

ANANSI GIVES NYAME A CHILD

A West African Myth

Collected by Harold Courlander

In this story, Anansi creates part of the reality we live in, even though he is motivated only by laziness and foolishness.

Anansi and Nyame the Sky God were friends. And it happened one time when they were in conversation that Nyame looked at his children and said, "See how all my children are the same color, all are dark."

Anansi said, "Yes, it is monotonous. I will bring you one of a different color."

Nyame replied, "Well, now, that is something. You make difficulties for yourself, but I will hold you to it."

Anansi left Nyame and went home, thinking, "Where shall I get Nyame a child of a different color?" He looked everywhere, but there were only children of dark complexion. Time passed. Nyame sent messengers to Anansi. They asked, "Where is the child you promised Nyame?" Anansi spoke to them as though he were offended. He said, "Does one make a baby instantly?" And when the messengers came again, Anansi answered, "Is a baby made in two months?" More time passed. The messengers again came, saying, "Nyame inquires about the child you promised him." Anansi replied, "Since when is a baby born in four months?" Anansi went on looking for a different-colored child. When the messengers from Nyame appeared another time at his house, eight months had passed. He told them: "Surely Nyame does not want a too-early child? The nine months are not yet used up."

Because Nyame had said, "I will hold you to it," Anansi became anxious. He decided to hide himself in the forest so that people would think he had died while hunting. He went out with his weapons and disappeared among the trees. He followed a trail used by hunters. He was gone a long while.

Now there was a woman from a distant village who had given birth to a boy child. The child's appetite was unending. Whatever she gave him, he wanted more. Her milk did not satisfy him. She gave him mush, but that did not fill his stomach. For seven days she devoted herself to feeding him from morning till night, but his hunger was never satisfied. At last she said, "This child is unnatural. He hungers without end. And his color is not the color of others. He is red. Surely this matter is too big to deal with." So she took the infant into the forest and placed him in the crotch of a tree, after which she went back to her village.

Anansi was walking along the game trail. He heard the crying of an infant. He found the baby where the mother had left it. He saw that its color was red, and he rejoiced, saying, "At last I can give birth." He took the baby home. He sent word to Nyame that the nine months were up and the child had been born. Nyame dispatched messengers to Anansi's house. They found Anansi lying on his mat as though he were recovering. He said: "Here, as I promised, is the child of a different color. Why does my friend Nyame reproach me? I have done what I promised."

The messengers took the child to Nyame's house. Nyame saw that its color was red instead of dark and he was pleased. He gave the baby to his senior wife, saying, "Take it, care for it as your own." She gave the child milk, but it cried for more. She asked Nyame's other wives for help. They all gave milk, they all fed the child mush, yet it continued to cry for more. At last Nyame's senior wife complained. She went to Nyame, saying, "It's an impossible thing. He does not stop wanting. He cries. He makes a great disturbance."

Nyame was annoyed. He said, “Whoever heard of such a thing?” But the child answered him. He said, “Where I lived before I ate better than here.” So Nyame answered, “Very well.” And he began to take care of the baby himself. He ordered milk brought. He ordered boiled plantains and other food. He began to feed the child. Whenever he stopped the child cried for more. Nyame sent word out into the village that all the people should bring food. They brought pots of everything. Whatever they brought, the boy was ready for it. People came from everywhere to watch him eat. Nyame’s servants brought huge vessels of water so that the boy could wash down his food.

The food and water were gone. The boy looked in one direction and another. He saw that the feeding was ended. In the front of the crowd that was watching him an old man was standing, his mouth wide open in amazement. The boy jumped into his mouth. He became a tongue. It was the first tongue. Because the boy was red, all tongues are red. Because the boy was never satisfied, tongues are never satisfied. If a person’s stomach is full or empty, it is all the same to his tongue. The tongue always wants something. So there is a saying, “Even though the stomach has plenty, the tongue wants more.” For all this Anansi was responsible.

From the book A Treasury of African Folklore by Harold Courlander. Copyright © 1996 by Marlowe and Company. Appears by permission of the publisher, Marlowe and Company.