

# The storyteller

---

## **Why Anansi couldn't steal all wisdom in the world, and instead a little wisdom lives in us all, as related by Efua, a young African girl.**

'Efua, Efua, tell us a story!' The little children pressed around Efua and dragged her by her arms to the edge of the packed red earth between the whitewashed dwellings where she always recounted the stories she had learned from her grandmother. Efua was older than most of them and an odd one amongst the village girls. She was good at storytelling and the younger children loved it.

'Another story?' Efua pretended not being in the mood for storytelling. 'But I don't know a story,' she teased the others. 'What should I tell a story about?'

'About Anansi,' they chorused. The day was drawing to a close, the sun was setting and the village women were pounding *fufu* and cooking dinner, the smoke of their fires curling up and lingering between the trees at the edge of the forest. As always, the men were sitting together in a group, chatting interminably about very important matters, and the children were feeling bored and tired of playing.

'All right then,' Efua said, chasing away the goats that were nibbling at the bushes at the edge of the clearing. She sat on a fallen tree trunk, not too far from the cooking fires so the smoke would keep the mosquitoes at bay. The little ones expectantly sat down in a semicircle around her, even though the little boys were jostling and causing trouble as Efua looked sternly at them as if she already were a grown-up woman, patiently waiting for them to calm down before making a start with the story.

'Anansi the spider was very clever already, but he wanted to be smartest of all,' she began, in a low secretive tone to add mystery to her tale. 'So he decided to steal all wisdom he could find and put it into a gourd. But the more he stole, the more his worry increased about someone else stealing his wisdom, so he took the gourd and secretly went to a tall tree in the forest to hide it in its branches, in order to remain the smartest of all people.'

Efua gazed round and saw all children listen to her story with bated breath, their dark eyes sunk into a kind of dream.

'His youngest son Ntikuma saw him go and followed at a distance to see what he was doing,' she continued. 'Ntikuma noticed that the gourd was far too big for Anansi to carry. He couldn't carry it and climb the tree all at the same time. Have you ever tried climbing a tree, holding something in your hand?' she asked of the children.

'No, no one can,' one of the girls replied.

‘No, you cannot, but Anansi the spider has eight legs, so he tried all the same,’ Efua said. ‘But the gourd was far too big and smooth to carry as he tried to climb into the tree. So he tied the gourd in front of his stomach and tried again. But each time it was too cumbersome to carry into the tree. He slid down every time he began climbing, and Anansi grew angrier each time he tried.’

The children screamed with delight as Efua made an angry face, just like the spider must have looked as he was fruitlessly trying to climb the tree.

‘Ntikuma burst out laughing as he saw what Anansi was trying to do. “Why don’t you tie the gourd to your back, so you can grip the tree better?” he asked. But as Anansi realised his son was right, he became so angry that the gourd slipped from his grip and smashed into a thousand pieces on the ground. All wisdom the spider had hidden inside now flowed out, and to make things worse a thunderstorm came, causing a great deal of rain in the forest. The rainwater covered the ground and flushed away all wisdom from the gourd into a tiny stream close by. The stream took all Anansi’s wisdom to the sea, and soon it spread all around the world, so Anansi’s plans did not bear fruit.’

Efua paused for a moment and looked around the little circle, where all the children were expectantly waiting for her to complete the tale.

She now put on a louder voice, where she had almost whispered earlier. ‘The spider became furious and chased Ntikuma home through the rain. But soon he calmed down and realised he was wrong. When he finally overtook his son he said: “what use is wisdom if your child has to show you the error of your ways?” Thus it came about that Anansi couldn’t steal all the wisdom in the world, and instead a little wisdom lives in each of us.’

The mothers called that dinner was ready and the children ran home, Efua laughing as she looked after them. She also went home to eat with her mother. The men of the village had caught a great deal of fish from the lake that day and her mother had cleaned and cooked yams and plantains from the field she tended.

---

Extract from *Anansi*, a novel of the slave trade. Copyright © Ted Polet 2023