Speaking the “Truth by Dissembling”: Necessary Ambiguities in the Tar-Baby Tale

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Summary

The following paper is an adapted version of the introduction to a chapter, entitled “Symbolic Orphans: the Politics of the ‘Father-Tongue’ in [Toni Morrison’s] *Tar Baby*”, from my current doctoral thesis. The fundamental premise underlying this chapter is that Morrison, in her text *Tar Baby*, uses the complex history of the Tar-Baby tales, and the trickster-figure of those tales, in order to trace the cultural origin of African-American people, to outline the “charts of cultural descent” encoded in their story traditions, and to reclaim such traditions from dominant appropriations of them, for African-American cultures. The paper that follows does not discuss Morrison’s text at all, but looks, instead at the ways in which the history and lineage of the African-American Tar-Baby tale can be seen to reflect and parallel the history and lineage of African-Americans themselves, and can further be understood as an important example of cultural preservation, through very particular cultural methods, in the face of a dominant American culture that sought to erase and censure African-Americans’ identification with an African past, lineage and culture.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is ‘n verwerking van die inleiding tot ‘n hoofstuk getiteld “Symbolic Orphans: the Politics of the ‘Father-Tongue’ in [Toni Morrison se] *Tar Baby”*, in my huidige doktorale tesis. Die fundamentele premis onderliggend aan hierdie hoofstuk is dat Morrison in haar teks *Tar Baby* die komplekse geskiedenis van die “Tar Baby”-stories en die bedrieërfiguur in hierdie stories gebruik om die kulturele oorsprong van die Afro-Amerikaanse nasie na te spoor, om die “kaart van kulturele herkoms” te skets, en om sulke tradisies uit dominante toe-eiening daarvan terug te eis vir die Afro-Amerikaanse kulture. Die artikel wat volg bespreek glad nie Morrison se teks nie, maar kyk in plaas daarvan na die maniere waarop die geskiedenis en oorsprong van die Afro-Amerikaanse “Tar Baby”-storie gesien kan word as reflekterend van en parallel met die geskiedenis van die Afro-Amerikaners self, en origens verstaan kan word as ‘n belangrike voorbeeld van kulturele preservasie deur besonder spesifieke kulturele metodes ten spyte van ‘n dominante Amerikaanse kultuur wat gepoog het om die Afro-Amerikaners se identifikasie met ‘n Afro-verlede, -afkoms en -kultuur uit te wis en te sensureer.

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While the debate as to whether African-American tales can, indeed, be traced back to African origins or not still rages in much folklorist scholarship, I find the arguments set out by theorists such as Werner, Bennett and Bascom to provide adequate evidence of the links between various West African stories, tales and, more significantly, trickster cycles, and the African-American Tar-Baby tale. However, I do not find these traces overt, which to my mind is to be expected given that cultural descent and origin are mediated for African-Americans by the history of the transatlantic slave trade. With the dispersal of different and varying African cultures and communities in America through slavery, it is clear that there is no *linear* cultural heritage to be traced for African-Americans. It seems to me that the history of the Tar-Baby[1] story reflects some of the complexities of this "orphaned" culture, not only because the history of the story is itself a dialectic of cultural orphaning and reclamation, but because that history is also multiple and dispersed and is, therefore, not easily, or linearly, read.

Henry Louis Gates makes a similar claim in his study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, which traces the lineage of the trickster-figure of Yoruba culture, Esu-Elegbara, to his "functional equivalent in Afro-American mythic discourse: that oxymoron the Signifying Monkey" (1988: 11), where he claims that there

> can be little doubt that certain fundamental terms for order that the black enslaved brought with them from Africa, and maintained through the mnemonic devices peculiar to oral literature, continued to function as meaningful units of New World belief systems and as *traces of their origins* …. [The trickster-figure] functions as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, rituals of the repeated oral narration, improvised upon in ritual – especially in the rituals of the repeated oral narrative – and willed to their own subsequent generations, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent.
>
> (Gates 1988: 4-5; my italics)

For Gates, the preservation of certain African cultural indexes in the "new" world allows African-Americans to trace their cultural heritage, but this is a complex endeavour, one that is always "disrupted" by a history of scattered cultures.

