From West Africa to West Philadelphia

Storytelling Traditions of Philadelphia’s Liberian Elders

A Collaborative Project of

The Center for Folklore and Ethnography
University of Pennsylvania

and

The Agape African Senior Citizens Center
229 North 63rd Street

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
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This collection of stories is the result of an ongoing collaboration between Penn’s Center for Folklore and Ethnography and the Agape African Senior Citizens Center of West Philadelphia. In 2004, Meltem Turksoy, a newly-graduated Ph.D. alumna of the Graduate Program in Folklore and Folklife, sought to create a service-learning course that would engage Penn’s undergraduates in folklore fieldwork as a means of bridging across cultures, while reflecting on the civics of cultural brokerage. It was not long before Meltem’s fieldwork in West Philadelphia led her to the office of the Rev. John R. Jallah, a Baptist minister from Lofa County in Liberia who founded the Agape Center. But Rev. Jallah and Mr. Prall cautioned Meltem that performing any service for the elders of this refugee community would require that students themselves first study the history that brought so many refugees here from Liberia, and learn culturally appropriate ways of dressing, behaving, and communicating. On this foundation, Meltem launched Folklore/Urban Studies 321, Exploring Memory and Tradition in Philadelphia Communities. This course is now regularly offered as a Nettet Center for Community Partnerships Academically-Based Community Service Course.

The course that Meltem taught in the spring semester of 2005 culminated with a visit from the Agape seniors to the University of Pennsylvania’s Folklore Archive. The elders brought with them a lavish sampler of traditional Liberian foods: goat meat and fish in palaver sauce, okra soup, sweet potato greens, fufu, rice bread, ginger beer and much more. Many guests at the event, Penn faculty and students, were meeting the elders for the first time. When the meal was finished, Meltem asked Edith Hill if she would like to tell a story. In response, Edith stood and announced: “Once upon a Time!”

And all of the elders, along with Meltem and her students, replied with gusto: “Time!”

To the delight of everyone there, one after another of the elders stood and offered a tale. Some told traditional West African animal stories, while others challenged us with “dilemmas,” those African tales with endings that can only be resolved through the deliberations of a jury appointed by the tale teller. As Rev. Jallah interpreted and contextualized the tales, we understood that the stories are outcroppings of deep veins of knowledge, cultural memory, and identity. In a traditional Liberian setting, such stories would be a primary means of building character as well as verbal dexterity and mental acuity in children.

Here in the United States, the elders are putting the stories to work in a new way. The community that assembles in the space of the Agape Center would be less likely to gather in Liberia’s interior counties. At home, the elders are putting the stories to work in their neighborhood. The elders are telling their stories in their tribal languages: Loma, Bassa, Kru, Krio, Krahn, and Mende, to name a few. Here, they must demonstrate the story-telling artistry of a Liberian elder, the only language understood by all the elders. Thus, exchanging stories over lunch at the Agape Center, the elders build community across tribal and cultural difference, using a second language.

The following year we offered this service learning class again, this time to explore more fully the civics of service learning as cultural brokerage. Can the University support the remapping of refugee worlds in West Philadelphia communities by collaborating on the cultural production of public space? In addition to the Folklore Archive, two more spaces appeared on campus in 2006: one in the Arts Café at the Kelly Writer’s House, where the elders performed as verbal artists, the other in the storage facility at the University Museum, where the elders perused and commented on artifacts collected from Sierra Leone in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Liberian English can be difficult for Americans to understand until they become familiar with it. As Rev. Jallah put it, “You have to tune your ears.” The service learners decided that, rather than render the stories completely in writing, we would provide the audience with written cues to assist this tuning of the ears. Accordingly, the service learners created visual and written cues to assist this tuning of the ears. The service learners produced a set of abstracts and visualizations to assist this tuning of the ears.

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Liberia and the Philadelphia Community

Liberia, Africa’s oldest independent republic, is a small West African nation with a population of approximately 3.5 million, including seventeen major ethnic groups. Founded by freed African American and Caribbean slaves in 1821, with backing from the American Colonization Society (organized by American leaders such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson), Liberia was ruled by an elite minority of the descendants of the freed founders, known as “settlers,” until a 1980 military coup. Subsequent arbitrary rule and economic collapse culminated in a civil war that lasted from the late 1980s until a peace accord was reached in 2003.

The long and brutal period of strife has left deep emotional, social, political, and economic scars on Liberians everywhere. Liberia’s fair and peaceful national elections in 2005 were hailed as a landmark of democracy in Africa. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’s presidency marks the first democratic election of a female head-of-state in Africa. Sirleaf’s election has inspired hope throughout the Liberian diaspora for a peaceful period of national renewal and growth.

There are presently about 15,000 Liberians living in the greater Philadelphia area, with the largest concentration of Liberians in West and Southwest Philadelphia and upper Darby. Most are refugees and asylees from the interior counties of Lofa, Bong, Nimba, and Grand Gedeh, who arrived here in the 1990s, some after many years of living in refugee camps in neighboring African countries. Over the past decade, Liberians have worked with American friends to put together the networks and services needed to help Liberians to find homes and to acquire new skills essential for living here, including reading, writing, the use of unfamiliar technologies, and the navigation of systems for health care and social services.

