



TEACHERS GUIDE
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PRODUCED BY
COLMAN COMMUNICATIONS
CORP.

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AFRICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN FOLKTALES

Time: 20:20

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

There are three stories on this tape. The first two, "*How Anansi Obtained the Sky God's Stories*" and "*Talk*," are from Africa, and the third, "*Bruh Fox and Doc Rabbit Build a House*," is an African-American tale. Each tale is told by internationally renowned storyteller Donna Washington, who gives information about the story before each telling. "*How Anansi Obtained the Sky God's Stones*" is one of many African tales about Anansi, a spider-trickster in the African oral story telling tradition. It is an explanatory tale that recounts the genesis of stories. "*Talk*" is a humorous and whimsical West African tale about talking animals and objects – cows, trees, stones, dogs, fish traps, and stools – and how people react when coming upon them. The final tale is one of the more than 300 beloved and culturally significant African-American "Br'er Rabbit" stories. Students will enjoy Doc Rabbit's ability to outsmart the fox, as well his confrontation with the tar baby.

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

After viewing this video and participating in the suggested activities, students should be able to do the following:

- (1) Summarize each story.
- (2) Discuss a favorite character.
- (3) Relate the moral of the story.

- (4) Explain the main idea of the story.
- (5) Briefly discuss cultural aspects of the story.

SUGGESTED LESSON PLAN

Introduction

This program can be viewed in sections or in its entirety. Before viewing the first story, ask if anyone has ever heard any folktales. What is a folktale? Do folktales differ from one area of the world to another? Help your students understand that folktales are stories that a group of people hand down from one generation to the next. Discuss cultural differences that may result from variations in climate, history, geography, and so on. Explore how those differences may affect a people's folk literature. Make certain that your students understand that storytellers create their tales from events they see and hear — only they build upon them and use their imaginations to make those events more interesting.

Pre-viewing Activities

Tell your students that they will be listening to some folktales created by Africans and African-Americans. Explain that these tales were first told aloud, not written down to be read at a later time. Explore possible reasons for a group's literature to be spoken, rather than written. Help your students understand that writing and reading may not have value in some farming societies, such as those found in certain parts of ancient Africa. Make certain that your class understands that writing occurred in many ancient African cities, such as Monomotapa, where written records were needed to conduct business. Explain that in many African cultures, it was common for stories to be dramatized and to be accompanied by music and dancing. Tell them that after they see each story, you will want them to tell it in their own words, as well as talk about their favorite character.

Post-viewing Activities

Younger students will enjoy drawing pictures of the stories. Older students may want to dramatize one of the stories, possibly more. If so, have your class put on its dramatization for other classes in your school. You may also find it beneficial to discuss the cultural aspects of the stories. What does each story say about the people who told it? Do they have a sense of humor? How did they live? What was important in their society? Older students should be aware of the historical context of the Br'er Rabbit stories. In the African-American folklore tradition, the rabbit represents the slave, for both rabbit and slave were very much defenseless against more powerful adversaries. Rabbits confronted burly bears, wily foxes and voracious wolves, while slaves confronted the whip-bearing overseer and the white master. Faced with such overwhelming obstacles, both used their wits to survive. At the core of each Br'er Rabbit story is a defenseless being who cleverly fashions survival from impending doom.

TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

Welcome to African and African-American Folktales. My name is Donna Washington, and I'm a storyteller.

Today, I'm going to tell you three traditional folktales. One comes from the United States, and two come from Africa.

Stones have been an important part of African life for thousands of years. Even today, troupes of entertainers travel from village to village to present programs of music and dancing — and stones. Often their stones are told in song and dance. Sometimes the entertainers' programs last for several days.

In the beginning, African tales weren't written down. They were passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth. People who could remember stories — and tell them well — were highly regarded throughout Africa, and they still are.

African folktales are used to pass on important ideas, tribal rules, and religious beliefs. Africans aren't the only people who have folktales. Every country in the world has a folk history.

People tell folktales for many different reasons. Some stories try to explain things about the world. You may have read or heard stories that answer the question, "Why do leopards have spots?" Or, "How come elephants have trunks?"

My first tale offers an explanation about where stories come from. It's called "How Anansi Obtained the Sky God's Stories."

Long ago the sky god Nyami was keeper of all the stories.

