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SWEET POTATO PIE AND SUCH

A Storytelling Experience

STUDY GUIDE

Queen Nur

BACKGROUND ON STORYTELLING

Storytelling is older than all other creative arts. It is said to be older than history. Storytelling transcends time, continents, and civilizations. It originated on the African continent and spread throughout the world. Stories may differ from place to place. In some cultures such as in Ghana, the teller is expected to repeat a story as it has been told for generations. It is not unusual to find a storyteller being interrupted by a listener if the style or content of a traditional story has been altered by the teller. In other instances, stories often change to fit the time and context in which they are being told, but universally, storytelling has continued to fill the same basic social and individual needs.

Stories are:

1. ...the way in which the history, traditions and cultural values are passed on from generation to generation.
2. ...the way in which the rules of the community are reinforced with children.
3. ...a way of explaining natural phenomena (*why* or *porquois* stories)
4. ...a fundamental unit of knowledge.
5. ...the foundation of memory.
6. ...essential to the way we make sense of our lives: the beginning, the middle and end of our personal and collective trajectories.

The early storyteller was established as the bringer of good news, the historian, the disperser of the culture, the upholder of religious belief systems and morals, and an entertainer. In many West African cultures there was the "resident storyteller" (*griot*, *djali*, or *Jali*) who was assigned to chiefs, royalty, and others with status in the community. His position was one of high honor, great respect, and power. The "travelling storyteller" went from village to village with tales, anecdotes, fables, accounts of natural disasters, births, deaths, successions, songs, and any event that affected the welfare of the people.

In the mid-to-late 1800's, folklorists began to seek out and preserve traditional African tales in written form. Collections of narratives became an important part of the preservation of the oral tradition. Out of this work came many anthologies of African and African American folktales by folklorists and researchers such as Roger Abrahams, Harold Courlander, B.A. Botkin and William Faulkner.

GETTING READY FOR THE STORYTELLER – Suggested Activities

BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE

Familiarize your children with African and African American folktales by:

...reading aloud or having your children read several folktales (consult your school librarian for help, or refer to the sources in this guide)

...choose an Anansi story, a tall tale, a dilemma tale (the resolution of a conflict is left for the listeners to discuss), a story that offers an explanation for natural phenomena (a *porquoi* or *why* tale) such as *Why Mosquitos Buzz in People's Ears*. Do any of the stories have morals or lessons? What are they?

...try to find two versions of the same story. Have children make comparisons between the two.

...encourage students to **tell** – not read – a story they are already familiar with. Discuss the differences between telling a story and reading that same story from a book.

...have your students brainstorm what they think a storyteller might do to make a story interesting to the audience. Make a list on chart paper. Encourage them to watch and listen carefully during the performance to observe the storyteller's voice, facial expressions, and body movements. Are there instruments used? How are they used in telling the story?

Please note: *It is important to refer to the **African continent** as just that – a **continent**. It is as diverse, if not more so, than the European continent. There are 52 separate countries and hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, cultural traditions and belief systems within each country's borders. Just as we make a point to clearly identify Poles, Czechs, Armenians, Scots, Celts, Welsh, Bosnians, Serbs, Croats, or the Hmong, we must also make a point to do the same when referring to inhabitants of the vast and ethnically diverse continent of Africa.*

Familiarize your students with the names, locations, and diverse cultures of the African continent by:

...identifying the ethnic group, culture, or country associated with the stories you use. Write and speak the name of the group or region of origin when referring to the story. *Example:* Anansi stories were created by the Ashanti people of what is now Ghana in the western part of the continent. Sungura the trickster rabbit comes from Kenya on the opposite side of the continent. The land areas, peoples, and lifestyles are all different.

...identifying on a map or globe – not just the African continent – but the country (and ethnic group or culture where possible) of the story's origin. *Examples:* The Ashanti of Ghana, the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Baganda of Uganda, the Shona of Zimbabwe.

...selecting an ethnic group, country or region of the continent. Research and explore the cultural traditions, foods, clothing, family structures, and languages of that region.

...if you have access to a computer, search through an encyclopedia on CD-ROM (such as *Grolier's* or *Encarta*). Type in (or click-on) and African country and download or print out the information. What do you discover that you didn't know before? Did you discover information that is on your brainstormed list?

DURING THE PERFORMANCE

Listen and observe the storyteller carefully. Participate when asked.

Notice how the storyteller uses his or her voice? Take notice of any additional items that the teller uses to enhance the story.

Visualize the setting of the characters of the story.

Be aware of what parts of the stories make you laugh, feel empathy, excitement, sorrow, fear, or suspense. Did any of the situations in the story sound familiar to you? What were they?

If the story has animal characters, pay attention to their behavior in the story. Do they take on human characteristics?

Notice if a character – human or animal – learns a lesson in the story. Is there something in the story that the listener can learn from?

AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

Review the list that was brainstormed before the performance. Ask your students to see if there are any items on the list that the storyteller incorporated into her storytelling style. Ask them to recall anything the storyteller did that was not on the list.

What specific things held their attention the most?

Did any of the stories leave them with something to think about or discuss? What, if any, lessons were learned from the stories? Which stories? What were the lessons?

If there were instruments, how were they used to enhance the story?

Which of the stories did you most enjoy? Retell the story in your own way.

Illustrate one of the stories.

Research and select a different story for telling.

Create your own story – one that teaches a lesson perhaps.

Sweet Potato Pie and Such

Story Repertoire

Queen Nur

The performance will include stories selected from the following repertoire.*

**story selections will vary*

Sweet Potato Pie Call is an original work song sung in a traditional format.

Ruth Oree's Sweet Potato Pie is a contemporary version of Red Riding Hood written by Queen Nur. It shares folkways of city life and lessons of truth centered around a family's traditional sweet potato pie.

John The Rabbit is a call and response traditional song from the time period when Africans were enslaved in America. It was used to teach children how to follow directions. Its primary function was as a coded message. While singing about a rabbit and a garden, the captives were planning their escape.

Harriet Tubman Didn't Take No Stuff is a retelling of Eloise Greenfield's popular poem. The storytellers add to the verses a phrase involving the audience through motion and singing.

Zora Neale Hurston and The Chinaberry Tree written by William Miller is a story that embodies the pursuit of hopes and dreams and overcoming circumstances. The story shares the childhood experiences of one of America's folklorist.

The Lion and The Hare is an interactive retelling of a favorite animal tale. The hare tricks the lion into acting like a horse. Students learn lessons of self-esteem and self-determination while engaging in thigh pats, singing and call and response.

Healing Hands is a telling of a traditional African tale. The written version is entitled The River That Gave Gifts. A very special celebration will take place for an elder mother. One little girl believes that she only has ordinary hands and cannot make her a special gift. However, nature reveals her inherent gift of healing. This is a story of self-discovery and identifying and appreciating the gifts each of us have.

In The Time of The Drum embodies life lessons learned by a young boy named Mentu. His teacher is Twe, his grandmother. The story takes place on an island during the time when African people were in captivity and bondage. This story comes from the Georgia Sea Island Tradition.

Baba Rabbit & The Coconut Tree tells how Baba rabbit's cousin Brer Rabbit, deals with the greed of his neighbors. The story ends with an African American proverb that says "Ashes fly back into the face of those who throw them."

Rafiki written and illustrated by Nola Langner, this animal tale speaks to gender equity. The animals all live in the same house and are told "animals do not clean, only little girls clean." Then, one day a little girl comes walking through the forest. Lessons are learned and attitudes are changed in this dancing story.

The Black Inventors Rap is an original call and response rap that teaches the inventions of various African and African American inventors.

Women's First is an interactive rap honoring women who made first achievements. "It's alright to rearrange. It's all right to make a change."

Story Repertoire, continued

The Kwanzaa Yam Story is Queen Nur's repetitive retelling of a traditional Russian animal tale. It includes the seven principles of Kwanzaa, and the Kwanzaa symbols, and shouts of "Harambee" (Let's pull together) as all try to pull up a stubborn yam.

Jump Down Turn Around is a traditional work song used while picking cotton. Introduced by having the audience use math skills, the song bellows the emotion of working with family, while enduring the work. Selected participants join the storytellers to perform the work movements.

Mary McCleod Bethune Story is a story about a little girl who turned her desire to read (at a time when she would not have been allowed to pick up a book) into a life-long mission. As a civil activist and advocate of education, Mary was a soldier of truth, faith, and determination.

RESOURCE LIST*

Storytelling Websites:

National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc. WWW.NABSNET.ORG

National Storytelling Network WWW.STORYNET.ORG

Recordings by Queen Nur: *Sweet Potato Pie and Such* and *Generation to Generation*

Suggested Reading

A Story, A Story by Gail E. Haley. New York: Atheneum, 1970. The story of how Anansi brought "spider stories" to the world.

Misoso: Once Upon a Time Tales from Africa by Verna Aardema. New York: Knopf, 1994. A collection of twelve folktales from different parts of Africa.

The Hat-Shaking Dance, and other Tales from the Gold Coast by Harold Courlander. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1957. A collection of traditional Ashanti tales.

The Storytelling Handbook: a Young People's Collection of Unusual Tales and Helpful Hints on How to Tell Them by Anne Pellowski (1995).

The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales by Virginia Hamilton. New York: Knopf, 1985

*WANT MORE INFORMATION?

An extensive ***EDUCATORS' RESOURCE GUIDE*** by Queen Nur is available from Theatreworks/USA upon request. A **KWANZAA** supplemental packet is also available. Contact us at (212) 647-1100 to request copies.



151 West 26th Street
New York, NY 10001
212.647.1100
www.twusa.org