At least some of the complexity of the history of the Tar-Baby tale is indicated by Craig Werner in an essay entitled, "The Briar Patch as Modernist Myth: Morrison, Barthes and Tar Baby As-Is", in which he considers the stages in the "ongoing genealogical process" of the tale:

> Originating in Africa, the tale assumes early meaning in trickster cycles that developed prior to extensive contact with Europeans. As an Afro-American folktale, it revoices the African myth as a response to slavery. Retold in Harris's *Uncle Remus*, it enters the mythology of the plantation tradition ….
>
> (Werner 1988: 155)

Werner's observation that the Tar-Baby story sees its origins in African trickster cycles is one that is corroborated by many theorists of African and African-American folktales and storytelling traditions.[2] Martin Bennett states:

> One of the trickster's most famous incarnations is Kweku Ananse, the spider/man from Ghana, though there is also a trickster spider in neighbouring Togo and Ivory Coast .... We must also not forget Ananse's almost identical twin across the ocean in the West Indies. The second trickster to star in these tall tales retold is Tortie the Tortoise from Southern Nigeria and Cameroon. The third trickster, the hairier Hare, hails mostly from Senegambia where he lollops to the name of Leuk. Leuk is also rumoured … to be a distant cousin of that American upstart Brer Rabbit, so the mythical trickster has a way of slipping across boundaries of space as well as time ….
>
> (Bennett 1994: 11)

While Bennett makes an overt reference here to a Senegambian trickster, Leuk the Hare, being the progenitor of the American Brer Rabbit, his words also suggest a large degree of similarity between these three West African trickster figures. Moreover, there is a striking similarity between Bennett's retelling of an Ashanti tale of Ananse,[3] the "spider-trickster", called "The Glue of Greed", and the American Tar-Baby tale (cf Appendix.) What is significant about these observations is not the specific origins of the Brer Rabbit trickster-figure, so much as the very "trickster" nature of that character. The Brer Rabbit character is a permutation of various African trickster-figures,[4] a permutation which does not transform into a stable and static figure, but, like the ongoing process of transformation that attends the trickster's tale, is constantly shifting. In my view, the trickster-figure denotes no single, coherent meaning, but is rather a reflection of the social, political, religious and communal contexts in which he (West African tricksters are traditionally male characters) is spoken or "told".

The basic narrative structures of each transformation of the Tar-Baby tale illustrates the point, since it is the very tricking nature of the trickster that propels all of these narratives, yet the trickster has different social, political and communal significance in each variant of the tale.

African Tale: "The Glue of Greed" (cf Appendix)

The story begins with the trickster's greed. There is narrative "equilibrium" at the outset of the tale, insofar as the trickster destabilises the narrative.

1. The trickster tricks the community in order to fulfil his greed.
2. The trickster's trick makes the community set up a trap – ostensibly to catch a villain and intruder.
3. The trap catches the "villain", who turns out to be the trickster. The trickster is shamed for his greed and his trick in front of the whole community.

African-American: Plantation Stories, the Brer Rabbit Tradition and the Tar-Baby Tale

1. The story begins with the trickster being confronted with a dilemma/ situation to respond to or to be solved. The trickster is under threat at the outset of the story by an opponent who is already trying to trap, and ultimately kill, him.
2. The trickster makes the wrong decision and finds himself trapped.
3. The trickster has to "trick" his way out of the situation – the trick is what frees him from the trap.

Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus Tales: Dominant American Appropriation of the Tar-Baby Tale (cf Appendix)

1. The narrative is the same as that of the African-American tale, but the entire narrative is framed, and spoken, by the Uncle Remus narrator.
2. The story is written, rather than spoken – the storyteller becomes a character in the story itself.[5]

In each transformation of the Tar-Baby tale, it appears that the trickster's significance, or what the trickster signifies, is reliant on external conditions. In the Ashanti version of the tale the trickster compromises his community, and is shamed of his trick. The trickster in this version is a character who signifies a moral lesson in an ambiguous way. For Gates, the African traditions of the trickster "privilege both the figurative and the ambiguous" (Gates 1988: 22), which is a claim that is corroborated by, and expanded upon by Robert Pelton who claims that the trickster is considered by many to be "… the very embodiment of elusiveness" (1980: 1). Pelton describes the

Ashanti trickster Ananse in the following way:

> it is [the] ambiguity of the trickster-figure that … Ananse demonstrates in all the stories about him. He is both fooler and fool, maker and unmade, wily and stupid, subtle and gross, the High God's accomplice and his rival.
>
> (Pelton 1980: 27-28)

Moreover, he states that "[t]ricksterlike, Ananse speaks the truth by dissembling" (Pelton 1980: 2), and this speech is thoroughly ambiguous and complex.

