

Snake Sun Crow

A creative process in contemporary oral storytelling practice and research.

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The story I worked with during the summer course in Berlin is a legend from Myanmar that I first heard told by a Dutch storyteller several years ago. I found various versions of it online and began telling it to audiences myself. Although it became a frequently told story in my repertoire, I often felt a discomfort when telling it which was hard to frame in words.

Over the course of the 'What Are You Talking About' workshops we explored the concepts of stereotyping and appropriation, which as a storyteller are always close. The course better equipped me to put language around the discomfort I sometimes feel telling stories from other cultures. It helped me to better articulate and explore questions that had been brewing in my practice and research. How has this story been treated? Whose variant of this story am I engaging with? What historical power dynamics are hidden here? How can I make this story my own whilst respecting its filiation to a culture, place and time that I know so little about?

Through the lens of these questions, I returned to the story. I looked into its depths as if it were a mirror, and I looked for what I could recognise in it. I teased out what I did not recognise. With those images and symbols that felt specific to their time and place, I had to make a decision: whether to find out all I could about their significance and keep them in the story; or replace them with new symbols – ones that I recognised, that felt alive for me. In this way a story emerged that felt both ancient and new simultaneously. One that I feel comfortable telling.

I tell it now to audiences and it feels vivid, alive, vital. A few days after I had told the story as part of a university guest lecture on narrative strategies for illustration students, a student emailed me with this image interpretation of the story:

