

African Folk Tales – Background Information

Way of Communicating

There is a rich, fertile legacy of folklore from Africa. On this vast continent, folk tales and myths serve as a means of handing down traditions and customs from one generation to the next. The storytelling tradition has thrived for generations because of the absence of printed material. Folk tales prepare young people for life, as there are many lessons to be learned from the tales. Because of the history of this large continent, which includes the forceful transplanting of the people into slavery on other continents, many of the same folk tales exist in North America, South America, and the West Indies. These are told with little variation, for the tales were spread by word of mouth and were kept among the African population.

In addition to the folk tales, there are myths, legends, many proverbs, tongue twisters, and riddles.

Anansi

Anansi, the Spider, is one of the major trickster figures in African folk tales. This spider can be wise, foolish, amusing, or even lazy--but always there is a lesson to be learned from Anansi. The spider tales have traveled from Africa to the Caribbean Islands. Sometimes the spelling is changed from Anansi to Ananse. In Haiti the spider is called Ti Malice. Anansi stories came into the United States through South Carolina. The Anansi spider tales are told as "Aunt Nancy" stories by the Gullah of the southeastern part of the U.S.

Use of Nature

In the African folk tales, the stories reflect the culture where animals abound; consequently, the monkey, elephant, giraffe, lion, zebra, crocodile, and rhinoceros appear frequently along with a wide variety of birds such as the ostrich, the secretary bird, and the eagle. The animals and birds take on human characteristics of greed, jealousy, honesty, loneliness, etc. Through their behavior, many valuable lessons are learned. Also, the surroundings in which the tales take place reveal the vastness of the land and educate the reader about the climate, such as the dry season when it hasn't rained for several years, or the rainy season when the hills are slick with mud. The acacia trees swaying in a gentle breeze, muddy streams that are home to fish, hippos and crocodiles, moss covered rocks, and giant ant hills that serve as a "back scratcher" for huge elephants, give the reader a sense of the variety of life in this parched or lush land in this part of the world.

UNCLE REMUS TALES

These are very well-known folk tales from Africa. In the Uncle Remus stories, Bre'r Rabbit is the outstanding trickster figure. Hare, or Little Hare, appears in this role in the eastern part of Africa. The tortoise is a primary trickster figure in the Nigerian tales. Bre'r Rabbit and the Tar Baby is similar to Anansi and the Gum Doll of West Africa. The Tar Baby motif has been traced from India to America through Africa, Europe, and Spain.

TORTOISE AND THE HARE

In African versions of this tale, the tortoise wins because he uses his wits. In the European versions, on the other hand, the tortoise wins through sheer endurance and grit. The triumph of

brain over physical strength is a common thread that runs through the trickster tales from Africa. The trickster figure is clever, witty, and unscrupulous, as are trickster figures all over the world, but the African trickster almost always wins out because of his brilliance.

A WEALTH OF PROVERBS

There are many thousands of proverbs from African folk tales. A single tribe may have as many as a thousand--or even several thousand--of their own. So there are proverbs in abundance from this continent. Many times, a proverb is spoken in a tale by a character, rather than being left for the end of the story. Some of the more familiar proverbs do not need a story context in order to figure out the meaning. For example, "Do not set the roof on fire and then go to bed"; "He who runs and hides in the bushes does not do it for nothing; if he is not doing the chasing, we know that something is chasing him"; and "Chicken says: We follow the one who has something."

DILEMMA TALES

Many stories are deliberately left without an ending. This leaves the ending wide open for audience discussion and participation. The ending of the tale would be determined by the group of people involved in the exercise. The ending, therefore, is flexible and might change depending upon who is participating.

STRING STORIES

Making a simple loop from string and telling a tale with the string by twisting and turning the string to represent different parts of the story, is one of the oldest forms of storytelling in the world. In parts of Africa, the native children who cannot speak a word of English can often communicate with an English-speaking foreign visitor via a string story. It is a way of getting acquainted without words, and is a form of communication as different cultures share string stories. Some of the African string figures are the same as those of Pacific Ocean islanders or Eskimos of the far north.

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE IN STORYTELLING

Many of the folk tales have musical participation by the audience that adds much to the tale. It is common for the audience to answer questions aloud, to clap their hands in rhythm to word repetition (chorus), and to join in the chorus. The audience participation cannot be cut short, or the audience will let the storyteller know it. Some of the tales have a repetitive quality to them (such as, the same chorus may be used repeatedly) because the audience wants to enjoy the story and participate in the experience for as long as possible.

CROCODILE TALES

There are a wealth of crocodile tales from Africa. In parts of West Africa, a person attacked by a crocodile is said to be the victim of the vengeance of someone he has harmed. It is said that he who kills a crocodile becomes a crocodile. A South African Vandau proverb reminds us that: "The strength of the crocodile is in the water." In another tale, the fox claims to have the answer to killer-crocodiles who terrorize the people. He says the solution is simple. He eats their eggs. The ending proverb is, "Get rid of your enemy before he is stronger than you."

THE VOICE OF THE DRUM

Language can be conveyed by drums. The Ashanti and other West African tribes, just by the rhythms and intervals in beating their drums by their fingers, the flat of their hand, or the thumb,

can convey messages and be understood over long distances. Many different tones can be made by the pressure of the arm under which a drum is held. The stick for beating the drum came later. We still refer to a turkey leg as the "drum stick."

THE KIND LION

This type of tale is from Africa, where lions live in the wild. It is the idea that the Lion, King of the Beasts, lets his victims go for one reason or another, and then this good deed is rewarded in the end by the victim saving the life of the lion. It is the "one good turn deserves another" motif. This kindly lion theme spread from Africa to Europe.

THE SACRED VULTURE

"Opete" is the Twi term for the vulture. This bird is believed to be an instrument of the gods by the Ashanti and other West African peoples. This feeling of the sacred bird has survived in the New World and in the Caribbean.