

Anansi Folktales

Folktales are a means of handing down traditions, values, and customs from one generation to the next. The stories are not only for entertainment but also teach a moral lesson. Anansi stories are one example of African folktales.

Anansi stories are well known in many parts of Western Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. These stories are an example of how elements of African culture travelled with enslaved Africans who were forcibly taken from the continent to work on plantations in the Americas. In this module you will learn who Anansi is, where the Anansi stories originate from and why they are an important part of many cultures in Africa and people of African descent who live in other parts of the world.

Here is a list of activities you will work on:

- KWL Chart
- Reading
- Listening / Video
- Summary
- Map Activities

KWL Chart

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What I know about Anansi stories	What I want to know about Anansi stories	What I learned about Anansi stories

Reading

Anansi¹

Anansi is an African folktale character. He often takes the shape of a spider and is one of the most important characters of West African and Caribbean folklore. He is also known as Ananse, Kwaku Ananse, and Anancy. The Anansi tales originated from the Akan people of present-day Ghana. The word Ananse is Akan and means "spider".

According to legend, Kweku Anansi (or Ananse) is the son of Nyame, the Asanti (Ashanti) supreme being. Nyame is also called by other names such as Oboadee

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anansi>

(Creator) and Odomankoma (Infinite, Inventor), as he created life and death. He is known as the great sky god.

Once, death used venom to overcome Nyame. Nyame used an antidote to combat death's venom; therefore, he has eternal life. A part of Nyame's eternal spiritual form was placed into the human soul, or "kra". Therefore, this kra also cannot die.

Additionally, Nyame is known as Ananse Kokuroko, which means The Great Spider or The Great Designer. Nyame turned Anancy into a spider-man as punishment for being mischievous. From that time forward, Anansi the spider-man had to use his mental skills to survive. Undaunted by his fate, Anansi rose to become the "Keeper Of All Stories". He is the hero of children and the champion of the little guy and the powerless. Like them, he often gets in trouble and must use his intelligence to save himself.

Enslaved Africans took these stories with them when were taken by force to the Caribbean, North and South America. Some of the countries they spread to include Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, The Bahamas, Grenada, Costa Rica, Suriname, The Virgin Islands, and the Netherlands Antilles. In the Netherlands Antilles on Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire, he is known as Kompa Nanzi, and his wife as Shi Maria.

In the Caribbean, Anansi is often celebrated as a symbol of slave resistance and survival since he is able to use his cleverness to get himself out of difficult situations. Anansi stories usually have some principle or moral lesson that they are trying to communicate. Some stories include a proverb at the end or may incorporate a song.

Anansi shares similarities with the trickster figure of Br'er Rabbit, who originated from the folklore of the Bantu-speaking peoples of South and Central Africa. Enslaved Africans brought the Br'er Rabbit tales to the Americas, which, like the Anansi stories, depict a physically small and vulnerable creature using his cunning intelligence to overcome larger animals. However, although Br'er Rabbit stories are

told in the Caribbean, especially in the French-speaking islands (where he is named "Compair Lapin").

How did the stories get to the Americas (that is, North America, South America, Central America and the Caribbean)?

In the 17th Century, people who traded with Africa started to increase trade in people rather than goods. A cheap workforce was wanted by European owners of huge plantations in the Caribbean. West Africa proved a fruitful area to capture or buy people and transport them, in terrible conditions, via slave ships across the Atlantic to work on the plantations. The children of these enslaved people themselves became slaves who were powerless, chained, beaten and often worked to death.

Naturally, the enslaved Africans took their stories with them and passed them on. The stories of Anansi and his exploits, of his ability to trick and defeat creatures more powerful than himself were extremely important and popular. Anansi symbolized rebellion and the stories could give both hope and pride to enslaved people in their struggles to survive and their fights for freedom.