Elderly Liberian refugees who have followed their children and
grandchildren to the U.S. are adjusting to their new country with the support of the Agape African Senior Citizens Center at 63rd and Race Streets in West Philadelphia. Space for the Agape Center is provided by a Lutheran Church, led by Rev. Arthur Zogar, from Liberia. The Agape Center assists the elders in transitioning to life in an urban American city. It is difficult for Americans to grasp how overwhelming this adjustment is. Many of the elders had never lived outside of their small villages before they fled to refugee camps in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Cote d’Ivoire. They left behind them a way of life in which elders are authoritative, homes are made of palm trees, dietary staples include rice and cassava, and life skills include fishing, hunting, farming, and gathering, along with work for the government or for global corporations such as Firestone. Traversing the Atlantic Ocean in an airplane, the elders land in Philadelphia, where it is challenging to distinguish one home from another and finding one’s way around depends on knowing how to read and write.

Rev. Jallah told students of a man who spent several hours walking up and down his street trying to remember which house he came out of, until finally he recognized a grandchild who was able to help him. Children and grandchildren who are themselves busy working and going to school are often the ones who must teach the elders to use the telephone or navigate the urban grid. For the first time, in lives that span many decades, the elders are confronted with the task of relating letters of the alphabet to phonetic sounds, some of which do not exist in their own languages.

“The first thing an African elder does in an unfamiliar setting like West Philadelphia,” Rev. Jallah told Penn students, “is look for other Africans.” Becoming place for each other, the elders can begin to rebuild the world that was so violently torn from them. Wearing traditional clothing, bringing traditional foods to share, such as fried plantains, performing the famous Liberian “snap” handshake, and telling traditional tales in Liberian English, the elders open West Philadelphia to new ways of being American.

Elders of the Agape Center have come from the interior counties of Lofa, Bong, Nimba, Grand Gedeh, and from the coastal counties of Montserrat, Margibi, and Maryland. Map by Alexis Stevens, Penn School of Design.
The many dialects spoken in Liberia fall into four major linguistic groups: Kru, West Atlantic, Mandé, and Indo-European. Through commerce since the 15th century, first with Portugal, then with Britain and the United States, Liberians have created several distinctive varieties of English. In addition to Liberian Standard English, the National language, there are ethnic and regional varieties, including forms that linguists term Liberian Vernacular English and Liberian Pidgin English. Influenced by African rules of pronunciation and grammar, these living vernaculars continue to evolve. It can be challenging for non-Liberian speakers of English to understand Liberian Vernacular English. Because English is the only language understood to some extent by all, English has become a crucial medium in the diaspora for the wealth of verbal artistry preserved in Liberian oral traditions.

In Liberia, as in other West African countries, folktales have played an important role in the education of children and in the ongoing renewal of community life. In contrast to American culture, which is youth-centered, African societies in which these tales flourish tend to be gerontocracies: along with honoring ancestors, respecting and caring for the elders is one of the highest priorities in life. As Rev. Jallah put it, when the community of refugees came here, they brought their elders with them. The importance of honoring elders is emphasized in many of the stories.

Liberian storytelling is an improvisational art form, in that tellers adapt the stories to the occasions of their telling, and indeed, often compose their own stories, which conform in content and structure to community expectations. Set in African landscapes familiar to the community, the tales are populated with humans who sing, animals who talk, spirits both good and bad, and creatures with magical powers. In tales of how things came to be, aspects of the known world become signs of events in mythological time that, for example, changed Turtle’s carapace from smooth to rough, or prompted Dog and Rabbit to move from the bush to the town, or caused eternal enmity between Alligator and Monkey or Hawk and Hen. Some of the stories account for interactions among species in the wild known to hunting communities: Elephant’s well-known aversion to Goat, Rabbit’s habit of going into shock, seeming to fall asleep, as a predator closes in, or Leopard’s wariness of Gorilla (chimpanzee). Liberian storytelling is participatory on several levels. Fables that dramatize the effects of jealousy, greed, disobedience, ingratitude, treachery, and infidelity spark critical reflection on the attributes most desirable in a parent, child, friend, spouse, or employer. Social norms modelled through the events of the story are reinforced through the structure of storytelling itself. Community storytelling encodes rules for turn-taking, orchestrates cooperation, cultivates listening and speaking skills, and encourages us to imagine the deeds of our fellow beings and their consequences from many points of view. The formulaic opening for each story launches the flow of reciprocity between teller and audience that sustains the world of the tales in this tradition. “Once upon a time” proclaims the storyteller. And as the audience responds, “Time!” all eyes and ears are turned toward the teller, and attention is focussed on the world of the tale that is opening up. The audience knows when and how to respond throughout, for its members learned as small children to punctuate stories with vocal affirmations, and to sing in response to the teller’s song. In the tales known as “dilemmas”, the audience must contribute to a debate about how the story should end, and to justify their decision. For many generations these mental and rhetorical exercises have formed the training ground for ethical decision-making and oratory among Liberian children.

Liberian storytelling proliferates, traveling through print, radio, and the internet, and emerging at gatherings small and large, wherever it finds people eager to lend themselves to the story.

This sampler offers story abstracts and storylines for a few of the many stories told by West Philadelphia’s Liberian Elders to help listeners to “tune your ears”, as Rev. Jallah put it, in order to enter more fully into the storyteller’s art.

—BENJAMIN KPANGBAH, DARBY

The big people sat down and they would tell stories to us, when the moon was shining. The small children came and they would tell them tales.”

Rev. John K. Jallah, founder and director of the Agape Senior Center, telling the story of Deer and Leopard at the Arts Café, Kelly Writers House, in April 2006. Photo by Rebecca Sherman ’06.