The trickster-figure remains, to a certain extent, ambiguous in his transformation from Ananse the Ashanti spider, to Brer Rabbit, the African-American trickster as evidenced in George Kent's claim that

> a Brer Rabbit story is full of the contradictions of experience – an expression of the existing order of the world and Brer Rabbit's unspecific sense of something "other".
>
> (Kent 1972: 53)

However, the reasons for Brer Rabbit's ambiguity seem to differ greatly from the figure of Anansi. In the African-American version of the tale the trickster maintains moral integrity throughout the story. The trickster in this version of the tale is *forced* into tricking in order to survive the threatening environment in which he finds himself at the outset of the story. Within this oppressive context ambiguity becomes akin to survival and the trickster must, of necessity, rely on his "slipperiness".

The ambiguity of the trickster-figure thereby takes on new political significance in an African-American context. Not only has the trickster shifted from antihero in the Ashanti tradition, to hero in the African-American tradition, but in the African-American version of the tale the trickster can be read as a mask – masking cultural meaning through ambiguity, the cultural and political significance of the trickster remains undetected by the dominant. Thus, Du Bois's "Double Consciousness" which underlies masking, is reiterated in the trickster's capacity to mask. This is corroborated by Gates's discussion of African-American Signification (he refers to the black signifier in the upper case ("Signification") and the white in the lower case ("signification" (1988: 46)), in which he claims that "Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced" (1988: xxv). Unlike white American signification which "depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time", Gates sees African-American Signification as that which "… luxuriates in the free play

of … associative rhetorical and semantic relations" (Gates 1988: 49).

The African-American trickster can, through his ambiguity, be seen to speak with a "double-tongue" or masked language. Gary Saul Morson's elaboration of Bakhtin's notion of double-voice is useful:

> The audience of a double-voiced word is … meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view (or semantic "position") and the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view. I find it helpful to picture a double-voiced word as a special sort of palimpsest in which the upper-most inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience) can know *only by reading through the commentary that obscures in the very process of evaluating.*
>
> (Morson quoted by Gates 1988: 50; my italics)[6]

However, while this may be true of the way in which the double-voice works *within* an African-American context, I would argue that Gates's use of Lacan proves that such a double-process of reading and understanding cannot occur across different cultural contexts, especially when there is an uneven distribution of power between those two contexts. He claims that Lacan considers

> vertically suspended associations [to be] "a whole articulation of relevant contexts", by which he means all of the associations that a signifier carries from other contexts, which must be deleted, ignored, or censored "for this signifier to be lined up with a signified to produce a specific meaning".
>
> (Gates 1988: 50)[7]

While the Lacanian "double-voice" is never lost, insofar as every subject unconsciously speaks both Empty and Full speech, the double-voice that Gates expounds upon is lost in the appropriation of a subordinate text for a dominant audience, because the dominant erases the origins and histories of such sub-ordinate texts in order to produce a meaning specific to the needs and understandings of dominant subjects. Moreover, it is clear that the dominant cannot do justice to the ambiguous and liminal trickster-figure, since such ambiguity, such free-play, threatens hegemonic linearity and structure. The process in which a dominant structure appropriates a marginal and subordinate text, is a process that, it could be argued, occurs precisely *because* the dominant is threatened by that text. Seizing a marginal text for dominant use is a form of censoring that which is most threatening because it cannot be read, or understood, from a dominant subject position.[8]

Thus, Joel Chandler Harris's appropriation, from a dominant[9] subject position, of the Tar-Baby tale, while maintaining the salient narrative of the African-American version of the tale, can be seen to alter crucially the *narrative function* of the trickster-figure. Werner states that

> each version of the story involves one other element basic to its meaning as sign: the frame. This frame may be either textual – the scholarly apparatus of a folklore anthology or Harris's plantation setting – or contextual – the specific circumstances in which the oral tale is related.
>
> (Werner 1988: 154)

Thus, given that the meaning of the story is dependent, to a very large extent, on its textual and contextual frame, the fact that Harris *wrote* the stories, and thereby altered their contextual frame and mode of telling, and, moreover, stereotyped this contextual frame through the Uncle Remus character, his version of the tale can be seen to alter significantly the contextual significance of the story and the characters in the tale. Furthermore, these changes are not simply textual, but crucially political and the appropriation is, therefore, a particularly dishonourable one:

> [a]s Bernard Wolfe demonstrates in …"Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit", the animal tales encode a worldview profoundly incompatible with Joel Chandler Harris's plantation mythology.
>
> (Werner 1988: 153)