Many came to ask for the stories, but Nyami thought none worthy enough to bring them to earth.

One day, Anansi the spider climbed on his thread to the skies in order to ask for the stories.

"How can you, Anansi, hope to be worthy enough to bring my stories to earth?"

"All I ask for is a chance!"

"Very well. If you bring me Momboro the hornet, Onini the snake, and Osebo the leopard the stories will be yours."

Anansi thought for several moments, and then agreed. "Okay!"
Then he dropped back to earth on his thread.

There, he set his plan into action.

"Momboro, it's raining! Come into my gourd where it's nice and dry."

"Why, thank you friend Anansi!"

After Momboro was captured, Anansi took him to Nyami.

"My eyes have seen Momboro. You have done well, Anansi. Now, return!"

And so Anansi went back to earth, where he set the second part of his plan into action.

“What a coincidence you should happen by, Onini. Why, just this morning, I was having an argument with my wife. I said you were longer than this stick, and she said you were not. Would you help me prove that I am right?”

“Why, of course, friend Anansi.”

“If you would stretch out next to the stick, and let me tie you to it, I would be able to prove that I am right.”

“Oh, I can see that I am much longer than that stick. Yes, of course you may tie me to it.”

Once Anansi had tightly spun a web around Onini and the stick, he took the snake to Nyami, far up into the sky.

“My eyes have seen Onini. You have done well, Anansi. Now, return!”

And so Anansi went back to earth, where he set the final part of his plan into action.

“Ah! Friend Anansi! As you can see, I’ve fallen in this hole! Can you think of a way to get me out?”

“Hmmm! Yes! I have an idea! There’s a springy tree over here. I’ll bend it down to you so you can tie your tail to it. Then I’ll let it up very slowly.”

“Thank you, friend Anansi. I will forever be in your debt.”

Well, Anansi watched carefully as Osebo tied his tail to the end of the tree. But then, instead of letting the tree up slowly, he let go all at once, and hopped on the leopard’s tail.

Osebo — Anansi riding on his tail — went flying up to Nyami.

When the sky god saw Osebo, he knew he must fulfill his promise to the spider. “I will now give you all my stories.”

But, being a fun loving god, Nyami decided to play a trick on Anansi.

He stuffed all his stones in a bag too small to hold them, and placed a thorny bush where Anansi would drop from the sky.

Sure enough, just as Nyami had planned, a thorn poked through the bag, and the stories flew out!

They landed everywhere on earth — in the water, the trees, the grasses, the people.

And that is where we still find them today: everywhere! Stories in people, places and things — stories from which we can learn and enjoy!

Anansi is a very popular trickster character in West African folklore. He appears in many stories as a spider — as he did in the one you just heard. Tricksters are characters who are very clever. They use their wits to help solve problems. They also play a lot of tricks on people or animals in the stories in which they appear.

Tricksters are found in folktales around the world. The Irish have leprechauns, Native Americans have trickster coyotes, northern Europeans have elves and pixies — and I'm sure you can think of quite a few others.

Magical events have always been an important part of folktales, and so these stories stretch our imagination.

They also can tell us things about people who live in faraway places. The next story does both.

As you watch and listen, see if you can remember how the people in the story earn their living. See if you can find out anything about the foods they eat, the houses they live in, and who their leaders are.

But most of all, just sit back and enjoy this magical, funny tale. It's called "Talk."

One day, a farmer went out to his yam patch to get some yams to sell at market.

When he got there, he began to dig for the biggest, juiciest yam he could find.

All of sudden he heard a voice say, "You don't come see me during the rainy season, and I almost drown. You don't come see me during the dry season, and I almost die of thirst. And you don't come see me when all the weeds grow, and I almost strangle to death! And now, no thanks to you, I've gotten big and juicy. You come here with your digging stick to dig me up and sell me at the market place.

"Well, you can just leave me alone!"

The man, who was very surprised, looked over at his cow quietly chewing its cud.

"Did you say something?"

His cow didn't answer. But his dog did. "Well, no. The cow didn't say anything. The yam did! He said to leave him alone, and I think he was right."

The man was shocked! His dog had never spoken to him before! And besides that, he didn't like his tone of voice!

So he walked to the nearest tree, and grabbed a branch to switch the dog.

As soon as he did, the tree said, "Hey! Put that down!"

