

**Various Authors**



***West African  
Folk-Tales***



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# **West African Folk-Tales**



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# INTRODUCTION

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In presenting to the public these stories based on the folk-lore of the Gold Coast peoples, it seems necessary to say something in general terms of the economic and social development of the colony in so far as that development is affecting the 'lore' of the folk.

Not until the civilization and industrialism of Europe began to penetrate into the districts of the Guinea Coast was any great attempt made to study the folk-lore of these peoples. It is obvious, therefore, that the student must find considerable admixture from outside sources which the absence of a native system of writing and consequent literature makes exceedingly difficult to detect. The difficulties increase with time, for we are getting farther and farther from the genuine folk-lore. Each year, from towns like Accra, Seccondee, and Cape Coast the tentacles of European civilization are slowly extending in all directions. Railways and roads are creeping [12]out, old-fashioned crudity is giving way to simpler and more expeditious methods; new industries, as rubber and cocoa, are being established.<sup>1</sup> All this must be borne in mind in studying the folk-lore as told by the native to-day. What is happening is, unfortunately, not an awakening, but a transformation. The negro is discarding his native cloth for a European suit of clothes.

"On all sides it is reported that the demand for European provisions, luxuries, and apparel is large and greatly increasing. The large imports of tinned provisions, flour, etc., is in part due to the scarcity of native food-stuffs in certain districts, but there is no doubt that the standard of living is changing and rising.

"There is a general desire not only in the colony, but in Ashanti, for better roads, better houses, cleaner villages, and the desire has been prompted by the example of the great sanitary improvements in the larger towns....

"It can be observed that the people take a growing pride in the institutions and traditions of their country, that the chiefs are realizing the duties and [13]influence of their position, and that public opinion, among the educated classes, at any rate, is beginning to recognize that some advance on the ideals and standards of the past must now be demanded."<sup>2</sup>

This, from the utilitarian and Imperial standpoints, is as it should be, but it tends to be fatal to the mythology, the customs, and the traditions of such peoples as the negroes of West Africa. For this change is not taking place only in the direction of mere materialism. Christianity, entering the country through the ports, and Mohammedanism, being carried by Haussas along the trade routes from the interior, are playing their part in these psychological and sociological changes. The negro of yesterday differs from the negro of to-day as he in turn

will differ from the negro of to-morrow. In view of all this metamorphosis it is much to be regretted that the geographical and linguistical difficulties have made the task of the folk-lorist not only difficult but wellnigh impossible. Much, of course, might be done if those whose duties carry them into the various districts would take in hand the task. The collation of their results might enable one to eradicate [14]outside and recent influences and in a measure get at “the back of the black man’s mind.”

The material in this book was collected in the following manner: The new educational policy of the Government provided for a Training Institution for Teachers at Accra. The first students to be admitted were men who had already had some considerable experience in the schools of their districts. They were, therefore, sufficiently familiar with the English language to express themselves clearly and fluently. At the same time they were men who could remember the time when the new civilizing forces at present at work were not nearly so pronounced. By obtaining from these students a variety of versions of the same story it became possible to some extent to eradicate the superfluous and the spurious.

The selection of tales has been carefully made, and in the retelling and illustrating of the story the object has been to give the reader an introduction to the thought and customs of the West African negro.

In order to produce the correct ‘atmosphere’ for the story, picture an evening scene in a native village. [15]The sun is nearing the western horizon, seeming to fall like a huge ball behind the distant hills, the air is cool, and a solemn stillness prevails. Even the noisy youths and girls are quiet, and the time for tom-toms, crickets, bull-frogs, and the miscellaneous instruments of man and Nature for the production of the most weird and inharmonious of sounds is not yet. In the compound—the courtyard round which are the family dwellings—the women with their *picin* (children) on their backs are busy with mortar and pestle making *foo-foo* (native food from maize). Squatting near the mud walls, naked to the waist, their cloth forming but a covering for the loins, are a number of men smoking short clay pipes and expectorating in a most insanitary manner—a perfect picture of idleness. Naked youngsters stand open-mouthed listening to the conversation of their elders, or amuse themselves at hide-and-seek, marbles, or some other native game.

The short twilight of the tropics brings all occupations except talking to an end, and of talking there seems to be no end. Here and there some one or other lies down, covers himself entirely with his cloth, and is lost to the world. [16]

A lantern is brought out, and unconsciously and imperceptibly it becomes the centre of dark forms, relieved now and again by rows of beautiful white teeth as the owners indulge in a hearty laugh. At times conversation lags; some one drones a monotonous tune, others smoke in quiet contemplation, while others

again follow the example of the dark human mounds scattered about the compound.

Suddenly, "Comrades, listen to a story." At once the men, women, and children press round the speaker, an eager crowd, ready to hear or to tell the tales of their folk.

"All right, let it come."

Thus commences another evening wherein the native recounts to his neighbour for the hundredth time the stories handed down by tradition from the dim 'before-time.' The native is a born *raconteur*, and his stories are not the outcome of his imagination, but folk-lore modified and ornamented perhaps to suit the particular audience or particular circumstance. Some of these modifications which have assumed a more or less permanent form are commented on below.

