

Stories and folklore of Jamaica

Anansi, duppies, Jonkonnu and the old songs.



Before you start

Before radio, Jamaica told itself stories. Here are Anansi, the duppies, the Jonkonnu characters and the ring games.

In this guide

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Who is Anansi?

Jamaica's cleverest spider, who came from Africa.

An Akan spider.

"Anansi" means spider in Akan, the language of the Ashanti of present-day Ghana.

In 1924 Martha Beckwith called him the "culture hero" of the Gold Coast.

He came with the enslaved.

The stories crossed the Atlantic by word of mouth, with enslaved Africans.

In Jamaica he is called Anancy. He almost always tricks Tiger, the strongest in the bush.

More than sixty storytellers.

On two trips, Beckwith wrote down stories from more than sixty storytellers in rural Jamaica.

There, an "Anansi story" is almost any tale, riddle or song.

Anancy on stage.

Louise Bennett brought Anancy into her pantomimes and books, such as "Anancy and Miss Lou" (1979).

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Anansi

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Zorro andino (fox)

Tales that explain "why"

Beckwith collected tales such as why the vulture is bald. In Huarochirí, around 1600, a tale explains why the fox has a dark tail.



Anansi and the goat

A tale from Westmoreland, told in our own words.

Tiger hunts, Anansi does not.

One day, Anansi and Tiger go hunting. Tiger catches a wild goat.

Anansi catches nothing. And he does not like that.

What do you say when you hunt?

Anansi asks him what he says when he catches a goat like that. Tiger answers: "Nothing".

Anansi tells him he should give thanks to God.

Thanks with your hand.

He explains how: goat under the arm, a clap of the hand on top and "Thank you, Lord!".

Tiger follows his advice to the letter.

No goat for anyone.

When he lifts his hand, the goat escapes. Neither of them gets to eat it.

Told by Henry Spence, of Bog, Westmoreland (Beckwith 1924, no. 12b, p. 15).

Anansi and the pineapple

A tale from Mandeville, told in our own words.

Let's throw our knives away.

Anansi and Tiger are out walking. Anansi proposes a deal: he will throw his knife away and Tiger has to throw his.

Tiger agrees.



A knife that never flew.

Anansi pretends to throw something. Tiger, trusting him, throws his knife away for real.

Anansi keeps his own hidden.

A field of pineapples.

They reach a field full of pineapples. Anansi takes out his knife and eats all he wants.

Tiger watches, unable to open a single one.

No knife, no pineapple.

Anansi tells him that whoever has no knife eats no pineapple.

Told by Benjamin Collins, of Mandeville (Beckwith 1924, no. 11a, p. 14).



Duppies

The spirits of Jamaican folklore: what people believe, not what is known.

Duppy /dó-pi/ · noun

Ghost or spirit of a dead person.

"A 'duppy' is a ghost or spirit." (Beckwith, 1928)

Souls with many forms.

Alice Werner wrote that duppies are souls of the dead that take the form of a person or an animal.

The origin of the word is not clear: the sources disagree.

Not all of them frighten.

According to the Observer, some are relatives who appear in dreams to give advice. Others, it is believed, do harm.

Werner noted that a duppy walks spinning round or backwards.

Nine nights.

After a death, family and friends gather for nine nights so that the spirit does not stay wandering around.

In 1928, Beckwith described games around a bonfire at these gatherings.

To keep them away

Salt	Eat it or lay down a line of salt.
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Clothes inside out	Wear your clothes turned inside out.
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No whistling	At night, the duppy "catches" your voice.
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Plants	Such as the "duppy pumpkin" (Beckwith).
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A tree of spirits.

Beckwith noted the belief that spirits live in the silk cotton tree. Before cutting it down, rum is offered to it.

Creatures of folklore

Rolling Calf, Ol' Higue, River Mumma and the three-legged horse.

The calf with the chain.

Beckwith describes it as a spirit in animal form that drags a chain and haunts bamboo, silk cotton trees and empty sugar mills.

Werner: the soul of someone not good enough for heaven and not bad enough for hell.

A dishonest butcher?

According to the Observer, it is the spirit of a dishonest butcher, with burning eyes.

The versions disagree: each source gives it a different origin.

The witch without skin.

According to the Observer, at night she takes off her skin, takes the form of an owl and steals the breath of sleepers, especially babies.

The belief: salt and pepper on her skin so she cannot put it back on.

The mother of the river.

A spirit who guards fresh water, according to the Observer. She leaves her golden comb on the rocks to lure people.

Where she is seen, people do not eat the fish: they would be her children.

The three-legged horse.

Werner lists it among the forms of the duppy (1907), and it appears in a tale collected by Jekyll.

In some versions it is ridden by the Whooping Boy, who shouts in the night.



Jonkonnu characters

Who is who in Jamaica's Christmas parade.

The one in strips.

He is covered in strips of coloured cloth. The Gleaner calls him one of the most popular characters.

Next to him, Jack-in-the-Green is dressed all in green.