Alice Walker, in an essay (originally a lecture given at the Atlanta Historical Society in 1981) entitled "The Dummy in the Window: Joel Chandler Harris and the Invention of Uncle Remus", considers Harris's invention of the Uncle Remus narrator for the Tar-Baby story. She claims:

> In creating Uncle Remus, [Joel Chandler Harris] placed an effective barrier between me and the stories that meant so much to me, the stories that could have meant so much to all of our children, the stories that they would have heard from their own people and not from Walt Disney.
>
> (Walker 1988: 32)

The crucial shift here, then, is to do with the frame – the trickster-figure changes as the narrative frame in which he is "spoken" shifts. Harris states about his Uncle Remus character:

> He was not an invention of my own, but a human syndicate, I might say, of three or four old darkies whom I knew. I just walloped them together into one person and called him "Uncle Remus".
>
> (Walker 1988: 27)

Thus, in Harris's appropriation of the tale, the trickster is framed and spoken by a character who, though benevolent, is stereotyped within dominant white discourse. Uncle Remus becomes a stereotypical "storyteller", which, in the eyes of the dominant is the binary opposite of "author" (i.e. Harris himself): while the author is seen as restrained by reason and guided by a superior knowledge of the narrator, the storyteller himself is considered to be governed by myth and superstition. Therefore, the voice of the storyteller, when depicted in the character of Uncle Remus, is invalidated as a source of wisdom and knowledge and is thereby stripped of its social significance. Moreover, as Walker argues, Harris was a man who was not only completely outside the African-American community, but who degraded that community and was complicit in the dominant white discourses of the time. Thus, the context in which the story is told is altered dramatically, which further changes the ways in which the characters of the story function and signify. The manner in which this new frame alters the role of the trickster is confirmed by Harris's claim that

> [it] needs no scientific investigation to show why he, the negro [sic], selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness. It is not malice but mischievousness. Indeed, the parallel between the case of all animals who must, perforce, triumph through his shrewdness and the humble condition of the slave raconteur is not without its pathos and poetry.
>
> (Harris quoted by Walker 1988: 29)

Harris's claim implies that he considers the Brer Rabbit character of the African-American tale as a figure that martyrs that community within the context of slavery. He acknowledges the context-dependent signification of the story in his claim that there is a "parallel between … [an animal] who must … triumph through his shrewdness, and the humble condition of the slave raconteur" (Harris quoted by Walker 1988: 28). Yet he also sees the choice of a rabbit as the central hero of the tale as one which ameliorates the trickster from its scoundrel-like qualities, making him seem benign and helpless, while the characters of the conniving fox, bear and the wolf are all considered powerful and malicious, thus indicating that in the confrontations

between the rabbit and these predatory creatures, it is only the rabbit's superior intelligence and wit that help him to escape the traps of the physically powerful. Harris seems to revile this reading of the African-American version of the tales – the tone in which he writes of these characters is filled with derision. Therefore, when Harris creates his own narrative frame for the telling of these tales, in the form of the Uncle Remus character, he does it in such a way as to change the social, political and communal significance of the characters of the Brer Rabbit tales. He achieves this by depoliticising the narrator's voice. For Harris Uncle Remus is "an old negro [sic] who appears to be venerable enough to have lived during the period which he describes – who has *nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery*" (1988: 28, my italics). In this comment Harris illustrates the way in which he has completely isolated the Brer Rabbit tales from their present African-American context as well as from the historical trajectory from which they originated. Through providing a depoliticised, decommunalised, deracialised and emasculated narrator, Harris's tales fundamentally changed the social and political significance of the Brer Rabbit tales. This is not to suggest that Harris's version of the tales inverts the significance of the characters – Brer Rabbit does not become a physically overbearing and rancorous trickster, while Brer Fox, Bear and Wolf become the object of the reader's sympathy. Indeed, the opposite is the case: by stereotyping the narrator, through "just walloping" together the "three or four old darkies" whom he knew, Harris caricatures African-American plantation and slave identity and culture, and this in turn ridicules and distorts the significance of the characters and narratives of the stories.

Harris's act of writing the tale also pins down the trickster's complex signification, and deprives him of the "play" and ambiguity crucial to the very definition of the trickster. Deprived of the ambiguity that was enhanced by the orality of the Brer Rabbit storytelling traditions, the trickster becomes one-dimensional – thereby denying him the "double-voice" that allows him to speak to the culture for which he signifies in ways that are incomprehensible to outsiders.

