

AFRICAN AND NATIVE AMERICAN TALES

Both African and Native American cultures include a wealth of stories which explain life and the world in which we live. These folktales often give reason to the unexplained such as the creation of the world or why certain animal behaviors exist. The tales also warn us about behaviors, attitudes or beliefs that are seen as inappropriate such as greed, envy, lust, selfishness, bias and egocentrism. These stories help the young and old to think about the world in a different way and to consider right from wrong.

Trickster tales are found in both cultures as well. The West African trickster Anansi tales traveled with African people and can be found in various forms wherever people of African descent live. "Among the Lakota Native Americans, the trickster is Iktomi, which means spider. Iktomi is the worst part of us: stupid, untrustworthy, with no respect for language, lazy and greedy. Iktomi is a shapeshifter. He can change into human form. When something goes wrong in a village, Iktomi is often blamed."

Using African and Native American tales in a classroom setting is an excellent way to encourage conversations centered on social justice, ethics, origins, our environment as well as to illustrate the interconnectedness between people all around the world.

Included within this section are several examples of tales from West African and Native American cultures.

Note: http://ccb.lis.illinois.edu/Projects/storytelling/hempel_403b/spider.html

NATIVE AMERICAN FOLKTALES

Lenape Legend: How the Spider Came To Be



Long, long ago, when the Earth was new, there lived in a certain village a woman who was a very skilled weaver. Her weaving became known throughout the village and the other village people came to her to have her weave their baskets, blankets and wall-hangings. And so it was that she became proud and began to imagine herself the finest weaver in the village.

As time passed, her reputation as a fine weaver began to extend beyond her village, and people from other villages came to see and barter for her baskets, blankets and wall-hangings. And so it was that she became proud and began to imagine herself the finest weaver in her region.

As more time passed, her weaving became known over all of Turtle Island, and her baskets, blankets and wall-hangings became much sought after on all the trade routes and traders came from places she had not even heard of to barter for her work. And

so it was that she became proud and began to imagine herself the finest weaver on Turtle Island.

And because nothing was known of any land beyond Turtle Island, she soon began to imagine herself the finest weaver in all of Creation. And this did not escape the notice of the Creator.

And so it was that the Creator came to the village of this woman, and he came to her home and looked upon the fine weavings she had created. "These are fine weavings," the Creator said, "but do you really believe you are the finest weaver in all of Creation?" And the woman answered that she did. "Well then," said the Creator, "let us have a contest, you and I, to see who is the finest weaver in all of Creation." And in a moment of foolish pride the woman agreed.

The Creator allowed the woman to go first. And she sat at her loom and wove a weaving of exquisite beauty. It was by far the finest work she had ever done and the people of her village were overwhelmed by the beauty and technique of her work. And the Creator agreed that it was a fine weaving, perhaps the finest which had ever been made on Turtle Island.

But it was now the Creator's turn to weave. So the Creator reached into the sky with his right hand and wove the clouds across the eastern sky. And the Creator reached into the sky with his left hand and wove a sunset across the western sky. Then with both hands he wove the stars across the night sky. And the woman bowed her head with shame, knowing that her pride had caused her to think more highly of herself than was proper.

Then the Creator spoke to her again. "Your pride must be punished, but I will leave you your excellent weaving abilities." And so it was that the Creator turned the woman into the spider, the second finest weaver in all of Creation.

When the Animals Left Lenap'hoink Land

Long ago, there was a time when the animals disappeared from Lenape'hokink, Land of the Lenap'hoink. No one could figure out where they had gone. So, finally, the Chiefs sent out the very best of their hunters to see if they could find any animals, but they came back with disturbing news. Not one track had they found! It seemed as if the animals had completely vanished from their lands!

So, the main source of our food being gone, something had to be done, for winter was approaching and we would surely starve with no meat. So, once again the Chiefs sent out groups of the best hunters to travel over the Turtle Island to look for the animals. Owl assisted them in this search too, for he needed the mice for food. Owl went far to the north to a place of spruce trees, and he saw many animals apparently imprisoned in an enclosure of trees; but they looked content and not the least bit ill at ease.

Seeing that something was strange here, Owl flew down to a low branch and talked to the animals. No sooner had Owl sat on the branch than he was attacked by fierce Giants and their friends, the Crows. Luckily, night was falling and Owl was able to escape, and he left as fast as he could fly.

Flying back to Lenape'hokink he reported to the people on what he had seen. So, the Lenap'hoink Chiefs gathered together a large body of warriors to rescue the imprisoned animals, and Owl guided them.