Deddeh Passawee telling the story of Goat and Elephant in the Moose Room of the Penn Humanities Forum Buildings to undergraduate folklore classes, November 2006. Photo by Rebecca Sherman ’06.
THREE TRUTHS THAT DEER TOLD LEOPARD
By Rev. John K. Jallah

This story of how telling truth to power gains deer his freedom is an African version of what some may recognize as the neck riddle—the riddle that a hero must solve in order to save his own neck. More riddle than tale, this story ends with a question that the audience must try to answer in order to get to the next story. In this case, there are three correct answers, with endless plausible alternatives which the storyteller considers while warming the audience to the engaged listening that these tales require.

Storyline

Deer finds himself in the presence of Leopard, whose appetite for deer is well-known and feared among animals of the bush. Much to Deer's surprise, however, Leopard gives him a chance to win his freedom by telling him three truths. To gain your freedom, what truths would you tell someone with the power of life and death over you?
Like many of the world’s creation stories, this one centers on a conflict among creatures in mythological time, long before the time of humans. The effects of this conflict divide time in two: the time before, when all creatures looked the same, and the time after, when each species is distinguished by its own color, texture, and markings. This story, like many in the Kpelle tradition, contains a call-and-response chorus, in which the audience is expected to join.

This is the story of how all the animals in the whole world come to have different colors. When God first makes the world, all of the animals are the same. Then God invites all of the animals to come to him, so that he can look at them. As the animals all start traveling toward God, a small deer named Hono begins to run. He runs so fast that he passes all of the other animals. This angers the other animals and while Hono is resting, they catch up to him. Seizing Hono, they tie him up and leave him behind.

Along comes Turtle, a slow traveler who can’t run at all. He sees Hono, and asks what happened to him. Hono tells him, and in exchange for Hono’s promise to help him move faster, Turtle unties him. Then Hono picks up Turtle and begins to run. As the pair travels they sing to each other about their adventure. The narrator begins their song, which means “They tie you on the road there. Who will free you?”

The others answer, “The turtle will.”

Hono passes the animals again, and again they catch up to him, inquiring who released him. When the animals find that Turtle did, they tie Hono up, and they hurl Turtle far down into the valley. But again the Turtle makes his way back to Hono and again he frees the deer, who puts Turtle under his arm and continues running. This time when they pass the animals, the animals never catch up to them. When Hono and Turtle reach their goal, God so admires Hono’s skin, and the marks on Turtle’s back that he decides to give all of the animals different colors, textures, and markings. And that is why you find so much variety among animals in the world today.

Storyline

Turtle and Deer, Watercolor by Alix McKenna ’08.
WHY ELEPHANT IS AFRAID OF GOAT
By Deddeh Passawee

Goat’s boast that he can eat more than Elephant leads the two friends into an eating contest. Elephant discovers that appearances can be deceiving, and has avoided Goat and his enormous appetite ever since.

Storyline

Goat and Elephant are the best of friends. One day Goat brags that he can eat more than Elephant. Elephant refuses to believe this. “I can eat past you!” Goat insists, and the argument continues until finally the two friends call on the Chief for help in resolving their dispute.

The Chief announces that the two friends will spend the following day in an eating competition. By the end of the day, whoever has eaten the most will be the winner.

The next morning at six o’clock Goat and Elephant begin to eat. Elephant eats from the tree tops, while Goat eats from the ground. They keep eating for fourteen hours. Finally at eight o’clock in the evening, when they can no longer see, Elephant calls for time out until morning. Goat agrees and the pair lay down to sleep on a large flat rock. At one o’clock in the morning, Elephant awakens to the sound of chewing. “Goat!” he says. “What are you eating?” Goat tells Elephant he’s eating the delicious flat rock, and that when he finishes that, he’ll start eating Elephant. Fearing for his life, Elephant departs in haste, abandoning Goat, rock, and competition. Since then, Elephant always runs away when he hears the sound of Goat’s voice.

GREEDY SPIDER
By Anusmana Passawee

Spider, a trickster known as Anansi, Nancy, Aunt Nancy, or Bruh Nancy, appears in stories told throughout the African Diaspora. Famed for his huge appetites and blatant disregard for social custom, Spider often gets away with breaking the rules, but he sometimes pays the price as well.

In this story, Spider deceives his generous hosts in order to eat far more than his share. However, his plan to attend feasts held in two different towns simultaneously backfires on him, and he is unable to eat at all.

Storyline

Two villages decide to hold banquets on the same day. Both villages invite Spider to be the guest of honor. Spider, rejoicing at the opportunity to gorge himself twice in one day, accepts both invitations. To conceal his simultaneous attendance at two feasts, he ties a long rope around his waist. He gives one end of the rope to each chief of the two villages, instructing them to pull on the rope when it is time for Spider to come to the feast.

As is often the case, spider is caught in the web he spins through his own trickery, this time with unappetizing results!
WHICH BROTHER SHOULD MARRY THE KING’S DAUGHTER?
By Ansumana Passawee

The fantastic elements in this tale place it in the company of wonder stories found throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. But here the familiar formula of three brothers who go off to seek their fortune must be resolved through the traditional ending of the West African dilemma story. The wisest among the community of listeners must help in deciding the outcome!

Storyline

Three brothers live together with their parents. After their parents die, the brothers decide to travel to England in search of a trade or profession to help them make their living. The first stop in England is the shop of a blacksmith, who invites one of the brothers to operate the billows and become his apprentice. The remaining two brothers find similar positions, one in the shop of a cobbler, making and mending shoes, and the oldest brother with an elderly woman, a singer, who offers to teach him how to sing.

