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From Messenger of the Gods to Muse of the People: The Shifting Contexts of Anansi's Metamorphosis.¹

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Abstract

Anansi, trickster spider and national Jamaican folk hero, has his roots amongst the Asante of West Africa. Amongst the Asante Anansi played the role of messenger between the gods and mankind. The Asante Anansi possessed the power to restructure both the world of the human and the divine, and his tales played a key role as complex and philosophical commentaries on Asante spiritual and social life. In Jamaica his interaction with the gods was lost as he became a muse to the people, representing the black slave trapped in an abhorrent social system, and his devious and individualistic characteristics inspired strategies of survival.

However, in the face of rising crime and violence in Jamaica today many argue that these survival strategies are being misdirected towards fellow citizens rather than implemented to thwart oppressive powers. Drawing from interviews conducted on the Island, this paper explores whether it time for Anansi to metamorphose once again, and asks if he can he still provide a form of spiritual guidance to the Jamaican people.

Introduction

I recently returned from a three-month research trip to Jamaica. During my stay I collected material for my PhD, which explores the history of the Anansi tales and focuses on the ways in which they were utilised as vehicles for cultural resistance in Jamaica. I went to Jamaica hoping to answer some questions regarding the popularity and significance of Anansi in contemporary Jamaican society and his place in the memory of the Jamaican people.

Whilst on the Island I combined in-depth interviewing with observation techniques and archival and library research to collect my material. I interviewed many Jamaican citizens, including storytellers, academics, teachers, taxi drivers, Maroons and school children. My information gathering was made easy by the willingness of many Jamaicans to share their thoughts, and the warmth with which they treat outsiders. However, I came back to the U.K saddened by the levels of poverty, crime and corruption on the Island and with the realisation that any discussion of the national folk hero Anansi inevitably leads back to these issues.

In West Africa Anansi reflected key elements of Asante thought and culture; not only were the stories employed as vehicles for political discourse, but they were tightly bound to traditional Asante religious belief. A mediator between humankind on earth and the Asante gods of sky, Anansi was perceived as a chaotic and liminal force, bridging the gap between culture and nature and testing the boundaries of Asante society by wreaking havoc in their tightly regulated world. In Jamaica Anansi came down to earth, he became more man and less spider and pitted his wits against Tiger rather than the Asante God *Nyame*. Much of the religious symbolism of the tales was lost, apart from the continued use of the stories at wakes to entertain the spirits of the dead.

On Jamaican soil Anansi's devious ways reflected the vital strategies of survival implemented by the slaves. However, in the face of the rising crime rate in Jamaica today there has been a debate

concerning Anansi's legitimacy as a folk hero. Many Jamaicans argue that 'Anancyisms' are being used by Jamaicans against their fellow citizens. They claim that these new Anansis are stealing, lying, conning and killing to get what they want, at any cost.²

Currently Caribbean storytellers such as Eintou Springer, devotee of the traditional African religion Orisa, and Jean Small, a Buddhist, are bringing to life a 'new' Anansi by writing and performing their own Anansi stories, with fresh messages for a changing social context. Small's Anansi learns the error of his ways and has the 'determination to change'.³ Springer's Anansi takes a rope across the ocean to the Caribbean to link his African brothers and sisters back to their homeland.⁴

While strategies of survival are still necessary in the face of the serious socio-economic oppression facing Jamaica, this paper asks whether it is time for Anansi to metamorphose once again. It asks if the national Jamaican folk hero, who provided forms of spiritual guidance and inspiration in the past, can still inspire Jamaican people to deal with the problems of the present.

Following Anansi's Thread, From Ghana to Jamaica.

