

The SAGE Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America

Trickster Tales

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The trickster tale is found worldwide in nearly every oral tradition. The African American tales about the archetype figure of the trickster evolved from West Africa. Told individually, or in a thematically connected series, trickster tales provide indirect, usually humorous instruction on moral prudence, social propriety, self-actualization, and basic survival.

The core storytelling formula centers on a likeable and cunning main character with special powers, or who is a conglomeration of opposites. For example, the protagonist may simultaneously be an innocent fool and malicious schemer, or a selfish prankster and wise teacher. The trickster-hero manifests as a small animal, and later a diminutive human underdog, with ignoble human characteristics such as knavery, gluttony, or greed. Usually male, he must skillfully deploy wit, wile, and guile to triumph over oppressing and life-threatening predicaments, often self-induced, imposed by a cast of seemingly superior antagonists.

African Origins: Anansesem

African American trickster tales originate from the Anansesem, or Ananse the Spider, mythology of the Ashanti people of Ghana. This ancient folklore reputedly is from an age before formally recorded time, when humans and animals could still talk with one another. Ananse (also spelled Anansi in the Anglophone world) was the son of Nyame, the great sky god, and Asase Ya, goddess of the Earth and fertility. One day, vexed to the limit by his son's mischief, Nyame turned Ananse into a spider.

Image 1 An image of the trickster Ellegua (also called Elegba).



Image 2 Miss Fox holding Br'er Rabbit by the collar, at a grindstone.



Among his fellow creatures, Ananse must now depend entirely on mental agility for survival. As a demideity, however, Ananse is credited with creating the sun, moon, and stars; night and day; and the first man, into which his father, Nyame, breathed life. He brings rain and controls the extent of flooding, and shows people how to plow and to sow grain, and how to weave and build houses. Essentially, Ananse is responsible for spinning the web of life, which also represents the lifegiving sun. From this supernatural beginning, in which the immortal Ananse provides the cornerstones for human life and society, the trickster tale becomes a symbol of the divinely antithetical nature of life itself.

Elegua, an *orisha* of the Yoruba religion, adapted into Santería/Lukumí practices in South America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, is also a well-respected and formidable trickster-hero spirit, though his origins are among the Yoruba people of West Africa. Elegua, and his occasional diminutive size and constant wit, also informs African diasporic trickster tales.

Adaptations of the Anansesem and other African oral traditions featuring the sympathy-evoking trickster-hero are found wherever African people have been displaced into slavery. The famous collective fables of Aesop, a slave in Ancient Greece believed to have been born around 620 BCE somewhere in Turkey, Ethiopia, or the South Mediterranean region, are almost certainly based on this early folkloric mythology.

Later, as West African peoples were abducted en masse into slavery in the New World, trickster-hero stories emerged in Jamaica, where Ananse has a whining lisp and speaks a local patois. Ananse [p. 815 ↓] allegedly came to North America in 1619 aboard a slave ship. As the story goes, he comes across a warthog killed by his main enemy,

Osebo the Leopard, and eats it without thanking Nyame for the find. When Osebo discovers Ananse has stolen his dinner, he gives chase. To escape, Ananse hides in the medicine bag around the neck of a woman on her miserable march into slavery, and is unwittingly carried onto a slave ship. On the ship, he begs Nyame to return him home to Ashanti, but Nyame sends Ananse instead to Jamestown, Virginia, to become “The Comforter of the Enslaved.”

In North America, the Anansesem repertoire became first “Nancy” or “Aunt Nancy” stories (from an anglicized translation of *ah-nan-see*) with a similar cast of animals who give amusingly serious lessons in moral and civic propriety. These eventually became the Br’er (Brother) Rabbit tales told by the fictive Uncle Remus. Originating as oral stories told in Deep South slave quarters, they were first recorded by Joel Chandler Harris in a Georgia newspaper around 1877.

In the Uncle Remus stories, the hare takes on the trickster-hero role of Ananse the Spider. The African American transition of the trickster-hero from spider to rabbit may have been a result of the intermixing of the oral traditions of enslaved Africans and Southeastern American Indians, for whom the rabbit, or hare, is a primary trickster. In fact, while Harris is credited with the public introduction of Br’er Rabbit, a version of the “tar baby” story appears in an edition of *The Cherokee Advocate* printed in 1845, the same year Harris was born.

During slavery, trickster tales articulated the ability of enslaved Africans to mentally adapt to the harsh injustice of the American chattel system. In African tales the antagonist-prey is generally hardworking, earnest, and too slow-witted to contend with the smooth-talking, deliberately scheming protagonist. The quintessential Br’er Rabbit stories present Br’er Fox, Br’er Bear, and other opponents as cruel instigators who force him to use his charm and small size to survive, and who in reality represent the White slave masters.

Although there are collections of African American trickster tales featuring an all-human cast of characters, such as the “John and Old Master” stories recorded by the American Folklore Society in the 1880s, they are less prominent. This is most likely because it was safer for the enslaved to use fanciful animals to define interaction between Whites and Blacks who used trickster tactics to improve their lot and get the best of their

masters. “Br’er Rabbit and the Tar Baby” is probably the most well-known illustration of this.

Determined to catch Br’er Rabbit, Br’er Fox sets a baby made of tar on the side of the road and hides in a ditch to wait. By and by, Br’er Rabbit comes along, lively as you please. He spies Tar Baby, thinks it’s a real person, and tries to make pleasant conversation. When Tar Baby won’t respond, Br’er Rabbit gets angry, begins to punch and kick it, and becomes entirely stuck in its pitch. Br’er Fox then jumps out of the ditch, licking his lips, and ready to barbecue Br’er Rabbit for his dinner. In the end, Br’er Rabbit cons Br’er Fox into tossing him into the nearby briar patch instead. Of course, the briar patch is where Br’er Rabbit was “born and bred,” so he escapes unharmed.

True to trickster tale form, the story has several hidden lessons, such as the ramifications of talking to strangers and of losing your temper. But it primarily illustrates the importance of quick thinking and skillful cunning as a fundamental tool for surviving enslavement, and for the basic survival that is the heartbeat of the Ananse the Spider trickster-hero from which Br’er Rabbit originates.

See also [African Cultural Survivals](#); [Anansesem and Contemporary Education](#); [Animal Folk Tales](#); [Papa Legba](#); [Preserving the Black Folk Heritage: Zora Neale Hurston](#); [Santería](#); [Signifying Monkey](#); [Storytelling: A System of Cultural Cohesion](#); [Yoruba Symbolism](#)

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Further Readings

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