After three years, the oldest brother goes to his younger brothers, saying, “We have learned enough. Let’s go back home and make our livings there.” Agreeing, the brothers go to say goodbye to their teachers. Each brother receives a magical gift from his teacher. The blacksmith gives to his pupil a handful of powder, saying, “If anybody ever dies, just blow this powder on them, and they will come back to life.” The cobbler bestows on his pupil a winnowing basket, saying, “Anywhere you want to go, just sit on this winnowing basket, and it will carry you there through the air.” The elderly singer confers on her pupil a spyglass, saying, “If you ever want to see the King or the Queen of a country you are in, just say so and look through the spyglass. It will show you the King or the Queen.”

That very evening the brothers pass through a country in which the King’s daughter has just died. Hearing the sounds of weeping and lamentation, the oldest brother peers through his spyglass and sees the King’s daughter laid out for her funeral. The second brother commands his winnowing basket to carry the three brothers to the King’s palace. When they arrive there, the third brother tells the guards that he has a powder that can bring the King’s daughter back to life. The King gives his permission to the brother to try to restore her to life. The brother blows the powder into the face of the dead girl, who suddenly sits up and demands to know what everybody is doing there. While she goes to take her shower, there is great rejoicing in the kingdom. But the King himself has a problem. “I want to reward you,” he tells the three brothers. “But only one of you can marry my daughter.”

Of the three brothers—one who spied the place, one who transported them there, and one who brought the girl back to life—which one should marry the King’s daughter?

Three Brothers. Watercolor by Alix McKenna ’08.
HAWK AND HEN
By Edith Hill

Birds of different feathers might attract one another, but they won’t be able to live together, as we learn from this tale of the tragic end of the romance of Hawk and Hen. If you listen wherever Hawks are circling over Hens, you may still hear them quarrelling.

Storyline
Hawk and Hen are so much in love that they want to be married. Hawk gives Hen an engagement ring, and the two begin planning their wedding and their life together. But they cannot agree on where they will live. Hawk wants to live high up on a cliff, while Hen, who cannot fly, wants to stay close to the ground. They begin to quarrel bitterly over this, and Hen calls off the wedding. But when Hawk demands that Hen return the engagement ring, Hen cannot find it. Hawk says that until Hen finds and returns his ring, he will capture and eat Hen’s children in payment.

This is why Hawk is always looking for baby chicks, and why you can hear Hawk and Hen quarreling to this day.

WHICH WIFE SHOULD DIE?
By Peter Sirleaf

This original composition is structured as an African dilemma tale which concludes with a question for the audience. The teller appoints a jury of three people to deliberate on the question of which wife showed the least love for her husband and thus should be sacrificed to the dwarf or genii whose magic brings the husband back to life. Composed by Peter Sirleaf, the story is a study of the extent to which people will go in order to act upon their jealousy or to prove their love.

Storyline
An old man, married to three beautiful young wives, is so jealous he doesn’t want them speaking to anyone but him. When he sees young men playing near the wives, he decides to move with them out of town to the bush. When they reach the bush, the old man dies. How do the wives respond? The first wife loves him so much that she wants to stay with him until he decays. The second wife loves him so much that she returns to town to tell his loved ones of his death so that he can have a decent burial. The third wife loves him so much that she wants to carry out his plan, and she resolves to continue traveling through the bush until she dies.

The second wife leaves to notify the family and bring them back to the body. The third wife ventures deeper into the bush where she meets a Dwarf (a magical spirit also known as a genii) and tells him her story. He asks to see the body, so she leads him back to her dead husband, arriving there at the same time the second wife arrives from town with the family.

The Dwarf requests the family’s permission to treat the old man, and then brings the old man back to life. The Dwarf names his price: he must have the liver from one of the old man’s wives. The old man bases his decision on the amount of love shown by each wife. Which wife must be the one to die?

The moral of this story is that life’s journey takes us each on separate paths. It is not your path, but your accomplishments that matter. And are we capable of judging one another? You be the judge.
WHY RABBIT FALLS ASLEEP WHEN LEOPARD CHASES HIM
By Deddeh Passawee

We often wonder why animals look and behave the way they do. We may not observe wild cats in West Philadelphia, but even our pets provide much to wonder about. Why do cats have little pockets in their ears? Why do they play with a mouse and lose interest when it "plays possum"? This story ponders a similar relationship observed in the bush between leopards and rabbits. Why does a rabbit, or any prey animal "freeze" as a predator closes in on it? In this explanation, which also accounts for the social standing of Gorilla in the bush, the animals are abiding by a covenant created by their ancestors for their own protection.

Storyline

Leopard is eating all of the animals, and the situation has gotten so bad that the animals call a meeting to see what can be done about Leopard. They ask Gorilla [chimpanzee] what he thinks they should do, because Gorilla is able to outsmart Leopard. He can climb trees that Leopard cannot climb, and he can pin Leopard’s paws under the roots of trees. Gorilla suggests a new rule. “If you fall asleep while Leopard is chasing you, then Leopard cannot catch you. However, if you stay awake, Leopard can catch you.” Leopard agrees to this.

Rabbit thinks, “But if I am asleep while Leopard is chasing you, then Leopard cannot catch you. However, if you stay awake, Leopard can catch you.” Leopard agrees to this.

Rabbit tells Leopard, “I am sleepy.” Leopard tells Rabbit, “I’ll look at you when I wake up.” Leopard tells Rabbit, “If you are sleeping, I can’t catch you.”

