PREREADING

“All Stories Are Anansi’s”
Anonymous

Africa is the birthplace of humanity. It is a delightful accident, then, that the continent of Africa is shaped roughly like the profile of a human head or skull. West Africa, located on the Atlantic Coast (at the base of the back of the skull), runs from the Sahara Desert in the north to the Gulf of Guinea in the south. The majority of enslaved people brought to the Americas came from this region, and, therefore, the stories carried to the New World by the slaves were largely West African.

Anansi the Spider is a major character in West African folklore. This character is believed to have originated in the myths and legends of the Ashanti (or Asante) people, heirs to a major state, the Ashanti Confederacy, that flourished from 1570 to 1900 in the area of modern-day Ghana. The central figure in traditional Ashanti religion is Nyame, the sky god. Anansi the Spider is Nyame’s son and is the main character in hundreds of wonderful tales told throughout West Africa. Anansi stories are also common among the descendants of West Africans in Jamaica, Suriname, and the Netherlands Antilles.

Like many myths, the stories about Anansi often explain the origins of natural or cultural phenomena. Anansi, for example, is sometimes identified as the one who brings rain to put out fires. Anansi is an example of a stock character of myth and legend known as the trickster. He loves to play tricks and often bends or breaks the rules. As you read the following story, ask yourself these questions:

1. What tricks does Anansi carry out?
2. Of what things does this story explain the origins?
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 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 calabash, 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 calabash 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 said: “My wife is stupid. I say he is longer and stronger. My wife says he is shorter and weaker. I give

VOCABULARY IN PLACE

* **calabash**, n. A large gourd used as a vessel, jar, or bowl

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1. **Anansi.** The name is variously spelled in written versions of the stories. Common variants include Ananzi and Ananse.
2. **Nyame.** The chief god in traditional Ashanti religion, who, like Zeus in Greek mythology, is identified as both a sky god and as the great father. The name is pronounced NYAH-meh.
3. **Kwaku.** The word Kwaku means, literally, “Uncle.”
4. **Mmoboro.** Pronounced mmoh-BOH-roh
5. **Onini.** Pronounced oh-NEE-nee
6. **Osebo.** Pronounced oh-SAY-boh
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 was accustomed 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 swear it won't happen!" Osebo said.
"Very well. Since you swear 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. And while he hung this way, Anansi killed him with his weapons.

Then he took the body of the leopard and carried it 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."

In this way Anansi, the spider, became the owner of all stories that are told. To Anansi all these tales belong.
## Understanding the Selection

### Recalling

1. According to this story, who originally owned all the stories in the world? How much are the stories worth?

2. What three things must someone do in order to win the stories?

3. How does Anansi capture the horns, the python, and the leopard?

4. Who, according to Nyame, has tried to win the stories in the past?

5. Why, according to this story, are there so many Anansi stories in the world?

### Interpreting

1. Why are stories so valuable?

2. What makes these tasks so difficult?

3. What do Anansi’s actions toward the horns, the python, and the leopard reveal about him? What kind of fellow is Anansi?

4. What characteristics or qualities does Anansi have that warriors and chiefs evidently do not have in such abundance? What does this story tell about the value of strength and wealth versus wisdom or intelligence?

5. What does this origin myth tell us about the nature of storytelling?

### Synthesizing

1. Anansi is sometimes referred to as a trickster and sometimes as a god of wisdom. In what ways does he reveal these qualities in this story? Why do you suppose Anansi is a spider? (Hint: think about what “tricks” spiders play.)

2. In West African folklore and mythology, Anansi is considered the god who brought practical arts to the people. What art does he bring to the people in this story?
Understanding Literature

**Trickster Tales.** In the mythologies of many cultures around the globe, there are gods or heroes who are associated with cleverness and cunning. These characters are known as tricksters. Greek mythology has Hermes, who stole the cattle of the sun god, and Prometheus, who stole fire and brought it to humans. Native Americans of the Southwest tell stories about such tricksters as Coyote and Hare. People in the Appalachian region of the U.S. tell of the trickster Jack. Natives of the Pacific Northwest tell stories about the trickster Raven. In Japanese myths, there are tricksters such as Badger, Tengu, and Kitsune. Often, tricksters are comic, mischievous characters who cause trouble, pull pranks on others, and act selfishly but end up bringing about good. Anansi, for instance, intends to keep all wisdom to himself but accidentally breaks the jar he has stored it in, scattering wisdom around the world. Many trickster stories explain origins. The story you have just read, for example, explains why there are so many Anansi stories. In Polynesian mythology, there is a trickster named Maui who created the Polynesian islands by fishing them up from the bottom of the sea. Often, tricksters are associated with invention and with bringing practical arts, such as farming or language, to the people. Africans brought trickster stories with them to the Americas, and these developed into popular stories such as the tales of Br'er Rabbit. (See page 160.) What trickster tales do you know?

About the Author

**The Oral Tradition.** The story that you have just read does not have a particular author. Instead, it comes out of the oral tradition. The oral tradition is all the stories, poems, songs, proverbs, and other materials within a particular culture that are passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. In a sense, a story like "All Stories Are Anansi's" has had hundreds of authors—people who tell the story over the generations, probably changing the story in little ways each time they tell it. On pages 8–11, you learned about proverbs and the important role that they play in African cultures. Stories have also played very important roles in Africa, for it is through the retelling of stories that African peoples have traditionally kept alive their religious beliefs, their histories, and their customs.