

JALIYA

celebrating African and Caribbean Folklore

Issue Three - March 2023



Solma

featuring the art of Sophie Phipps

compiled and edited by Natty Mark Samuels

Editorial

Dear Reader

In the month of Ghana Independence, Jaliya places a spotlight on the oral traditions of the Black Star Country; focusing on the Ashanti of the south and the lesser known Gurunsi of the north.

Solma is the Gurunsi word for tales and the title of a short collection of them, by Ghanaian politician and writer, G.A. Agambila, where Hare appears to be trickster and Hyena the buffoon; a compilation of six tales. The first, entitled *Kanwum and Bunsela*, contains for me, one of the great concluding paragraphs of a folktale, transcribed within; from a story of the consequences of disobedience, embellished by those final words. As the Ashanti are part of the Akan, the Gurunsi come from the Gur speaking people, which includes the Mossi/Moose people, whose city now known as Ouagadougou, once the capital of the Mossi Empire, holds the biggest film festival on the continent: FESPACO. Another Gur speaking people are the Kasenna, whose women are among the great muralists of sub-Saharan Africa. As with *Black Cloth* in the first issue, I have transcribed my favourite passages from the six vignettes.

Because of Rootical Folklore – celebrating African and Caribbean folklore through flora - I'm always alert to the mention of them. Four trees are mentioned, though not featured; baobab, eucalyptus, tama (shea) and kapok (silk cotton).

Concerning Ashanti orality, Anansi is easily the most well known character; the international celebrity of African Folklore. Because he always walks away with the Oscar, I offer the stage to three of those in supporting roles; Amokye (psychopomp), Sasabonsam (ogre) and one of the great heroes of West African Folklore, Kwasi Benefo.

Wishing Ghana, a Happy Birthday.

***Jaliya* is a Mande term for their bardic tradition. The jali is storyteller, musician, historian, geneologist, tutor, advisor and envoy. Jalimuso is the female counterpart of Jali.**

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Cover photograph of Ghana flag from *Dreamstime.com*

SOLMA

Tales from Northern Ghana



G. A. AGAMBILA

The trees in the distance had arms and big heads. And Kanwum saw that some even moved. This was the time of night when trees that were not really trees, but evil people who had died, moved about so that no living person would see them. In the day, these false trees looked just like normal trees to people without spiritual eyes. But now was the time of night when even the sentry dogs had fallen asleep, and the cocks had their heads tucked under their wings....

Suddenly, she heard a loud rustling in the shrubs behind her. She thought of turning to look, but all her courage was gone. The noise grew louder and turned into scrunchy grunts. Now that Kanwum had no courage left in her, her curiosity took control. She looked back. It was the most horrible monster she'd ever seen in her nightmares. Flaming coals stood where eyes should have been. A tongue, as large as a spade and red like blood, hung from its mouth. The monster stood staring at Kanwum, smacking its hideous lips. Steam gushed from its wide nostrils. A forest of teeth filled its mouth and the excess hung out and shone like new daggers. The monster made a scraping sound with its teeth, as if sharpening them to tear tender flesh and grind bones.

...The monster grunted, trampled a bunch of grass, and lifted a hairy hand towards Kanwum. She screamed and ran for her life. Her little legs worked fast, like the pestles of energetic woman pounding millet. The monster was slow, but it continued to follow her. She would smell it. She could hear it, breaking up shrubs in its way, and leaving a path behind it. And that awful odour!! It had the smell of an animal that had been dead for many days.

...That day, when the whole village gathered for Kanwum's funeral, her mother spoke to the crowd. She said: "Mothers, children, before they put my daughter back into the belly of the earth from which we all came and to which we will one day return, let me tell you a few things. My daughter was beautiful but her beauty did not save her from Bunsela. She could dance, but her legs did not save her. She had young men, who laughed with her, but she faced Bunsela alone. If she had listened to me, she would be alive today. I always said to her, 'Don't stay out late,' but she never listened. Mothers, go and tell your children that Kanwum lost her heart because she would not listen to her mother. Tell your children what happened to Kanwum and why it happened. Let your children's children not forget this story. Children, go home and listen to your mother's and your fathers. Let this story be told as long as there are children.

