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# Spiders in African Children's Stories

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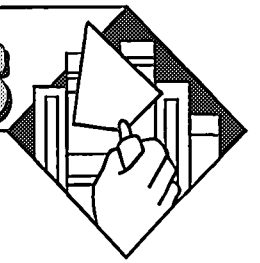
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## Spiders in African Children's Stories

by Dorothy Bowen

The first literature that many American children come into contact with consists of Mother Goose rhymes. One of the very familiar ones is "Little Miss Muffet."

Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet,  
Eating her curds and whey;  
When along came a spider,  
who sat down beside her,  
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

The child who hears this rhyme and sees one or more of the many illustrations that accompany it in children's collections soon will learn that a spider is probably not the most desirable of bugs. In fact, he or she probably will become a bit fearful of the eight-legged creature that was so unkind to Miss Muffet. This is quite a different picture of a spider from the one that we find in traditional African stories where Anansi the Spider, one of the most outstanding characters in African fables, is portrayed as a very clever trickster who can fool animals many times his size. Most of these stories come from culture groups in west Africa, although there are some from other parts of the African continent as well.

McDermott writes in the prologue to his Caldecott-winning book *Anansi the Spider* (1972), "This funny fellow is a rogue, a wise and loveable trickster. He is a shrewd and cunning figure who triumphs over larger foes. An animal with human qualities, Anansi is a mischief maker. He tumbles into many troubles."

Arkhurst notes, "He is a favorite person in the stories of West Africa. Maybe it is because he is just like a naughty little boy, who is full of mischief and yet loved by everyone. Maybe it is because he is like some people all of us know, and maybe it is because he is a little like you and me—or at least a tiny part of us sometimes" (1964, 3).

Caldecott winner Gail Haley tells how this all began in her book *A Story, A Story* (1970). It seems that there was once a time when there were no stories on earth. The Sky God, Nyame, owned all of the stories and kept them in a golden box next to his royal stool. Anansi the Spider Man spun a web and went to the sky to buy the stories from Nyame. He was given a series of tasks to perform

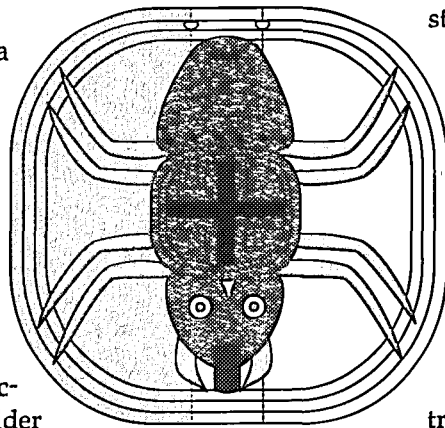
in order to receive the stories. "The price of my stories is that you bring me Osebo the leopard of-the-terrible-teeth, Mmboro the hornet who-

stings-like-fire, and Mmoatia the fairy whom-men-never-see," he said. Trickster that he was, Anansi managed to trick Osebo, Mmboro, and Mmoatia, and he was able to take them all to the Sky God. He received the golden box of stories in exchange. When he opened the box, the stories "scattered to the corners of the world."

Duane, in her beautifully illustrated *African Myths and Legends*

(1998), gives a slightly different slant on this story which she attributes to the Ashanti people. In her telling of how Anansi obtained the stories, she writes that his task involved capturing the hornets, the leopard, and Onini the python; and Anansi is not a Spider Man, but rather had been turned into a small spider as punishment for killing the king's magnificent ram. In Aardema's (1997) retelling of the same story, the price is a live python, a real fairy, and forty-seven stinging hornets.

