break the spell.”

And so Sanfu started to carry, day after day from the pure clean water of the well to the river below. In the beginning it did not seem to make any difference, but his unending efforts slowly became visible, in that the river started to change its hue from dark, drab brown to a transparency that could reflect the stars in heaven. At the end of the ten months it was finally so far that the river completely had transformed and all the darkness had vanished. It was at this moment that the White Dove called Sanfu to the place where they had met for the first time.

“Sanfu, after all your hard work, all these months, there is only one thing left for you to do. You must repeat after me the following words:

River, river, magic river,
You bewitched us long ago.
Change us back from the shapes you gave us
Back to the forms we know.”

Immediately Sanfu repeated the words which the dove had spoken. The moment he finished, a rumbling and a grumbling was heard. The caves opened and out came on the one side a flock of the most beautiful, colourful birds, which then circled around their heads. From the other side a group of wild animals stormed out into the open field.

“Quick, quick,” said the White Dove, “say the words once more.”

And again Sanfu spoke the words. Now a most wonderful change took place as the birds descended to the earth and started to take on their human forms. They sang and danced for joy to be able to feel their human limbs again. The same transformation took place with all the wild animals, who now changed into the most splendid warriors. Amongst them stood their chief, dignified in his leopard skin clothing.

All of a sudden Sanfu saw a most beautiful maiden approaching. “Sanfu, good Sanfu thank you for all you have done for us.” She said. “At last you see me in my human form. I am the White Dove.”

Then the chief spoke: “Our hearts are filled with gratitude for what you have done for us, Sanfu. Anything you wish shall be yours; cattle, sheep, goats—up to half my kingdom.”

“I have only one wish,” replied Sanfu. “I do not need riches, as my father is a chief himself. The only thing that my heart longs for is this beautiful princess.”

When their eyes met, the White Dove smiled happily.

“I see that my daughter already loves you,” said the chief. “While you are going to your father’s country to invite your parents as well as all the relatives for the great feast, we will be preparing for the most magnificent wedding and thanksgiving feast that has ever taken place in the history of this tribe.”

And so Sanfu went, accompanied by a host of brave warriors. Upon their return, a splendid marriage feast was celebrated and the love and happiness of the bride and bridegroom lasted to the end of their days.