

# Head Tree

*A retelling of an African folk tale*

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A man who had never done any wrong to anybody else had a great misfortune happen to him. His wife noticed that a tree was beginning to grow out of his head. This was not painful to the man, but it made him feel awkward when there were other people about. They would point at him and say that this was a very strange thing to happen. Some people walked some miles to see this man sitting outside his hut with a tree growing out of his head.

At last the man decided that it was time to do something about the tree. He asked his wife if she would chop it down, but she warned him that this



could be dangerous.

"If this tree is growing out of your head," she said, "then you might bleed to death if I chop it down."

The man agreed that this was a danger. So instead of chopping the tree down he went to see a certain woman who was well known in that part for being a woman who could use charms to solve difficult problems. This woman lived in a hut some distance away and so the man had to bear the stares of all the people as he walked to her place.

The charm woman looked at the man and said that she had never seen this sort of thing before, but that her mother had told her that things like this could happen and had given her instructions as to how to deal with it.

"You must have done something bad to have this happen to you," she said.

"I have not done anything bad," said the man hotly. "I have always behaved well."

"In that case," said the charm woman, "you must have been planning to do something bad. If this were not so, then why would a tree grow out of your head?"

The man had no answer for this, and so the charm woman took a special herb out of her bag and gave it to him.





"You must eat this every day for a week," she said. "At the end of the week the tree will go. You must also pay me two cows, for this is a very expensive herb and it is not easy to stop trees growing out of people's heads."

The man promised that he would give the woman her cows once the tree had gone. Then he returned to his home and took the first part of the herb. At the end of the week, when he had taken the last part of the herb, the tree fell off his head. The man's wife chopped it up and they used the wood for their cooking fire. The man was very relieved, and he was now able to walk about without people pointing at him and clicking their tongues in amazement.

"You must give that woman her cows," his wife said. "She has cured you well."

"I shall not," said the man. "She is just an old witch with a sharp tongue. There is no reason to give her anything."

The charm woman heard that the tree had fallen off the man's head and she asked a young boy to tell him to send her two cows. The man listened to the message which the boy brought, but all he did was beat the boy with a stick and send him home.

The next day, when the man was sitting in front

of his hut drinking his beer, his wife came to him and looked at the top of his head.

"Another tree seems to be growing," she said. "This time it looks very big."

The man's heart filled with despair. He could not face the thought of having a tree on his head again, and so he went back to the charm woman's house.

"I have come for more medicine," he said. "And I have brought those two cows I promised you."

The charm woman looked at him and shook her head.

"You are a wicked man who does not keep his promises," she said. "If you want me to cure you again and to stop that tree forever, you will have to pay me four cows."

The man stamped his feet on the ground, but he knew that she was the only woman who could stop a tree from growing out of his head. Reluctantly he brought four cows and left them in front of her house. She gave him the herb and told him that he should always keep his promises, even if he thought that he had made a promise to a weak old woman. The man said nothing, but he knew that what she said was quite right.