Harris's appropriation of the Brer Rabbit tales thereby constitutes a seizure of a subordinate text for the dominant in which the trickster-figure no longer "signifies", but has come to simply "signify" for a dominant audience. The complex ambiguity that the trickster-figure came to embody in African-American cultures – an ambiguity that had allowed for the recollection of traditions of storytelling, of the "wonderful" and politically necessary ambiguities that those stories used to encode, of lost histories and the reality of having to speak with a double-voice in the context of slavery, is erased in

the "Uncle Remus" version of the tale. Thus, Brer Rabbit is understood as a trickster only in the sense that he tricks the more powerful wolf-figure. The ambiguity of the mask is misread and lost, the double-voice is muted, the context of the plantation becomes void of history, and the trickster-figure who no longer "speaks the truth by dissembling" becomes culturally and politically orphaned.

Notes

1. This applies to various other trickster cycles, but I will focus only on this particular tale.

2. An example is William Bascom's *African Folktales in the New World*, in which he examines the African lineage of various African-American tales, making specific reference to "the Uncle Remus tales" (xiii) and finds a great deal of evidence to verify H.H. Smith's claim of 1879 that "the animal stories told by the negroes [sic] in [the] Southern States … were brought by them from Africa" (cf Bascom 1992: xiii). I do not intend to provide a folklorist approach to the Tar-Baby tale. Instead, I accept the arguments of Werner, Bennett and Bascom who find adequate evidence of the links between various West African stories and tales, and the African-American Tar-Baby tale.

3. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* also mentions the resemblance between Brer Rabbit and "the two major tricksters of Africa (Anansi, the Ashanti Spider, and Ijapa, the Yoruba turtle)" (1997: 97).

4. This does not suggest that all African trickster-tales and -figures are all so similar as to be replaceable by, and with, one another, but that what is pertinent to this study are the similarities between such trickster-figures. Moreover, I do not intend to refer to "African" tales in an uncritical and general manner.

5. Moreover, the storyteller's voice is itself represented here by Harris, which poses various problems regarding the use of vernacular. I find Tommy Lott's (1994) discussion on such problems particularly insightful. Houston A. Baker Jr's often cited *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) is also significant in terms of these issues.

6. cf Morson 1981: 108.

7. cf Lacan 1977: 154.

8. Blackface was another example of such an appropriation, in which a black

American minstrel tradition was appropriated for the purposes of parody and caricature by a dominant white American culture.

9. Although Harris has been considered by many to be "one of the first writers in any country to admire and to make use of traditional black culture", and is "often praised for the accuracy of his black dialect, and for his sensitive appreciation of black folklore", (Forkner & Samway 1989: 185) the argument that follows will indicate that Harris was far from "sensitive" in his appropriation of black stories, and that his own dominant subject position was ever-present in his retelling of the Brer Rabbit tales.

Appendix

The Glue of Greed (as retold by Martin Bennett)

It was getting to harvest time in the village. Ananse, World Champion for Greed and Fast-Eating … could hardly wait. Yam! Yam! Yam! Pounded yam as high and round as a hill! Ananse's stomach beat like a drum at the thought of it. But …. There was a problem.

Ananse wanted all that food for himself. And himself alone. The idea was that anyone [who] should share it with him was most distasteful. And when those to share in it were his own family, his own flesh-and-stomach, that was more distasteful still. Whatever the laws of heredity said otherwise, he would not let it happen. No way! And as he and his family made their way home from the farm, Ananse thought out a plan. He was not Ananse for nothing. He would show them that when it came to eating he could beat anyone, even his own family, spidery greedy-guts that they were.

Then that same evening at table a very strange thing happened. The first bowls of groundnut soup and pounded yam had just been emptied.

"More!" cried Kwesi.

"More!" cried Kojo.

"More!" cried Kwame.

"More!" cried Kobbina, last but by no means least, completing the hungry chorus.

"Ha … ba! What terrible children!" scolded Mrs. Ananse, otherwise known as Anansia. "What terrible appetites! Like holes that get bigger and emptier with filling. Why, you would eat the table if I put sauce on it! Don't you know that the second helping is always reserved for your father? Wait till harvest comes, then you will be able to get your second helpings, and even a third and fourth ones if you like ..."

Mrs Ananse turned to her husband at the head of the table.
"Now, my dear, have some more groundnut soup, you know it's your favourite."

But instead of automatically holding out his bowl as usual, Ananse just sat there and said, "I'm sorry, my sweetie, but you see … I am not hungry …"

"Not hungry!?! Have my ears heard correct? How possible? Is this my very own Ananse talking or someone in disguise? Ananse refusing food? And after all the pounding I have done? Or perhaps you have been taking food outside? My husband, look me in the eyes and tell me."