The man was so shocked, he began to throw the branch on the ground. Just then, the branch said, "Ohhh! Put me down gently!"

The man got very frightened. Even so, he followed the branch's directions and gently laid the limb on a rock.

And the rock said, "Hey! Get that off my back!" Well, that was just too much for the man!

"Ooooooh!" he yelled.

And he ran toward the village.

He hadn't gone too far when he came across a fisherman with a fish trap on his head.

And the fisherman said, "Hey, friend! You're going to knock somebody over running like that!"

"Oh, I'm frightened! I have to get back to the village! Everything started talking to me. The yam said, 'Leave me alone.' The dog said, 'Listen to what the yam said.' The tree said, 'Put that down!' The limb said, 'Put me down gently.' And the rock said, 'Get that off my back!'"

"That is the most foolish story I've ever heard! Do you honestly expect me to believe that?"

And the fish trap on top of the fisherman's head said, "I want to know just one thing: did you take the limb off the rock's back or didn't you?"

The fisherman hurled away the trap, and, along with the farmer, ran toward the village.

Soon they came upon a tailor carrying a bolt of cloth.

“Why are you running like that? Don’t you know it’s dangerous to run so fast? You might knock somebody over!”

“Oh, we have to get back to the village. Everything started to talk to me today! The yam said, ‘Leave me alone.’ The dog said, ‘Listen to what the yam said.’ The tree said, ‘Put that down!’ The limb said, ‘Put me down gently.’ And the rock said, ‘Get that off my back!’”

“And my fish trap said, ‘Well, did he? Is that anything to be running about?’”

“Well, if that happened to you, you’d run, too!” “Ooooh!”

And the three of them began running toward the village.

After several moments, they arrived to find the chief sitting on a stool in front of his house.

“Now, there! Quiet down! What seems to be the matter?”

“Oh, this has been the strangest day! Everything has been talking! The yam said, ‘Leave me alone.’ The dog said, ‘Listen to what the yam said.’ The tree said, ‘Put that down!’ The limb said, ‘Put me down gently.’ The rock said, ‘Get that off my back!’ The fish trap said, ‘Did you?’ And the bolt of cloth said, ‘You’d run, too.’”

“I want you three to return to work. And I don’t want to hear any more of this foolishness!”

The men tried to protest, but the chief interrupted them. “If you say anything else, I will banish you from the village.”

“It’s people like that who cause trouble in a village.”

“I couldn’t agree more! Whoever heard of a talking yam?”

Well now, let’s see if you can name some important foods of Africa — foods suggested by the story. Okay, yams or sweet potatoes. What about fish? Don’t forget the fisherman in the story. There’s also milk and cheese. Those foods would come from the cow.

Now, what did the story tell us about how some Africans earn their living? There are farmers, fishermen, and those who make and sell cloth. Of course, Africans work at many other jobs, too. It depends on where they live. In cities,

there are doctors, and lawyers, and teachers and cab drivers, and so on and so on — just like here.

Did you notice the houses in the village? In West Africa, they're often made of mud and thatch, just like those you saw in the story. And the leader in the village is often a chief, the person who makes certain that tribal rules and laws are obeyed.

Many of the main characters in the folktale "Talk" are objects — yams, trees, rocks, and so forth. But there are still plenty of people. In many folktales, however, there are no people at all, and it's up to the animals or the things in the story to do all the talking. My last story features two talking animals — a fox and a rabbit. It's one of the more than 300 Br'er Rabbit stories found in the African-American folktale tradition. Br'er Rabbit tales were very popular among African-Americans during slavery days. Slaves liked the smart little rabbit who used his brain power to outwit those who were supposed to be more powerful. It helped them remember that a person's body might be enslaved, but not his or her mind. This story is called "Bruh Fox and Doc Rabbit Build a House."

One day Doc Rabbit and Bruh Fox were busy building a house. As the hours passed, it became hotter and hotter.

Doc Rabbit began to think how nice it would be to have a drink of that sweet cream he and Bruh Fox had put in the cool water for when they had finished building the house.

So he went where Bruh Fox couldn't see him and started moanin', "Uhhhhhh. Uhhhhhh."

That got Bruh fox to a-wonderin'. "Doc Rabbit, did you hear that moanin'? Sounds like someone's in a heap o' pain!"

"Yup! I heard it all right!"