Anansi is closely linked to the traditional religion of the Asante, who occupy part of present day Ghana. Their religion is based around the worship of spiritual forces that structure the world and the universe. For the Asante Anansi plays the role of mediator or messenger and the tales explain how he brought both wisdom and stories to earth from the realm of the Asante Sky-God, Nyame. But Anansi of the Asante is a multi-faceted creature; he not only reeks havoc in the human world and disrespects the omnipotent Sky-God Nyame, but he lives in the dangerous zone of the bush where perilous spirits roam free. The Asante were traditionally a people preoccupied with the boundaries between the human world and the unfathomable world of natural forces; boundaries which Anansi continually breaks in the Asante tales. From the sixteenth century onwards Anansi tales travelled with Asante slaves across middle passage into the Caribbean. In Jamaica Anansi came down to earth; he became more man and less spider and pitted his wits against Tiger rather than Nyame. Nyame was understandably not replaced by an unambiguous and unyielding

Christian God, who would have remained immune to his cunning tricks and chaotic force (Austin-Broos, 1997, p.46).

Anansi shifted from being assimilated into the sacred world of the Asante to become representative of the Jamaican slaves' human condition. Following the plantation period, with his lisping 'bungo-talk,' influenced by West African language structures, Anansi came to assume the 'parodied features of the Jamaican peasant' and represent 'the ghost of the African slave past' (Tanna, 1984, p.80). 'Bungo' is described as meaning 'country bumpkin' or 'African in the sense of a descendant of slaves whose civility is minimally mediated by European mores' (Cassidy, 1971, 41-42) in (Austin-Broos, 1997, p.48). In post-emancipation Jamaica Anansi became the embodiment of the African-born slave or 'uncivilized' peasant, an identity which Jamaicans came to ridicule and despise as they internalised the racist hierarchy that structured their environment.⁵

Much of the religious symbolism of the tales was lost in Jamaica, apart from their continued use at wakes to entertain the spirits of the dead. Some mourn the loss of the spiritual side of Anansi, and describe it as a type of 'falling from grace' – like Prometheus, the cunning rebel god who brought the essential elements of civilisation to the earth, he became chained forever to the human world.

In the Jamaican tales Anansi's predominant character traits are those of cunning, greed, slothfulness and deceit. Amongst the Jamaican slaves Anansi came to symbolise aspirations for physical contact, a break from relentless labour and for plentiful meals. He is also incredibly resourceful and creative, as we can see in this excerpt from the tale *Anancy an Yella Snake* (1979), adapted by Louise Bennett, which incorporates aspects of an Asante tale which explains how Anansi won the Sky-God's stories. Notice how Bennett turns Anansi into a type of black crusader, proving himself cleverer than 'Yella' skinned man and winning the girl. The girl's attitude demonstrates the racist snobbery of certain middle-class brown Jamaicans. Also interesting is the way the girl's brother uses a gun to shoot Yella Snake; a reflection of the weapon of choice for many young men in Jamaica today:

'Once upon a time, dere was a gal livin in Jamaica an plenty man did want fi married to her, but she nevah want noh black nor noh dark nor noh brown man; she dida look fi *yella* skin man.'

Bra Yella Snake marries the girl, but drags her into his hole saying ‘Ah wi Suck yuh, Till yuh mumah and pupa Cyaan even fine piece a yuh calla bone’; but Anansi thwarts him, playing on his pride:

‘Anansi hear bout it, an go see him can ketch snake. Anancy cut one long juice a bamboo an walk pass snake hole. Hear Anancy loud; “not a man don’t like dish bamboo, not a man een de whole worl can long like dish bamboo.” (Anancy tongue-tie, yuh know, so him call “dis” “dish”). Yella snake hear Anancy, an as him proud a him twelve-foot Yella skin him come outa him hole seh to Anancy ‘Ah bet yuh seh me longa.’

Anancy ties snake round the bamboo pole, and carries him to the girl’s family. ‘De gal bredda shoot yella snake, an from dat day till today man dah shoot snake. Is Anancy mek it. Jack mandora me noh choose none’ (Bennett, 1979, pp.49-50).⁶

Anansi’s skills of resourcefulness and cunning exemplified in this tale became a vehicle for sly resistance on Jamaican soil. Although the debate continues as to whether Anansi was a *rebel* or a true *revolutionary*, as chief Abeng player of the Maroon community in Moore Town explained to me, Anansi’s skills of trickery and guile undoubtedly inspired survival tactics in the face of oppression.



