

HOW THE SKY GOD'S STORIES CAME TO BE KNOWN AS SPIDER STORIES

*"We do not really mean, we do not really mean, that what we are going to say is true."*¹

Kwaku Ananse,² or Spider, once went to Nyankopon,³ the Sky God, in order to buy the Sky God's stories. The Sky God said, "Will you be able to buy them?"

Spider said, "I am sure I will be able to buy them."

The Sky God said, "Great and powerful towns like Kokofu, Bekwai, Asumengya⁴ have come, but they were unable to purchase them, and you who are but a mere masterless man, will you really be able to buy them?"

Spider said, "What is the price of the stories?"⁵

The Sky God said, "They cannot be bought for anything except Onini the Python,⁶ Osebo the Leopard, Mmoatia the Fairy, and Mmoboro the Hornets."

Spider said, "I will bring some of all these things, and what's more, I'll add my old mother, Nsia, the sixth child, to the lot."

The Sky God said, "Go and bring them then." Spider returned home and told his mother all about what had happened, saying, "I wish to buy the stories of the Sky God, and the Sky God says I must bring Onini the Python, Osebo the Leopard, Mmoatia the Fairy, and Mmoboro the Hornets. And I said I would add you to the lot and give all of you to the Sky God."

Spider consulted his wife Aso, saying, "What is to be done that we may capture Onini the Python?" Aso said to him, "Go cut off the branch of a palm tree and cut some

¹ *"We do not really mean, we do not really mean, that what we are going to say is true":* A typical opening line, one that emphatically calls attention to the status of the story as "lie."

² *Kwaku Ananse:* Ananse is usually referred to as simply Ananse, the Akan word for spider. Here, Kwaku means "father."

³ *Nyankopon:* Nyankopon is one aspect of the triune deity Nyame, with Nyame representing the cosmos, Nyankopon its life-giving force, and Odomankoma, the creative power.

⁴ *Kokofu, Bekwai, Asumengya:* villages in the Ashanti region of Ghana

⁵ *"What is the price of the stories?":* Stories are made from mere words, and it seems deeply ironic that we hear about the "buying" and "purchasing" of things that have no material substance.

At the same time, nothing is more precious than the stories of a culture, and for that reason the "price" for them is made almost impossible to pay by making a set of challenging demands.

⁶ *Onini the Python:* The choice of creatures—a python, hornets, a leopard—seems somewhat arbitrary, though each could be seen as incarnating some kind of attribute, e.g., stealth, suffering, swiftness. The Fairy provides the opportunity to stage a version of the tar-baby story. The fact that Ananse throws in his mother for good measure seems astonishing but is treated in matter-of-fact fashion.

"How the Sky God's Stories Came to Be Known as Spider Stories," from R. S. Rattray, ed., *Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales*, 1930. By permission of Oxford University Press.

string-creeper as well, and bring them back.” And Spider came back with them. Aso said, “Take them to the stream.” So Ananse took them, and, as he was moving along, he said, “It’s longer than he is. It’s not as long as he is. You lie, it’s longer than he is.”

Spider said, “There he is, lying over there.” Python, who had overheard the imaginary conversation, said, “What’s this all about?”

Spider said, “It’s my wife Aso, who is arguing with me and telling me that this palm branch is longer than you are, and I say she is a liar.”

Onini the Python said, “Bring it over here, and come measure me.” Spider took the palm branch and laid it out next to Python’s body. He said, “Stretch yourself out.”

Python stretched himself out, and Ananse took the rope-creeper and wound it around—the sound of the tying was *nwenene! nwenene! nwenene!*—until he reached the head. Ananse the Spider said, “You fool! I shall now take you to the Sky God and receive the Sky God’s tales in exchange.” Ananse took him off to Nyame, and the Sky God said: “My hand has touched it, but there remains what still remains.”

Spider returned and told his wife what had happened, saying, “There remain the Hornets.” His wife replied, “Look for a gourd, fill it with water, and go off with it.”

