



Djembe Drumming and West African Story Telling Traditions

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Mande – the original homeland considered to be the larger stretch of the river Niger roughly between Kouroussa (Guinea) and Bamako (Mali). (Mande can be referred to as Mali).

Malinke – those people who remain geographically within the homeland of Mali and Guinea

Mandinka – those people who have settled further West in the Senegambia area (Senegal and Gambia)

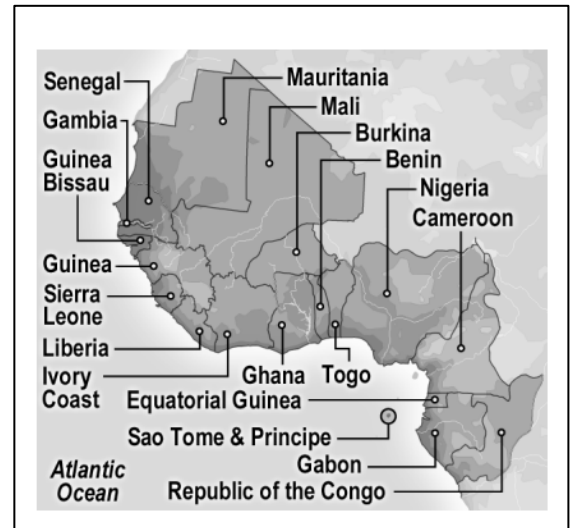
Griot – originally an employee of kings who wanted the history of their kingdom sung and narrated.

Djembe – the main drum used for West African music. The tree is felled a year in advance after a traditional ceremony asking for acceptance from the tree.

Djundjun – the bass drums. Dununba, sangban and kenkeni, plus bells.

Sese – a rattle fitted to a djembe drum, rather like a snare on a classical drum.

Festivals and celebrations – naming rituals, circumcisions, weddings.



How Anansi got his stories

Once there were no stories in the world. The Sky-God, Nyame, had them all. Anansi went to Nyame and asked how much they would cost to buy.

Nyame set a high price: Anansi must bring back Onini the Python, Osebo the Leopard, the Mmoboro Hornets, and Mmoatia, the dwarf.

Anansi set about capturing these. First he went to where Python lived and debated out loud whether Python was really longer than the palm branch or not as his wife Aso says. Python overheard and, when Anansi explained the debate, agreed to lie along the palm branch. Because he cannot easily make himself completely straight a true impression of his actual length is difficult to obtain, so Python agreed to be tied to the branch. When he was completely tied, Anansi took him to Nyame.

To catch the leopard, Anansi dug a deep hole in the ground. When the leopard fell in the hole Anansi offered to help him out with his webs. Once the leopard was out of the hole though he was bound in Anansi's webs and was carried away.

To catch the hornets, Anansi filled a calabash with water and poured some over a banana leaf he held over his head and some over the nest, calling out that it was raining. He suggested the hornets get into the empty calabash, and when they obliged, he quickly sealed the opening.

To catch the dwarf he made a doll and covered it with sticky gum. He placed the doll under the odum tree where the dwarfs play and put some yam in a bowl in front of it. When the dwarf came and ate the yam she thanked the doll which of course did not reply. Annoyed at its bad manners she struck it, first with one hand then the other. The hands stuck and Anansi captured her.

Anansi handed his captives over to Nyame who rewards him with the stories, which now become known as Anansi stories or Anansesem.

The Great Drum

The lion sent out a message for all the animals to come to a very special meeting. Messengers went far and wide to spread the news of this meeting. As soon as the animals heard the message, they hurried right away to the council circle. It was about three weeks before they were all gathered. The lion was very disappointed.

"We have got to find a way to get everyone together more quickly!" shouted the lion.

Anansi had an idea. "What we need," he explained, "is a great drum, one that can be heard all over the forest. When the great drum is sounded, everyone will know right away and come swiftly to meetings."

Everyone agreed that this was a fine idea. The animals were divided into groups, each group taking on a different part in the construction of the drum. The first group cut down a large tree. The second group trimmed off all the branches. The next group hollowed out the tree. Then sculptors worked to decorate the drum. They worked hard through many days. On their way home at the end of each day, they would sing;

*Life is labor,
We are tired and hot,
We work so hard,
Because we work for our people.*

Everyone worked except the monkey. While the others labored, he found a nice shady spot to hide and eat berries all day long.

When they were on their way back to the village, Monkey would join them as though he had been working with them all along.