⁷That is a plan of the Maroon you know. Is these tricks of the Anansi. Now, you coming for a little Anansi story. But you are gaining bigger than that. Because you wanted to know HOW Anansi started to talk his story. Through *we* Maroon. We get in de bush. And we HAM-BUSH. And is anyone passing through, we a scare them right *there*’.

‘You see Nanny was like Anansi too. She was tricky. She used her brains. She use *science*. When them shoot her with the gun. She took them a catch the balls in her behind. Science. She kill thousands of them’.⁸

One element of the African Anansi storytelling tradition that remained in Jamaica was the continuation of the African influenced custom of telling tales at a nine-night ceremony, which is still practiced in Jamaica today. On the ninth night of a wake there is a final set-up, in which

music and dancing take place and the spirit of the deceased is entertained with Anansi stories to ensure that they do not rise to pester the living. In Jamaica today the tales are more likely to be told at nine-night when an old person dies, as the life of a deceased youth would be celebrated with a more modern sound-system set-up.

Another way in which the Anansi tales remained connected to death in Jamaica was the continued belief that it was terribly unlucky to tell Anansi tales in the daylight. I found several references to this, one of them from Lily G. Perkins (born 1910 – died 1977) who took a great interest in Jamaican customs. In her notebooks in the National Library of Jamaica she writes; ‘to tell an Anancy story in daylight is a proceeding fraught with danger. The teller will surely become blind, or turn into a broomstick, and your mother will die’.⁹ This suggests that even though many aspects of Anansi’s connection with the spiritual world disappeared in Jamaica, he was still seen as a harbinger of unknowable and powerful forces. Like the Asante Anansi he was perceived as existing on the boundaries between the human world and the unfathomable world of spirits; to summon him in daylight was akin summoning the spirits of the unknown.

Trapped in the Web of Violence: Anansi’s Relevance in Contemporary Jamaica

It seems that untimely death is commonplace in Jamaica today, as a battle rages on the island. Jamaica's long history of slavery and colonialism has left behind a legacy of racism, poverty and class prejudice. The Jamaica Labour Party and the Peoples’ National Party have been at logger heads for several decades. Rival politicians circulated arms to their supporters in impoverished communities in the 1970s and '80s, and these communities have been locked in into a continuous conflict resulting in outrageous degrees of violence.

The national Jamaican myth and mantra of ‘Out of many, One People,’ smoothes over glaring social inequalities, injustices and genuine class differences. The drive towards globalization allows a small powerful elite to dominate and exploit and its people, manipulating international capitalism and foreign governments in their own interest. A third movement, based on community democracy and mutual aid, needs to develop from below in Jamaica; a movement which supersedes the two self-serving parties and undermines the gun-rule of gangsters and drug-dealers. As Maroon Abeng blower Isaac Bernard explained, people are losing touch with

their traditions and the way of the gun is becoming ever more attractive. He illustrated how the Anansi tales offer alternatives to using force to get what you want;

‘Anansi storytelling is dying out because younger people they is coming up now, and some of them full of *pride*, they don’t want to learn about this thing, they want to learn about the gun. And the knife. And the bayonet, how to push them, and all those things. You understand.