"No, it's not that, my dear, don't vex! It's just that since this afternoon on the farm, I have not been feeling quite myself …. Er, if you will excuse me, I think I had better go to bed and rest."

Mrs. Ananse readily agreed. For the first time in history, ancient or modern, her husband refused to eat. It was a sign that Ananse must be very ill indeed.

"Ooooh! Aaaaah! Ooooooh!"

All night the small hut echoed with Ananse's cries of pain until the walls themselves seemed to ache in sympathy.

"'Ooooh! Aaaaah! Ooooooh! Aaaaah!" again and again until Mrs. Ananse decided it was time to call … [the] doctor …. A waiting and keen-eared monkey picked up the message and flew with it through the trees as fast as his long arms would carry him. A final leap and he reached the doctor's surgery. There was no time to lose. The doctor packed some leaves and potions into a bag and made his way through the shadows to Ananse's hut. By the time he had arrived, Ananse was almost too weak to speak.

To his expert "How are you?", Ananse could only groan from beneath the bedclothes, "Worse … and … worse." Each word, it seemed, threatened to be Ananse's last.

The doctor's visits increased …. "I cannot understand it", the traditional doctor said to Mrs Ananse in private. "I have tried every leaf and root in the rain forest and not a few from the savannah as well. But your husband is not responding to any of them."

"Oh, doctor!" poor Mrs Ananse replied, wringing her eight legs. "Please do something. Anything. This afternoon I offered Ananse a groundnut, just a tiny groundnut. And Ananse told me it was too much, that if he ate it he might vomit. Oh! Oh! I am too old to become a widow!"

The following day it seemed her worst fears were about to come true.

Ananse raised a trembling leg from beneath the bedclothes on his bamboo bed and beckoned to his wife. "Anansia …" he gasped in an uphill voice. "Bring me … a … pen … and paper. Yes, dear …. My time … has … has come … like it must come … to us all and … and I wish to make my last will

… and … testament …. My wife …. I leave all … all my earthly possessions to you … and … the children …. Only …. My wife. …. Listen very carefully …. When they bury me …. Don't forget to put plenty … plenty of salt and pepper … and dried shrimps … .You know, my dear, how I like … dried shrimps in my soup …. Yes, in the next world … my spirit will need feeding …. Also, put plenty of kerosene …. Who … who … who knows whether kerosene is scarce in the next world as … as it is on earth …. Next …. Listen well …. Anansia … this is most important of all …. Take my coffin to the middle of the farm …. Bury me right in the middle … so … so … my spirit can be near … near … you and protect you …. But … but … but … I am … too … tooo … weak … toooo."

And with a last sigh Ananse said no more.

"Speak, Ananse! …. Speak, my husband! …. Speak!"

But it seemed that Ananse was dead.

The whole village mourned. Libations were poured; speeches and tributes were made in Ananse's honour, first by Tortoise, his international rival in trickery, then by the other animals. It was a sad occasion indeed. Even the laughing hyena was weeping. The elephant shed tears by the bucketful, and the dog howled and howled. There in the special circular-shaped coffin Ananse's body rested in state, his eight arms tucked neatly by his side, his mouth set in an unearthly smile. "Perhaps he is dreaming about heavenly and never-ending mountains of fufu", Mister Monkey thought to himself, only he was too polite to say it.

The same afternoon, amidst the beating of drums … Ananse's coffin was loaded on the ox's back and carried to the middle of the farm exactly as Ananse had instructed. A hole was dug and the special circular-shaped coffin lowered into it with a rope. The last soil dropped on the coffin lid, and the mourners filed sadly home.

The sun went down on the empty field and slowly, silently, rose the moon.

Then, out of the coffin, slowly, silently, appeared an arm, then another, then another, then another, all the way up to eight. Then, slowly, silently, rose the head of Ananse; not all, just the eyes rolling beadily around on stalks, taking in the lie of the land to make sure nobody was watching.

The field was empty.

There in the moonlight and the shadows Ananse came out of his coffin and held his stomach with laughter.

"So, I tricked them this time!" he snorted through his furry nostrils. "I really tricked them this time! They thought I was dying. But I wasn't dying at all. When I refused that groundnut, what they did not know was that I had my

own secret supply under the bed all the time. Oh, the fools! But I am feeling hungry again. Let me not waste time ….”

