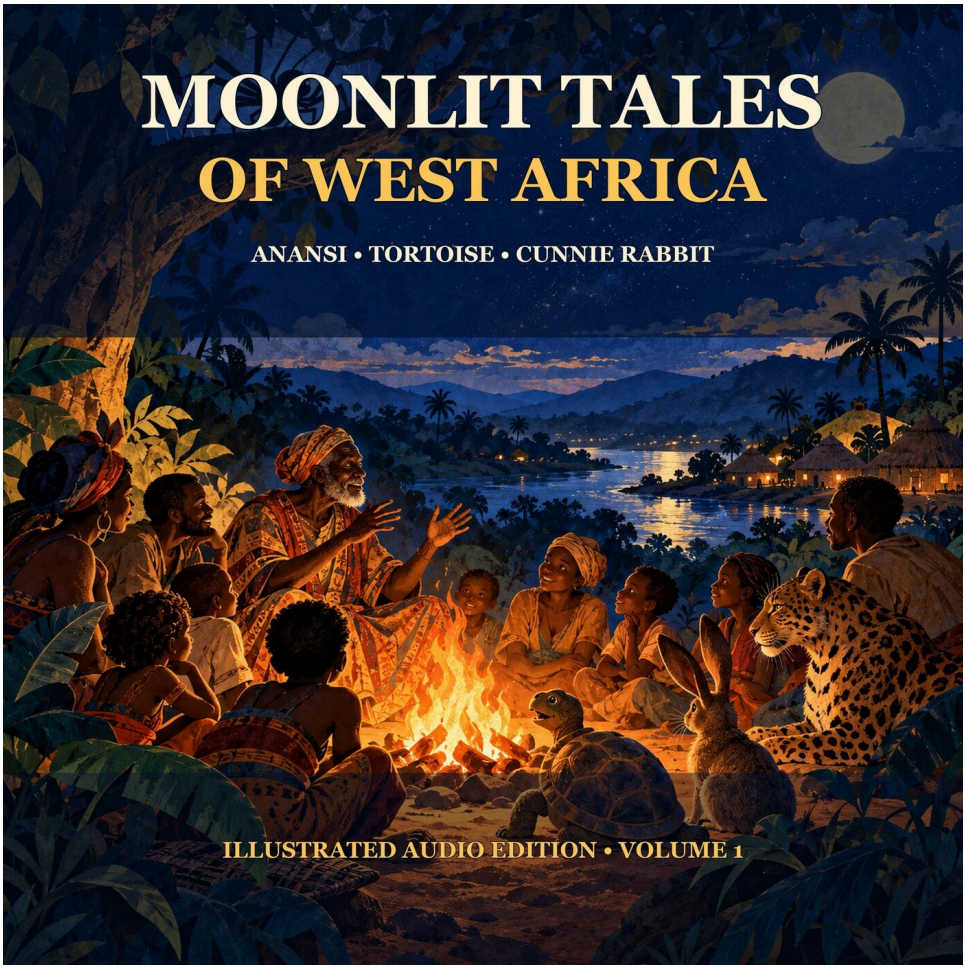


Moonlit Tales of West Africa

Anansi, Tortoise, Cunnie Rabbit, and Stories of Wonder

Illustrated Audio Edition — Volume 1

> Press play at the beginning of each chapter to hear the complete narration by the Piper en_US-amy-medium digital voice.

Welcome to the Story Circle

Introduction — New editorial material



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These stories come from the living oral traditions of West Africa. They were written down in three early collections from the Gold Coast, now Ghana; Southern Nigeria; and Sierra Leone. In their pages, Spider and Tortoise are clever, boastful, generous, greedy, and very human. Animals bargain with kings. The moon and stars acquire their places in the sky. Ordinary people meet magic on the road, at the farm, and beside the water.