They don’t want to know a little Anansi story, but with Anansi if trouble take you, you can come out and walk back round. They don’t want to know dem dee. Say that that is TO LOCAL. And they say no. But I am thanking God for we who know’¹⁰

Professor Barry Chevannes also discussed the changing value systems in Jamaica;

‘You beginning to see this change of values? And you think ‘how can we live like that?’ We can’t, but you see Emily, we are in the midst of accelerated change. That is what we are in the midst of. The value system is changing but it has not settled into a mode in which a new social order is affirmed, and we redefine our social relationships with one another and how we are going to live together in this new social order’.¹¹

It seems that the relevance of Anansi amongst younger people in Jamaica is waning as the value systems of society alter. I spoke to teachers, school children and young people in their teens and early twenties, and I found that although Anansi tales were alive in Primary schools, told by teachers or swapped amongst children in the playground, inner-city youths are understandably more interested in following American trends in technology and style than listening to old-fashioned folktales about a trickster spider. As one old lady told me in church ‘these days young town people find themselves too *sophisticated* for those country stories’.¹² However, writer and poet Velma Pollard revealed that some aspects of the stories are being assimilated into popular Jamaican youth culture. She said:

‘I think people will keep on telling Anansi stories forever. The stories are part of the fabric of our society. And even people who don’t tell them, they quote them in the DJ stands. These modern young people. Every time they hear something from an Anansi story, or something from a proverb, without even thinking about it they pick up a part of what is Caribbean’.¹³

Although Pollard sees the integration of folk culture taking place all around her, there is undoubtedly an anxiety amongst Jamaicans regarding Anansi’s continued relevance. In the face of the immense problems facing the Island Jamaicans are more likely to turn towards religion for

guidance and inspiration than draw from their folklore and customs. When life on earth becomes unpredictable and frightening, we turn to higher forces for strength and inspiration. But can the value systems of the past, often passed down through proverbs, riddles, songs and stories and based on a faith in tradition and ancestral knowledge, be brought back to life to suit a new social context? What will Chevannes new social order be, and what part will Anansi, as the national folk hero, play within it? Storyteller Jean Small shared these poignant thoughts on Anansi and spirituality in a letter she wrote to me recently:

‘The Jamaican society today is so spiritless, so inhuman, so destructive, that there is need to hold on to Anansi’s thread to move upwards; go back in time to the mores of the society of our ancestors, to reach a higher spiritual level. Anansi is a trickster God and he uses his brains for survival as if he has some secret knowledge coming from afar. **Are we reading these stories correctly?** As Louise Bennett said in an interview I had with her, we must try not literally to be Anansis, but do what Anansi did, that is use our knowledge to solve problems, to restore the spirituality that we have lost. **Are we really reading these stories correctly?**’¹⁴

Barbara Gloudon, well-know Jamaican playwright, journalist and radio host, also ponders Anansi’s continued relevance. She asks why Anansi’s is loved by his audience even if his behaviour is despicable. She concludes that the tales as symbolic of mankind and the continual cycle of sin and redemption that is central to human life. Her interpretation is heavy with Christian symbolism:

‘The Anansi tales are symbolic of human nature. I deliberately bought it to a kind of religious analogy; in fact it is saying that man’s falling from grace is a constant situation, and mans redemption is a constant situation. He is mankind; that is my reading of him, that he is a SYMBOL of mankind’.¹⁵

Reverend Daley from Webster Memorial Church in Kingston supports Gloudon’s view and also interprets Anansi within a religious Christian framework. He stated that ‘forgiveness plays a dominant role in the self expression of a society’. In the Anansi tales he sees ‘always a theme of sin and redemption. Anancy is the errant child who is forgiven’.¹⁶

Anansi’s Metamorphosis, from the Street to the Stage

Although the relevance of Anansi tales is being question in Jamaica today, there is a conscious movement amongst artists to aid the survival of the stories. However, while they were

traditionally told on porches and street corners, they are often now found 'performed' on the stages of theatre and at storytelling events. There are many who do not have access to these events; tickets are expensive, and they take place in the cultural milieu of the capital, often uptown. Inevitably they are attended by the same cultured middle-class Kingstonian set; people concerned with preserving their traditions and creating new cultural forms which feed from their ancestral roots, but not people who are from the poor inner-city communities where social problems are at their worst. As Jean Small explains;

