





## INTRODUCTION

**E**very culture has folktales. They were first communicated orally, then they were recorded. They are now rooted in our literature, songs, dances, visual art, and plays. Folktales communicate values, promote morals, and acknowledge experiences of oppression as a way to break free. They entertain while explaining why things are the way they are (even if they aren't) and use trickery to settle scores. While folktales have their roots in the past, they perform in and negotiate with the present.

This heirloom book of African legends (the term is used generically) is made up of multifaceted stories that have African cultural roots. Some reflect the reality of slavery and racism. They exist here as recorded history but they began as spoken storytelling due to the prominence of orality in Africa and the limited access that enslaved individuals had to the written word. Folktales gave levity to difficult lives as they provided hope for a better future. In Africa, and throughout the diaspora, folktales provided an otherworldly release that was socially sanctioned.

Telling tales became a way of confronting a powerful person without reprisal, such as an unpopular African chief or an enslaver. When these legends were told, laughter often followed, releasing pent up rage and displeasure. These folktales reorder the world around us as they focus on creating a better future by subverting power systems or describing a different version of our general understandings.

Thankfully, the legends in this book have survived due to folklorists, anthropologists, historians, and everyday people who shared them. They resonate today, still teaching important lessons and in some cases, offering comfort and a safe space for commiseration.

The creative content of these folktales allows animals to do everything people do. Many stories address the continual need to be fed and successfully grow crops. Some are about trickster animals who have less power than those who are physically stronger or who have more status. A character like Brer Rabbit may stand in for an enslaved person while another animal might represent the oppressor. This kind of coding was understood by enslaved individuals while plantation owners became outsiders, thinking the tales were harmless nonsense. Adapted to each new time and place, these tales cleverly reinvent the world. In nineteenth-century North Carolina, for example, Anansi tales became Ann Nancy stories. This was not only a change in gender but provided audiences with a name that was more comprehensible at the time. Folktales changed with each telling, morphing into expressions that functioned in new environments.



Shape-shifting is often used as a useful tool for escaping onerous situations or making something previously unthinkable materialize. Any person could temporarily become a spider, a fly, or an alligator, allowing for ease of mobility and a way to hide. Sometimes, shape-shifting was a technique used to spy on an adversary and gather information. Anansi, for example, successfully used his sharp-wittedness to overpower figures with more rank and reputation. For audiences, these legends provided power and might to those who needed it most. Telling stories was a means of bringing families and communities together as they generated hope and empowerment. Because the original tellers were far more connected to nature than we are today, their subjects often come from the mysteries of our natural world.

Cultural and geographical diversity define Africa. When Africans were kidnapped and forced to sail to the New World, they brought with them their connections to their homeland. African enslavement began in the Caribbean in the late sixteenth century and in colonial America in 1619, although there is a great deal of evidence that suggests the presence of slavery in what is now North America took place as early as the 1500s. While the importation of Africans for slavery was legally discouraged in 1808, Black immigration from Haiti brought refugees to the American mainland after the Haitian Revolution, and the British “United Empire Loyalists” (Tories) came to the eastern coast of the United States, bringing with them enslaved people.

Regardless of the 1808 legislation which made the

domestic sale of enslaved people in the United States illegal, both the American South and the North resisted, continuing their previous acts of brutal subjugation. In fact, the Northern maritime industry began to dominate the slave trade with the small state of Rhode Island controlling half of all the voyages in the United States. The former United States senator, James DeWolf, was potentially the largest slave trader in American history and members of the Brown family who were also involved in trafficking human beings gave considerable donations to Rhode Island College, which later became Brown University. The North not only imported Africans for slave trade and their own use, they sold them to individuals in the South and abroad. Folktales about slavery, therefore, continued into the Jim Crow era as our violent racial history carried on and was later remembered.

But African American folktales about slavery are neither solely a reaction to slavery or the adoption of African tales. Most scholars regard them as a creolization of the convergence of New World cultural traits, thereby resulting in a new form of storytelling. However, these tales also retain various Africanisms. Sometimes it can be difficult to determine which part of a folktale is African, especially considering Africa is comprised of fifty-four cultures.

