

Anansi and the Box of Stories

A WEST AFRICAN MYTH

RETOLD BY PAT PERRIN

Once he got used to the whole thing, Anansi found it quite convenient to be a spider-man. He hadn't started life out that way. Anansi had once been a fairly ordinary human being with a wife named Aso, a son named Ntikuma, and an extraordinary sense of humor. It was the humor that got him into trouble. Anansi was a practical joker, and he never knew when to stop.

The victim of one of Anansi's jokes got so mad that he punched Anansi. In fact, the injured party struck so hard that the joker broke into lots of little pieces. When Anansi got all his parts back together again he discovered that he'd become something else altogether. He had a flat body, eight legs and some strange new appendages and abilities.

"How odd," observed Anansi.

"Ug-g-g-h!" screamed Aso.

"Awesome!" commented Ntikuma.

When he looked into the mirror, Anansi was inclined to agree with Aso. A giant spider was pretty ugly. But then he discovered that he could change back into a man at will, and he decided that being a spider-man was all right.

These events took place very early in time—one might say before there was such a thing as time—and the world was rather different then. The deities lived in the clouds, humans and animals lived on Earth, and sometimes they visited back and forth. There wasn't much to do, though most animals and humans and deities seemed perfectly contented with the way things were. Except Anansi.

The joker soon discovered that being a spider-man didn't make the world any more interesting. Animals and people and deities still got mad at him when he played jokes on them, and sometimes nobody would talk to him at all.

One day Anansi got too bored to stay on Earth. He slung a long, strong strand of spiderweb silk into the sky and climbed up to the clouds to see what the gods were up to. Not much was going on there, either, but that was when Anansi first noticed the box. It wasn't gold or silver, and it didn't glow with magic. It was just a wooden box, and although beautifully carved and highly polished, it didn't look especially valuable. So why did the sky-god Nyame always keep it at his side?

The question bothered Anansi so much that he asked a minor deity about it.

“What’s in that box, anyhow?”

“They say it’s full of stories,” the deity replied.

“What are stories?” Anansi wondered.

“I don’t know. I never saw one.” And the deity wandered off to nap on a cloud.

Anansi couldn’t get his mind off the wooden box and whatever was inside it. *Maybe stories are something to eat, he thought. Maybe they’re something to wear. But Nyame never opens that box. Could there be something dangerous inside?*

Trying not to seem *too* interested, Anansi casually asked the sky-god if he would sell the wooden box. All he got in return was a glare that sent Anansi scurrying for a hole in a cloud. But once the spider-man got set on something, he’d never give up. Every day, Anansi asked Nyame to sell him the box. Every day Nyame refused ... until one day, finally ...

“All right!” Nyame shouted. “I’ll sell you the box!” Then the sky-god chuckled. “But the price will be high.”

Nyame demanded just four items in exchange for the box—but all those four items were ill-tempered creatures with teeth or fangs or other unpleasant qualities. The sky-god demanded that Anansi bring him Python (known to swallow people whole), Lion (whose big teeth were often bloody), the Hornets (wasps with poisonous stings), and Mmoatia.

“M-M-Mmoatia?” stammered Anansi, taken aback.

“Mmoatia,” said the sky-god firmly.

“I’ll do it,” declared Anansi. But he was downhearted as he swung back to Earth on his web. How was he to capture those creatures without being badly damaged himself, or even killed? He discussed the problem with his wife and son.

“And I even have to catch Mmoatia,” Anansi sighed.

“Well, you can’t just mope around here,” Aso said. “You might as well start with Python. Here’s what you should do ...”

So the next day, Anansi and his son Ntikuma went for a walk in the woods.

“She’s wrong,” Anansi proclaimed loudly, waving a big wooden stick in the air. “This is longer.”

“Aw, you know Mom’s always right,” said Ntikuma. “That stick is shorter.”

As they argued, a large, large sleek head rose from a tree branch overhead. It was Python (who surely could swallow even a giant spider whole).

“What are you two quarreling about?” demanded Python.

“My mom claims you’re longer than that stick,” said Ntikuma.

“And I say that no snake is that long,” protested Anansi.

“That’s easy enough to prove,” hissed Python.

The great snake slid off the tree branch and stretched out alongside the stick, which was, indeed, a bit shorter than Python.

Quickly, Anansi spun his strongest web and bound the thrashing Python to the stick. When the snake could no longer move, they picked up the stick and carried it, with Python attached, to the sky-god.

Nyame merely said, “You aren’t finished yet.”

Anansi and Ntikuma went back to Earth to talk with Aso.

“That was easy,” bragged Ntikuma.

“But I still have to catch Mmoatia,” groaned Anansi.

“Save Mmoatia for last,” said Aso. “That ‘How big are you?’ trick worked fine on Python. Lion’s not too bright either, so here’s what you should do ...”