'Now that the Anansi tales are done on stage it is *very* different to in a community setting, on a bench in a yard or in a park. Now there are people like me and Amina Blackwood Meeks on a stage, very often with a microphone; all this technology!'¹⁷

This is another stage of Anansi's metamorphosis. The tales are changing from a participative, everyday form into a cultural product. Anansi is transforming yet again as he is taken from the streets and villages and into the comfortable spaces of the theatre. And although this allows for the all-important survival of the folktales, it undeniably changes them; they transmute from participatory community activities into buyable and sellable cultural commodities. And so Anansi becomes something to be looked at, separated by space and observed from a distance by a well-healed audience, rather than something to be involved in that belongs to the masses; ubiquitous and free for all.

Jean Small has been making efforts to celebrate Anansi with her local community in Kingston by writing an Anansi puppet play which she performs alongside local children. In the play Small's Anansi is a 'new' Anansi with a fresh message for a changing social context; as a mirror is held up to him he begins to see himself clearly and learns the error of his ways; he develops the 'determination to change'. Anansi cries at the end of *Anansi and the Mirror*:



Anansi and De Mirror

By Jean Small

‘Me promise dat me will be a good citizen ov AWE DIS COUNTRY, an dat nobody won’t haffe wrote no more stories ‘bout how Anansi tief, ‘bout how Anansi greedy, ‘bout how Anansi tell lies. Me will mek a complete change.’

(Small, 2005, p.9)





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Celebrating the Liminal: The Agent of Ambiguity

Although a repentant Anansi offers a positive messages to young Jamaicans, perhaps, as Small advocated in her letter, it is *not* the Anansi stories that need change but the *way* in which the stories are being interpreted. The lady responsible for bringing Anansi tales to the rest of the world is queen of Jamaican storytelling, Miss Louise Bennett. Miss Lou, anxious to defend Anansi, believes the tales do not encourage an Anansi mentality but illustrate how ‘we must *not* be tricksters’ by pointing out the weaknesses of human nature;

‘That quality of Anansi is in human nature. Anancy is showing you human traits, **pointing out all the human weaknesses**. Showing you how you can be tricked, or how somebody can hurt you if you are greedy, thoughtless or stupid’.¹⁹

In Miss Lou’s mode of interpretation the Anansi tales act as a warning against the dangers of violence and using brawn over brains. The message is use your intelligence like Anansi, because if you are stupid, an Anansi will expose your weaknesses. In this context Anansi becomes symbolic of a push for change by offering messages of caution against the weaknesses of greed, pride and stupidity and advocating thought before action; values which are undoubtedly key to influencing change in Jamaican society today.

However, it is vital to remember that Anansi is a master of transformation and metamorphosis and therefore *resists* fixed definition and interpretation. The Anansi tales could be argued to contain Christian messages illustrating the possibility of redemption from sin by a forgiving God, yet there is undoubtedly more ambiguity in the tales than some would like to acknowledge - and there is little place for ambiguity in Western thinking, especially within the Christian church. As Diane Austen-Broos argues, West African religions were based around 'notions of good and evil which were not assigned to separate spheres but were allowed to reside as ambivalent companions in the world'; a way of thinking which 'was expressed in African trickster myth'²⁰ (Austen-Broos, p.48, 1997).

Anansi is a liminal being. The term liminal is derived from the latin word 'limen' meaning 'threshold'; it is a 'betwixt and between' space between boundaries or binary constructions in which transformation occurs.²¹ Anansi's liminality lies in his ability to invert all social rules; we see him disconnect his own body parts, eat his own children, abuse his guests and totally disrespect higher powers. His chaotic energy and hatred of labour and discipline challenges Christian moralities and work ethics, which 'resurrects sensuousness and the fallibility of the rational world' (Austen-Broos, p.49, 1997)²². Therefore to attempt to interpret this agent of ambiguity and ambivalence within any established moral framework is futile. Anansi cannot be fully constructed as a moral being, deployed for 'progressive' social movements, nor is he a glorification of gangsterism and greed. Anansi erodes binary oppositions and challenges clear conceptions of good and evil - and it is in *this* way that he provides fascinating a medium for the exploration of the interplay of complex contradictions, conflicts and tensions within Jamaican culture today.

