

## African Mythology

### Objective

Students will understand the background of the African Myth and be able to relate the Odyssey and Romeo and Juliet to two well-known African tales.

### Procedure

1. Students will read and discuss two articles entitled "African Animals and Gods" and "Two African Tales."
2. In small groups, students will discuss two worksheets entitled "Rituals and Reflections" and "Words and Meanings."
3. After reviewing American myths surrounding Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit, students will use the Venn Diagram to compare the hyena and hare of Africa to these two characters.
4. Based on their Venn Diagrams, students will write a paragraph that compares and contrasts these characters.

### Evaluation

Paragraphs will be graded.

## PART III



## AFRICAN ANIMALS AND GODS

## LESSON 36

From recent discoveries of fossilized human bones in Africa, scientists estimate that human life there dates back more than four million years. Unfortunately, not much early history exists of African people who lived south of the Sahara Desert. Also, unlike other ancient cultures, Africa developed no unified collection of myths.

From social studies, you know that Africa is a vast continent with natural barriers—mountains and deserts—that isolated one group of people from another. The fact that several different languages were spoken set up a cultural barrier as well. Thus, it is understandable that a variety of myths existed.

Myths of the Northeast, now Sudan and Ethiopia, showed similarities to those of the Egyptians. Animal gods were worshiped (even a hippopotamus goddess like the Egyptian Tuat), and they were succeeded by half-human, half-animal gods.

People wore animal masks, believing that in doing so, they acquired the animal's strength, and the animal became their protector. Like the Egyptian cats, some animals were given high status. Snakes, the symbol of royalty, were also supposed to possess special powers. In a myth from Ghana, a python's ritual and spell brought children to a couple who had previously been childless. Ever after, as a mark of respect, pythons were given proper burial. For yet another reason, snakes were respected—it was always possible that the snake was one's ancestor, for the dead could return to earth as snakes or leopards or lions.

The hyena, not an especially attractive beast, nevertheless had special skills. He was a wizard who could change at will from animal to human form. He also had earned a reputation as a sly trickster. In one myth, the hyena and the hare, in a time of famine, agreed to kill their mothers for food. (Cannibalism was actually practiced in some areas.) The hyena did kill his mother, but the hare went back on his word. Angered, the hyena killed the hare's mother anyway. But in this

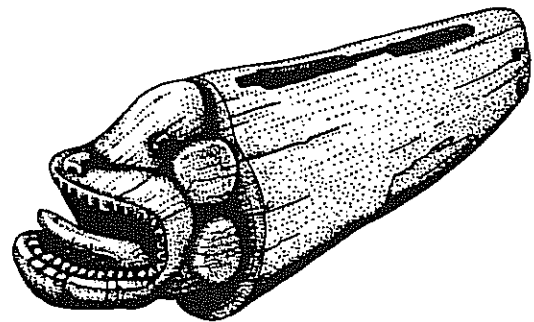
myth it is the hare who is the trickster, eventually killing the hyena and a lion as well.

The hyena and the hare came to this country; only their names were changed. African slaves, imported to work on the plantations of the South, brought their myths with them. The hyena became Brer Fox and the hare, Brer Rabbit.

Sierra Leone and Ghana in West Africa contributed the myth of the spider Anansi, another trickster, and a ruthless one at that. Anansi wanted to buy stories from a sky god, renowned as a storyteller. The god set a high price. Anansi had to bring him a python, a hornet, and a nature spirit. Anansi agreed to the terms and offered his mother as a bonus. By trickery, he was able to collect everything the god had requested and brought them, along with his mother, to the great storyteller. The god kept his part of the bargain and turned his stories over to Anansi.

In contrast to Anansi was Yiyi, another spider, who was credited with stealing fire from the sky and bringing it to mankind. You might say that Yiyi was the Prometheus of the animal kingdom.

Although Anansi managed to capture a nature spirit, people generally feared them and feared their own ancestral spirits as well. Gods and spirits were everywhere. Sun, moon, earth, forests, rivers, even the ocean were divinities whom people dared not offend. Dwarf demons lurked in the forest and delighted in devouring human flesh. The Abatwa, people so small that they slept in anthills, amused themselves by shooting arrows at passersby. Given all these potential dangers, life must have been perilous indeed.





## RITUALS AND REFLECTIONS

- Let's begin with a few vocabulary words. In Lesson 32, you learned that the Chinese used divination. If you don't remember exactly what divination is, check the dictionary and write down the definition. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

African people used divination as well, but they had some other interesting practices that you did not encounter in the mythologies you have already studied. These were fetishism and totemism. Read the definitions below carefully; then try to answer the questions that follow.

- A. **Fetishism**—showing reverence for some object believed to have magical powers.
- B. **Totemism**—believing that some natural object such as a plant or animal has a blood relationship through heredity to a particular family or tribe.