Spider went along through the bush, when he saw a swarm of Hornets hanging in the air. He poured out some of the water and sprinkled it on the Hornets. Spider then poured the rest on himself and cut a leaf of the plantain⁷ and covered his head with it.

⁷ *plantain*: A major food staple (related to the banana) in parts of Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands.

Then he addressed the Hornets, saying, “Now that it’s raining, you should go into the gourd so that the rain won’t beat down on you. Can’t you see that I’ve covered myself with a plantain leaf?”

The Hornets replied, “We thank you, Aku, we thank you, Aku.” The Hornets all flew into the gourd and disappeared—*fom!* Father Spider covered its mouth, and he said, “Fools, I have caught you, and I am going to exchange you for the Sky God’s stories.” And he took the Hornets to the Sky God. The Sky God said, “My hand has touched them, but there remains what still remains.”

Spider came back again and said to his wife, “There remains Osebo the Leopard.” Aso said, “Go and dig a hole.”

Ananse said, “That’s enough, I understand.” Then Spider went off to look for the Leopard’s tracks, and once he found them he dug a very deep pit and covered it. Then he went home. Early the next day, when objects started to become visible, Spider said he would go out, and when he was moving along, lo and behold, a Leopard had landed in the pit. Ananse said, “Little father’s child, little mother’s child. I told you not to get

drunk, and now, just as expected, you have become intoxicated. That's why you fell into the pit. If I were to agree to lift you out, the very next day, if you saw me or any of my children, you would run after them and catch them." The Leopard said, "Oh! I would never do such a thing." Ananse went and cut two sticks, put one here, and one there. He said, "Put one of your paws here, and the other one there." The Leopard placed his paws where he had been told. As he was about to climb up, Ananse lifted up his knife, and in a flash it descended on his head. Gao! was the sound it made. The Leopard landed in the pit and fom! was the sound of the falling. Ananse got a ladder to climb into the pit so that he could pull the Leopard up. He got the Leopard out and went on his way. He said, "Fool, I am taking you to exchange for the stories of the Sky God." He lifted up the Leopard to go and give to Nyame, the Sky God, who said, "My hands have touched it, what remains still remains."

Spider came back and carved an Akua's child. He tapped some sticky fluid from a tree and plastered the doll's body with it.⁸ Then he pounded some yams and put them in the doll's hand. He pounded some more yams and placed the doll in a brass basin. He tied some string around the doll's waist and went off with it and put it at the foot of an odum tree, the place where Fairies come to play. And a Fairy came along. She said, "Akua, may I eat a little of this mash?"

⁸ *plastered the doll's body with it:*
Here is the *ur*-form of the tar-baby story, with a doll covered with a sticky substance, an interlocutor insulted by lack of responsiveness, and an aggressive punch that backfires.

Ananse tugged at the string, and the doll nodded her head. The Fairy told one of her sisters, "She says I may eat some." The sister said, "Eat some then." The Fairy finished eating and thanked the doll. But when she thanked her, there was no answer. The Fairy said to her sister, "When I thanked her, there was no answer." The sister of the Fairy said, "Slap her crying-place." And she slapped it, pa! And her hand stuck there. She said to her sister, "My hand is stuck." The sister said, "Take your other hand and slap her crying-place again." And she took it and slapped her, pa!, and this one, too, stuck fast. The Fairy said to her sister, "Both my hands are now stuck." The sister said, "Push it with your stomach." She pushed it with her stomach, and her stomach got stuck too. Ananse came and tied her up, and he said, "Fool, I have got you. I shall take you to the Sky God and exchange you for his stories." And he took her back home with him.

Ananse told his mother, Ya Nsia, the sixth child, "Rise up, let us go, for I am taking you along with the Fairy to exchange you for the Sky God's stories." He lifted them up and went to the place where the Sky God lived. He said, "Sky God, here is a Fairy along with my old mother whom I told you about. She is here too."