And there in the yam field, Ananse started pulling up his yams as fast as he could get his eight hands on them. Yams and more yams, the very ones he and his family had spent all those back-breaking months planting! Soon he had a pile of them, the fattest and the tastiest he could find. Then he brought out from his coffin his small kerosene stove and his kingsize pots and his cooking oil. He shaved and cut up the pile of yams, added the necessary ingredients, lit the stove, and hummed tunes as if to hurry the cooking along.

At last, Ananse's private feast was ready. Himself as host, chief honourable guest, and other invitees combined, soon he was eating, eating, eating to his heart and stomach's content. Several pots of food later, he had finished. Ananse lowered himself back into his coffin, skillfully scraped soil on top and in no time was sleeping off the after-effects of his massive meal.

An hour later along came the sun. And along came Ananse's family, their shadows spidering out in front of them. The field was just as they had left it. Or almost.

Things are not always what they seem on the surface. Imagine their surprise when they dug a foot-or-two below the soil and found half of their harvest missing. Had they got the wrong field? But no. One memory might be wrong, but not five memories together and all in exactly the same way. What thief, then, could have done it? Not to mention the insult to their late and dear departed. If the thief had no sympathy for the dead, he might at least respect them and leave them to their eternal rest.

What was to be done? “Gong! Gong! Gong!” It was not long before the village crier had been informed and he was summoning the elders and local wisemen for a meeting. What was the best method to catch this yam-stealer and disturber of the dead as well as of the living? With calabashes of freshly-tapped palm wine on hand to provide refreshment and inspiration, the elders scratched their heads through more and more speeches and the orangutan scratched his armpits. Several thousand words and many proverbs later they had come up with a definite plan. They could not catch the thief in any obvious way; he was obviously far too clever for that. No, they would catch him with a trick even the trickiest trickster would not be able to wriggle free from. They would …. Well, we will come to that later.

Meanwhile, back in the yam field, night after night, when his family and everyone else had gone home, Ananse rose from the coffin, pulled up some yams, cooked them on his secret stove, then ate them … and ate them … and ate them … and was still eating them when, one night, in mid-mouthful, he stopped. Before him in the moonlight stood a skinny, scruffy looking figure

stretching out his arms.

"Hey, you! So you don't know who owns this farm? Go away, you rogue, you hear!" shouted Ananse as bravely as he could manage.

But the figure did nothing. Just stood and stood and stood there like a towering dummy.

"U-Uh! So you don't know Ananse, Kweku Ananse, World Champion for greed and fast eating?! Or perhaps you are deaf? Whoever-you-are, I said get out from this my farm or I will make trouble, I am telling you!"

Still the weird figure just stood there. And stood there. And stood there.

This was too much for Ananse.

"So you are dumb as well as deaf, are you? We will see about that! If you won't respect the living, at least you might learn some respect for the dead. So you don't know that I have just risen from the grave? You don't know that I am a ghost? And you know what ghosts can do, don't you? Or do you want me to give you a demonstration of my supernatural powers? I am warning you. Uh? …. Uh? … .All right, Mister Man or Whatever-You-Are, enough is enough …. All right, if, er, words don't frighten you, take this!"

And there in the moonlight, Ananse gave the figure a definitely unsupernatural slap …. First – Thwack! – with one arm and then … and then … But Ananse's arm had stuck.

"Ho! So you think that you can lay hold of me like that, do you? And on my own farm too? All right then, if I can't slap sense into you, let me kick sense into you! Take this!"

His leg stuck.

"Huh! This is getting serious. Take this then!"

His next leg stuck also. Hmmm. This was more than serious. Ananse, who had in his time beaten the hippopotamus and the elephant in a single duel, had never met such an opponent before. He wiggled. He squiggled. He jiggled. He wriggled. And he would even have ziggled if such a word existed. In this world or the next, what kind of opposition was this?

Ananse was now stuck – from his furry head to his eight hands-or-feet. Worst of all, his opponent had not yet uttered a word. Ananse's pride and anger now turned to beggarly fear.

"Look Mister Man-Or-Whoever-Or-Whatever-You-Are, I beg. I am sorry for what I must have said just now, about you being a thief and me being a ghost. I didn't mean it …. Just let me go. If you are hungry I will share my food with you if you like …. Or if the food is not enough, I can always cook some more …. All right, how many yams do you want? Fifty, a hundred? Just let me go. All right, take the whole harvest, I don't mind. Only put me down, I am aching. Oh, Mister Man, please, pleasssse!"