When the warriors arrived at the place where the animals were imprisoned, they were immediately attacked by large numbers of fierce crows. Never had the warriors seen so many! Then they were set upon by the Giants, who came after them with small trees and threw large rocks upon them! The battle that followed lasted for days, with

neither side gaining victory. To the warriors something did not seem right, because at no time did the animals try to escape, but just looked curiously upon the battle raging all around them.

Finally, the Lenap warriors being discouraged, they asked the Giants for a truce. Their adversaries granted the request, welcoming the rest themselves. The Lenap War Chief asked the animals, "Why is it that you seem unconcerned with our attempts to release you from your imprisonment? We have undergone much hardship and even death for you, but you don't seem to care!"

The Chief of the animals, a large elk, came forward, saying, "You think we are here against our wishes, but this is not so! We wish to remain here and we are content. The Giants have treated us better than you ever did when we lived in your lands!" Amazed, the War Chief asked, "How is it that we have offended you?"

The Chief Elk replied, "You have wasted our flesh; desecrated our forest homes, and our bones; you have dishonored us and yourselves. We can live without you, but you cannot live without us!"

"How can we make right our wrongs to you? How shall we atone for your grief? Tell us!" cried the War Chief.

The Chief Elk spoke again. "Honor and respect our lives, our beings, in life and death. Do what you have failed to do before. Stop doing that which offends our Spirits."

The War Chief promised, and so the Giants released the animals and they followed the Lenap back to their homeland. Ever since that time we Lenap have always offered tobacco and shown the utmost respect when hunting or upon killing an animal for food. We never took more than we needed, and we used as much of the animals remains as we could.

Taken from The Grandfathers Speak, by H-takonanu'laxk

Interlink Books, New York, 1994

<http://www.nativeamericanembassy.net/www.lenni-lenape.com/www/html/LenapeArchives/LenapeSet-01/animleft.html>

AFRICAN FOLKTALES

Anansi, the spider, trickster tales derive from the Asante people of Ghana and were brought by African slaves to the Caribbean and parts of the U.S. The spider trickster is also known in Africa as Ananse, Asante, Ashante, and Ashanti. These tales developed into Brer Rabbit stories and were written down in the 19th century in the American South. Anansi is the trickster hero of the Ashanti and related Akan peoples. He is also a culture hero and, frequently, a buffoon. Sometimes he is seen sympathetically, even as wise. He is more often characterized as predatory, greedy, cunning, gluttonous and without scruples. Although he may be admired for his frequent victories over those who are larger and stronger, Anansi does not usually gain moral approval. He can be shrewd, yet he is often unwise.

Source: http://ccb.lis.illinois.edu/Projects/storytelling/hempel_403b/spider.html

Why Anansi Has Eight Thin Legs



Once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived a spider named Anansi. Anansi's wife was a very good cook. But always, Anansi loved to taste the food that others in the village made for themselves and for their families.

One day, he stopped by Rabbit's house. Rabbit was his good friend.

"There are greens in your pot," cried Anansi excitedly. Anansi loved greens.

"They are not quite done," said Rabbit. "But they will be soon. Stay and eat with me."

"I would love to, Rabbit, but I have some things to do," Anansi said hurriedly. If he waited at Rabbit's house, Rabbit would certainly give him jobs to do. "I know," said Anansi. "I'll spin a web. I'll tie one end around my leg and one end to your pot. When the greens are done, tug on the web, and I'll come running!"

Rabbit thought that was a great idea. And so it was done.

"I smell beans," Anansi sniffed excitedly as he ambled along. "Delicious beans, cooking in a pot."

"Come eat our beans with us," cried the monkeys. "They are almost done."

"I would love to Father Monkey," said Anansi. And again, Anansi suggested he spin a web, with one end tied around his leg, and one end tied to the big bean pot.

Father Monkey thought that was a great idea. All his children thought so, too. And so it was done.

"I smell sweet potatoes," Anansi sniffed happily as he ambled along. "Sweet potatoes and honey, I do believe!"

"Anansi," called his friend Hog. "My pot is full of sweet potatoes and honey! Come share my food with me."

"I would love to," said Anansi. And again, Anansi suggested he spin a web, with one end tied around his leg, and one end tied to the sweet potato pot.

His friend Hog thought that was a great idea. And so it was done.

By the time Anansi arrived at the river, he had one web tied to each of his eight legs.

"This was a wonderful idea," Anansi told himself proudly. "I wonder whose pot will be ready first?"