from *Kanwum and Bunsela*

Bunsela Chant

You should have listened,
Now Bunsela.
Not to stay out late,
There's Bunsela.
She's behind you,
What will you do?
In the shadow of Bunsela.
You haven't got a clue,
Maybe on the menu:
Should have listened to your Mama.



from *Pinterest*

Kassena

Ghana and Burkina Faso

Hare flew down the narrow path. Before the burning sun had reached the middle of the sky, they arrived at where they were going. Hare's in-laws were happy to see him. They took him to the best guest room where the air was cool and the seats were furry soft. They inquired after the health of their daughter and Hare assured them that she was in perfect health. Then they asked about the many children that God had blessed them with. Hare said the children were in good health, they were frolicking about when he left the house and their appetites were turning him into a pauper. His wife's parents replied that children and health were to be preferred to wealth.

While Hare was conversing with his wife's parents and relations about his wife and children, Scorpion grew jealous because he hadn't yet found a wife and here was Hare with a wife and many children. And, in addition, his wife's parents were even nice to him. Scorpion had heard somewhere that in-laws were nasty relatives. Scorpion was irritated by all the love lavished on Hare. So he said to himself: "I'll fix all this mushiness. They think Hare is a nice person...well, I'll show them. When I'm done with Hare, no one will dare love him."

from Jealousy and the Scorpion

Hare unslung his bag and filled it with food. He stood up and said to the tree: "Thank you very, very much. May the spirits of my ancestors protect you, may no fire ever scorch your bark, may your leaves laugh at the scorching sun, may your roots always find water and play in it, and may the woodcutter stay way from your branches."

The tree replied, "Thank you for your blessing. May the spirits hear your prayer." The tree made a sound like an approaching storm with its big green leaves. It was saying good-bye to Hare.

from Tree of Plenty

A long time ago, there was a dog, called Tangura. Tangura got her name from her puppy days. When she was still only a few weeks old, she kept a careful eye on the whole household. She never took her protecting eyes from the babies of the house. And when strange animals or people wandered too close to the house, she kept them back with ferocious barking. She only stopped when her owner, Yidama, came and assured her that he knew the visitor and that the visitor should be allowed into the house.

...It is not for nothing that it is said that a dog is a man's best friend.

from Tangura



from *Institut Francais de Ouagadougou*



from *Cine Latinamerico*



from *FESPACO*

The Manioc Mantra

Rootical Folklore

I sometimes ask myself, why me? Why not Okra, Pumpkin or Eggplant? Why the leaves of me? I mean, I'm supposed to be toxic to them, so why me? I feel like the chosen one, but it comes with pressure. Who needs pressure? Wish I could be like Watermelon, Yam, or one of the others; grown, consumed, enjoyed; that's it, no pressure. But no, some person back in time; healer, mystic, forest guardian, I don't know, decided I was the one to facilitate re-kindled love. Let me tell you how it goes.

A woman whose with an Elsewhere Man, goes early in the morning to where I'm located, picks leaves, soaks them in salted water and after three days, places them under the pillow of the man. So you can see the pressure I'm under, as she quietly chants

Cassava leaves,
Under his pillow,
Time to rekindle the glow.

She wants to go smiling again through Kumasi Market, stopping here and there, buying this and that, arm in arm through the colourful interaction. To sit snuggled, joking as they used to, the easiness of laughter. Like the time he shared a tale about Sasabonsam, he of iron teeth and iron feet. Removing themselves from the sofa, role playing an encounter between a forest walker and the aforementioned ogre; she playing the fearless warrior, vanquishing old metal mouth.

And after the re-kindling, to go to Lake Bosomtwi, giving thanks to Nyame. Then to return, to sit at their favourite chop bar, enjoying jubilation jollof. Until then, she places hope in me, quietly chanting.

Cassava leaves,
Under his pillow,
Time to rekindle the glow.

In parts of Ghana, **cassava leaf** is used as a love talisman. **Lake Bosomtwi** is sacred to the Ashanti, where shrines are located and **Nyame** is their word for God. **Sasabonsam** is the ogre, the bogeyman of Ashanti orality.