Now the Sky God called his elders, the Kontire chiefs, the Oyoko, Ankobea, and

Kyidom. And he put the matter before them, saying, "Great kings have come and were not able to buy the Sky God's stories, but Kwaku Ananse the Spider has been able to pay the price. I received Mmoboro the Hornets from him. I received Mmoatia the Fairy⁹ from him. I received ●sebo the Leopard from him. I received Onini the Python

9 *Mmoatia the Fairy*: Mmoatia is also known as Mmotia and Kulparge and Chichiriga, all of whom are mischief-loving fairies and dwarfs.

10 *my story*: The narrator lays claim to the story rather than crediting Ananse with ownership.

11 *let some come back to me*: The story is given an attribute associated with edibles, and the narrator sends it into circulation but hopes to enjoy some returns as well.

from him, and, of his own free will, Ananse has added his mother to the lot. All of these things are here."

He said, "Sing his praise." "Eee!" they shouted. The Sky god said, "Kwaku Ananse, from today and forever, I take my Sky God's Stories and present them to you. Kose! Kose! Kose! My blessing, my blessing, my blessing. We shall no longer call them the stories of the Sky God and from now on they will be Spider stories."

This is my story,¹⁰ which I have told. If it be sweet or if it be not sweet, take some elsewhere and let some come back to me.¹¹

SOURCE: Adapted from R. S. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales*, 55–58.

Spider is both animal and human, a trickster figure standing betwixt and between, embodying desire in all its excesses along with efforts to measure and contain. On the one hand, we have the expansive, generous wisdom of story and on the other a greedy trapping and acquisition of animals. In this tale, Ananse "buys" the Sky God's stories, and what is the price? Nothing less than all the characters in plots staged by Spider. The Sky God may now own the players, but Spider has created a story about the naming and ownership of stories, a metanarrative that serves a foundational role as charter narrative and that will also be preserved through cultural memory. Note that he would never have succeeded without the specific instructions issued by his wife Aso.

The British captain R. S. Rattray collected this story while in the service of what was then known as the Gold Coast Colony, and it has been adapted here from his version. Rattray established a Department of Anthropology in Kumasi, which gave him the opportunity to devote his full energies to studying Ashanti culture.

THE TALKING SKULL

A hunter goes into the bush. He finds an old human skull. The hunter says: "What brought you here?" The skull answers: "Talking brought me here." The hunter runs off. He runs to the king. He tells the king: "I found a dry human skull in the bush. It asks you how its mother and father are."

The king says: "Never since my mother bore me have I heard that a dead skull can speak." The king summons the Alkali, the Saba, and the Degi and asks them if they have ever heard the like. None of the wise men has heard the like, and they decide to send a guard out with the hunter into the bush to find out if his story is true and, if so, to learn the reason for it. The guard accompanies the hunter into the bush with the order to kill him on the spot should he have lied. The guard and the hunter come to the skull. The hunter addresses the skull: "Skull, speak." The skull is silent. The hunter asks as before, "What brought you here?" The skull does not answer. All day long the hunter begs the skull to speak, but it does not answer. In the evening the guard tells the hunter to make the skull speak and when he cannot, they kill him in accordance with the king's command.

After the guard leaves, the skull opens its jaws and asks the dead hunter's head: "What brought you here?" The dead hunter replies: "Talking brought me here."

SOURCE: Leo Frobenius, *African Genesis*, 161–62.

The German archaeologist and ethnologist Leo Frobenius felt it his duty to establish a "science of culture" by exploring zones unknown to Europeans and gathering images and stories to map out the many contact areas among civilizations. He was determined to establish broad networks of knowledge that would establish connections rather than make distinctions. In the version of "The Talking Skull" recorded by him, we can see the remnants of an emphasis on remembering ancestors. The skull is purported to ask the king about its own parents, a reminder to remember the dead.

John and the Devil's Daughter

Let's talk about one time. This young man, John who could conquer. They call him John de Conquer. He's goin out huntin for a labor. But he is huntin the Devil. He expects to get some work with him. But there is no wagon ride to there. You have to find the witch lady. So he did, he found her. She had this giant bird. Call him a great big kinda eagle.

"How much it cost to ride?" John de Conquer asked the witch lady.

"Cost you meat," she told him.

"How much meat?" he says.

And she says, "Beef in quarters. Mebbe three quarters beef."