That’s why Rabbit and Leopard are always running through the bush, and why Rabbit falls asleep when Leopard gets too close so that Leopard will stop bothering him.

LEOPARD AND SPARROW
By Garrison Togba

The qualities that are at first most attractive in a suitor may not be the qualities that will sustain a marriage. This dilemma story challenges the audience to decide which of two suitors should marry the daughter of the King and Queen: the one with the greatest physical strength or the one with the greatest capacity for thought.

Storyline

The King and Queen of a town have a beautiful daughter. Two suitors, Leopard and Sparrow, come to the parents seeking the daughter’s hand in marriage. To determine which suitor is most deserving of his daughter’s hand in marriage, the king invites Leopard and Sparrow to come and help him on his farm. He gives them the task of cutting sticks in his field. Sparrow, who is not strong, but is very intelligent, works on a small stick. As he works, he sings to himself: “One thing about me, Sparrow, is that I can think. I can think. I can think.” While Sparrow is singing his song and working on one stick, Leopard finishes the sticks for the rest of the farm. Leopard’s song goes like this: “Me, I have one habit. When I say something, I must do it. I can’t think. I just do what I say.”

In another part of the farm, the King and Queen are working and listening to the songs of Sparrow and Leopard. When the cutting is finished, Leopard brags, “I cut that whole farm! Sparrow only cut one small little bush.” The Queen says, “Father, we want a good person to marry our daughter. Sparrow is not strong, but he can think! Leopard said that he can’t think, but he will do anything he says. If he says, ‘I will beat you to death,’ he will do it!”

So, I put this matter before you, who should this girl marry? The one who can think, or the one who can’t think?

Garrison Togba relates the tale of Leopard and Sparrow in the Folklore Archive at the University of Pennsylvania, April 2005. l-r Benjamin Kpangbah, Peter Sirleaf, William Jolo, Garrison Togba, and Esther Tailey. Photo by Meltem Turkoz.
THE HARD-HEADED BOY AND THE DRAGON
By Benjamin Kpangbah

A hard-headed child is one who may do what he is told, but in his own good time. This particular child tells his parents to go to work on the bush farm ahead of him so that he can sleep late. Consequently, he almost loses his life in an encounter with a Dragon (a name for bad-tempered, dangerous reptiles such as the python or gaboon viper, also known as cassava snake). This story contains a song, which the audience is invited to join in singing.

Storyline
A hard-headed boy refuses to go to the farm with his parents, telling them that he will come later. When he finally starts off, hours later, he meets a Dragon, who tells him that he will eat the boy. However, he gives the boy a chance to delay his death by singing for the Dragon.

So the boy starts singing about the misbehavior that brought him to this end, and begins to walk up the dragon’s body toward its mouth. Attracted by the singing, a hunter sees the boy and the Dragon, and kills the Dragon, saving the boy’s life.

The moral of this story is that hard-headedness should not be tolerated in children, for it can lead to disaster. Children should be trained properly from the beginning so that they will have honor when they reach adulthood.

LEOPARD AND GOAT
By Martha Carr

Leopard and goat decide to build a house together, only to discover that they cannot live together. Frightened by the strange habits of the other, each decides to run away. Villagers laugh at their foolishness, and when they return to their house, they find it has been destroyed by the wind.

Storyline
Leopard and Goat build a house together so that all of their friends can visit them. The first night they are together, Leopard’s snoring alarms Goat, and Goat’s constant munching frightens Leopard. In fear and desperation, both decide to run away. Each of them meets villagers who laugh at them for running away, and so they return, embarrassed.

But when they arrive back at the house, they find that the wind has blown it down. Goat and Leopard agree to go their separate ways.

The moral of the story is that you should live with those whose manners and upbringing are compatible with your own.
HOW A DISABLED PEASANT GIRL BECAME THE CHIEF’S BELOVED WIFE
By Benjamin Kpangbah

Many stories illustrate the problems caused by competition and jealousy, and how a person whose heart is pure will prevail in the end. This one shows how a young wife with a deformed hand overcomes the plot against her by the Chief’s jealous wives to become the most cherished wife of all.

Storyline

A beautiful young girl in one of the villages goes to the market each week to sell bitter ball (a small round eggplant that grows in West Africa and West Philadelphia). One week, the King comes to that market, and when he sees the beautiful girl selling bitter ball, he falls in love with her. He asks her parents to give their permission for her to come and live in his compound. Her parents agree and eventually to become his wife. He asks her parents to come and live in his compound, and they give their permission for her to do so. The girl returns to the King’s village. It is announced that the wives will bathe before the King the next morning, so that he can see for himself the condition of the girl who will become his wife. All is revealed: the jealous wives are banished, and the beautiful young girl becomes the King’s only wife.

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WHY DOG AND RABBIT LIVE IN TOWN
By Edith Hill

When reflecting on how animals became domesticated, we might assume that humans started the process. But in this account, it is the animals who initiate a covenant with people. In an effort to help his friend Rabbit, Dog accidentally khu the pot of water that had been left out on the riverbank near her parents’ village. Sitting on the riverbank near her parent’s home, she begins weeping. A genii in the form of a water dragon appears to her and asks what is troubling her. When she tells him, he instructs her to put her disfigured arm all the way into his mouth and to pull it back out. She does so, and on withdrawing her arm, she is amazed to find a perfect hand.

The Bathing Trial.
Watercolor by Alix McKenna ’08.