Once upon a time, in the land of Hyena and Hare, there was a stomach-shrivelling famine. The crops had failed. The granaries were empty to the bottom. There was a little food left, but it was all sold only in a market far away. But food prices were so high that very few people could afford to buy anything to feed their families.

Hare did not know what to do. He was getting angry with his hungry wife's nagging. He was tired of hearing his little children crying for food. Hare sat under a baobab tree and thought and thought. Finally, an excellent idea came into his head! He got up and hurried to his friend Hyena.

Hyena was taking his usual long afternoon nap under the cool shade of a eucalyptus tree when Hare arrived.

"Hyena!" Hare exclaimed. Hyena opened one eye slowly and gave Hare a wicked stare. "Wake up!" Hare shook Hyena.

"Why are you bothering me on this hot afternoon when I am hungry?" Hyena growled, sitting up.

"I've found a way for us to get food for our families," Hare told him.

"Yeah?" Hyena's eyes perked up.

"Yes! It's very simple. Look, you take your old mother, and I take mine and we barter them in the market for food," Hare explained the scheme to Hyena.

"We can't do that to our mothers!" Hyena protested.

"I love my mother just as you love yours. But these hags have already lived a long time," Hare explained. "Look, Hyena, this famine is going to kill them anyway. There comes a time when each of us has to make a painful choice. It is either our children or our old mothers who're waiting for Death to come and take them away any day now."

"You know," Hyena said to Hare, "you're right. We have to sacrifice the old to save the new."

"Right! So we've agreed that we'll take the old things to the market tomorrow?" Hare asked Hyena.

"Yes, friend Hare, we'll do the difficult deed tomorrow."

from *The Famine*



from *Wikipedia*

Burkina
Faso



Anchor in The Storm

Sophie Phipps

A long time ago, a man left his young beautiful wife alone in a village. His name was Basiyire. His wife's name was Apoka. He left her to look for a well-paying job in a gold mining town very far away from his village.

One day, Apoka went into the fields to gather some *tama* fruits. She went very early in the mornings so that she could pick some of the best fruits before anyone else. It was still dark because the sun had not yet woken up. She carried a huge raffia basket in which to put her fruits.

While she was walking among the trees, her bare foot suddenly felt something soft and cold. She knew it was something she'd not felt before. Vipers were common at this time of the year. But she knew it was not a snake because most snakes ran away when they heard the noise of an approaching person. And she had been shuffling the dead leaves and grass with her feet just for that purpose.

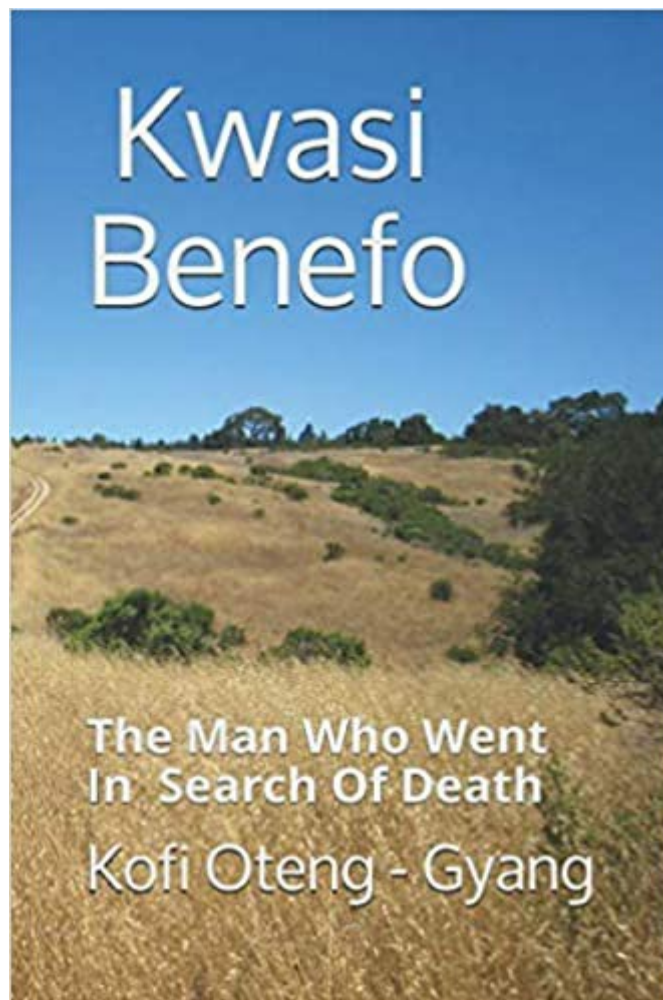
So Apoka held her basket with both hands and stepped back to look at what her foot had felt. And there it was. It was a huge bulbous thing. It had hair all over it like human hair. Not a lot of hair as on a person's head, but just like hair that you'd find on a grown man's leg. She bent down slowly, keeping a constant eye on the big round thing. Now she saw that The Thing was alive. The whole of it rose up and down, up and down; just like your chest when you're afraid or nervous. The Thing was breathing! Apoka started to put her basket down. She wanted to be ready to run if she had to.