This edition is designed for listeners from the early teenage years through adulthood. It favors humor, wonder, animal tales, riddles, and adventures. A number of the darkest selections in the source books have been omitted. The remaining stories still contain the sudden reversals, punishments, dangers, and old social assumptions common to traditional folklore.

The English reflects the editions in which the tales first appeared. The Sierra Leone stories preserve a historical Krio-influenced storytelling dialect. A listener may need a few minutes to settle into its patterns. Beef often means animal; pickin means child; small-small means little by little; and cunning describes cleverness. The voice used in this production is a synthetic American English voice, so it does not attempt to reproduce an African accent or claim cultural authenticity.

The collectors and editors worked in a colonial world and sometimes used descriptions that are unacceptable today. Their framing has mostly been left outside this anthology, while the tales themselves are presented as historical texts. The communities whose imagination sustained these stories deserve primary credit. This edition identifies the region and printed source before every selection.

Settle in as people have always settled in for stories: ready to laugh at a trickster, question a moral, recognize an old human weakness, and wonder what may be waiting just beyond the firelight.

Names, Words, and Listening Notes

Listener's Guide — New editorial material



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Anansi is the famous spider trickster of Akan storytelling. The name appears in several spellings. Nyankupon is the sky deity named in the Gold Coast collection. In the Southern Nigerian tales, juju is the historical edition's broad term for spiritual power, a charm, or a sacred object. The word does not always mean the same thing from one story to another.

The Sierra Leone section uses spellings intended to suggest the sound of local speech as heard by its collectors. Common forms include ooman for woman, wey for who or which, deh for there, and no mo for only. The prose may sound unfamiliar at first, but its repetition and call-and-response rhythm become easier with time.

These printed versions are records of performance, not definitive versions of the traditions. Folktales change with every teller and audience. Listeners are invited to compare variants, notice recurring patterns, and seek contemporary Ghanaian, Nigerian, Sierra Leonean, Akan, Efik, Ibibio, Temne, and Krio storytellers as well.

How We Got the Name ‘spider Tales’

Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) — West African Folk-Tales (1917)



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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 talking about, Mr Anansi?” He thereupon explained to them that Nyankupon and he had had a great dispute. Nyankupon had said the bees could not fly into the jar—Anansi had said they could. The bees immediately declared that of course they could fly into the jar—which they at once did. As soon as they were safely inside, Anansi sealed up the jar and sent it off to Nyankupon.

Next day he took a long stick and set out in search of a boa-constrictor. When he arrived at the place where one lived he began speaking to himself again. “He will just be as long as this stick”—“No, he will not be so long as this”—“Yes, he will be as long as this.” These words he repeated several times, till the boa came out and asked him what was the matter. “Oh, we have been having a dispute in Nyankupon’s town about you. Nyankupon’s people say you are not as long as this stick. I say you are. Please let me measure you by it.” The boa innocently laid himself out straight, and Spider lost no time in tying him on to the stick from end to end. He then sent him to Nyankupon.

The third day he took a needle and thread and sewed up his eye. He then set out for a den where he knew a tiger lived. As he approached the place he began to shout and sing so loudly that the tiger came out to see what was the matter. “Can you not see?” said Spider. “My eye is sewn up and now I can see such wonderful things that I must sing about them.” “Sew up my eyes,” said the tiger, “then I too can see these surprising sights.”

Spider immediately did so. Having thus made the tiger helpless, he led him straight to Nyankupon’s house. Nyankupon was amazed at Spider’s cleverness in fulfilling the three conditions. He immediately gave him permission for the future to call all the old tales Anansi tales.

How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race

Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) — West African Folk-Tales (1917)



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There once lived, in Fanti-land, a man named Father Anansi. He possessed all the wisdom in the world. People came to him daily for advice and help.

One day the men of the country were unfortunate enough to offend Father Anansi, who immediately resolved to punish them. After much thought he decided that the severest penalty he could inflict would be to hide all his

wisdom from them. He set to work at once to gather again all that he had already given. When he had succeeded, as he thought, in collecting it, he placed all in one great pot. This he carefully sealed, and determined to put it in a spot where no human being could reach it.