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The Bathing Trial.
Watercolor by Alix McKenna ’08.
WHY HAND AND FOOT MUST WORK FOR BELLY
By Peter Sirleaf

This story plays with the figurative language we often use to symbolize community as individual members integrated within a larger social body. The comparison of society to a body illustrates the need for cooperation, and raises many interesting questions. What if the social body were governed not only by the appetite for wealth and power, but by the desire to honor one’s elders regardless of one’s own worldly achievements or theirs?

In this story, a father (the family Head) has three sons named Belly, Hand, and Foot. When the father arranges his sons according to their efforts to please him, it is Belly who comes out on top!

Storyline

A man has three wives. Each wife bears him a son. But while the sons are away at school, all three wives die. The father invests all of his money in his sons’ education. On graduating from college, the sons return to their father for his blessing as they set out to seek their fortunes. They promise to return to help their father once they have made something of themselves. The father gives his sons his blessing, and money for the journey, and they scatter.

The names of the three brothers were Hand, Foot, and Belly. Hand went to England, Foot traveled to Germany, and Belly ended up in America.

Hand becomes prime minister of England, Foot becomes Chancellor of Germany, and Belly is elected president of the United States.

Back in Liberia, their aging father is ailing and running out of money. He is worried about his sons, from whom he has heard nothing since they left him. One day a friend brings news that his sons occupy the top posts in England, Germany, and the United States. The father cannot believe his ears. With money from his friend, he sets off to find his sons. His first stop is Germany, where he seeks an audience with Chancellor Foot. On being told that his father is waiting to see him, the Chancellor says, “No, that’s not my father. That’s someone looking for money. Give him some money and send him on his way.”

Forsaken by Foot, the old man travels next to England, hoping for better treatment from Hand. Prime Minister Hand, however, fails to recognize his father, and sends him on his way. Arriving at last in America, the old man goes straight to the White House and asks to see President Belly. President Belly agrees to see him, and when his father walks into the oval office, President Belly says, “Oh, Pa, what is wrong?” The old man is overjoyed. Belly treats his father lavishly, and after a few days, the old man tells him of his ill-treatment by Hand and Foot.

In great indignation, Belly calls Hand and Foot and summons them to a meeting in Washington, D.C. While they are talking with Belly, their father walks in. “Pa” they say, “No,” their father replies. “I don’t know you. When I was hungry and in need of shelter and comfort, you put me out. And now I will repay your ingratitude.”

He turns to Belly, “Belly,” he says, “You will rule Foot and Hand. In order to survive, they must work for you. Hand and Foot will look for food to satisfy Belly.”

Benjamin Kpangbah: It’s not good for children to be ungrateful and to forsake their parents, or to deny hospitality to the stranger. You never know who that stranger may be. He might put a blessing on you that will carry you far away. That kind of person, give him a cup to drink.

Fulu, a kind of dumpling made from cassava flour, and served with soup. Photo by Rebecca Sherman.
THE WAR BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN
By Benjamin Kpangbah

How and why male and female roles are divided up in social life is a question explored in this story, which begins in a time when women were so powerful that men almost disappeared. The events that resolve this crisis are the sort that can happen anywhere, anytime to restore amity between lovers who quarrel.

Storyline

Woman and Man live together at first, but surpassing Man in strength, Woman declares war on Man and kills so many men that Man runs away, leaving Woman alone. For a long time after this war, Woman and Man live in separate places, far from each other. Along the water that forms the boundary between their territories, there are palm trees growing. When the center of the female pissava palm fills with sap, it is the time to make palm wine. One day, when the female palm trees are bursting with juice, a teen-aged boy climbs a tree along the boundary between the territories of Man and Woman. He makes a cut in the center of the tree to allow the juice to flow into his pot. Each morning for three days he returns to collect the palm wine.

At the same time, a woman named Gafu sends two girls to fetch water for her. As they approach the water, they hear the palm wine tapster: “Bwok, bwok, bwok, bwok!” Curious, the girls go to see what is making that sound. Arriving at the palm tree, they see the young man. When he sees them, he is scared because he has heard about women. They exchange greetings and the girls ask him what he is doing. He tells them he is collecting “man-water.” They ask for a drink, and he lowers his bucket. By the time they finish drinking, they are drunk, and have to explain themselves to the Woman, who sends them back the next day for man-water for herself. Carrying a small white bucket, they return to the palm tree. The young man fills their bucket, and the girls carry it back to Gafu, who becomes drunk and sleeps deeply. The next day Gafu tells the girls to return to the palm tree and this time to bring back the man-water and the man.

The young man is hesitant. “But they say your mother can kill me!” he tells the girls. The girls promise that she won’t, and he accompanies them back to their mother, with the bucket of man-water. Gafu orders the young man to spend the night, drinks the man-water, and falls into a drunken sleep on the bed prepared for the young man. The young man deliberates on what to do, and finally decides to sleep with Gafu. The next morning, they celebrate their union with palm wine. Gafu tells the young man she wants to marry him, and she promises not to kill men anymore, surrendering her ring, her sword, and her spear to the young man. She tells the young man to bring back the men from his town. The young man goes to the men, and shows them the tokens of the ring, the sword, and the spear. Seeing these tokens, the men are persuaded to return to the women, and they have remained together ever since.

A palm wine tapper ascends a date palm in Cameroon, using a rope of twisted palm fronds. Photo by Randi Baird. Used under license from Creative Commons.
Elders & Storytellers

of the Agape Center

Washington Bai (76), was born in the town of Zwedru in Grand Gedeh County, where he was a farmer. A member of the Krahn tribe, he is an active participant at the Agape African Senior Citizens Center. He has three sons.

