

Nyangara

as told by Peter Amidon

ONCE UPON A TIME a long time ago there was a Chief who was loved by everyone in his village. One day the Chief got sick. He took to his hut, he lay down on his mat. He got sicker and sicker. So he called the men of the village into his hut and said, "My men, I am so sick that I am afraid I will die unless you can get my doctor." "We'll get your doctor," said the men, "Where is he?" "Next to the village up on top of the hill is a cave. Inside the cave lives a python snake named Nyangara. He's my doctor." "A snake is your doctor? Well, we'll bring him to you. How do we do it?"

So the Chief told the men how they must fill a pot with beer and bring it up to the cave as a gift from the Chief. He taught them the magic song with which to sing the python out of the cave. He told them to let Nyangara drink the beer and then bring him down to the Chief's hut. The men did just as the Chief said. They filled a pot with the village beer and took it up the hill next to the village. On top of the hill they found the cave. They looked into the cave and saw nothing but dark blackness. The men stood outside the cave and sang the magic song:

Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena

They stopped singing and waited. Then, out of the mouth of the cave came the huge head of the python snake. He was all coiled up inside the cave. As he came out towards the men he uncoiled one coil, two coils, three coils. The men were so scared that the one who was holding the pot of beer dropped it onto the ground. The pot broke into a hundred pieces and the beer ran all over the ground. The men all turned and ran down the hill. They ran back to the village. They went into the Chief's hut. They said, "Chief, Chief, we couldn't bring Nyangara down from his cave on the hill. Is there anything else we can do to make you better?"

"No," said the Chief, "Only Nyangara."

The children in the village started wondering why the adults were acting so strange. The children noticed that the adults had stopped singing and dancing. The adults spoke with each other solemnly, in hushed tones. They hardly talked with the children at all. The children decided to ask the one person they loved the most. The children loved the Chief more than anyone else, because the Chief always answered all their questions. So the children ran into the Chief's hut and said, "Chief, Chief, what's going on? The adults have stopped singing and dancing and they won't tell us a thing."

"Ah, children," said the Chief, "It's because the men couldn't bring the python snake, Nyangara, my doctor, down from his cave to make me better, and now I'm going to die."

"What?" said the children. "The men couldn't bring you your doctor? We'll do it. We'll bring Nyangara down to you."

“No, no, children,” said the Chief, “You have to be strong and brave.”

“Strong and brave? We’re strong and brave! We can do it! Just tell us what we have to do.”

So the Chief told the children the same as he’d told the men.

He taught them the magic song. The children ran out of the Chief’s hut and got another pot. They filled it with the village beer. They climbed up the hill; there was the cave. They stood around the cave and sang the magic song:

Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nai-we Nyangara-we, We want to see you Nyangara
Nai-we Nyangara-we, Our Chief is dying Nyangara
Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nai-we Nyangara-we, Ta zo ku wona Nyangara
Nai-we Nyangara-we, Mambo wedu wofa Nyangara

They stopped singing. It was quiet. Then out of the mouth of the cave came the huge head of the python snake. As he came out, he uncoiled one coil, two coils, three coils. The children were so scared that their bodies felt like turning and running down the hill. But they said to their bodies: “Be still! Be still!” And they stood there as Nyangara looked at all those children and sang to them:

Kwire chinyere. Kwire chinyere.
Some men came here yesterday.
They broke the pot and ran away.
Kwire chinyere. Kwire chinyere.

They broke the pot and ran away.
Will you also run away?
Kwire chinyere. Kwire chinyere.

The children stayed right there and sang back to the snake:

Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nai-we Nyangara-we, We want to see you Nyangara
Nai-we Nyangara-we, Our Chief is dying Nyangara
Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nyangara chena, Nyangara chena
Nai-we Nyangara-we, Ta zo ku wona Nyangara
Nai-we Nyangara-we, Mambo wedu wofa Nyangara

When the children stopped singing the second time, Nyangara continued coming out of the cave. He uncoiled four coils, five coils, six coils, seven, eight, nine, ten coils. He was completely out of the cave. He slithered right up to the children. Right onto the first little boy's feet. Right up his legs. Right up his chest and over his shoulder and onto the shoulder of the little girl behind him, and onto the shoulder of the little boy behind her, and on over all those children's shoulders. The children stayed absolutely still. Nyangara came to the last little girl who was holding the pot of beer, and she watched the python's huge head come right down into the pot and drink all that beer.

Then, slowly and carefully, the children carried Nyangara on their shoulders down the hill, back to the village, and right up to the Chief's hut. The Chief looked up from his mat and said, "Oh children, you've brought Nyangara."

Then Nyangara slithered off the children's shoulders onto the floor of the hut and up to the Chief's mat. And Nyangara licked the Chief's feet. And he licked the Chief's legs and body and arms. And he licked the Chief's head. And when he was done the Chief got up off his mat and stood up and said, "Thank you Nyangara. Thank you children, I feel much better."

Then the children took Nyangara back up on their shoulders and carried him back up the hill to his cave. And the children brought Nyangara a roasted ox, from the Chief, in thanks. And when the children came back to the village, the Chief ordered that another ox be roasted. "But this one," said the Chief, "This one is for the children, and only the children. For they are the ones who brought my doctor, Nyangara down to make me better. The children. They are the ones who were brave and strong."

And that's the story of Nyangara.

Source

I learned this story from my wife, Mary Alice Amidon, who'd learned it from Connecticut storyteller Sara deBeer. Sara learned it from a written source as collected from the Shona people of Zimbabwe and retold by ethnomusicologist and storyteller Hugh Tracey. The story has developed and changed, as stories do, through transmission, from storyteller to storyteller. Hugh Tracey's retelling and Andrew Tracey's music transcription can be found in the collection of world folktales entitled *The Singing Sack*: book and audio tape published by A & C Black, London.

