

### **The Origin of Anansi the Spider**

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Measurements: Bust: 34” Waist: 25 1/2” Hip: 36”

History tells us that many great artists and designers have used stories to inspire their works. Sir John Everett Millais' 1851 painting of "Death of Ophelia" depicting William Shakespeare's famous Hamlet character or the 1960s psychedelic band, Jefferson Airplane's song "White Rabbit" inspired by Lewis Carroll's Alice and Wonderland are great examples of this (Temple, 2011). From a fashion perspective, Ralph Lauren, Dolce and Gabbana and many other designers have used cultural/ethnic inspiration to express their design creativity. However, what makes a great artist or designer is the execution of the interpretation. As a designer and researcher, I am on a journey to discover how my imagination and creative skills can interpret African fables and folklore as a platform to learn more about the variety of cultures and tribes inhabiting our second largest continent.

**The Origin of Anansi the Spider** is inspired by an African fable from the Ashanti people of Ghana. Anansi the spider who often appears as a human being with a spider body or just as a spider, is honored as one of the world's best known folklore characters. He is what Africans call a "trickster," a cunning character with unmeasurable wit and wisdom. Anansi stories traveled from Ghana to the Caribbean during the slave trade, and then to the Americas. Anansi was a strong folklore character that the slaves looked up-to because of his ability to outwit the slave Master and win his freedom.

Through paraphrasing, I briefly tell the story of how Anansi became lord of all stories. Long ago, there were no stories in the world, Anansi went to the Sky-God Nyame, and asked to be the lord of all stories. Nyame set a high price for Anansi, asking him to bring back Onini the Python, Osebo the Leopard and the Mboro Hornets. Anansi was known for his wit and he knew this was going to be the only way he could fulfill Nyame's request. Anansi first captured Onini the Python by asking him to measure himself on a stick, which Anansi had wrapped in his silk web. Then Anansi went to capture Osebo the Leopard by digging a hole in the ground which the leopard fell into and Anansi offered to help him out by using his silk web as a rope. Last, Anansi caught the Mboro hornets by filling a calabash with water and dropping the water over the nest of the hornets pretending to be harsh rain falling, when the hornets swarmed out of the nest, Anansi invited them to fly into his now empty calabash for protection, which he sealed with silk webs. Nyame was pleased and rewarded Anansi by naming him lord of all stories.

**The Origin of Anansi the Spider** was reinterpreted using digital printing and leather etching. The process began by creating a digital print combining python, leopard, and hornet images onto a background of Kente cloth. Kente cloth is highly regarded fabric of Ashanti Ghanaian culture and is normally worn by the wealthy or for special occasions. The complex combination of all the elements made for an interesting print on the cotton sateen which resulted

in much visual texture and color value. The body of the garment was draped in a mermaid silhouette with a high-low hem reminiscent of modern day Ghanaian dress. The dress has three layers: exterior, inner/foundation for boning and tulle construction, and last the cotton batiste lining with a complementary orange cotton sateen triangular Kente pattern for the interior of the lower ruffle of the dress printed.

The spider shape representing Anansi was first draped over top of the garment body. The detailed spider was then created from tooling leather laser etched with an image of a Ghanaian Giant Banded Huntsman Spider. The leather spider was hand sewn on the garment as a waist detail which wraps to the back around the lower hips and around the shoulders as straps for the dress. The spider being placed over top of the dress silhouette instead of being incorporated into the print, symbolizes Anansi's wit allowing him the advantage to overtake the animals.

This work contributes to the field more knowledge of stories of the Ashanti people of Ghana. Storytelling is a very important aspect of the African way of life and with retelling the Anansi story, a bit of the culture is present within us. As many artists and designers before me, reinterpreting of culture and stories brings an interestingly new way to understand their origins.

Myths and Legends (n.d.). *Anansi Brings Stories to the World*. Retrieved from <http://myths.e2bn.org/mythsandlegends/story11717-anansi-brings-stories-to-the-world.html>

Temple, E. (2011, December 29). Great Works of Art Inspired by Great Works of Literature Retrieved from <http://flavorwire.com/245401/great-works-of-art-inspired-by-great-works-of-literature/11>