The Krachi people have a story that explains why Anansi's name was changed from Anyankon to Anansi by Wulbari, their god. It seems that Anansi asked to borrow a corn cob from Wulbari, promising to turn it into a hundred slaves. He started out on a journey, first tricking a village chief into thinking that he was at fault for the disappearance of his corn cob and received from him a whole basket of corn. He next traded the corn for a chicken, which he killed while staying in the home of a second village chief, and then tricked the chief into thinking he was responsible for the chicken's death. Fearful of the wrath of Wulbari, the chief begged for forgiveness and gave Anansi ten of their best sheep. As Anansi continued on his journey, he met a funeral party. He offered to assist them in carrying the corpse stating, "I would be only too delighted to help you in any way. Here, take my sheep and lead them to your village and I will follow behind with the body on my shoulders." He then fell behind the party, ending up at yet another chief's house, telling him that he has with him the favorite son of Wulbari who was very weary and needed a bed for



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the night. He was granted a place for the corpse and, through even more devious means, tricked a third chief into thinking that he was responsible for the death of Wulbari's son. He struck a bargain with the chief, telling him that he would persuade Wulbari that it was a terrible accident, if he replaced them with a hundred of the best young men of the village. Anansi returned to Wulbari with the report, "Do you not remember giving me that single corn cob? Now you have a hundred excellent slaves in exchange. They are yours to keep and I have kept my promise..." Wulbari smiled broadly and was so pleased with Anansi that he confirmed his appointment as Chief of his Host there and then, and ordered him to change his name from Anyankon to Anansi, which is the name he has kept to the present day (Duane 1998, 53-57).

Arkhurst (1964) helps us to understand why Anansi is thin and bald. It seems that he did not start out that way, but at first was big and round and loved to eat, but the lazy spider did not want to work for his food. In his greed to get free food from more than one place, he had his sons pull ropes tied around his waist to inform him when the food was cooked, so he was able to stay between two villages, ready to go in either direction. However, it so happened that the food was ready at exactly the same time in both villages and both sons pulled with equal strength from two directions, causing the ropes to squeeze tighter and tighter and his waist to grow thinner and thinner. He then had a big head, a big body, and a tiny waist in between.

Anansi's greedy appetite, along with his laziness, also contributed to his baldness, for one day he could not wait for lunch time to eat the beans his mother-in-law was preparing. He decided to ladle them secretly into his hat just when a crowd of people appeared. In an effort to hide his stealing, the spider put his hat on his head. The result? The hot beans burned the hair right off his head!

Kimmel (1994), in one of his picture book retellings of Anansi stories, tells how on another occasion the spider's greed caused him to eat so much of a melon that he was unable to get out of the hole through which he entered. However, he soon discovered a way to use his dilemma to best advantage. When Elephant came along, the clever trickster talked to him from inside the melon. A talking melon! Elephant soon had Hippo, Warthog, and Turtle all believing they had found a magic melon that was fit for their king. However, Anansi refused to speak when the melon was given to the king. Finally the king said, "Oh, this stupid melon!" So the melon spoke saying, "Stupid, am I? Why do you say that? I'm not the one who talks to melons!" At this, the king became very angry and threw the melon against a thorn tree causing it to burst into pieces, and of course Anansi was free.

As clever as he was, however, Marsh (1997) tells us a story about how his attempt to find one too many free lunches backfired on him. It seems that there was a mean queen named Queen Five, who hated her name, so she put a spell on the word "Five." Anyone who said it would fall down dead. Anansi just happened to hear Queen Five chant her magic words, "Five, say-it-and-fall-down-dead." He thought he could make this work to his advantage and tricked Rabbit and Duck into saying the word and becoming his dinner. However, Pig refused to say the word, causing Anansi to become so angry that he yelled out the word for him. When he said "five," the trickster fell down dead. That's the last of the Anansi stories.

These are just a few of the Anansi tales that you can share with your students who will be delighted with his clever antics and will think of many ways to act them out in the classroom. Marsh's book *A Treasury of Trickster Tales* (1997) offers a number of creative storytelling methods appropriate with these tales, such as using sign language, paper folding, and paper-cutting. This is a wonderful way to bring a piece of the many rich African cultures into your classroom.

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