

The Spider God's Son

Background information for teachers:

The roots of this story stretch back fifty years ago when my mother, the daughter of a Trinidadian man and a Grenadian woman, decided to analyse folk stories and songs in Grenada for her Bachelor's Degree in Literature at the University of the West Indies in the 1970s. It was in 1976, not long after the Black Power movement. According to her, there was much interest in researching and reviving folklore on an academic level as a reaction to the colonial European influence and her English Literature lecturer encouraged her to document what she could. Her research took her to the small island of Carriacou, one of the three islands that comprise Grenada. She recorded several of the remaining story-tellers relating stories, poems, songs and prayers in the local French-based patois. Back in Trinidad, her precious cassettes in hand, she needed to find a translator for them. That proved a challenge in itself for historically, patois has primarily been a spoken language and some speakers did not feel comfortable writing it. The father of one of her friends reluctantly agreed in the end. The cassettes were lost in the mists of time and Caribbean humidity but the translated words remain. Her Bachelor's thesis, entitled Folk Culture in Grenada and Carriacou, won the university's prize for Best Thesis in 1977.

As a Trinidadian woman living in Germany, I wanted to expose my children to the Caribbean story-telling tradition. I possess several books with original Anansi stories and in telling them to my children, I began to reflect on the morals in the stories. The story of Anansi and the plantains struck me one day: in the original story, the son was the last to give his father half of his plantain. For the first time, I looked at the rest of the family. How could a father sit by and eat two plantains while the rest of his family only had half? How would the son feel watching his father do that? The story was born.

The name Anansi comes from the Akan word for spider. This folklore figure is common to both West African (Akan) and Caribbean mythology, although there are differences concerning his appearance, role, skills and characteristics across regions. In the Caribbean, it is Anansi's quality as a trickster which he is most known for. The development of Anansi folklore has a socio-historical background. During European colonisation of the Caribbean, Africans were enslaved and forcibly brought from trading posts on the West African coasts in order to work on plantations, mostly sugar cane. Among those taken were the Akan who carried their cultural traditions, including stories of Anansi, with them. These stories can be found in different parts of the Caribbean, notably Grenada, Carriacou, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica.

In plantation society, elements of African culture that could be maintained among enslaved people were singing, dancing and story-telling. The Anansi figure was particularly significant because of his characteristics of trickery and intelligence. He can be interpreted as a symbolic figure of resistance: an underdog who uses his wit to ensure his and his family's survival in the face of more powerful forces. This helps to explain his enduring popularity in the post-emancipation period, when formerly enslaved people established new forms of livelihood, including subsistence farming.

Historically, Anansi stories in the Caribbean were commonly told at evening-time, often

accompanied by singing and drumming. In the islands of Grenada and Carriacou, story-telling also formed part of funeral ceremonies, known as “wakes”. A story-teller, sometimes referred to as a ‘Nancy-Storyteller’ would share Anansi stories with those present.

The stories function as educational stories as well as tools for social regulation, as they reflect the values of the society in which they were told. The element of humour in the stories also allows listeners to reflect on their own behaviour and, at times, laugh at themselves. They can be re-interpreted and adapted for the needs of every generation who tells them and are not simply relics of slavery.

Method of story-telling:

In Carriacou, story-telling often begins by the story-teller saying “Crick.” If the audience is ready for a tale, they respond with “Crack”. The story-teller may then sing a song and at the end of the song, the word “Crick” is repeated and the audience says “Crack”. The story-teller then begins to relate the story. At several points in the tale, the story-teller can sing the song from the beginning again and call “Crick” at the end. If the audience wants the tale to go on, they say “Crack”. (This is the reason why the Anansi stories in Carriacou are sometimes referred to as Cric-Crac stories.)

The participation of the audience is important. In some Anansi stories, members of the audience ask the story-teller questions during the narration. In Trinidad and Tobago, Anansi stories may conclude with the repetition of “Crick”, “Crack”, followed by a short rhyme, such as the one at the end of this story, in order to chase out any evil spirits who may have entered the story circle. These rhymes are usually delivered in dialect. Another typical one is: *Crick, crack, wire bend, story end.*

Themes:

The main themes in the story are truth versus lies, importance of family, love, change / metamorphosis, personal growth, conflict, as well as destruction and creation. In the English-speaking Caribbean, the expression “nancy story” has entered local English to mean a lie. The concept of truth versus lies in order to achieve one’s aims is a topic that can be dealt with in detail and expanded e.g. fake news.

I have suggested discussion questions that could be asked in class or in smaller groups, however some topics such as conflicts in families or arguments between parents and children could cause an emotional reaction if students have experienced domestic violence. The same can happen in Chapter Fifteen when the storm causes widespread damage and loss of housing that needs to be re-built. Therefore, I would advise teachers to use their own judgement when deciding whether to address such topics in class.

The Anansi folktales with their roots in West Africa and the Caribbean lend themselves to further research and presentations in class. A co-operation with the subjects of History, Geography and Gardening is possible. Music and Art can also be integrated into the study of the text.