"That much?" he says.

And she says, "When my giant eagle lets a screechin, you give him a quarter beef."

So he did, John got on, paid the meat. And the eagle took off, risin, flappin his wings. John held on to the biggest feather he could reach. Big as a pine tree, it was. Eagle just flew and flew. Ten mile. One hundred. One thousand miles. That eagle let out a screechin.

And John de Conquer takes up his sack of beef. He gets a quarter. Tosses it to the eagle. Eagle catches it in his beak.

Another thousand miles. Eagle lets out a mighty noise, as big as a cloud.

John gets the sack, gives him another quarter beef.

Eagle is full up. He flies and flies maybe two thousand miles now. And then he comes swoopin low. And then he lands. John de Conquer hangin from a pinfeather and then lettin go. He is down on the ground.

She is standin right there—the Devil's daughter.

John says to her, "I'm huntin some work with the Devil. Have you seen him?" He's not a bit scared of her.

"Oh well," she says, "the Devil is my daddy. He'll give you a labor, but don't you take it. Others have come for work and he has killed them."

John asks, "Well, why?"

And the Devil's daughter tells him, says, "Because none of them could do it. They couldn't do the work he give them."



“Is that so?” says John. Says, “Well, I have to find some work.”

“Well,” she says, “if you have to, then. You just do what he says, just try to do it.”

“Will you help me out?” asks John. He was seein how pretty she was.

“I will help you,” she said, and smiled at him. She saw he was some handsome.

So she taken him to her father. Says to the Devil, says, “Daddy, I brought this one to meet you. Name of John. Lookin for a labor.”

Devil says to big John, “All right. Here’s some work. First thing in the mornin, you clear me some land. Some sixty acres. Don’t take all day. Just half a day. Make sure the trees is cut. Don’t leave ’em.”

So big John de Conquer is up and out the next day without any breakfast. It’s way early. He wants to get a head start. He cuts one or two big trees by ten o’clock. He’s got acres to go.

The Devil’s daughter comes out there right by where he’s workin. She feels sorry for him. He’s way behind. He’ll never make two days, let alone half a day.

She says, “Gimme that hatchet.”

He does and she shows him a thing or two. Talkin to the hatchet, says to the hatchet, “Let one tree fall, all will fall. Trim one limb, trim all. Burn one branch, burn all.”

The sixty acres is cut, on fire, and burned up in a second. Nothin is left to bother the eye smoothin its lookin over the land.

Then the daughter goes off. The Devil comes out to see what John de Conquer has done. “Did you do my work the way I said?” Devil asks him.

"It got done," John de Conquer says. That wasn't a lie.

Devil nods. "Not bad. Pretty good," he says. "Now, in the mornin, you go plow that sixty acres. You go plant it. I want some roastin ears good and sweet for my meal tomorra night."

John gets up way early in the mornin. He hitches the horses and plows up straight rows. But it's after eleven and he hasn't plowed ten acres yet.

Devil's daughter is there. Brings John a jug of water for his thirst. He drinks all of it, he was that thirsty. She says to him, "I'll plow it for you." She's got her eye on him. Stuck on him.

She talks to the plow, says, "Plow one row, plow all. Plant a kernel, plant all. Corn, grow high over my head.

"Now," she says to John, "pick yourself some good corn ears for my Devil daddy."

So he does.

Now the daughter knows the father is going to kill John anyhow. Cause John de Conquer is just too big for him. But John don't know nothin.

"We could get married," she tells John.

"The Devil will kill us both," John tells her.

"Well, I got me two fastest horses. We'll go get them," the daughter says. "When Daddy's asleep, we'll just ride off. Then we'll marry."

So that was the plan. Waitin until the Devil is asleep.

Midnight. They go out for the horses that belong to the Devil. They get on and ride off. Daughter says, "Horses run on, run on, five hundred mile. Jump it."

When it's mornin, they are way far away from there. But so is the



Devil. He waked up, see, when they went out. Seen his daughter taken his favorite horses. And he has on his boots hip high. John and the Devil's daughter look back and the Devil is sayin to the boots: "Step it, I say, high step it. Make each step five hundred mile."