Napaa H. Byepu (68), came to Philadelphia from the Sanoyea District in Bong County, where she was a housewife and rice farmer. In 1955 she married Pastor Byepu, an evangelist then in Palarkolleh, Lofa County. They raised seven children. During the Fourteen Year War, they moved from one place to another within Liberia, until 1998, when she resettled with her children in the U.S. A speaker of Kpelle, Nappa is participating in the Agape ESL program and studying for her citizenship test.

Martha Carr (58), hails from Grand Gedeh County in Eastern Liberia. A member of the Krahn tribe, she is a farmer, a housewife, and a seamstress, who learned to sew through an apprenticeship with Esther Gaye in Monrovia. She learned to tell stories as a child in Grand Gedeh, along with the other members of her Girl Circle.

Robert Flahn (78), came to the United States with his wife, Sarah Flahn (76), in 2000. They were married in 1962 and they have four children, in addition to twenty three children of Robert’s. Robert has 27 children! In Zwedru, Grand Gedeh County, they had a cocoa farm. Robert also worked as a nursing aid for 38 years, at the Martha Tubman Memorial Hospital in Zwedru. In 1990 they fled Liberia and became refugees in the Ivory Coast, before coming to the U.S. in 2001. They live on Greenway Avenue, in southwest Philadelphia, in a rowhouse bustling with multiple generations. Robert Flahn plans to take his citizenship test in November.

Edith Hill (67), comes from Montserrado County in Western Liberia, and received her training in Monrovia, the Liberian Capital, as a home economics instructor for the Ministry of Agriculture. For thirty years she traveled as a civil servant throughout Liberia teaching home economics to women. She published several books on the topic, including *Nutrition and Energy*. Eventually she moved back to Monrovia, where she began training teachers, and was head of Liberia’s Home Economics Program. Edith learned many of her stories by listening to the elders of her community and by reading stories that had been written down.

Rev. John K. Jallah (61), is the founder and director of the Agape African Senior Citizens Center in West Philadelphia. A member of the Loma tribe, Rev. Jallah was born in Lofa County, near Voinjama. He was groomed from childhood to succeed his father as Grand Poro Zoe (Voodoo High Priest), but conversion to Christianity at an early age radically altered his life course. While living in Monrovia, he founded the Bible Believing Church and the Liberia Vernacular and Cultural Research Institute to document the traditional arts and social and scientific knowledge represented in the vernacular languages and customs of Liberia’s ethnic groups, and to train students to incorporate vernacular arts and knowledge in the work of Christian evangelism and community development. He served the Liberian government in various capacities, including that of Deputy Minister of internal Affairs. In 1997 he came to the United States as a refugee. Three years later he founded the Agape African Senior Citizen Center.

Benjamin Kpangbah (72), is from Kakata District in Margibi County in the western part of Liberia. For many years he operated heavy equipment for Limico, Liberia’s mining company, in the iron ore mines of Nimba County. The son of a village chief, Benjamin is a farmer. He owned 600 acres of land, where he lived in a house he built for his family until a rebel group seized his property. With his family he fled Liberia and has lived since then in Guinea, Sierra leone, and Ghana. He moved to Philadelphia in 2002, and now lives in Darby with several of his grown children. He has a large repertoire of stories, many of which he learned as a boy, listening to elders tell them to villagers gathered together on moonlit nights.
Sarah G. Kular (64), is from a farming community in Putu, in Grand Gedeh County. She raised rice on a “swamp farm” until the war forced people to flee. In 2007, she followed her brother, Peter Sirleaf, to Philadelphia. She has seven children.

Ansumana Passawee (78), and Deddeh Passawee (78) were both born and raised in Lofa County. Ansumana, who was born in Womai Town in Zorzor district, was a farmer, police officer, and surveyor. Deddeh, who was born in Gboi Town, is a farmer and midwife. Their fourteen children include one set of triplets and two sets of twins. In 2005 they came to live in Upper Darby. They maintain a sumptuous back-yard garden at the home of their daughter in Yeadon. They are both accomplished storytellers and Deddeh is a Women Community leader.

John Pratt (68), is the Health Advocate for the Agape African Senior Citizens Center. A speaker of Loma and member of the Mende tribe, he grew up in Voinjama, in Lofa County. After graduating from Cuttington College and Divinity School in Gbarnga, in Bong County, he earned his master’s degree in Medical Demography at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He has lived in the United States since 1977.

Joseph Quaye (78), is a drummer, gardener and storyteller from Zwedru in Grand Gedeh County, where he worked as a farmer and police officer. He has eight children, including three sons and five daughters. We hope to include his stories in future collections.

Peter Sirleaf (73) and Maman Sirleaf, are members of the Krahn tribe from Grande Gedeh County. Peter worked as a forest ranger for the Liberian government until he was offered a job as a circuit court clerk. From there he was appointed to the post of superintendent of Konobo District, Grand Gedeh County. When the civil war broke out, Peter and Maman spent nine years in refugee camps before coming to Philadelphia in 1999. He and Maman joined the Agape Center to prepare for their citizenship test. Maman is working on literacy as well. On March 29, 2006, Peter became a U.S. citizen. Peter emphasized that storytelling is not something anyone teaches you: you learn by trying to tell stories. The dilemma story, “Which Wife Should Die?”, is an original composition, demonstrating his mastery of the form.