Little did Ananse know that he was not speaking to a man at all. Not even a deaf-and-dumb one. No, the man was … a scarecrow, covered with the stickiest, gummiest gum from the stickiest, gummiest gumtree the forest could provide. However much Ananse begged or shouted, it did not listen but just kept on holding Ananse till along came the sun, big and red, at the far end of the field.

And along with it came Ananse's family.

If Ananse's death had been a shock, if the disappearance of their yam harvest had been another, then here was the shockingest shock of all. There was their dear and late departed risen from the dead and dangling in mid-air. If Ananse were really a returning ancestor or spirit, certainly no ancestor had returned to earth in such a form. Or so soon. Was it really possible to reach heaven so quickly? Or the other place?

Ah, the disgrace of it!

Before anyone dared to bring Ananse down from his peculiar sticking place, he was forced, painfully, shamefully, to confess to everything, from his eating half the yam harvest, right down to his refusing to eat that single groundnut because he had a whole store of them under his bed all the time. No wonder the traditional doctor had rustled and shuffled his leaves in vain.

Poor Ananse! How small he felt! Somebody brought a pot of boiling water and, limb by limb, he was unstuck and brought back down to earth. As punishment, all Ananse's cooking implements were confiscated indefinitely. Until the next yam harvest, Anansia refused to cook anything for him but bread and water. And, of course, she did not forget this time to check under Ananse's bed for any hidden supplies of groundnuts.

"All right, if you refuse to cook for me", Ananse threatened, "I will go and marry a second wife who will, just you wait and see!" But then Ananse had become so infamous, no female would have him ….What was left but for Ananse to go back home for his evening bread and water?

And that is why, kind listeners, when you see a spider hiding there so tinily in the corner of you house, it is only Ananse. Still, after all these years, he has not forgotten his lesson (Bennett 1994: 11-12).

The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story (As retold by Joel Chandler Harris)

"Didn't the fox never catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?" asked the little boy the next evening.

"He come mighty nigh it, honey, sho's you born – Brer Fox did. One day

atter Brer Rabbit fool 'im wid dat calamus root, Brer Fox went ter wuk en got 'im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun w'at he call a Tar-Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot 'er in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de news wuz gwine ter be. En he didn't hatter wait long, nudder, kaze bimeby here come Brer Rabbit pacin' down de road – lippity-clippity, clippity-lippity – dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit come prancin' 'long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz 'stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"'Mawnin'!" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee – "nice wedder dis mawnin", sezee.

"Tar-Baby ain't sayin' 'nuthin', en Brer Fox he lay low.

"'How duz yo' sym'tums seem ter segashuate?' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

"Brer Fox, he wink his eye slow, en lay low, en de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'.

"'How you come on, den? Is you deaf?' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. 'Kaze if you is, I kin holler louder', sezee.

"Tar-Baby stay still", en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"You er stuck up, dat's w'at you is', says Brer Rabbit, sezee, "en I'm gwine ter kyore you, dat's w'at I'm a gwine ter do", sezee.

"Brer Fox, he sorter chuckle in his stummick, he did, but Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothin'".

"'I'm gwine ter larn you how ter talk ter 'spectubble folks ef hit's de las' ack, sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

'Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gwine ter bus' you wide open', sezee.

"Tar Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Brer Rabbit keep on axin' 'im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin' nothin', twel present'y Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis', he did, en blip he tuck 'er side er de head. Right dar's whar he broke his merlasses jug. His fis' stuck, en he can't pull loose. De tar hilt 'im. But Tar-Baby, she stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"'Ef you don't lemme loose, I'll knock you agin', sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, en wid dat he fotch 'er a wipe wid de udder han', en dat stuck. Tar-Baby, she ain'y sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"'Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natal stuffin' outen you', sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'. She des hilt on, en de Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way. Brer Fox, he lay low. Den Brer Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt 'er crank-sided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' dez ez innercent ez wunner yo' mammy's mockin'-birds.

"'Howdy, Brer Rabbit', sez Brer Fox, sezee. 'You look sorter stuck up dis mawnin', sezee, en den he rolled on de groun', en laft en laft twel he couldn't laff no mo'. 'I speck you'll take dinner wid me dis time, Brer Rabbit. I done laid in some calamus root, en I ain't gwineter take no skuse', sez Brer Fox, sezee".

Here Uncle Remus paused, and drew a two-pound yam out of the ashes.
"Did the fox eat the rabbit?" asked the little boy to whom the story had been told.

"Dat's all de fur de tale goes", replied the old man. "He mout, an den agin he moutent. Some say Judge B'ar come 'long en loosed 'im — some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin'. You better run 'long" (Harris 1904: 9).

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