Now, Father Anansi had a son, whose name was Kweku Tsin. This boy began to suspect his father of some secret design, so he made up his mind to watch carefully. Next day he saw his father quietly slip out of the house, with his precious pot hung round his neck. Kweku Tsin followed. Father Anansi went through the forest till he had left the village far behind. Then, selecting the highest and most inaccessible-looking tree, he began to climb. The heavy pot, hanging in front of him, made his ascent almost impossible. Again and again he tried to reach the top of the tree, where he intended to hang the pot. There, he thought, Wisdom would indeed be beyond the reach of every one but himself. He was unable, however, to carry out his desire. At each trial the pot swung in his way.

For some time Kweku Tsin watched his father's vain attempts. At last, unable to contain himself any longer, he cried out: "Father, why do you not hang the pot on your back? Then you could easily climb the tree."

Father Anansi turned and said: "I thought I had all the world's wisdom in this pot. But I find you possess more than I do. All my wisdom was insufficient to show me what to do, yet you have been able to tell me." In his anger he threw the pot down. It struck on a great rock and broke. The wisdom contained in it escaped and spread throughout the world.

Anansi and Nothing

Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) — West African Folk-Tales (1917)



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Near Anansi’s miserable little hut there was a fine palace where lived a very rich man called Nothing. Nothing and Anansi proposed, one day, to go to the neighbouring town to get some wives. Accordingly, they set off together.

Nothing, being a rich man, wore a very fine velvet cloth, while Anansi had a ragged cotton one. While they were on their way Anansi persuaded Nothing to change clothes for a little while, promising to give back the fine velvet before they reached the town. He delayed doing this, however, first on one pretext, then on another—till they arrived at their destination.

Anansi, being dressed in such a fine garment, found no difficulty in getting as many wives as he wished. Poor Nothing, with his ragged and miserable cloth, was treated with great contempt. At first he could not get even one wife. At last, however, a woman took pity on him and gave him her daughter. The poor girl was laughed at very heartily by Anansi's wives for choosing such a beggar as Nothing appeared to be. She wisely took no notice of their scorn.

The party set off for home. When they reached the cross-roads leading to their respective houses the women were astonished. The road leading to Anansi's house was only half cleared. The one which led to Nothing's palace was, of course, wide and well made. Not only so, but his servants had strewn it with beautiful skins and carpets, in preparation for his return. Servants were there, awaiting him, with fine clothes for himself and his wife. No one was waiting for Anansi.

Nothing's wife was queen over the whole district and had everything her heart could desire. Anansi's wives could not even get proper food; they had to live on unripe bananas with peppers. The wife of Nothing heard of her friends' miserable state and invited them to a great feast in her palace. They came, and were so pleased with all they saw that they agreed to stay there. Accordingly, they refused to come back to Anansi's hut.

He was very angry, and tried in many ways to kill Nothing, but without success. Finally, however, he persuaded some rat friends to dig a deep tunnel in front of Nothing's door. When the hole was finished Anansi lined it with knives and broken bottles. He then smeared the steps of the palace with okro to make them very slippery, and withdrew to a little distance.

When he thought Nothing's household was safely in bed and asleep, he called to Nothing to come out to the courtyard and see something.

Nothing’s wife, however, dissuaded him from going. Anansi tried again and again, and each time she bade her husband not to listen. At last Nothing determined to go and see this thing. As he placed his foot on the first step, of course he slipped, and down he fell into the hole. The noise alarmed the household. Lights were fetched and Nothing was found in the ditch, so much wounded by the knives that he soon died. His wife was terribly grieved at his untimely death. She boiled many yams, mashed them, and took a great dishful of them round the district. To every child she met she gave some, so that the child might help her to cry for her husband. This is why, if you find a child crying and ask the cause, you will often be told he is “crying for nothing.”