So the Devil daddy is almost to them. And daughter don't know what to do.

John de Conquer says, "Don't know what to do, but we better hurry up and move."

"Well, I thought of somethin now," she says. "You be a fox," she says to John. She turns herself into a pond of water with a duck on it swimmin.

And so John de Conquer, big as anythin, is an old, gray fox.

The fox is tryin to get at the duck when the Devil high-steps by. Devil can't see it's them. Just sees a gray fox tryin to snap up a duck on the pond.

The Devil, he went on. But his legs are worn out. His feet hurt him. And his boots are steamin. He has to get a big old animal, looks like a great big bull.

"Come on," says the daughter to John. "He's gone back for his bull. We'll make some time up." So they hurried along. "Jump, five hundred," girl says to the horses. "Jump a thousand, five hundred." And so the horses did.

Half a day later she looks back. Who's comin?

That's who. Devil comin on, sayin, "You bull, you bull, jump it."

She says, "My daddy is comin with his bull under him. He's ridin hard."

John tells her, "I don't know what to do about your Devil daddy."

So they were passin some thorny bushes and she tells him, "Reach me some thorns."

So John does it. He hands a whole thorny bush over to her.

She takes it from him and she says, "Plant one thorn, plant all. Up thorns, four feet up, ten feet up, fifteen. Ten, no, fifteen feet wide. Make it a thousand, five hundred miles long."

That thorn hedge went on long about forever.

The Devil comin up to the thorn hedge, ridin the biggest, reddest fire bull in the Hell world. The bull couldn't get through the thorns.

Devil says, says, "I'll go back and get my hatchet. I bet I'll get through then." So he went back.

And he come back. And it took him hot summers and cold winters to cut through that what his daughter had built up. The thorn hedge. And by then there wasn't a scent of nothin. No horses. No daughter. No big John de Conquer.

But they say John and the Devil's daughter made it all right. The Devil never caught them. They got married. Say they farmed all around and John and her made a good home. Had lots of children. Lived happily forever after.

That's all.



Attempts to control the environment, people, or situations brought the concept of witches to the black folktale. "John and the Devil's Daughter" is a Märchen, a tale of the supernatural and magic in which the Devil plays a main part. John must visit the "witch lady" in order to get work. Extraordinary powers out of darkness—the witch's giant eagle—give an added dimension as an aid to the hero in getting his way. The Devil's daughter also has power, and by marrying her, John de Conquer, the legendary black hero, adds her strength to his. De Conquer, the little-known mythical hero, is said to have come to America from Africa on a slave ship following the wind like an albatross.

Variants of this tale appear worldwide, with the motif of "the girl as helper

in the hero's flight" being most popular in the American South and in the West Indies. There are Jack tale versions in which the hero is always known as Jack. There are also Amerindian versions. Often in the black versions the hero is simply called John. "Help from the ogre's daughter" and "obstacle flight" motifs are quite common.

THE PEOPLE COULD FLY

American Black Folktales
told by VIRGINIA HAMILTON

Illustrated by LEO and DIANE DILLON



Doc Rabbit, Bruh Fox, and Tar Baby

Heard tell about Doctor Rabbit and Brother Fox. They were buildin a house. And they kept a crock of cream in the bubbly brook down below the house they were buildin. Every once in a while, Doc Rabbit got thirsty. And he hollered aside so Bruh Fox wouldn't know who it was, "Whooo-hooo, whooo-hooo, whooo-hooo," like that. Scared Bruh Fox to death.

"Who is it there?" Bruh Fox say.

"Sounds like somebody callin bad," said Doc Rabbit.

"Well, can you tell what they want?" Bruh Fox say.

“Can’t tell nothin and I’m not lookin to see,” said Doc.

“Oh, but yer the doctor. Yer the doctor, you’d better go see,” says Bruh Fox.

So Doc Rabbit went off down to the bubbly brook where the water ribbled, keepin the cream cold. He drank a long drink of sweet cream. Then he went back to help Bruh Fox with the house.