Lucy Solo (73), hails from Grand Gedeh County, where she was a housewife and farmer until the Liberian Civil War. Separated from the rest of her family, she fled with two of her children to the Ivory Coast, where they lived for three years as refugees. Five years ago she resettled in Philadelphia with her children. She joined the Agape Center program in 2006.

Esther Tailey, a singer and dancer, is from Zwedru, in Grand Gedeh County, where she was a housewife and rice farmer. Her first language is Krahn. With her late husband, who worked as a practical nurse in Grand Gedeh, she had seven children. In 1998, Esther came to Philadelphia to join five of her seven children living here in the U.S. The other two are in Ghana.

Garrison Togba, who was from Polar in Grand Gedeh County, was an active participant in the Agape Center. In 2007 he became ill and returned to Ghana, where he died not long afterward.
The Academic/Community Partnership as a Thinking System

Refiguring Service Learning in the Time of Refugee Resettlement

“Exploring Memory and Tradition in Philadelphia Communities” engages ethnographic field methods to bring students together with members of Philadelphia communities in a spirit of shared inquiry. Through this inquiry, we arrive at the “service” aspect of the service-learning course. Traditionally, the pedagogy of service learning immerses students in the giving of services needed by a client community — such as tutoring, coaching, mentoring, and so forth. These services are of tremendous value, not only for the University recognize and appreciate the contribution that the University makes to them. However, under what conditions does the University recognize and embrace the contribution that its neighbors can make to academic life? Exploring this question ethnographically led us to refigure service learning as cultural brokerage.

The brokering here is not between social bodies distinguished by class, race, or gender, but between social bodies with a shared stake in an urban setting that anchors different and disjunct “thinking systems.” The anthropologist Gregory Bateson defined the “thinking system” as “the organism plus its environment.” This is, Bateson argued, not only the minimum unit required for the thinking system, but for the survival of an organism. If we think of communities as “thinking systems,” we see how undergirding people from environments laden with cues to memory and action not only destroys thinking systems, but squanders resources vital to the success of urban renewal. Communities can be forced to relocate for many reasons: war, “natural” disasters, or redevelopment among them. In such cases, communities regenerate their thinking systems one piece at a time, as they adapt to new locations. Material outcroppings of emergent thinking systems from around the globe proliferate along major cultural corridors. Material resources vital to the success of communities as “thinking systems, but for the survival of communities as “thinking systems, but for the survival of...
The hands of Deddeh Passawee, wearing a basket from an unraveled onion bag and plastic strips. The inspiration to do this came from a visit to the University Museum where she saw woven bags collected from elders at the Kelly Writers House, listening to Washington Bai and Robert Flahn discussing West African artifacts in the storage room of the University Museum. Photo by Rebecca Sherman.

Looking for Hen, the red-tailed Hawk of Locust Walk, on the Penn Campus. Photo by Mary Hufford.

Leah Lowthorp, PhD candidate in Folklore, listening to Washington Bai and Robert Flahn discussing West African artifacts in the storage room of the University Museum. Photo by Rebecca Sherman.

Liberia in the late 19th century. Photo by Mary Hufford

Museum where she saw woven bags collected from inspiration to do this came from a visit to the University Museum.

The hands of Deddeh Passawee, weaving a basket in the Museum's artifacts in elders' knowledge regarding in West Africa. The Liberian "We have that bird in Liberia," he exclaimed. "It flies up and down the rivers and catches fish." It was a Kingfisher, which Philadelphians may see while strolling along the Forbidden Drive that follows the Wissahickon Creek. An idea began to form. The stories of the elders are rich in allusion to the species and habitats of West Africa. What kind of global democratic space can form around cognate species and habitats in West Philadelphia? Many of these species have fallen out of social life and are ripe for resocialization by the elders. Wasting no time, Edith Hill identified the trailhead: "Are there any Hawks here?" she inquired. Several of the men had seen them attacking pigeons. That was entrée enough for Edith Hill. "Hawk and Hen," she began, "wanted to get married..."

Partnership as a sort of public space needed in order to materialize the Academic/Community Partnership as a thinking system. Beyond this space, we caught glimpses of even more enticing horizons. One afternoon, some of the elders were browsing through natural history guides to the eastern United States. Suddenly, Ansumana Passawee pointed in excitement to a picture in Roger Tory Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds of North America. "We have that bird in Liberia," he exclaimed. "It flies up and down the rivers and catches fish." It was a Kingfisher, which Philadelphians may see while strolling along the Forbidden Drive that follows the Wissahickon Creek. An idea began to form. The stories of the elders are rich in allusion to the species and habitats of West Africa. What kind of global democratic space can form around cognate species and habitats in West Philadelphia? Many of these species have fallen out of social life and are ripe for resocialization by the elders. Wasting no time, Edith Hill identified the trailhead: "Are there any Hawks here?" she inquired. Several of the men had seen them attacking pigeons. That was entrée enough for Edith Hill. "Hawk and Hen," she began, "wanted to get married..."
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Photo of palm wine tapper:
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** Academically-Based Community Service
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On the cover: Benjamin Kpangbah and Martha Carr. Kpangbah is telling a mon- pelele (fable) in the Kpelle tradition, “How All the Animals in the World Became Different Colors,” and Martha Carr is sing- ing the refrain, during students visit to Kpangbah’s home in Upper Darby, February 2006.

Photo by Rebecca Sherman, School of Arts and Sciences ‘06.
Details from watercolor illustrations of stories and storytelling by Alix McKenna, School of Arts and Sciences ‘08.