Throughout the Gold Coast Colony and Southern [17]Ashanti the stories as given by the various tribes are essentially the same. It may be that further and more detailed investigation in the domain of folk-lore will help to solve a very important ethnic problem, namely, whether the coast tribes are or are not of the same stock as those of the hinterland. It is generally accepted at present that "these people of the West Coast were for the most part the broken fragments of races that have been driven to the sea by the stronger races of the interior."<sup>3</sup> If this were so, then one would expect to find differences in the folk-lore of the stronger and weaker races similar to those between the folk-lore of the Celts and Anglo-Saxons. Actually, this does not appear to be so, though at present the data is not sufficient to enable one to form a definite opinion.

The following is from a recent work on the Gold Coast, and presents a slightly different view from that in the quotation above: "The general sum of these traditions [regarding the origin of the tribes] is that the Fantis, Ashantis, Wassaws, and in fact all the Twi-[Tshi] speaking, or Akan, peoples, were originally one tribe. They were a pastoral race and [18]inhabited the open country beyond the forest belt and farther north than Salaga. A northern and lighter-skinned people, which is commonly supposed to have been the Fulanis, commenced to encroach on their territory, and, being stronger than they, seized their cattle and young women and made many of the others slaves.... The subdivision of the united Akan race into its main branches, the Fantis and Ashantis, is variously accounted for.... One story very plausibly explains that the constant raids of their northern enemy, who burned all the farms, reduced the Akans to great straits for food. Some of them subsisted on a wild plant named *fan* and others on a plant named *shan*, and thus gained the names *Fan-dti* and *Shan-dti* (*dti*, to eat)."<sup>4</sup> A possible alternative explanation is that the same stock occupies the coast and the hinterland, and that differentiation has come about as the result of malaria affecting that portion of the race inhabiting the region of the lagoon

marshes along the coastal plain. It has now been fairly well established that malaria can and does have a deleterious effect on races, and [19]that even in the case of Greece and Rome the malarial factor must be taken into account in discussing the causes which brought about their fall.<sup>5</sup> It may be that the marshes round Salonica and the swamps of the Campagna have their counterpart in the long line of lagoon swamps that lie between the surf-wall and the forest wall of 'the Coast.' Medical science alone, perhaps, will be able to solve the problem, but folk-lore can and does render valuable assistance toward a solution. A conquered people do not give up their 'lore' with the land, but carry their customs and traditions with them to their new homes.

There is one story which has a special interest in this connexion because, after being carried by the negroes from Africa to the Southern States in the slave days, it became the basis of a story which has served to amuse the children and adults of the whole of the English-speaking peoples, namely, *The Wonderful Adventures of Old Brer Rabbit*. It is interesting to compare the tar-baby narrative with the manner in which Anansi was caught in Story X.

From the scanty material we have at present, it would seem that the folk-lore of the coastal and [20]hinterland peoples are substantially the same, the differences being traceable in many cases to the influence of the new environment. Thus, in the story where Anansi seeks to hide the wisdom of the world (Story II), which he has collected in a pot, among the coast peoples he finds a difficulty in climbing up the palm-tree, but among the forest tribes his difficulty is to get over the trunk of a tree which has fallen across the bush-path. Here the difference is due to environment and not to race.

It is necessary to point out that similarity of story cannot by itself be taken as indicative of similarity of race. Indeed, so common is it to find the same story told by people of varying types and in every stage of progress that it has opened up a problem of great importance. Have such stories originated from a common source? and, if so, where may the common origin be found? Or are folk-stories like the material productions of the races, *i.e.* do they follow a more or less common line of development?<sup>6</sup> What connexion can there be, for example, [21]between the negro of the Gold Coast and the Serb? Yet they have a story remarkably similar. In the story of Ohia (Story XIX) the power of understanding the language of animals was given him on condition that he should not disclose the secret to any human being under pain of death. This knowledge often gave him occasion for laughter, and at such times his wife, ignorant of the cause, became angered and suspicious. She demanded to know the reason for such outbursts, and at last her importunity resulted in the telling of the secret, and consequent death of the man. In the Serbian story<sup>7</sup> the *dénouement* is somewhat different, comedy taking the place of tragedy. The man when just about to yield his life to satisfy the curiosity of his wife listens to the cock, who



declares that he can manage to keep his *hundred* wives in order by giving them a good peck when they need it. The man accordingly leaves his coffin and brings his wife to reason and her knees by a well-administered chastisement. How came these two peoples to have a story with so many features in common? Is it possible [22]that the Turk and the Moor may have provided links?

