



14. “Fire from heaven”, a folk story from Tanzania



Summary: the folk story “Fire from Heaven” is used to encourage field workers in CBR to reflect on the relationship between religion, culture and disability and on their own religious and cultural values in relation to their professional functioning.

“Long ago there was no fire on earth; so a man went up into the sky to look for fire. When he got to the first heaven he met some people who were only half men (they had only one side) so he began to laugh. They asked him if he was laughing at their disability, and he said yes, because there were no such people in his country. He then went up until he reached the second heaven, where he saw men walking on their heads. They also asked him if he was laughing at them; and he said yes. He had not yet found fire, so he climbed up higher, until he got to the third heaven. There he saw men going on their knees; and they also asked him if he was laughing at their disability. As before, he replied yes. He asked them about fire, and they told him that he had almost reached his goals: he should go straight on until he came to God’s house. He would find God standing outside, as that was the place where he was always to be found.

The man went on as directed, and soon he reached the house of *Mulungu* (God), which was situated in the fourth heaven. Everything around was very beautiful. The man came near and bowed down before *Mulungu*. After that, *Mulungu* asked him what he had come for. He replied that he had come in search

of fire, because in his country there was no fire. *Mulungu* showed him a room in which to sleep and told him that tomorrow he would find fire. Next morning *Mulungu* came and called him and showed him a room in which the most beautiful vessels were placed, all of which had covers. Apart from the very beautiful vessels, there were two plain vessels placed in a corner. The man chose a very beautiful pot and went outside, where he met *Mulungu*, who told him to take off the cover. When he did so, he found ashes and charcoal in the pot. So he asked: “Lord, have you no fire?” *Mulungu* replied: “On the journey here, why did you laugh at my children? If you have no problems in your country, why did you come up here?” Then he ordered the man to go home.

A second and a third man went who had the same experience. At last a woman went: and when she got to the first heaven, the one-sided people came to greet her, and she sang and they danced; and when she was tired of singing, the strange people showed her the way without her asking anything. When she got to the second and third heavens she also sang and the people danced. They asked her if people in her country had disabilities, and she said many people were

disabled, so that some walked on their ears, others on their toes, and others were blind. When she had rested she continued her journey, and soon she came to the house of *Mulungu*. He asked what she was looking for. When she told him, he showed her a room in which to sleep the night.

The next morning he called her and showed her the lovely vessels which he had previously shown to the three men, and told her to choose one. But she was afraid to touch such lovely vessels. Looking around she saw the two plain pots in the corner, and she found enough courage to take one of them. She went outside with this pot and saw *Mulungu*, who told her to uncover the pot. When she took off the cover, there was the long-

looked-for fire inside! *Mulungu* praised her for the way she had behaved toward his children on her journey; and he gave her an ox in recognition of her kindness. She stayed for two days feasting on the meat, and on the third day *Mulungu* told her she could go home and take the fire with her, which would be enough for the entire world.

It was a day of great joy when the woman returned to the earth. Vast numbers of people came to hear the news and to get fire from the pot. The men all praised the woman, and agreed that the women have more sense than the men."

Rev. H. Cole, Notes on the Wagogo of German East Africa. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 32: 305-338; see pp. 315-316, 1902.
 Rewritten by M. Miles.



Assignment

Competencies

The participant:

- becomes aware of the wealth of gender- and disability-related information that exist in folk stories, myths and proverbs and is able to absorb and relate the information to his/her professional work
- improves his or her knowledge on how cultural heritage can play a role in understanding social responses to disability and people with disabilities
- reflects on religious and cultural values in relation to professional functioning

- increases his or her appreciation of the possible value of some parts of the cultural heritage in explaining social responses to disability

Session preparation

Setting:

there are two assignments. Both parts should be prepared individually. Afterwards the answers should be presented and discussed in a plenary session.

Approximate duration:

- Preparation first part: 30 minutes
- Presentation and discussion: 45 minutes
- Preparation second part: 45 minutes. (This could also be carried out as a pre-session assignment at home)
- Presentation and discussion: 45 minutes

Required materials:

- Paper and pens

Suggested session design:

reflection on folk stories

First part

1. Reflect on the folk story "Fire from Heaven". What do you like in this story? What do you dislike? Explain your answers.
2. Take some time to reflect on your own (religious or cultural) values in relation to disability. How do your values determine your concept of human being and, as a result, how do they determine your professional functioning?

3. What could be the benefit of making use of folk stories or myths for:
 - a. Training purposes
 - b. Raising awareness about the position of persons with disabilities in the community?
 How could you do so? Try to give examples.

Second part

Do you know folk stories or myths from your own culture about persons with disabilities? Please write down at least one story. The story should be no longer than two pages (A4-format) and should directly or indirectly give insight into the position of persons with disabilities in relation to God, other supernatural beings or in relation to the community.

As authors we are very interested in learning about folk stories from various cultures and religions. We kindly invite you to send your story to the authors on h.cornielje@enablement.nl or e.veldman@enablement.nl.

Considerations

Being confronted with disability raises questions about life and existentialism (life view or philosophy). Why does disability occur? Could disability be explained in the viewpoint of religion? Should disability be explained in a moral way? Denying or neglecting the importance of religion and culture is a denial and neglect of explanations that people give to their disabilities. Are we aware of the impact of our religious and cultural values in shaping our professional attitude

and functioning? It might help to take time to listen to folk stories and myths. We could ask people questions and be aware of the ways in which people explain disability. We could use folk stories, myths and proverbs in training situations or in raising awareness about disability related issues. When trying to understand the religious and cultural language, we can break barriers and can get to a better understanding of the people we work with.

Recommended reading

- Albert B, The social model of disability, human rights and development, briefing note, Disability KaR Research paper, 2004 (*DVD*)