“Who was it callin?” asks Bruh Fox.

“Just started callin me, was all it was,” said Doc Rabbit.

So Doc Rabbit got down to work. But the sun was hot and he came thirsty again. He went about callin out the side of his mouth:

“Whoo-ahhh, whooo-ahhh, whoo-ahhh!”

“Who is callin so scared?” says Bruh Fox, trembly all over.

“Somebody callin me for help, I expect,” Doc Rabbit said. “But I am sure not goin this time, me.”

“You have to go. You have to, yer the only doctor. Go ahead on, you,” Bruh Fox say.

Big Doc Rabbit went down to the brook again. The water was so cool and ribbly and it kept the crock of cream so fresh and cold. Doc Rabbit drank about half of the cream this time. Then he went back up to help Brother Fox with the hard labor of raisin the roof.

Bruh Fox says, “What was the name of the one callin you this time?”

“Name of about half done callin,” mumbled Doc Rabbit. “Whew! This work is a hard labor.”

The rabbit toiled and sweated until his fur was wringin wet. He took off his fur coat, too. He wrung it dry and put it back on. But that didn’t even cool him any. He says over his shoulder, says,

“Whooo-wheee, whooo-wheee!” like that.

The fox says, lookin all around, “Somebody else callin you, Rabbit.”

“I sure am not goin this time,” Doc Rabbit said. “I’ll just stay right here this time.”

“You go on,” says Bruh Fox. “Go ahead on, folks needin you today.”

So Doc Rabbit scurried down to the ribblin brook. It was nice by the water. He sat himself down, took up the crock of cream. He drank it all down. Then he ran off.

Fox feel a suspicion. He went down there, saw the cream was all gone. He filled up the crock with some lemon and sugar water he had. He knew Rabbit was after anything cold and sweet.

“Think I’ll catch me a doctor and a hare together,” Fox says to himself.

Next, he made a little baby out of the tar there. The baby lookin just like a baby rabbit. He named it Tar Baby and sat it right there on the waterside. Bruh Fox went back up the hill and he worked on his house. He thought he might keep the house to himself. Doc Rabbit was bein bad so and not workin atall.

Doc Rabbit came back for a drink. He spied the new crock full. And he spied Tar Baby just sittin, gazin out on the water.

“What you doin here, baby rabbit?” Rabbit asked Tar Baby.

Tar Baby wouldn’t say. Too stuck up.

“You better speak to me,” Doc Rabbit said, “or I’ll have to hurt you.”

But the Tar Baby wasn’t gone speak to a stranger.

So Doc Rabbit kicked Tar Baby with his left hind foot. Foot got stuck, it did. "Whoa, turn me loose!" the rabbit cried. "Turn me loose!"

Tar Baby stayed still. Gazin at the water. Lookin out over the ribbly water.

So Doc Rabbit kicked hard with his right hind foot. "Oh, oh, I'm stuck again. You'd better let me loose, baby," Doc Rabbit said. "I got another good foot to hit you with."

Tar Baby said nothin. Gazin at the water. Lookin far on by the waterside.

Doc Rabbit kicked Tar Baby with another foot, and that foot got stuck way deep. "Better turn me loose," Rabbit hollered, gettin scared now. Shakin now. Says, "I got one foot left and here it comes!"

He kicked that tar baby with the one foot left, and that got stuck just like the other three.

"Well, well, well," said Doc Rabbit, shakin his head and lookin at Tar Baby.

Tar Baby gazin on the water. Watchin out for the pretty birds.

"Well, I still got my head," Doc Rabbit said. "I'm mad, now! I'm agone use my head, too."

He used his head on the little tar baby. Butted his head in the tar baby's stomach as hard as he could. Doc Rabbit's head got stuck clear up to his eyes. His big rabbit ears went whole in the tar of Tar Baby.

That was the way Bruh Fox found him. Doc Rabbit was stuck in Tar Baby. Bruh Fox got him loose.

"What must I do with you?" Bruh Fox said. He led Rabbit along to the house they were buildin. "You the one drank up my crock of cream. I didn't get one taste. Have a mind to burn you in a fire, too."