Just then, Anansi felt a tug at his leg. "Ah," said Anansi. "That is the web string tied to Rabbit's greens." He felt another. And another. Anansi was pulled three ways at once.

"Oh dear," said Anansi as he felt the fourth web string pull.

Just then, he felt the fifth web string tug. And the sixth. And the seventh. And the eighth. Anansi was pulled this way and that way, as everyone pulled on the web strings at once. His legs were pulled thinner and thinner. Anansi rolled quickly into the river. When all the webs had washed away, Anansi pulled himself painfully up on shore.

"Oh my, oh my," sighed Anansi. "Perhaps that was not such a good idea after all."

To this day, Anansi the Spider has eight very thin legs. And he never got any food that day at all.

<http://www.africa.mrdonn.org/anansi.html>

Note:

Anansi (pronunciation Ah-nahn-see) the trickster is a cunning and intelligent 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; and in the Southern United States he has evolved into Aunt Nancy. He is a spider, but often acts and appears as a man. The story of Anansi is akin to the tricksters Coyote, Raven or Iktomi found in many Native American cultures.

The Anansi tales are believed to have originated in the Ashanti tribe in Ghana. (The word Anansi is Akan and means, simply, spider.) They later spread to other Akan groups and then to the West Indies, Suriname, and the Netherlands Antilles. On Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire he is known as Nanzi, and his wife as Shi Maria. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anansi>)

Great Link: How Anansi Became a Spider, http://www.anansistories.com/Anansi_Spider_Man.html

All Stories are Anansi's

In the beginning, all tales and stories belonged to Nyame, the Sky God. But Kwaku Anansi, the spider, yearned to be the owner of all the stories known in the world, and he went to Nyame and offered to buy them.

The Sky God said: "I am willing to sell the stories, but the price is high. Many people have come to me offering to buy, but the price was too high for them. Rich and powerful families have not been able to pay. Do you think you can do it?"

Anansi replied to the Sky God: "I can do it. What is the price?"

"My price is three things," the Sky God said. "I must first have Mmoboro, the hornets. I must then have Onini, the great python. I must then have Osebo, the leopard. For these things I will sell you the right to tell all the stories."

Anansi said: "I will bring them."

He went home and made his plans. He first cut a gourd from a vine and made a small hole in it. He took a large bowl and filled it with water. He went to the tree where the hornets lived. He poured some of the water over himself, so that he was dripping. He threw some water over the hornets, so that they too were dripping. Then he put the bowl on his head, as though to protect himself from a storm, and called out to the hornets: "Are you foolish people? Why do you stay in the rain that is falling?"

The hornets answered: "Where shall we go?"

"Go here, in this dry gourd," Anansi told them.

The hornets thanked him and flew into the gourd through the small hole. When the last of them had entered, Anansi plugged the hole with a ball of grass, saying: "Oh, yes, but you are really foolish people!"

He took his gourd full of hornets to Nyame, the Sky God. The Sky God accepted them. He said: "There are two more things."

Anansi returned to the forest and cut a long bamboo pole and some strong vines. Then he walked toward the house of Onini, the python, talking to himself. He seemed to be talking about an argument with his wife. He said: "My wife is wrong. I say he is

longer and stronger. My wife says he is shorter and weaker. I give him more respect. She gives him less respect. Is she right or am I right? I am right, he is longer. I am right, he is stronger."

When Onini, the python, heard Anansi talking to himself, he said: "Why are you arguing this way with yourself?" The spider replied: "Ah, I have had a dispute with my wife. She says you are shorter and weaker than this bamboo pole. I say you are longer and stronger."

Onini said: "It's useless and silly to argue when you can find out the truth. Bring the pole and we will measure."

So Anansi laid the pole on the ground, and the python came and stretched himself out beside it.

"You seem a little short," Anansi said.

The python stretched further.

"A little more," Anansi said.

"I can stretch no more," Onini said.

"When you stretch at one end, you get shorter at the other end," Anansi said. "Let me tie you at the front so you don't slip." He tied Onini's head to the pole. Then he went to the other end and tied the tail to the pole. He wrapped the vine all around Onini, until the python couldn't move.

"Onini," Anansi said, "it turns out that my wife was right and I was wrong. You are shorter than the pole and weaker. My opinion wasn't as good as my wife's. But you were even more foolish than I, and you are now my prisoner."

Anansi carried the python to Nyame, the Sky God, who said: "There is one thing more."