Possible exercises:

Chapter	Activities in class	Homework / Research tasks
Chapter One	• Discuss/write: “What does family mean to you?”	• Draw family tree. • Draw Anansi based on his description “spider with a human face” / “human with a spider face”.
Chapter Two	• Act out the scene between Mr. Tiger and Tjabo in pairs.	• Draw house / apartment. • Write down who does what in their families.
Chapter Three	• Discuss: “who/what is a good parent / child?” • Make up a trick that Anansi did to make the bank not trust him. • Write/discuss the pros and cons of Tjabo’s plan to borrow money and pay it back later.	• Focus on Tjabo. Write a description of his character. • Write a monologue with Tjabo’s thoughts and feelings.
Chapter Four	• Write the rest of the dialogue between Anansi and Crooky.	• Draw jungle scene / the scene at the house after the storm. • Research the West African Aziza and draw.
Chapter Five	• Describe how Tjabo felt when he met Eshu. • Choose an animal that they would like to be and present orally or in writing.	• Research and describe spiders / types / where they live and what they can do.
Chapter Six	• Write a poem / anagram using letters like TJABO or SPIDER.	• Draw Tjabo’s transformation into a spider in 4 pictures.
Chapter Seven	• Discuss role of grandparents in family / society. • Write a diary entry from Tjabo’s perspective with his feelings/thoughts on meeting his grandparents.	• Write sentences to describe grandparents they know / ideal grandparents. • Write a postcard to his brother and sister.
Chapter Eight	• Make a list of some of the “hundred questions” in Tjabo’s head.	• Paint a picture of their moods. • Write a short text describing their feelings/moods in different situations. • Make a feel-o-meter.
Chapter Nine	• Discuss conflicts in a family: reasons / solutions.	• Continue Tjabo’s family tree. • Draw a picture of Anansi showing all of his characteristics.
Chapter Ten	• Discuss role of stories in their lives: which stories they heard as children / folk stories they would like other children to hear or read.	• Write a folk story or a summary of a favourite story.

Chapter Eleven	● Act out the story of how Anansi got the calabash of stories. ● Write the dialogue between Anansi and Nyame.	● Research other Anansi stories e.g. how Anansi captured the python, leopard, hornets and fairy. ● Write a character sketch of Anansi.
Chapter Twelve	● Discuss: Why does Tjabo ask, "What was wrong here?" Explain orally or in writing.	● Draw or find a picture of a well-organised garden. ● Plan a kitchen garden for themselves/family. ● Visit school garden.
Chapter Thirteen	● Describe their own evening meal.	● Research and present/cook dishes from Ghana. ● Draw Tjabo changing back into a human in 4 pictures.
Chapter Fourteen	● Discuss role of work and play: how to rest at the end of the work/school day. ● Role-play: act out and extend dialogue between Eshu and Anansi.	● Write dialogue between Nyame, Anansi and Asase. ● Compare how the villagers celebrate Eshu's visit and how the students celebrate visitors to their homes.
Chapter Fifteen	● Write a diary entry or monologue for Tjabo when he goes to sleep that night. Answer the following questions: ● Why do you think "sleep did not come" for Tjabo? ● How did the villagers react to the damage done by the storm? ● What did Tjabo do to make them feel better?	● Draw pictures of the village being re-built. ● Describe the villagers.
Chapter Sixteen	● Write a dialogue between Asase, Nyame and Eshu after Tjabo leaves. ● Write the story that Tjabo tells Anansi.	● Draw a picture of the new cottage and the vegetable garden. ● Write a letter from Tjabo to Asase explaining why he went back home. ● Continue the story.

Other research / presentation ideas:

- History: transatlantic slave trade / slavery
- Geography: Caribbean tropical rainforest and West African rainforest;
- Art: colours that reflect moods for example use of blue in calm skies versus purple/grey in storms
- Music: Songs that were sung as accompaniment to stories
- Proverbs: Anansi stories contained traditional wisdom in the form of proverbs. Compare German / English / Ashanti proverbs. Write a story including a proverb.

Further background information:

Here are a sample of Internet pages that may help in class preparation and expanding background knowledge. The last link (Natural History Museum UK) includes two videos, one of which could be shown and discussed in class, depending on the level of the group. If showing the video, the use of students' own artwork to create the telling of an Anansi story through stop-motion video can be a follow-on project to the reading of the book.

<https://mythfolklore.blogspot.com/2014/06/congo-how-spider-won-and-lost-nzambis.html>

<https://anansestory.africa/anansi-the-spider/>

<https://mythology.net/mythical-creatures/anansi/>

<https://african.mythologyworldwide.com/the-weaver-of-worlds-the-role-of-anansi-in-creation-myths/>

<https://african.mythologyworldwide.com/the-story-of-the-first-humans-creation-myths-across-africa/>

<https://mythologyworldwide.com/the-sacred-spider-weaving-myths-across-cultures/>

https://www.listofproverbs.com/source/a/ashanti_proverb/

<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/ananse.html>

Spiele für Unterricht oder Zuhause:

Kartenspiel: <https://shop.heidelbaer.de/products/anansi-english/342974000000071615>

Videospiel: <https://memorywizards.com/gods-african-mythology/anansi-the-trickster/>