"Oh, I like fires," Doc Rabbit said. "Do go on burn me up, Bruh Fox, for it's my pleasure to have my coat on fire."

"Well, then, I won't burn you," said the fox. "Burnin up is too good for you."

"Huh," grunted Doc Rabbit. He said no more. Bruh Fox had him in his mouth, a-danglin down his back. Then he laid the rabbit under his paws so he could speak.

"Well, think I'll throw you in that thorny briar patch," Bruh Fox said. "How you like that?"

"Oh, mercy, don't do that!" cried Doc Rabbit. "Whatever you do with me, don't dare throw me in those thorny briars!"

"That's what I'll do, then," Bruh Fox said.



And that's what Brother Fox did. He sure did. Took Doc Rabbit the short hair and threw him—*Whippit! Whappit!*—right in the ~~tar~~ patch.

“Hot lettuce pie! This is where I want to be,” Doc Rabbit hollered for happiness. He was square in the middle of the briar patch. “Here is where my mama and papa had me born and raised. Safe at last!”

“Didn’t know rabbits have they homes in the briars,” Bruh Fox said, scratching his tail.

He knows it now.



There are some three hundred versions of the Tar Baby tale. Variants of the tale appear in many countries. In the Bahamas the elephant creates the tar baby; in Brazil an old woman or man traps a monkey in a sticky wax baby. There is a version from India, and there are African versions among the Ewes and Yorubas, all showing the great antiquity and universality of this tale.

Long ago, in certain localities of Georgia, the tar baby was considered an actual, living, monstrous creature. The monster was composed of tar and haunted isolated places on the plantation. It would insult people to the point at which they would strike out at it and thus become trapped in its sticky substance.

The People Could Fly

They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin against the blue up there.

Then, many of the people were captured for Slavery. The ones that could fly shed their wings. They couldn't take their wings across the water on the slave ships. Too crowded, don't you know.

The folks were full of misery, then. Got sick with the up and down of the sea. So they forgot about flyin when they could no longer breathe the sweet scent of Africa.

Say the people who could fly kept their power, although they shed their wings. They kept their secret magic in the land of slavery. They looked the same as the other people from Africa who had been coming over, who had dark skin. Say you couldn't tell anymore one who could fly from one who couldn't.

One such who could was an old man, call him Toby. And standin tall, yet afraid, was a young woman who once had wings. Call her Sarah. Now Sarah carried a babe tied to her back. She trembled to be so hard worked and scorned.

The slaves labored in the fields from sunup to sundown. The owner of the slaves callin himself their Master. Say he was a hard lump of clay. A hard, glinty coal. A hard rock pile, wouldn't be moved. His Overseer on horseback pointed out the slaves who were slowin down. So the one called Driver cracked his whip over the slow ones to make them move faster. That whip was a slice-open cut of pain. So they did move faster. Had to.

Sarah hoed and chopped the row as the babe on her back slept.

Say the child grew hungry. That babe started up bawling too loud. Sarah couldn't stop to feed it. Couldn't stop to soothe and quiet it down. She let it cry. She didn't want to. She had no heart to croon to it.

"Keep that thing quiet," called the Overseer. He pointed his finger at the babe. The woman scrunched low. The Driver cracked his whip across the babe anyhow. The babe hollered like any hurt child, and the woman fell to the earth.

The old man that was there, Toby, came and helped her to her feet.



"I must go soon," she told him.

"Soon," he said.

Sarah couldn't stand up straight any longer. She was too weak. The sun burned her face. The babe cried and cried, "Pity me, oh, pity me," say it sounded like. Sarah was so sad and starvin, she sat down in the row.

"Get up, you black cow," called the Overseer. He pointed his hand, and the Driver's whip snarled around Sarah's legs. Her sack dress tore into rags. Her legs bled onto the earth. She couldn't get up.

Toby was there where there was no one to help her and the babe.

"Now, before it's too late," panted Sarah. "Now, Father!"

"Yes, Daughter, the time is come," Toby answered. "Go, as you know how to go!"

