

‘Ananse sem’

A long time ago, when the Ashanti people of Ghana told their stories, they weren’t called ‘Ananse sem’ (Ananse stories). At the time, Kweku Ananse was an insignificant, crawly spider who lived in the forest. Nobody ever took him any notice of him or took him seriously. This upset Kweku Ananse, so he decided to try and change things.

One day, Kweku Ananse decided to ask Nyankopon, the sky god, if he could help him to become more significant and important. Nyankopon thought about Kweku Ananse’s request and decided to set him an almost impossible task. If the task was done, Nyankopon would grant Kweku Ananse’s request.

Nyankopon asked Kweku Ananse to capture the fierce snake and bring it to him before sunset. All the creatures were present to witness the almost impossible task that Nyankopon had set for Kweku Ananse. Not wanting to seem like a coward, Kweku Ananse replied; “I can easily capture the fierce snake and deliver him to you before sunset, if you promise to help me to become more significant and important”. The deal was done!

In his heart of hearts, Kweku Ananse was absolutely terrified of the task he had just agreed to carry out, especially as he had done so in front of all the creatures. However, being Kweku Ananse, he always had a plan. So he set about devising a plan for how he would capture the fierce snake.

Kweku Ananse went into the forest and cut a bamboo stick from the bamboo tree and gathered some raffia grass, and dragged it all the way through the forest. All the creatures laughed at him as he dragged the bamboo stick and the raffia grass through the forest. “What a fool he is”, they laughed, “perhaps he’s planning to beat the fierce snake with the stick until it is unconscious”. “What a fool he is, perhaps he’s planning to whip the snake with the raffia grass...what a fool...what a fool...”. Kweku Ananse was terribly embarrassed by all the taunts and laughter, but carried on with his plan, regardless.

As sunset fast approached, Kweku Ananse knew that the time for performing his difficult and dangerous task, was also fast approaching. Kweku Ananse went deep into the forest where the fierce snake lived. He looked for the snake but there was no snake to be found. He called out for the snake, but there was only the silence of the deep, thick forest.

Then, he was startled by a scary, hissing voice from behind, “KWEKU ANANSE”, snake hissed loudly, “Is it true that you have come to capture me and take me to Nyankopon?”. Snake had heard of the deal between Nyankopon and Kweku Ananse because gossip and rumour spread easily amongst the creatures in the forest!

Kweku Ananse replied, “Erm...of course not, you mighty creature. I wouldn’t even think about it”. “You see”, Kweku Ananse continued, “ I was asked by Nyankopon to capture you and bring you to him, but I told him what a preposterous idea it was, because you were far too big and mighty to capture. Far too strong to overcome. Far too quick to chase, far too smart...”

“Yes, yes, get on with your story Kweku Ananse”, snake interrupted, fiercely.

Ananse continued, “so I brought this long bamboo stick to...”

“Beat me with?”, snake interrupted again. Kweku Ananse was terrified!

“No, no you mighty creature,” replied Kweku Ananse, “I brought this long bamboo stick to measure you, and to show Nyankopon how long you are, and how preposterous a task he had set me when he asked me to try and capture you and bring you to him”. Ananse continued, “Please let me measure you so that I can tell Nyankopon and all the other creatures just how long you are, so that in future they dare not even think about capturing you. That way, everyone will be afraid of you and will pay you the utmost respect”.

Snake thought about this for a moment and, vainly, agreed to Kweku Ananse’s flattering request.

“Please lie beside the bamboo stick so that I can measure you, your greatness”, Ananse said.

Snake became more mesmerised by Kweku Ananse’s constant flattery, and he did as Ananse suggested, and lay beside the bamboo stick. However, the bamboo stick was actually longer than snake. Snake’s vanity gave way to a feeling of slight embarrassment. He wanted, desperately, to be longer the bamboo stick.

Snake looked to Ananse, as if to say ‘what now?’.

Kweku Ananse pretended to think for a long time, looking this way and that way, and sighing often, as if he was really trying very hard to solve a difficult problem. He continued, “I can see that you are almost as long as the bamboo stick, but if you would let me tie your tail securely to one end of the bamboo stick with this raffia grass, you could stretch out your long, strong body and become longer than the bamboo stick”.

Snake was so determined to be longer than the bamboo stick that he agreed to Ananse’s suggestion.

Ananse continued, “I can see that you are almost as long as the bamboo stick, but if you would let me tie your middle securely to the bamboo stick with this raffia grass, you could stretch out your long, strong body and become longer than the bamboo stick”.

Snake was so determined to be longer than the bamboo stick that he agreed to Ananse’s suggestion.

Ananse continued, “I can see that you are almost as long as the bamboo stick, but if you would let me tie your head securely to the bamboo stick with this raffia grass, then I can go and get my measuring tape, so that I can tell everyone just how long you are.

Snake was so determined to be longer than the bamboo stick that he agreed to Ananse's suggestion.

By this time, snake was tied up very securely and couldn't move. Ananse disappeared into the forest and gathered some of the creatures to come and witness his work, and to help him carry snake to Nyankopon before sunset.

On the way to deliver snake to Nyankopon, Ananse told the creatures elaborate stories about how he had chased and hunted the fierce snake through the forest, and how he had set traps for snake, and how he had wrestled and fought with snake and beat snake with the bamboo stick...

The creatures were mesmerised by Ananse's stories.

The party arrived at the shrine of Nyankopon, just before sunset, to deliver snake to him. Ananse's stories continued long into the night, with all the creatures mesmerised by Ananse's words.

Nyankopon was so impressed with Ananse's trickery (although he wasn't fooled by them), that he decided to have stories named after Kweku Ananse.

That's why stories of the Ashanti people of Ghana, and their descendants in the West Indies, and around the world, are often called Ananse sem, or Ananse stories.

A traditional Ashanti Folktale.

Isaac Acheampong.