Osebo, the leopard, was next. Anansi went into the forest and dug a deep pit where the leopard liked to walk. He covered it with small branches and leaves and put dust on it, so that it was impossible to tell where the pit was. Anansi went away and hid. When Osebo came prowling in the black of night, he stepped into the trap Anansi had prepared and fell to the bottom. Anansi heard the sound of the leopard falling and he said: "Ah, Osebo, you are half-foolish!"

When morning came, Anansi went to the pit and saw the leopard there.

"Osebo," he asked, "what are you doing in this hole?"

"I have fallen into a trap," Osebo said. "Help me out."

"I would gladly help you," Anansi said. "But I'm sure that if I bring you out, I will have no thanks for it. You will get hungry, and later on you will be wanting to eat me and my children."

"I promise it won't happen!" Osebo said.

"Very well. Since you promise it, I will take you out," Anansi said.

He bent a tall green tree toward the ground, so that its top was over the pit, and he tied it that way. Then he tied a rope to the top of the tree and dropped the other end of it into the pit.

"Tie this to your tail," he said.

Osebo tied the rope to his tail.

"Is it well tied?" Anansi asked.

"Yes, it is well tied," the leopard said.

"In that case," Anansi said, "you are not merely half-foolish, you are all-foolish."

And he took his knife and cut the other rope, the one that held the tree bowed to the ground. The tree straightened up with a snap, pulling Osebo out of the hole. He hung in the air head downward, twisting and turning. As he twisted and turned, he got so dizzy that Anansi had no trouble tying the leopard's feet with vines.

Anansi took the dizzy leopard, all tied up, to Nyame, the Sky God, saying: "Here is the third thing. Now I have paid the price." Nyame said to him: "Kwaku Anansi, great warriors and chiefs have tried, but they have been unable to do it. You have done it. Therefore, I will give you the stories. From this day onward, all stories belong to you. Whenever a man tells a story, he must acknowledge that it is Anansi's tale."

And that is why, in parts of Africa, the people love to tell, and love to hear, the stories they call "spider stories." And now, you have heard one too.

<http://anansi-web.com/anansi.html>

Yoruba Creation Story:

In the beginning was only the sky above, water and marshland below. The chief god Olorun ruled the sky, and the goddess Olokun ruled what was below. Obatala, another god, reflected upon this situation, then went to Olorun for permission to create dry land for all kinds of living creatures to inhabit. He was given permission, so he sought advice from Orunmila, oldest son of Olorun and the god of prophecy. He was told he would need a gold chain long enough to reach below, a snail's shell filled with sand, a white hen, a black cat, and a palm nut, all of which he was to carry in a bag. All the gods contributed what gold they had, and Orunmila supplied the articles for the bag. When all was ready, Obatala hung the chain from a corner of the sky, placed the bag

over his shoulder, and started the downward climb. When he reached the end of the chain he saw he still had some distance to go.

From above he heard Orunmila instruct him to pour the sand from the snail's shell, and to immediately release the white hen. He did as he was told, whereupon the hen landing on the sand began scratching and scattering it about. Wherever the sand landed it formed dry land, the bigger piles becoming hills and the smaller piles valleys. Obatala jumped to a hill and named the place Ife. The dry land now extended as far as he could see. He dug a hole, planted the palm nut, and saw it grow to maturity in a flash. The mature palm tree dropped more palm nuts on the ground, each of which grew immediately to maturity and repeated the process. Obatala settled down with the cat for company.

Many months passed, and he grew bored with his routine. He decided to create beings like himself to keep him company. He dug into the sand and soon found clay with which to mold figures like himself and started on his task, but he soon grew tired and decided to take a break. He made wine from a nearby palm tree, and drank bowl after bowl. Not realizing he was drunk, Obatala returned to his task of fashioning the new beings; because of his condition he fashioned many imperfect figures. Without realizing this, he called out to Olorun to breathe life into his creatures. The next day he realized what he had done and swore never to drink again, and to take care of those who were deformed, thus becoming Protector of the Deformed. The new people built huts as Obatala had done and soon Ife prospered and became a city. All the other gods were happy with what Obatala had done, and visited the land often, except for Olokun, the ruler of all below the sky.

<http://www.mythome.org/creatafr.html>

Note:

Yoruba people (Yorùbá in Yoruba orthography) are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa. The majority of the Yoruba speak the Yoruba language (Yoruba: Èdè Yorùbá; Èdè). The Yoruba constitute an estimated 30 to 50 million individuals throughout West Africa and are found predominantly in Nigeria with around 21 percent of its total population.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba_%28people%29)