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- ¹ Caribbean English and the Literacy Tutor: A Manual, Page 70 [Internet] (No Date Provided). Available from: <<http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/caribb/page70.htm>> [Accessed July 18 2006] (Image from Salkey, Andrew (Ed). (1992) *Caribbean Folktales and Legends*. Bogle L'Ouverture: London)
- ² Discussion sparked by educator Pauline Bain in March 2001 at a conference of the Jamaica Teachers Association. Baine stated on the subject of Anansi: "If you want to ginnal (cheat) and out-smart people, this is what he represents." See Pauline Bain, *Jamaica Gleaner*, 18 March 2001. Also see letters sent to *Jamaica Gleaner*, in the 'Ban Anansi' debate: *Jamaica Gleaner Archives* (2001) [Internet]. All available from: <<http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/search3.htm>> [Accessed April-July 2003].
- ³ Small, Jean (Dec 2005). Puppet Play, *Anansi and the Mirror*.
- ⁴ Storytelling Event (Dec 2005). Marcus Garvey Centre, Kingston.
- ⁵ Austin-Broos, Diane (1997). *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ⁶ Bennett, Louise (1979). *Anancy and Miss Lou*. Kingston: Sangsters Book Stores
- ⁷ Bernard, Isaac with his Abeng (Dec 2005). Comfort Castle. Photograph taken by Emily Zobel Marshall.
- ⁸ Bernard, Isaac (Dec 2005). Comfort Castle. Sound Recording: Minidisk. Interviewer: Emily Zobel Marshall.
- ⁹ Perkins, Lily (1910 – 1977). Handwritten notes titled 'Superstition in Jamaica' Private Collection. Ref: MS 2019, National Library of Jamaica.
- ¹⁰ Bernard, Isaac (Dec 2005). Comfort Castle. Sound Recording: Minidisk. Interviewer: Emily Zobel Marshall.
- ¹¹ Chevannes, Barrington. (Dec 2005). UWI, Kingston. Sound Recording: Minidisk. Interviewer: Emily Zobel Marshall.
- ¹² Kingston Parish Church, King street, Kingston, October 2005.

¹³ Pollard, Velma (Nov 2005). Asante restaurant, Kinston. Sound Recording: Minidisk. Interviewer: Emily Zobel Marshall.

¹⁴ Small, Jean. (Feb 2006). Letter to Emily Zobel Marshall.

¹⁵ Gloudon, Barbara (1983). Jamaican Memory Bank, Kingston, Sound Recording: Audio Cassette. No Ref Provided. Interviewer: Paulette Bell, Place of interview: Mom Building, Half Way Tree, Date: 29/06/83.

¹⁶ Revered Daley, Oliver (27/6/83). Jamaican Memory Bank, Kingston, Sound Recording: Audio Cassette. No Ref Provided. Interviewer: Paulette Bell, Place of Interview: Webster Memorial Church

¹⁷ Small, Jean (Nov 2005). Sovereign Centre. Hope Road, Kingston. Sound Recording: Minidisk. Interviewer: Emily Zobel Marshall.

¹⁸ Small, Jean (Dec 2005). Puppet Play, *Anansi and the Mirror*.

¹⁹ Bennett, Louise (No date provided). Jamaican Memory Bank, Kingston. Sound Recording: Audio Cassette. Ref: Tape T272, Interviewer: Paulette Bell.

²⁰ Austin-Broos, Diane (1997). *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²¹ Neufeldt, V. David B. Guralnik (Eds.) (1988). *Websters New World Dictionary of American English*. Simon and Schuster: New York.

²² Austin-Broos, Diane (1997). *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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