

Greetings from Ghana #17 Let Me Tell You a Story

I am not a prolific traveler but I have been to a few places over the years and I have discovered that the older societies tend to have legends, stories, and myths that fascinate me. The ones here in Ghana might be surprising to you (some were to me) but others have almost a ring of familiarity. Many cultures believe in the spirit world.

In Klobatem, Togo, it is not uncommon to see shrines to the gods of the woods. Or one will be set up where the person or family feels it will best be met by the spirit. So it might be at a dirt road intersection, a sheltered area as you enter a woods, or in the shade of a tree.



Togo has the largest fetish market in the world located in Lome'. Need lizard teeth and three different animal skulls for a ceremony? Not a problem. When the former King of Zogbedji fell ill and went to the hospital where he died the next day, villagers said he had been cursed. Beliefs run strong.

There used to be a voodoo high priestess on Ghanaian television who talked about sacrificing human organs to create wealth . . .until two teenagers believed her and killed a woman to become rich. The TV hostess served some prison time and was released early after converting to Christianity and becoming a minister. Yes, voodoo and the belief in spirits and demons is very real here.

Perhaps the most prolific of the Ghanaian folklore characters is Anansi, the spirit of mischief and cunning, who often takes the shape of a spider. He is said to have originated in the tales of the Ashanti tribe. Centuries ago the Ashanti formed a confederation and became the dominate force in western Africa for many years. Their influence and stories were carried to the Caribbean and to the Southern United States. Despite that, some of the local legends remained in country.

One of their legends (and I am sure there are more than I am aware of) concerns a Chief of the Northern region who had a young son. One day the boy went to play with some of his mates. After playing with them for a while he said he was going to sit under a tree and rest. The children forgot about him and went to their homes after play.

That evening the King thought the boy was with the mother. The mother thought the boy was with the King. When they discovered that the boy was not home the King ordered his subjects to search their neighborhoods for him. He was not to be found.

The King called his warriors and sent them out to find his son. Because it was night and dark the warriors carried torches in search of him. They found the boy under a tree fast asleep and sent him home to his parents. The desperate parents thought the tree had stolen the child and hidden him. They considered the tree an evil tree and threw the torches they were carrying on it and shamed (punished) it.

The community considered it an evil tree and feared it. The King decreed that the event should be marked yearly to commemorate the event of the tree being punished. The festival is called Bugum Chugu,(the Fire Festival). It is held around the 9th of August.

During the day of the Fire Festival, villagers prepare massive amounts of food and take pots of food to neighbors and family. After the evening meal some food is placed on the top of the short walls in the house as an offering to deceased relatives and to God.



As evening approaches drummers begin playing and proceed to outside of the chief's palace. The Elders gather and enter the palace to invite the Chief outside. The chief comes out and lights his torch. He carries it away from the palace and then throws it on the ground for his subjects, now dressed as warriors - dancing and chanting to the thunderous drums - light their torches, hold them above their heads and dance in a procession to the tree just outside of the village. Some of the men will douse their clothes with water to prevent their clothes from catching sparks during the procession.

Some of the men carry swords, cutlasses, knives, bows and arrows and cudgels. Some carry guns filled with powder but no bullets. The mood is war-like. A bowl of holy water is brought out and people believe if you drink from it your medical maladies will be cured and you will live "to throw fire again."



Somehow over the years people have believed that if your “magic” is good then you cannot be cut or burned during the ceremony. People will drag swords across their body parts.



Others will sit in the fire or play with it and pile it around themselves, believing that their magic will prevent injuries. If someone becomes injured from the fire or the weapons it is because their belief was not strong and they did not have the power in their magic.