1. Have you ever carried a rabbit's foot? If so, why did you do it?  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Is carrying a rabbit's foot and believing in its power an example of A or B? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Have you ever heard of worry stones? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. What special property are they supposed to have? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Have you ever heard about totems before? If so, in what connection? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you know where in this country you might find totems?  
\_\_\_\_\_

- Let's reflect a little on the stories in today's lesson.

7. In the one about the hyena and the hare, what justification was given for their decision to kill their mothers? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. If you have ever heard the term "survival of the fittest," what is your understanding of its meaning? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Can you apply the term to this myth? Explain briefly. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. What one adjective would you use to describe Anansi the spider? (Don't use an adjective that appeared in the lesson.)  
\_\_\_\_\_

## PART III



## TWO AFRICAN TALES

## LESSON 37

On his long journey home to Ithaca after the Trojan War, the Greek hero Odysseus faced many dangers but was clever enough to get himself out of tight spots. In fact, the goddess Athena called him "Never At a Loss," because she so admired his ingenuity.

A Ghana myth describes another hero's exploits. He was Number Eleven, so named because he was the youngest of eleven children. Their mother was like the Old Woman in the Shoe, for her children had such voracious appetites that they ate all the food. As a consequence, she was starving to death and didn't know what to do.

Knowing that the children were going to a certain pumpkin patch to gather food, she asked a tree that overhung the patch to drop its branches on them and kill them all—a pretty drastic solution! But Number Eleven thwarted her plan, and they harvested and ate the pumpkins.

The Sky God was her next ally in her attempt to rid herself of her children. Number Eleven bested him several times. Finally, in exasperation, the Sky God sent the children on a quest for four golden objects obtainable only in the village of Death. Number Eleven had his work cut out for him this time, for Death intended to eat the children, but he tricked her, too, and obtained the golden objects the Sky God had described.

Death did not give up easily, but after several more encounters with Number Eleven, she acknowledged that she was beaten and promised not to bother him again.



If you have read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, you know that Juliet refuses to marry the man her father has chosen for her and that she falls in love with Romeo at first sight and secretly marries him. Although the love story ends tragically, the families of Romeo and Juliet agree to stop feuding—so the play ends on a positive note.

An African myth from Nigeria has some similarities to the Romeo-Juliet story. A beautiful girl, Nkoyo, spurns each suitor her father chooses for her. Meanwhile, a skull from the Bush of the Ghosts decides to woo her. Wisely, he first borrows the finest of body parts from each of his friends so that he can appear before her in a very attractive form.

When he arrives in Nkoyo's village and she sees him, like Juliet, she falls wildly in love. Her parents are troubled because they know nothing about the man, but finally they agree to the marriage. Immediately after the ceremony, the skull wants to take his bride back to his own country. The poor father, sad to lose his beautiful daughter, nevertheless cautions her to be obedient to her new husband.

As they travel toward the skull's home, he returns each body part to its rightful owner, and the poor bride is left finally with only a skull for a husband. In addition, she now has the task of caring for his old mother. But Nkoyo remembers her father's words and becomes a model wife.

The story has a happy ending, for the old mother-in-law saves the girl when the other people in the Bush of Ghosts are plotting to kill her. She returns to her own home and marries the man her father had chosen for her.



## WORDS AND MEANINGS

- Have you ever tried the *Reader's Digest* quiz "It Pays to Increase Your Word Power"? If you have, you know that twenty words are listed with multiple choice definitions. As a reader, you are asked to select the correct definition.

Let's see how well you can do in choosing the correct definition for each of the following words. All of them appeared in today's lesson. You will probably want to read the stories again and see the words in context before you try the quiz.

- \_\_\_\_\_ **ally** (noun) (a) a narrow corridor between two buildings (b) a glass marble (c) someone you can count on to help you (d) one who is on the opposite team
- \_\_\_\_\_ **drastic** (adjective) (a) harsh, apt to burn the skin (b) flexible (c) outstanding, (d) extreme in effect
- \_\_\_\_\_ **exasperation** (noun) (a) annoyance (b) breathing out (c) state of confusion (d) aggressiveness
- \_\_\_\_\_ **ingenuity** (noun) (a) lacking in genius (b) resourcefulness (c) belonging to a particular family (d) innocence
- \_\_\_\_\_ **spurn** (verb) (a) stir up (as a fire) (b) turn on a spindle (c) seek out, (d) reject disdainfully
- \_\_\_\_\_ **thwart** (verb) (a) threaten (b) taunt or insult (c) prevent or defeat (d) abolish
- \_\_\_\_\_ **voracious** (adjective) (a) highly motivated (b) difficult to, satisfy (c) uncontrolled (d) puzzled
8. In one sense, both the stories have to do with resurrection. Can you explain how? *Clue:* Think of the places Number Eleven and Nkoyo visited. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
9. The story of Nkoyo has a moral. What is it? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
10. In an earlier lesson, you were asked to define "survival of the fittest." In the story of Number Eleven, how is it demonstrated by his brothers and mother? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_