

Characters from Caribbean Folklore

The Caribbean has a rich history of oral literature, which has been written down over time to become the region's folk tales. From Anansi, the conniving spider that lures other animals into mischief to serve his own agenda as a trickster, to Mama D'lo the snake who reigns as queen of the rivers, and other shape-shifting folk tale characters of the forest, the Caribbean comes alive with African traditions passed down from slavery.

The **Anansi** stories brought by the Ashanti people of West Africa begin and end with a call and response between the storyteller and audience. Together, they share the ritual of beginning and ending a story by sharing the lines,

"Crick crack, monkey break he back, for a piece of pomegranate. Crick crack, wire bend, story end."

This ritual creates a bond between the storyteller and audience while giving the stories a predictable structure.

Can you think of some stories that all start and end in the same way?

Anansi stories can be found throughout the Caribbean in every island where enslaved people once lived. These traditions fit comfortably in the genre of **fables**. Anansi and most of the French folklore characters found in the West Indies are animals who can challenge, trick or belittle authority figures in ways that enslaved could not.

Do you know any fables?



Enslaved people from French-speaking Martinique brought their folklore characters with them to Trinidad when the Spanish Cedula of Population opened up the island in 1783 for French plantation owners to settle.

These folklore characters with French names boldly cross boundaries and take on human physical characteristics as well as human behaviour. They usually have roles that establish a sense of fairness, morality, respect and power.

Can you think of some characters in animal form that have human characteristics?

Mama D'lo the snake, often has a human head. When people catch her combing her hair, they will see that hair sprout into tiny snakes. She rules the rivers and punishes hunters and anyone who abuses the environment.

Mama D'lo's partner, **Papa Bois**, the father of the forest, has a wise, old, bearded, human face. He is usually said to be half deer and not half goat like the Greek satyr. Papa Bois demands respect, and if people encounter him in his forest domain, they must be very polite. He takes the environment seriously and balances out Mama D'lo's rage.

The **lagahoo** is the Caribbean version of a werewolf. He generally walks around on two legs like a human, but he has a wolf's head. In the night, he drags a coffin by a chain through the streets.

One of the most popular French folklore characters is the **Soucouyant**, the Caribbean version of a vampire. The Soucouyant can turn into an ugly old hag, when she takes off her skin and deposits it in an old-fashioned mortar and pestle. She can be destroyed by pouring salt on her skin left behind while she is bouncing around as a ball of fire in the night. The Soucouyant survives just like a vampire by sucking a victim's blood. It is possible to keep her away by sprinkling uncooked rice at a crossroads or outside of a window or door.

Everyone seems to be aware of mermaids, but in the Caribbean **mermen** live off the coast of Tobago. Who knows why Tobago has mermen instead of mermaids? Perhaps like Papa Bois, they have some connection that can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, which would make them related to Poseidon.

Every island has its folklore characters. Each folklore character has its defining features, which haven't changed over the centuries. For people in the Caribbean, folklore characters are as real as fairies, mermaids, werewolves and vampires are to people in other parts of the world.

Why not try drawing some of the Caribbean folklore characters mentioned here? You could even come up with your own character, draw their features and write a description of their personality..

Crick crack, wire bend, story end!

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