from *Apoko and The Thing*



from *YouTube*

Kwasi Benefo



from *Amazon.co.uk*

Dialogue of Kwasi Benefo

Student: So you're telling me he was married four times, each of his wives died and there was no foul play in any of the deaths!

Teacher: Yes. They all died of natural causes.

Student: Wow! That's heavy. So did he have any children?

Teacher: Well, that's where the angel of mercy seems to have abandoned him. You see, one of his wives died during pregnancy and another died after giving birth, so he never had a chance to share parenthood.

Student: He never had it easy! So what happened to the child?

Teacher: Given to the family to look after, as he made his way to depression.

Student: He must have felt like he was jinxed or something!

Teacher: You said it! That deepened his anxiety: the feeling that he was cursed. He festered, more dead than alive.

Student: All that would tear me up too: twist me up.

Teacher: Yes, me too.

Student: So how did he get out of the pits?

Teacher: By going deeper into one!

Student: Excuse me!

Teacher: To live again, he went to Asamando, the underworld.

Student: Really! Why would he go there?

Teacher: He loved each of his wives and the love was returned. I think he just missed them and wanted to make sure they were resting in peace. They yearned for him too.

Student: I see what you mean now, when you called him the Sad Sweet Man. So how did he get there, to Asa, Asa...?

Teacher: Asamando.

Student: Thankyou. I thought you had to be dead to meet the ancestors!

Teacher: Because of what he'd been through, an exception was made: his request was granted.

Student: So who gave him permission? Who was the granter of the request?

Teacher: Have you ever heard the term psychopomp?

Student: No I haven't! Sounds like some crazy rich granny!

Teacher: You got the age right! Psychopomp is the term given to the guide, who takes the person of final breath to their last residence. For the Ashanti people, its a wise old woman called Amokye. And when we speak of psycopomp, then we enter the world of escatology.

Student: Escatology?

Teacher: As you know, Theology is the study of religion. Well, within that area of study, there is the exploration of death, the afterlife and judgement, which is called escatology.

Student: Ok. Thankyou for that. So he became the recipient of this monumental opportunity; but were there any conditions?

Teacher: No. She just informed him that although he wouldn't be able to speak face to face, they would be aware of his presence.

Student: So what happened?

Teacher: They became the Weeping Quintet. Asamando had never seen so many cascades before! Anyway, in between the crying, his wives again declared their love for him and wanting to see him happy, gave him their blessings, in his search for another wife: hopefully his final one.

Student: So what happened after the meeting?

Teacher: He returned here and found another wife. They loved each other and as they say, lived happily ever after.

Student: So the Sad Sweet Man, left behind the sadness, finally embracing the sweeter life.

Teacher: Yes, well put. So there you have him; one of the great characters from African folklore: Kwasi Benefo.



