



ANANSI THE SPIDER-MAN: A WEST AFRICAN TRICKSTER IN THE WEST INDIES

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The folklore of many peoples includes a traditional trickster figure, the subject of many stories. These form a "cycle", in which there is no particular sequence and the different adventures are independent of each other. Trickster tales are almost always placed in the "animal tales" genre, with the trickster himself -- he seems always to be male -- identified with a particular animal. These include the mouse deer in Southeast Asia, the fox in Japan, the coyote and the spider among the North American Indians, the tortoise, rabbit (or hare) and spider in West Africa, and the mantis in Southern Africa. The outstanding exception to this rule is Till Eulenspiegel of Western Europe, depicted as a young man.

The most salient shared feature of trickster figures is their small size, relative to the large, strong animals that appear in the same folktales. Even the tortoise is depicted as helpless when faced with such other animals as the lion or the python. Tricksters survive by their wits, but they do more than just survive. As the term implies, they are forever playing tricks on the large, fierce animals around them that not only get them out of difficulties but may actively dupe the others in the absence of any danger. Furthermore, tricksters delight in outwitting and mistreating their powerful neighbours even when these have done nothing to deserve it. It should be noted, however, that the trickster does not always come out on top. Occasionally he overreaches himself and finds that he has been too clever for his own good.

Two of the West-African trickster animals mentioned above have a significant presence in the New World, imported as part of the folklore of enslaved Africans. The rabbit is best known as Br'er Rabbit in the folktales preserved by Joel Chandler Harris in the USA (and in his modern avatar, Bugs Bunny). The spider is best known as Anansi, the Asante name by which he is called throughout the former English and French colonies of the West Indies. Our present understanding is that demographic history can account for the prominence of the rabbit in the USA versus the spider in the West Indies. The patent relationship between the popularity of these tricksters and the longing of enslaved peoples to dominate their situation and their oppressors through ruse has often been noted.

In the folklore of the West Indies, Anansi enjoys a dominant position not paralleled by any other trickster figure. While most Americans have probably at least heard of Br'er Rabbit, and Till Eulenspiegel is similarly recognized in Germany and the Netherlands, each of these tricksters is merely one among a great many well-known folk figures in his respective country. Anansi, in contrast, is **the** West Indian folk hero. Folktales are often referred to as "Anansi stories", and a collection of folktales in which he does not figure very prominently would be unthinkable. A pan-african literary journal which began publication this year is called *Anansi*.



Anansi continues to be the subject of new stories, some of them true folktales and others originating in as published literary works by named authors. To a West Indian, there is nothing incongruous about a story in which Anansi and his family ride in a car, go to the supermarket, play cricket or even use a computer.

My research into the comparative folklore of trickster tales has given rise to two hypotheses, each applicable to Anansi.

The first is that animal trickster figures undergo a progressive humanization. This is by no means an original idea. It seems, in fact, to have the status of a vague conventional wisdom in folktale research. However, I am not aware that it has yet been tested or even closely examined. The considerable variation in Anansi's spiderness/humanity between stories and versions is readily apparent. It is also seen in the various published illustrations of Anansi, which range from entirely spider-like to entirely human. Our conference logo was commissioned to represent the middle range of this continuum, in which Anansi has some spider and some human features, a true spider-man.

However, it is by no means proven that this variation represents a historical progression, such that over time the spider features are more and more de-emphasized. The hypothesis, then, is easy to pose and in principle testable, but formulation of a satisfactory scientific test continues to be a problem.

The second hypothesis is somewhat bolder and has to do with the relationship between peoples, their traditional trickster figures, and the exploits of these tricksters. Arising out of a remark in Walter Jekyll's classic treatment of the folklore of Jamaica, it is hypothesized that folklore will at once show extreme conservatism in the identity of the trickster figure and great adaptability in the particular stories associated with him.

Preliminarily, this hypothesis seems well corroborated. Especially among traditional peoples, trickster exploits are attributed to consistent figures. However, where two neighbouring peoples have very different trickster figures, as a rule many of the same stories are told about each. It is even plausible that, where a trickster figure is the subject of an apparently unique story, this is in fact due to uneven collecting by folklorists.

The most striking observation in favour of this second hypothesis is those stories that show up in the folklore of widely dispersed peoples, many of whom would appear to have very little social contact with each other. The famous story of Br'er Rabbit and Tar Baby, for example, appears in clearly homologous versions not only among various peoples of West Africa but as far afield as Asia and among the Indians of North America.

The hypothesis of the immobility of trickster figures combined with extreme vagility of their exploits, if demonstrated, seems likely to be a general principle of folklore. In the meantime, it provides me with a convenient scholarly pretext to delectate the adventures and foibles of Anansi, the West Indian spider-man.