He raised his arms, holding them out to her. "*Kum . . . yali, kum buba tambe,*" and more magic words, said so quickly, they sounded like whispers and sighs.

The young woman lifted one foot on the air. Then the other. She flew clumsily at first, with the child now held tightly in her arms. Then she felt the magic, the African mystery. Say she rose just as free as a bird. As light as a feather.

The Overseer rode after her, hollerin. Sarah flew over the fences. She flew over the woods. Tall trees could not snag her. Nor could the Overseer. She flew like an eagle now, until she was gone from sight. No one dared speak about it. Couldn't believe it. But it was, because they that was there saw that it was.

Say the next day was dead hot in the fields. A young man slave fell from the heat. The Driver come and whipped him. Toby come over and spoke words to the fallen one. The words of ancient Africa once heard are never remembered completely. The young man forgot them as soon as he heard them. They went way inside him. He got up and rolled over on the air. He rode it awhile. And he flew away.

Another and another fell from the heat. Toby was there. He cried out to the fallen and reached his arms out to them. "*Kum kunka yali, kum . . . tambe!*" Whispers and sighs. And they too rose on the air. They rode the hot breezes. The ones flyin were black and shinin sticks, wheelin above the head of the Overseer. They crossed the rows, the fields, the fences, the streams, and were away.



"Seize the old man!" cried the Overseer. "I heard him say the magic *words*. Seize him!"

The one callin himself Master come runnin. The Driver got his whip ready to curl around old Toby and tie him up. The slaveowner took his hip gun from its place. He meant to kill old, black Toby.

But Toby just laughed. Say he threw back his head and said, "Hee, hee! Don't you know who I am? Don't you know some of us in this field?" He said it to their faces. "We are ones who fly!"

And he sighed the ancient words that were a dark promise. He said them all around to the others in the field under the whip, "... *buba yali . . . buba tambe. . .*"

There was a great outcryin. The bent backs straighted up. Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands. Say like they would ring-sing. But they didn't shuffle in a circle. They didn't sing. They rose on the air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn't matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to *Free-dom*.

And the old man, old Toby, flew behind them, takin care of them. He wasn't cryin. He wasn't laughin. He was the seer. His gaze fell on the plantation where the slaves who could not fly waited.

"*Take us with you!*" Their looks spoke it but they were afraid to shout it. Toby couldn't take them with him. Hadn't the time to teach them to fly. They must wait for a chance to run.

"Goodie-bye!" The old man called Toby spoke to them, poor souls! And he was flyin gone.

The People Could Fly

So they say. The Overseer told it. The one called Master said it was a lie, a trick of the light. The Driver kept his mouth shut.

The slaves who could not fly told about the people who could fly to their children. When they were free. When they sat close before the fire in the free land, they told it. They did so love firelight and *Free-dom*, and tellin.

They say that the children of the ones who could not fly told their children. And now, me, I have told it to you.



“The People Could Fly” is one of the most extraordinary, moving tales in black folklore. It almost makes us believe that the people *could* fly. There are numerous separate accounts of flying Africans and slaves in the black folktale literature. Such accounts are often combined with tales of slaves disappearing. A plausible explanation might be the slaves running away from slavery, slipping away while in the fields or under cover of darkness. In code language murmured from one slave to another, “Come fly away!” might have been the words used. Another explanation is the wish-fulfillment motif.

The magic hoe variant is often combined with the flying-African tale. A magic hoe is left still hoeing in an empty field after all the slaves have flown away. Magic with the hoe and other farm tools, and the power of disappearing, are often attributed to Gullah (Angolan) African slaves. Angolan slaves were thought by other slaves to have exceptional powers.

“The People Could Fly” is a detailed fantasy tale of suffering, of magic power exerted against the so-called Master and his underlings. Finally, it is a powerful

testament to the millions of slaves who never had the opportunity to “fly” away. They remained slaves, as did their children. “The People Could Fly” was first told and retold by those who had only their imaginations to set them free.

THE PEOPLE COULD FLY

American Black Folktales
told by VIRGINIA HAMILTON

Illustrated by LEO and DIANE DILLON