"Well, you better go see who it is, you bein' the only doctor in these here parts!"

"Nope! I ain't gonna do it. I promised to help you make this here house and that's what I'm gonna do!"

But Bruh Fox kept sayin' how it was Doc Rabbit's duty to help sick folks.

So Doc Rabbit left the house, sneaked down to the stream and took himself a big, long drink of that sweet cream. Drank just about half of it!

Then he hopped back to the house.

“Who was it?”

“Oh, it wasn’t nobody. Just the wind in the trees!”

And they went back to work.

But before too long, it started getting hotter, and hotter, and hotter.

And Doc Rabbit started thinkin’ ’bout that cream again.

So he went to where Bruh Fox couldn’t see him and started groaning, “Uhhhh! Uhhhh! Uhhhh!”

“Doc Rabbit, do you hear that? That ain’t no wind in the trees. I’m sure that’s somebody callin’ you!”

“You’re right, Bruh Fox, that does sound like somebody a- callin’. But I ain’t gonna go see who it is! Nosiree! I’m gonna stay right here and help you finish makin’ this house.”

“No, no. You gotta go — seein’ how you is the only doctor in these here parts. It’s your duty!”

So Doc Rabbit left the house, went down to the stream and drank the rest of that sweet cream, and then ran into the forest.

Well, Bruh Fox was a-workin’ away and getting pretty hot hisself, so he decided to take just a little sip of that sweet cream.

So he went off to the stream.

Well, as soon as he saw that the cream was gone, he figured out what had happened. And he was mad! He decided he was gonna punish Doc Rabbit for trickin’ him like that!

So he made a baby out of tar — with ears like a rabbit’s.

Then he set that tar baby down where he knew Doc Rabbit would be hoppin’ by.

Sure ’nough, later that day, Doc Rabbit was hoppin’ down the path and saw that tar baby sittin’ there just as quiet as you please.

Now, Doc Rabbit, thinkin’ to be sociable, said, “Howdee!”

But the tar baby, he didn't say nothin' Too stuck up!

"Can't you say nothin? Where's your manners? I said How-dee!"

"Now you listen here! Either you say 'howdee' back, or I'm gonna haul off and hit you in your nose! Now, HOOOWWWW- DEEEEEEE!"

But the tar baby, he didn't say nothin'!

So Doc Rabbit pulled his arm back and popped it right into the tar.

Well, his arm got stuck right up to the elbow! "Now you give me my arm back or I'll hit you with my other arm!"

Tar baby just sat there, so Doc Rabbit hauled off and smacked him again. And his other arm got stuck up to the elbow.

Well, Doc Rabbit realized now that he was in a lot of trouble.

He started squirmin' and movin' and wrestlin' tryin' to get loose, but the more he struggled, the more stuck he got!

In just a little while, all you could see was his eye balls! And a little while after that, Bruh Fox, walkin' through the forest, came upon Doc Rabbit all wrapped up in that goeey glob o' tar.

"Well, Doc Rabbit, looks like I got you good this time! And I'm gonna teach you a lesson 'bout trickin' folks!"

So Bruh Fox cleaned Doc Rabbit up and said, "Now I'm gonna throw you in the fire! Hah hah!"

"You go on and throw me in the fire if you like, Bruh Fox. But whatever you do, please — oh, *please!* — don't fling me in the briar patch!"

Well, Bruh Fox looked over and saw that briar patch with them sticky, sticky thorns everywhere. Looked like Doc Rabbit would be cut real good if he threw him there in that briar patch.

"Hah! Fire's too good for you, Doc Rabbit! I'm gonna fling you in that there briar patch."

And that's just what he did!

Then he waited to hear Doc Rabbit screamin'. But he didn't hear ne'er a sound. Then he looked, and he saw Doc Rabbit just a dancin' and a singin'!

“Hey, Bruh Fox! How's ya'll doin'? I'm doin' fine! I was born and bred in this here briar patch, and this is exactly where I wanted to be!”

I hope you liked that “Br'er Rabbit” folktale — as well as the other stories in this program. If you did, you'll be pleased to know that your school and community libraries probably have dozens of African and African-American folktale collections on their bookshelves. So why not stop by and check out several of them? They'll give you many hours of enjoyment.

Thank you very much for allowing me to share my stories with you. I'm Donna Washington.