from *Redbubble*

Ashanti Flag

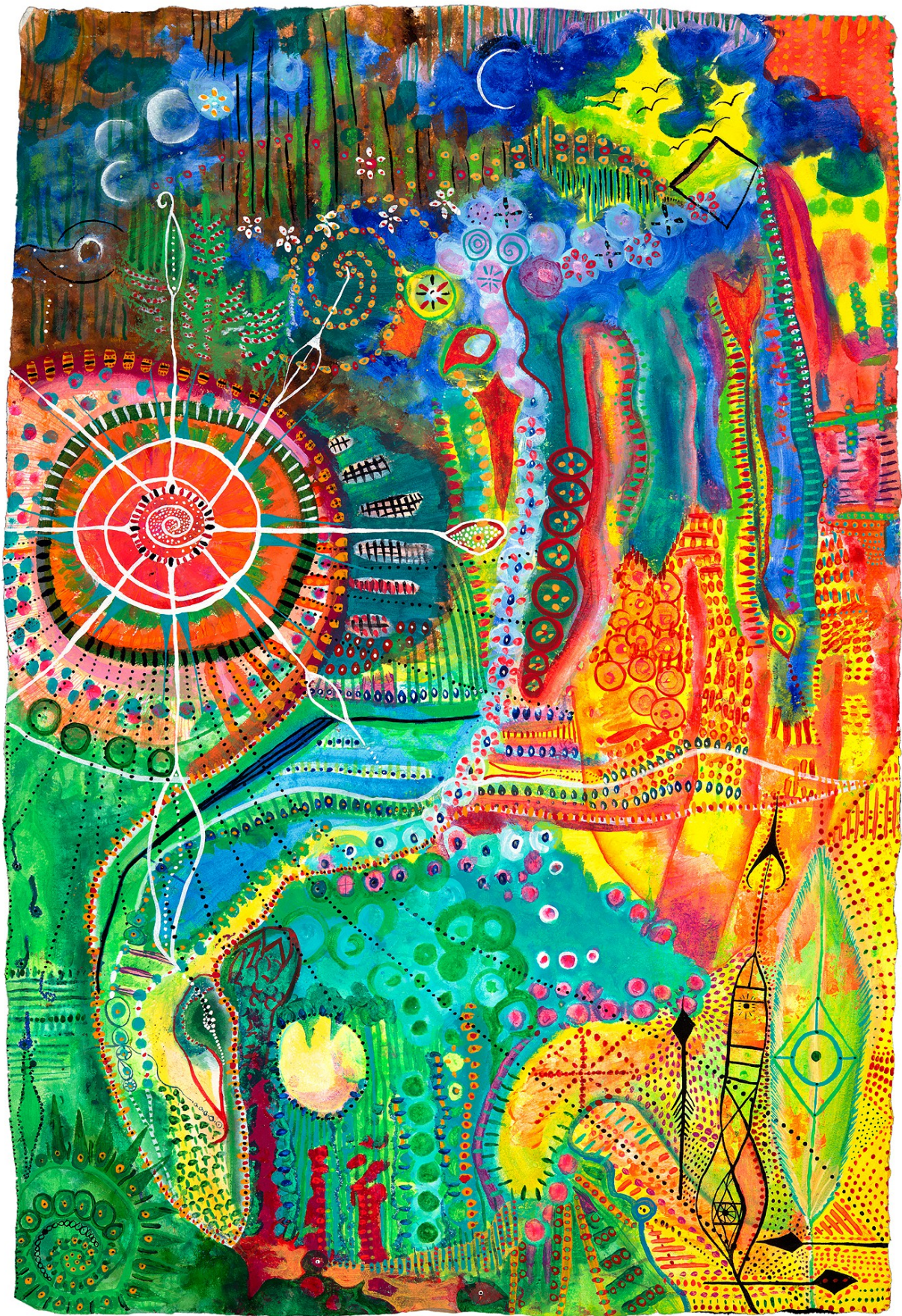
Seperewa Time

to Osei Korankye

Okra sits in the lap of yam,
Kola nut snuggles up to cassava,
Aubergine stretches out full length.
Everyone is gathering,
For the marriage of evening sweetness,
Between Word and Sound,
Because Osei Korankye is officiating.
The Master has stepped in,
So let the stories begin.
The sky is spangling:
It's Seperewa Time.

Pepper's hanging out with shallot,
Tomato with calabash,
Watermelon's massaging pumpkin.
Everyone around the centre,
As beauty is about to commence,
All want a fireside seat,
Because Osei Korankye is visiting.
The Doyen has stepped in,
So let the songs begin.
Their faces are beaming:
It's Seperewa Time.

Seperewa is the traditional stringed instrument of the Ashanti storyteller and musician.



After The Fires
Sophie Phipps