

**UCLA**

**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

Gale, Steven H. West African Folktales

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/95v711tz>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 23(1)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Author**

Dakar, Laini

**Publication Date**

1995

**DOI**

10.5070/F7231016703

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 1995 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Gale, Steven H. *West African Folktales*. Lincolnwood, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1995.

In *West African Folktales*, timeless tales from 15 countries are presented by Dr. Stephen H. Gale. These stories were collected during his residencies throughout Africa. The short stories in this book offer insight into West African cultures from Angola to Senegal and merit a trip to the bookstore. Gale's collection of folktales provides evidence of the great significance oral traditions have in African history and culture. These legendary stories have traditionally functioned as teaching tools, commonly told by older generations to younger members of the community.

Gale, the University Endowed Professor in the Humanities at Kentucky State University, has gathered 42 tales (at least one from each West African country) circulated among different ethnic groups in the region. He writes:

African tales interest and amuse audiences, while passing along historic and religious myths, lessons about preferred social behavior, and practical advice related to daily activities such as hunting, farming, childrearing, governing, and so forth (xiv).

The tales seem to concern five basic themes and/or issues: pride, greed, a lack of faith, untrustworthiness, and the history of the community. The historical narratives attempt to explain "why things are done in certain ways, how specific habits or practices evolved, to how a precise location has taken on a sacred significance" (xvii).

Many stories feature animal characters representing human attributes, usually involving some form of trickery. One such tale is "A Test Of Strength" as told by the Mpongwe of Gabon. This story of pride, in which the witty tortoise challenges the strength and intelligence of both the elephant and hippopotamus, concerns issues of equality. In addition to animals, fabled creatures are sometimes major characters in the stories, as in one of the Liberian tales, "The Mammy Water," in which the male character must perform yearly sacrifices to the queen, a mermaid, in exchange for money and wealth. Most of the Liberian tales present the aforementioned topics in distorted pictures. This tale of greed, for example, tells of the many killings of human beings explained through artificial circumstances.

Many stories in this collection end with dilemmas, which are meant to raise intellectual questions rather than provide answers. In "The Hunter and the Boa Constrictor," a tale told in the Ivory Coast, the Hunter is left with an ironic decision brought on by his own lack of faith.

In order to maintain a good relationship with the queen, the man must perform yearly human sacrifices...Since he has been given the power to change into any of the sea animals, he can utilize this means to wreck boats, ships, and steam engines (145).

The vernacular used by the storyteller is not to be associated with an uneducated teller, especially considering the strong, and oftentimes violent, subject matters. Usually there is little descriptive detail supplied in these tales, presumably because the local audience is familiar with the community in which the tale is set. The use of the third person, a simple narrative structure, is standard in all of the tales, however, the logic behind the stories may often be illusive. Exaggerated humor and laughter are important in some tales, as in the story of untrustworthiness presented by the Mende of Sierra Leone. In "Three Very Fast Men," the men working in the fields use superhuman efforts to prevent others (including animals) from stealing a hard day's worth of work: " 'What do you think you are trying to do?,' he said to the hawk. 'Are you trying to steal my chickens? It is a good thing that I am too fast for you' " (192).

"The Creation of the Universe," a story from the Yoruba of Nigeria, is a particularly illuminative historical narrative which describes how the universe and human beings were created. The disagreements between the gods, in addition to their weaknesses, help explain an imperfect world.

These are not just short stories to be compared to familiar Western fairy tales. They represent a performance art which stirs emotions, educates, and raises questions within various African cultures through symbolism and generalizations about human existence. Yet the ideas presented in these tales are not limited to the region, as people from all cultures can relate to them. For example, "The Chief's Daughter" is a tale that explains the common pursuit of money by people, a message those in Western cultures can especially relate to.

For African history and culture enthusiasts, Gale has presented an enjoyable volume of folktales full of dreams, animals, wickedness, journeys, riddles, and myths. However, the inclusion of information on the specific ethnicity and historical period from which the individual stories were collected would have greatly enhanced each tale.

Laini Dakar