Monkey sang:

*Life is labor,
I am tired and hot,
I work so hard,
Because I work for my people.*

Anansi watched and knew exactly what Monkey was doing, but Anansi said nothing. When the Great Drum was finished, it had to be brought to the council circle. The problem was that the Drum was very heavy and no one wanted to carry it. It was then that Anansi spoke up.

"Since no one wants to carry the Great Drum and we have all worked so hard already, I suggest that the laziest person among us carry the Drum."

All the animals thought this was a good plan. Each of them looked around, trying to think who among them was laziest. Who hadn't they seen working? First one looked at Monkey, then another and soon all eyes rested on the monkey.

Monkey stepped out into the center of the circle and announced, "I just want to make one thing perfectly clear. I will not carry that drum!"

All the animals laughed. Anansi said, "No one mentioned your name, Monkey. All we said was that the laziest person should carry the Drum."

People were wondering to themselves, who was laziest among them. But the monkey did not have to wonder. He knew very well who was laziest. He came forward and made it clear when he spoke.

So it was agreed that the monkey had to carry the Great Drum to the council circle.



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Anansi Writes a Song

A lion named Simba was ruler of a small kingdom called Korro. A traveling griot came to his village to give a performance. He played the Kora and sang stories about great people and the deeds they'd done. He sang about the wide world. Everyone around enjoyed the music very much.

When he was finished, the bard asked king Simba for a small token in exchange for his performance.

Simba went into a rage! "You dare ask me for a gift!? You should be honored to have me listen! You should give me a gift!"

Simba was so angry that he ordered his servants to give the griot fifty lashes.

The griot returned home and told his friends what happened to him at King Simba's court. They were shocked and angry to hear of the meanness of the king.

Anansi was among the friends of this griot and he decided to write a song to let everyone know how they felt about Simba.

It went like this.

Simba the Lion, king of Korro,

He is fat and very flabby.

Simba the Lion, king of Korro,

He's a fool whose mane is shabby.

Simba the Lion, king of Korro,

his face is ugly, his teeth are few.

Simba the Lion, king of Korro,

He wrote the song with a very catchy tune and people all over the countryside began to sing it. Women sang it while they were cleaning clothes at the river. Children sang it during their games. Men sang it while digging yams. It was heard at dances and festivals. Soon it was known all over Africa.

When the king heard the song, he sent for the griot he had mistreated and asked him, "Who has written this song about me?"

"It was Anansi who wrote the song, but everyone sings it," responded the griot.

"I will give you much money if you tell him to stop the song." Simba promised.

But the griot refused saying, "A thing once it is done cannot be undone. You did not have to have me beaten, but you did. And now you cannot undo it. Anansi did not have to write the song, but he did. Now the song is alive among the people. It cannot be taken back."

Anansi's song about Simba is still sung to this day.



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Anansi and his Sons

When Anansi's first son was born and Anansi and his wife, Aso were ready to name the child, the baby spoke up and said, "I have brought my own name with me. It is See Trouble." Their second son also announced his name in this way. He was Road Builder.

Each of his six sons in turn announced their names in this way. There was River Drinker, Game Skinner, Stone Thrower and Cushion.

Once, Anansi had to go on a long journey. On his trip, he found a big, bright, shiny ball. He was bringing it home, when he fell into the lake and was swallowed by a big fish. Anansi decided right then that he would give the bright shiny object to whoever rescued him.

As time passed, and Anansi did not return home, his family became worried. See Trouble looked ahead to see Anansi inside the big fish. He told his brothers. Right away, Road Builder cleared a path through the forest for his brothers to follow.

When they got to the lake, it was the thirsty brother's turn. River Drinker drank up all the water in the lake. There was the big fish at the bottom. Game skinner went right to work. He cut open that fish to let Anansi out. Anansi was still holding that bright, shiny object he had found.

Suddenly a giant bird flew down and grabbed Anansi. It took him way up into the sky. Stone Thrower grabbed a rock and threw it. He hit the bird just right to make it let go of Anansi. Down, down Anansi fell, but he didn't get hurt because Cushion put himself in the way. Anansi landed softly.

Anansi wanted to give the bright, shiny object to the son who had rescued him, but he couldn't decide who had done the most to help him.

He gave the bright, shiny thing to Nyame, who put it up in the sky until someone could figure out which son deserves it the most. It is still there in the sky. You can see it tonight.