The Creolization School, which came from the work of sociologists and folklorists in the early part of the twentieth century, maintained that African culture in the New World was a mixture of cultural thought. Africanisms could be found in dance, drama, speech patterns, foodways, hairstyles, music, family patterns, and folktales.



and heritage. The preservation of this folklore enables it to be enjoyed by generations to come, and today, the creativity of these tales continues to work its magic as it joyfully celebrates a proud African culture.



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## WHY THINGS ARE THE WAY THEY ARE

This genre of African folklore teaches children about the world around them. Historically, this genre has helped Africans and African Americans ground themselves in a frequently hostile world. Traditionally told orally, these explanatory tales teach children about the nature of humanity, other creatures, the land surrounding them, the solar system, and beyond. A popular subset of this genre is the fable, which explores the connection between animals and humans. Fables often explain specific elements of an animal's nature while also teaching lessons, as animals with human characteristics undergo entertaining and morally relevant trials and tribulations. Many of the tales in this broader genre have a significant moral element, demonstrating mistakes and deceptions that have caused specific elements of the world to arise. These tales present a unique and culturally significant way of processing the surrounding world, in which an unexpected event has a ripple effect that alters the nature of the universe.

## Anansi and Nothing

*Anansi, also spelled “Anancy” or “Annancy,” is a shape-shifting spider who commonly takes the form of a human, mostly a man. He came to the New World with the enslaved Ashantis of West Africa. Known as a cunning trickster, he is much like the better-known Brer Rabbit, whose stories originated with the Yoruba and, in the New World, combined with tales from Native American and European traditions. Many folktales about Anansi explain how things came to be as we now know them. His tales, like this one, mostly depict him as having flawed character traits, such as his subjugation of women. There are often negative consequences to his bad behavior.*



**N**ear Anansi’s miserable little hut there was a fine palace where lived a very rich man called Nothing. Nothing and Anansi proposed, one day, to go to the neighboring town to get some wives. Accordingly, they set off together.

Nothing, being a rich man, wore a very fine velvet cloth, while Anansi had a ragged cotton one. While they were on their way, Anansi persuaded Nothing to exchange clothes for a little while, promising to give back the fine velvet before they reached the town. He delayed doing this, however, first on one pretext, then on another—till they arrived at their destination.

Anansi, being dressed in such a fine garment, found no difficulty in getting as many wives as he wished. Poor

Nothing, with his ragged and miserable cloth, was treated with great contempt. At first, he could not get even one wife. At last, however, a woman took pity on him and gave him her daughter. The poor girl was laughed at very heartily by Anansi’s wives for choosing such a beggar as Nothing appeared to be. She wisely took no notice of their scorn.

The party set off for home. When they reached the crossroads leading to their respective houses the women were astonished. The road leading to Anansi’s house was only half cleared. The one which led to Nothing’s palace was, of course, wide and well-made. Not only so, but his servants had strewn it with beautiful skins and carpets in preparation for his return. Servants were there, awaiting him, with fine clothes for himself and his wife. No one was waiting for Anansi.

Nothing’s wife was queen over the whole district and had everything her heart could desire. Anansi’s wives could not even get proper food; they had to live on unripe bananas with peppers. The wife of Nothing heard of her friends’ miserable state and invited them to a great feast in her palace. They came and were so pleased with all they saw that they agreed to stay there. Accordingly, they refused to come back to Anansi’s hut.

He was very angry, and tried in many ways to kill Nothing, but without success. Finally, however, he persuaded some rat friends to dig a deep tunnel in front of Nothing’s door. When the hole was finished Anansi lined it with knives and broken bottles. He then smeared the steps of the palace with okra to make them very slippery and withdrew to a hiding spot.

When he thought Nothing’s household was safely in bed and asleep, he called to Nothing to come out to the courtyard