Of course, the stories developed and changed. Over the next decades and centuries, enslaved Africans were also bought to work in the plantations of the Southern United States. Anansi became Aunt Nancy, a spider-woman, and many of Anansi's escapades were attributed to other creatures, such as Brer Rabbit.

Anansi and The Distribution of Wisdom

Read the Anansi story below and try to discover what the moral of the story is.

This story tells of how Anansi once tried to hoard all of the world's wisdom in a pot (in some versions a calabash). Anansi was already very clever, but he decided to gather together all the wisdom he could find and keep it in a safe place.

With all the wisdom sealed in a pot, he was still concerned that it was not safe enough, so he secretly took the pot to a tall thorny tree in the forest (in some

versions the silk cotton tree). His young son, Ntikuma, saw him go and followed him at some distance to see what he was doing.

The pot was too big for Anansi to hold while he climbed the tree, so he tied it in front of him. Like this the pot was in the way and Anansi kept slipping down, getting more and more frustrated and angry with each attempt.

Ntikuma laughed when he saw what Anansi was doing. "Why don't you tie the pot behind you, then you will be able to grip the tree?" he suggested.

Anansi was so annoyed by his failed attempts and the realisation that his child was right that he let the pot slip. It smashed and all the wisdom fell out. Just at this moment a storm arrived and the rain washed the wisdom into the stream. It was taken out to sea, and spread all around the world, so that there is now a little of it in everyone.

Though Anansi chased his son home through the rain, he was reconciled to the loss, for, he says: "What is the use of all that wisdom if a young child still needs to put you right?"

Listening/ Video

1. Watch the 5 minute Anancy story entitled "Owning Your Own Gifts: Anancy and the Birds". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAEpsVKLi4o>
 - a. In the video, the owl repeats several times that spiders don't fly. This statement shows that the owl holds a stereotype about spiders. A stereotype is a belief or expectation about an individual or group of people.
 - b. Can you think of a time when someone tried to limit your ambitions because of stereotypes associated with a group to which you belong? For example, some people say that girls are not good at maths, or that boys are not good at cooking.

- c. In what ways can you respond when someone expresses a stereotype about you or a group that you belong to?
- d. Anancy used his creativity to achieve his dream to fly; however, he lost his wings. Why did he lose his wings and what lesson can it teach us?
- e. In the end how did Anancy save himself? What do you think is the moral of this story?



Some storytellers are using modern technology to ensure that the ancient folktales of Africa remain alive for people of all ages in all countries to enjoy. One such person is Comfort Ero, the founder of [African Stages Theatre Company](#) in British Columbia. Comfort Ero is a trained teacher who has used storytelling to facilitate her French and English language teaching both in Nigeria, her original homeland, and in Canada. Also a playwright, poet and children's story writer, Comfort believes in storytelling as a powerful and non-violent tool to motivate learning and positive values in children. She has received many awards as a teacher, writer and community builder.

Comfort says "Having for a long time analyzed the past with regard to Black History, we cannot afford to just remain in the past. Time to put our stories in the modern social media garb and not just stifle, waste and wail our old and valuable stories away."

She has written a number of children's books, the most recent one being "Kokodiko: The Dance Monster" which tells the story of identical twins in who save an African community from a monster who forced the villagers to dance to death.

Summary

Anansi stories are an example of how people of African descent who no longer live on the continent have preserved some parts of their African culture. The Anansi stories are more than just folktales. They contain important principles about what is good and bad and how we should live. Anancy stories also show how people can be resilient and use creative ways to solve their problems. Additionally, the fact that these stories survived in the memories of people of African descent shows the strength of African culture and the high regard in which this culture is held by people of African descent even when they no longer live on the continent - even through the trauma of enslavement in the Americas.

Activities

1. Colour the country in Africa that Anancy stories are said to originate from



2. Use an arrow to show the continent that Anancy stories originated in and the regions it spread to.



3. Underline the countries in the Americas where Anancy stories are still told.

Central America and the Caribbean



802107 (R00769) 8-93

References

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