

READING COMPREHENSION

African Folklore and Music— Fire and Rhythm

Folklore is important to many African peoples, as it has been to cultures throughout history. Adults use fables to teach morals to young people. Legends show how people’s beliefs developed, or

illustrate the creation of natural forces, such as fire. Music is also essential in this purpose. Read the following article, then answer the questions on a separate sheet of paper.

➔ Word to Know

- **folklore** (*n*): stories, beliefs, and customs of a people, handed down from one generation to the next

Many African cultures have passed down tales of how people stole fire from the gods. Anansi the spider, the hero of numerous stories from the Ashanti people of Ghana, is known for this feat. Anansi is an important type of figure in mythologies from all over the world. He is a trickster—one who plays tricks or breaks the rules of the gods or society, often to benefit humanity.

Another story, “How the Lame Boy Brought Fire From Heaven,” comes from the Hausa people of Nigeria. In this tale, Obassi Osaw, the creator of the world, “made everything but he did not give fire to the people who were on Earth.” To get fire, a boy goes to the sky to work as a servant for Obassi. He works for many days. Left alone to light a lamp, the boy slips away to the forest with a burning piece of wood and uses it to light a fire. When everyone is

asleep, he takes the fire back to Earth.

Obassi is enraged when he sees the smoke. He sends his eldest son to Earth to tell the boy that he will no longer be able to walk. “That is the reason why the Lame Boy cannot walk,” the story concludes. “He it was who first brought fire to Earth from Obassi’s home in the sky.”

Keeping these stories alive has been particularly important in Africa because, until recently, few of them were written down. Most folklore there has been transmitted orally. In West Africa, storytellers, called griots (*GREE-ohs*), have memorized the entire history of their tribes. Griots often sing or play instruments to accompany their stories.

Music is another important element of African culture. African music can be delicate or loud, but it almost always has strong and danceable rhythm—thanks to the drums.

In traditional West African music, three or more drummers play different beats that mesh to create a complex pattern called a polyrhythm. This makes the keeper of rhythm especially important in these cultures. “Ever since the Creator created the world,” goes a proverb from the Akan people of Ghana, “the drummer is treated gently and kindly.”

A common instrument in many parts of Africa is the thumb piano. It goes by different names, such as the *kalimba*, the *mbira*, the *likembe*, and the *sanza*. The instrument is made from metal tines (slender pointed objects), each tuned to a different note. They are attached to the top of a small board or wooden box. Each tine produces a bell-like sound. Sometimes kalimbas have bits of metal wrapped around the keys, or bottle caps nailed to the wood, to add a buzzing sound.

Traditional African music is used for rituals such as weddings or coming-of-age ceremonies, where young people

are acknowledged as adults. Almost everyone in the community joins in these performances. A chorus will sing lines to answer the lead singer, and many people dance or play small percussion instruments.

African-American music has inherited many characteristics from these traditions. But modern African music has also been influenced by African-American soul and dance music. There are many African hip-hop artists.

Throughout the Americas, you can hear the influence of music originally brought by African slaves to the New World. In Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, African rhythms became the foundation of what we now know as Latin music. In the U.S. before the Civil War, slave owners forbade drumming almost everywhere except in New Orleans. But the rhythms survived. They made it into jazz, blues, soul, funk, and more recently, hip-hop and R&B.

QUESTIONS *Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.*

- How are fables used in folklore?
- What are West African storytellers called?
- What kind of mythological figure was Anansi?
- What role did this figure play in many world mythologies?
- How did the Lame Boy first get fire to Earth?
- What is a polyrhythm?
- What is a coming-of-age ceremony? Can you name similar ceremonies from other cultures?
- What kinds of American popular music rely on stories told over a powerful rhythm?
- Why do you think that people would believe they got fire by stealing it from the gods?
- What stories or beliefs function as folklore in your culture? What are some of the lessons they teach?