The cast

Belly Woman	A man dressed as a pregnant woman.
Devil	Sometimes pokes the crowd with his pitchfork.
Horse Head	A horse's head that jumps and runs.
Cow Head	A head with horns.
House Head	Carries a large house on his head.

With sceptre and sword.

In Westmoreland, Beckwith saw a king, a queen and a prince acting out a rivalry with sceptre and sword.

Earlier, in 1816, there was already talk of two sides: the Reds and the Blues.

A house on the head.

In 1921, the dancer Frederick Swabe wore a headdress shaped like a small house with a porch.

Many headdresses carried porcelain dolls. According to the dancers, "just for play".

Few groups remain.

The South West St Andrew band has been going out since 1962, with fife and drums.



Its leader told the Gleaner in 2025 that he knows of only two other groups.

Jamaican folk songs

Five songs Jamaica has sung for generations. Just the story.

Not a single ackee sold.

A mento about a mother who takes ackee to market, sells nothing and fears her children will go hungry.

Its first printed version is in Jekyll's book (1907).

From slow to danceable.

Olive Lewin noted that it used to be sung slowly and sadly. Today it is played fast, for dancing.

La Sonora Matancera recorded it in 1957, in English and in Spanish.

Sung on the docks.

A work song of the dockworkers who loaded bananas at night, when it was cooler.

Harry Belafonte, whose mother was Jamaican, made it famous on his album "Calypso" (1956).

From the 19th century to 2026.

A traditional folk and mento song, from the 19th century according to the Observer.

In 2026 it came back as a dancehall riddim, and some new lyrics caused controversy.

Lyrics by Miss Lou.

Lyrics by Louise Bennett and music by Barbara Ferland.

In 2020, a foundation asked people to sing it every Friday at 6 p.m. to lift spirits during the pandemic.



The woman who kept them.

She was born in Clarendon and collected folk songs all over the island. In 1967 she founded the Jamaican Folk Singers.

Her book: "Rock It Come Over" (2000).

Ring games

The singing games Beckwith and Jekyll wrote down a century ago.

The bull in the pen.

The children form a circle holding hands. Inside are a bull and a herdsman who checks the "fence" hand by hand.

The bull tries to break through and escape (Beckwith, 1928).

Sally rises up.

A ring game in which Sally rises up, wipes her eyes and turns to the east and to the west.

It was written down by Jekyll (1907) and Beckwith (1928).

Under the hat.

In another game, a child hidden under a hat gets up as a "duppy" and chases the others.

Beckwith collected it in 1928.

Three lies.

Whoever lost had to pay a forfeit: tell a story, ask riddles or recite "three lies" that could not be true.

That is how Beckwith recorded it.

Brown Girl in the Ring.

A traditional Caribbean ring game, said to have been born in Jamaica. Boney M took it to no. 2 in the United Kingdom in 1978.



In 1907 Jekyll had already recorded a ring game called "There's a Black boy in a ring".



Revival and Pocomania

A faith born in Jamaica, a blend of African roots and Christianity.

The Great Revival.

It began in Moravian, Baptist and Methodist churches. Followers of Myal took it further.

Revival was born from that blend of African tradition and Christianity.

Zion and Pocomania.

Revival Zion (the 60 Order) has more elements of European Christianity.

Pocomania or Pukumina (the 61 Order) keeps more African spiritual practices.

Bands and leaders.

The churches are organised into bands. The leader is Captain in Zion or Shepherd in Pocomania. A woman leader is called Mother.

Members are called Brother and Sister.

Flags and turbans.

The temple is usually in the leader's yard, marked with coloured flags on tall poles.

The faithful wear coloured robes and turbans.

Watt Town, heritage.

UNESCO inscribed the Revivalist pilgrimage to Watt Town, in St Ann, as intangible heritage.

It is Jamaica's third, after the Maroons of Moore Town (2008) and reggae (2018).

Counted since 2011.

The 2011 census included the "Revivalist" box for the first time: 1.35% of the population ticked it.



Kumina and Myal

Two Afro-Jamaican traditions that honour the ancestors.

Talking with the ancestors.

Kumina is based on communication with the ancestors of the Congo people. It arrived with indentured Africans between 1840 and 1860.

In the face of death and life.

Mainly after a death in the family: wakes, burials and memorials.

Also at births, weddings, thanksgivings and for healing.

Spirit and shadow.

Each person has a spirit and a shadow. At death, the spirit goes to Nzambi Mpungu, the supreme god.

A shadow without a proper burial can become a duppy, a wandering spirit.

Against witchcraft.

Myal joined healing and religion, an idea brought from Africa. Its rituals sought to find and remove obeah, harmful magic.

In 1841–42 the police broke up its meetings.

It lives inside other faiths.

Over time, Myal became part of Revival.

In kumina, “myal” is the name for possession by an ancestral spirit.

JAMAICA

Kumina • Congo

&

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Cristo Moreno

Central African roots

In 1651, an enslaved Angolan man painted the Señor de los Milagros in Lima. Kumina came from the Congo.



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