The next day Anansi and Ntikuma carried a large sack to the rock where Lion lay sleeping in the sun. They pretended to argue again.

“Of course he won’t fit in there,” proclaimed Anansi. “That’s a really big lion.”

“Mom’s always right ...” Ntikuma began, but Lion (whose teeth could surely pierce spider skin) yawned and sat up before they even got through their act. Of course, Lion let them try the bag on him for size, they quickly tied the bag shut, and they took Lion to Nyame in the sack.

Nyame grinned and said, “You aren’t finished yet.”

Anansi and Ntikuma went back to Earth to talk with Aso.

“We’ll never catch Mmoatia that way,” grumbled Anansi.

“Catch the Hornets next,” Aso said. “Here’s what you should do ...”

So the next day Anansi and Ntikuma went into the woods, carrying two buckets of water, a big empty gourd, and a rope. They found the Hornets’ nest hanging in a tree, buzzing ominously. Very quietly, Ntikuma climbed an adjoining tree. He lowered the rope and lifted up both buckets of water. Then he began pouring water right onto the Hornets’ nest.

The Hornets (whose poison was surely more deadly than any spider’s) came swarming out. They looked mad enough to sting anything they saw—which was Anansi.

“Hello friends,” called Anansi. “It isn’t the rainy season so I know you weren’t prepared for this storm. But look,” he raised the empty gourd, “you can keep dry in here until the downpour ends.”

So the Hornets flew into the gourd, Anansi quickly sealed the opening with spider web, and they took the Hornets to the sky-god.

Laughing, Nyame said, “You aren’t finished yet.”

Anansi and Ntikuma went back to Earth to talk with Aso.

“Well, now you have to catch Mmoatia,” she said.

“But Mmoatia is *invisible*,” Anansi groaned. “Even I can’t catch something I can’t see.”

“And Mmoatia is magic,” Ntikuma protested. “The touch of her hand can kill whoever annoys her.”

“And she’s said to be easily annoyed,” added Anansi.

“I’ve given this a lot of thought,” Aso said. “Here’s what you should do ...”

So Anansi and Ntikuma carved a wooden doll and covered it with a thick layer of sticky sap from a gum tree. They put the doll in a lovely clearing and hid themselves in nearby bushes. Anansi was very nervous. For all he knew, Mmoatia had been watching them the whole time. For all he knew, Mmoatia would touch him at any moment now, and he’d surely be a dead giant spider.

But they waited a long time. Finally, Ntikuma nudged Anansi. “Listen!” he whispered.

Anansi heard a high-pitched sound. He listened harder, and he heard words.

“Why won’t you answer me?” a voice demanded. “I’m warning you, rudeness *really* annoys me.”

Then the gum doll’s head jerked.

“Mmoatia touched the doll,” whispered Ntikuma.

The doll’s head shook hard.

“And Mmoatia’s stuck,” whispered Anansi, stifling a giggle.

The doll’s head jerked the other way, then its body jerked twice. The high-pitched sound got so shrill it was impossible to understand any words. Clearly, Mmoatia’s hands and feet were stuck to the gum doll.

Standing a little distance away, Anansi wrapped the gum doll and Mmoatia in a cocoon of spider silk. They dragged the whole wad back to the sky-god.

Nyame was not at all happy, but lots of other deities had heard the bargain he’d made with Anansi. So Anansi got the carved wooden box and took it back to Earth.

Day after day, Anansi polished the box and admired it, but he still didn’t know whether there were actually any stories inside—or even what stories were. Of course, one day the spider-man cracked the box lid open just a little and peeked inside the box.

Stories came pouring out ... true stories ... fictional stories ... scary stories ... love stories ... all kinds of stories flew out of that box. Anansi heard bits of sentences as they fluttered by him and scattered all over the world. The people and animals heard the stories, too. Jumping and laughing, they caught some of those stories, and began to tell them to their children and their friends.

That’s where this story came from too.

The Anansi Stories

The Ashanti people of Ghana call all their folktales *Anansesem*, meaning “Spider Tales.” Ghana is where stories about Anansi (or Ananse) were first told. Then the Anansi stories spread all around West Africa, and African slaves brought them to the West Indies and both American continents.

Naturally, any story told in so many cultures over such a long time will change. Sometimes Nyame is Anansi’s father, and *he* turns his annoying son into a spider. Different animals get tricked in other tales. Even the spider, himself, is often replaced by some other creature. And in South Carolina, the Anansi stories became “Aunt Nancy” stories.

In one tale, it’s Anansi who is tricked and gets stuck to the gum doll. That version was popular in the southern United States, but with Brer Rabbit as the trickster. It turned up among the folktales collected by Georgia author Joel Chandler Harris. Then Harris rewrote it as “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story,” supposedly told by the fictional character he called Uncle Remus.

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