

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AFRICAN FOLKLORE

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Overview We have devoted other entries to African religion and mythology, and intimated our interest in finding a distinctive definition for African folklore, among these other expressions of the African mind. Mythology concerns present and compelling explanatory tales which help us understand why the world is as it is. Religion addresses questions of belief. It is left to folktales and folklore to address fancies, fantasies, fictions which set themselves outside of history and belief, to celebrate everyday villains and heroes, and to generate puzzles or riddles (often with a trick or conundrum embedded in them), moral reflections (frequently extracted from daily life,) and especially extended animal based tale sequences, like those of tricksters like Anansi, who find themselves deeply embedded in the cultures. It is the trademark of African folktales that animals regularly figure as spokesmen for the main point.

Folktales and history By their natures, folktales, being set in a never never time, neither confirm nor deny historical placing, though some folktales contain, within themselves, propositions about their historical settings. It is also clear that the themes of folktales reveal cultural changes. In extreme cases, say, a well known animal tale figure, like tortoise, who has forever functioned as the tricky slow poke of folktale, has become a university student attending classes and aspiring to white-collar status. While African folktale, like African myth, has its roots in a centuries long unrecorded past, its history does however open to let the occasional larger pattern of historical movement into the light: for example, in early modern times--vaguely put--when the north of West Africa was dry, hare was the dominant folktale figure, while spider and tortoise ruled in the south, but with the drying of the south, hare took over, and challenged the other two figures. This kind of modification, from within folktale personae, is universally adaptable to historicizing on the basis of folktale.

The Anansi tale One of the most fertile and widely beloved African folklore complexes concerns the spider-figure Anansi, whose origins appear to be among the Akan people of the ancient Empire of Ghana. (Through considering this tale-complex we scan gain some insight into the anatomy of a classical piece of African, and African diaspora, folklore.) The tale involves a figure, Anansi, who often takes the form of a spider, though often of a clothed spider with a human face, or of a human with eight legs. This dangerous--but slightly comical--figure is exclusively oral, and exists as a kind of 'figure of speech' present in the ability to narrate, indeed to use your wits in language, as the Anansi-loving trapped slaves, in the Atlantic slave trade, learned to trick the system. The multiform imagination of this tale-figure writhes in and out of almost pan-African versions of this language animal.

History and the Anansi tale While we cannot 'date' the creation of this myth we can make certain assumptions about the period in African history that created it. There are, of course, the flora and fauna that teem in the tale, and did in the Empire of Ghana (700-1250 C.E.), and then, at the opposite extreme, there are the sophisticated, humorous largenesses of thought which drive the Anansi tales before them. A look at a couple of strands of tale, one concerned with 'wisdom,' the other with 'stories,' should stand for the humor and power of this kind of expression.

Anansi and stories It seems that there were no stories at all in the world, for the Sky-God had kept them all to himself. Anansi, however, wanted stories so he asked if he could buy them. The Sky-God agreed to sell Anansi stories, but at a price: Anansi was to bring back, to the Sky-God, Onini the python, Osibo the Leopard, and the Mboro hornets. Anansi talks python into stretching out full length on a tree limb, to be measured, then swiftly ties him up and puts him in a sack. He ties up the leopard in his webs, and puts him a sack. He catches the hornets in a calabash, and fastens the lid. Then he takes his prizes to the Sky-God, and is given the power of story. The whole story is about the power of story to unlock the power of story!

Anansi and wisdom Anansi decided to hoard all the world's wisdom, but was not sure where it would be safely hidden. He decided it would be safest in the top of a tall thorn tree. So he put the wisdom in a jar and started climbing the tree, with the jar strapped around his belly. Just then his son came along and started laughing at dad. Tie the jar at your back, his son roared. It will be safer. But just as Anansi was shifting the jar it fell, and broke, and all the wisdom spilled onto the ground where, because a large storm was hitting the land, it flowed away into the oceans, and is subsequently scattered into small and limited deposits to be found here and there.

The range of African folktale Anansi meets the subtlest demands of the animal-trickster type tale, and in its richness and multiple meanings it has spread, in the form of a (now long written down) vast number of versions scattered worldwide. Apart from ‘tales,’ but best thought of as never never and tale like, is a profusion of sayings, proverbs, and riddles, which all incorporate the imaginative pithiness of the folktale, unwrapping it in alternate forms. ‘Katsina, home of genteel poverty, one eats a dimesworth of groundnuts, and washes one’s hands.’ ‘Indifference of the butcher as vulture watching the carcass of a motor car.’ ‘What is kpai kpai, what is kim kim, what is an herbalist under a tree, what is a signal drum, or a nonsense sentence?’ ‘Coconut, palm fruit, cocoyam, yam, maize.’

Reading

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Gordon, April, *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, London, 1996.

Opie, Iona; Opie, Peter, *Children’s Games in Street and Playground*, Oxford, 1969.

Spears, Richard; Berry, Jack, *West African Folklore*, Evanston, 1991.

Stahl, Sandra, *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative*, Bloomington, 1989.

Discussion questions

Distinguishing folklore and folktales from myth can be difficult. Please review our African mythology entry and see whether you see a clear distinction between these two categories of folk-produced expression.

Anansi is a classic folktale. Does it, however, raise philosophical questions, like what is wisdom anyway or what is the origin of stories?

Out of what kind of ‘archaic’ experiences could the Anansi tale have emerged? Are they by products of creative imagination or of the practical mind attempting to devise explanations for the everyday world?

What relation do you see between the folktale, the proverb, and the riddle? Do they all call on a distinctive kind of intelligence?

What traces of its particular historical past is the folklore able to embed in itself? How often are ‘actual historical events’ embedded in folktales, with their clues into the timeframe of the tale itself?

What happened to the African tale of Anansi as it was carried to the Americas by the slave trade? How did it merge with indigenous American tales, like those of ‘Br’er Rabbit?’, to form a new blend of story expression?