It may not be out of place here to mention the effect of the contact of the slave-trading Europeans on the folk-lore of the Coast negroes. The grim white castles every few miles along the whole of the Guinea Coast stand as stern reminders of the time when the helpless coastal tribes were raided and men, women, and children sold into slavery. But one who has conversed with the native of to-day cannot doubt that the greatest effect of those terrible days is discernible in the native mentality itself. It has, as one might expect, influenced more or less the folk-story. Here, for example, is one type of influence:

“When the Portuguese first landed, the natives betook themselves to the forest. When the white man had put off again the natives crept cautiously back to the beach. To their great surprise they found there a basin full of rum. One of them, by name Mbura, tasted some, and finding that it was sweet, drank as much as he could and became intoxicated. Others did the same, and when many of them were helpless the boatmen returned and carried [23]them off. On account of the rum being tasted by Mbura, we call rum in Fantee *Mbura-nsa*—i.e. Mbura’s wine.”<sup>8</sup>

Even more remarkable is the origin of the god Nyankupon, who figures largely in both mythology and folk-lore. Many stories introduce Nyankupon, and yet he is no native god at all.

“After an intercourse of some years with Europeans, the Tshi-speaking inhabitants of the towns and villages in the vicinity of the various forts added to their system of polytheism a new deity whom they termed Nana-Nyankupon—sometimes called simply Nyankupon. This was the god of the Christians, borrowed from them and adopted under a new designation. The great superiority manifested by the whites in their weapons, ships, manufactures—in short, in everything—convinced the natives with whom they had intercourse that they must necessarily be protected by a deity of greater power than any of those to which they themselves offered sacrifice, since their own deities had not, except very remotely, helped them to attain any such prosperity. They therefore gladly enrolled themselves amongst the [24]followers of the god of the whites, and being informed that he dwelt in the heavens above, they denominated him Nana-Nyankupon, which may be freely translated ‘Lord of the Sky.’”<sup>9</sup>

The Gold Coast folk-stories are readily divisible into two groups, Anansi and non-Anansi tales. *Anánsi* is the spider, and with him is generally associated his son, Kweku Tsin (Tsí). Why so many *spider* stories? No satisfactory explanation can as yet be given. It cannot be due entirely to the superabundance of spiders

in native dwellings and surroundings, for other tribes along the Coast seem to concentrate on other creatures, as the elephant and the tortoise. Nor does there seem to be sufficient evidence to trace the origin to totemism. No doubt many of the Anansi stories as told to-day are due to observation of the ways and peculiar characteristics of the spider, and are an attempt to explain the why and the wherefore. And generally it is decided that he is a wise, cunning, deceitful creature who scampers off to hide in the ceiling because he has done something to be ashamed of and has, unfortunately, been [25]found out. Here are two comments from folk-stories on Anansi:

“The wisdom of the spider is greater than that of all the world together.”

“Woe to one who would put his trust in Anansi—a sly, selfish, and greedy person.”

The non-Anansi stories are generally of the ‘Just-so’ type—why the ears of the deer are long, why the waist of the wasp is slim, etc. There is nothing in the wide realm of botany, astronomy, or geography of a peculiar or striking character but an explanation is forthcoming in the lore of the folk. There is, of course, the usual sprinkling of magic tales, which bear a striking resemblance to many European *märchen*, or fairy-tales.

In conclusion, an apology must be offered to the scientific folk-lorist. The stories have been retold in order to appeal to a wider public, but it is hoped that ere long the complete original material may be available for the student of folk-lore.

W.H. B. [27]

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1 The cocoa exported in 1891 realized £4; in 1914 £2,193,749. ↑

2 *Colonial Report*, G.C., 1913. ↑

3 *The Story of the Negro*, Booker T. Washington, vol. i, p. 57 ↑

4 *A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti*, W.W. Claridge, vol. i, pp. 4-5. ↑

5 See *Malaria and Greek History*, by W.H.S. Jones. ↑

6 E.g. ancient and modern primitive men in all parts of the earth seem to have shown a similar development in flint, bronze, and iron weapons, and in the arts generally. See *Cinderella: Three Hundred and Forty-five Variants* (Folk Lore Society). ↑

7 “Animals’ Language,” in *Hero-Tales and Legends of the Serbians*, by Woislav M. Petrovitch. ↑

8 From a story told by a native of the Gold Coast. ↑

9 *Tshi-speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa*, A.B. Ellis, p. 24. [↑](#)

# **I. ANANSI, OR SPIDER, TALES**

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# **I. HOW WE GOT THE NAME ‘SPIDER TALES’**

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In the olden days all the stories which men told were stories of Nyankupon, the chief of the gods. Spider, who was very conceited, wanted the stories to be told about him.

Accordingly, one day he went to Nyankupon and asked that, in future, all tales told by men might be Anansi stories, instead of Nyankupon stories. Nyankupon agreed, on one condition. He told Spider (or Anansi) that he must bring him three things: the first was a jar full of live bees, the second was a boa-constrictor, and the third a tiger. Spider gave his promise.

He took an earthen vessel and set out for a place where he knew were numbers of bees. When he came in sight of the bees he began saying to himself, “They will not be able to fill this jar”—“Yes, they will be able”—“No, they will not be able,” until the bees came up to him and said, “What are you [\[30\]](#) talking about, Mr Anansi?” He thereupon explained to them that Nyankupon and he had had a great dispute.