

'Once Upon A Time...' - tales and songs from Mali

Some of my happiest childhood memories are from holidays spent with my grandparents in the village of Koulikoro – especially the evenings of story telling.

There was no electric light in the village when I was growing up, only oil lamps. But the moon and the stars lit our way when, after supper, we would make our way to one of our grandparents for a storytelling session. A fire would already be burning when we arrived, and we had been taught to greet all the adults present very respectfully.

“Once upon a time...” the story always began, and with those words magic was already in the air. Several hours later, when some of the boys couldn’t stop themselves yawning with tiredness, grandma would finish the story saying,

“And now I’ll put this story back where it belongs.”

That is the tradition in Mali, for as the wise old people say, a story does not belong to the teller, it is just on loan, and like everything else borrowed it must always be returned to its rightful place.

My father had inherited my grandma's gift of storytelling and right up to his death he would delight in telling me some of the stories from his childhood.

Now I want to tell you some of the stories from Mali and therefore I have written the book 'Once Upon A Time ...' and recorded a CD with songs belonging to the stories. I'll be very happy if it inspires you to begin storytelling yourself. Hope you will enjoy them.

Moussa Diallo Trio performs for children, teachers and parents in schools, cultural centers and other venues

Moussa Diallo - bass, vocals and storytelling

Dawda Jobarteh - cora, tama and vocals

Ayi Solomon - percussion and vocals

The aim of Moussa's trio is to recreate the magical atmosphere he himself experienced as a child when the elders in the village used to tell stories. Moussa sings and tells the stories taking his audience on a

journey into the Malian world of fairytales.

Children are encouraged to interactively take part in the performances. In Denmark the book and the CD are used in schools to tell about Malian culture and to prepare the children for our visit.

The trio has performed over 100 concerts in Denmark and Norway between November 2004 and November 2005.

The concept of this project is to bring Malian storytelling tradition and music to schools in different countries. Diallo's wish is to be able to cooperate with singers/storytellers from the respective countries, as he has successfully done in Norway with Barth Niava, who was telling the stories in Norwegian.

To date the book and the CD have been translated and recorded into Norwegian, English, French and Greek. The Greek version is sung by Greek singer Despina Apostolidou. Moussa Diallo himself performs in Danish, English, French and of course Bambara.

Currently he is also working on a German version and wishes to draw more countries into this project.

If you are interested in this project please contact:

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THE HARE AND THE HYENA

Once upon a time a hare and a hyena went fishing together. They caught two fish, and at the end of the day the hare said, "Well, my friend, would you like the two fish we caught today, or the four we'll catch tomorrow?"

The hyena, being rather stupid, answered, "I'd rather have the four we're going to catch tomorrow."

So the hare went home with the two fish, happy that he had such a stupid partner.

Next day they caught three fish, and the hare asked ...

THE CAT, THE CROW AND THE FOX

Once upon a time, along time ago, a cat, a crow and a fox lived in a town in Africa just south of the Sahara desert. They lived there side by side with the townspeople. One year it was extremely difficult to find enough to eat. Everyone had to search far and wide for food in the hot, dusty terrain. The hours of wandering wore out the shoes of the cat and the fox.

One day the tired, hungry fox went to the shoemaker to get his shoes repaired.

"Hello my friend," said the fox to the shoemaker, "please will you repair my shoes?"

"Certainly," replied the shoemaker. "It's a funny coincidence though, the cat has just brought in his shoes for repair too."

"Oh, is that so?" said the starving fox. "Can you wait until I come back before you give him his shoes? I've just remembered something very important that I need to talk to him about."

THE WICKED STEPMOTHER

Once upon a time there was an orphan girl. When her father died she was left to live with her stepmother, who also had a daughter. The orphan girl was a skivvy in the house. She was expected to make all the meals and do all the other household chores without any help whatsoever.

One day, when she was washing pots and pans in the river, she broke a calabash. She hurried home and told her stepmother what had happened, but said she could easily mend it. But the wicked stepmother flew into a rage and screamed:

"No! You must travel to the end of the world to get it repaired. Only a spirit from the end of the world can mend my calabash properly, and you're not to come back before it is done!"

The poor girl cried and pleaded, but it was to no avail. She had to leave. She had been walking for a very long time when she met an old woman sitting on the roadside. She had taken her head off and put it in her lap so that she could do her hair.

"Hey, little girl," she said "what are you doing so far away ...

THE FARMER AND THE DEVIL

Once upon a time, a long time ago, a young farmer was ploughing his field, when the devil suddenly appeared. "What are you doing here?" he asked the farmer.

"I'm getting my field ready so that I can sow some seed" replied the farmer.

"This field isn't YOURS, it's MINE!! All the fields in the world belong to me! Who gave you permission to plough this one?" asked the devil.

"Sorry", said the farmer. "I didn't know it was your field. I need to grow food to make a living".

"OK, let's make a deal" said the devil.

"What do you have in mind?" asked the farmer.

"When the crop is ready for harvesting, you get everything that grows above ground, and I take everything that grows under the soil. Agreed?" "It's a deal!" said the farmer.

Now this young farmer was very smart. He decided to grow millet. When the millet was ripe, he cut, threshed and winnowed it. Then he put his crop in a basket and took it to the market to sell it. The devil and his children went to the field and tore out all the millet roots, put them in a basket and went off to the market. Everybody just laughed at them! This made the devil extremely angry. He went back to the farmer and said "You really fooled me this time. But next season YOU get the roots. Understood?".

But the next season this smart young farmer sowed sweet potatoes. When harvest time came around the devil made sure he got to the field first. He cut off all the leaves and the farmer pulled up all the roots and they set off to market together. Of course the farmer sold all his sweet potatoes, while the devil just made a laughing stock of himself again. People simply doubled up with laughter when they saw what he was trying to sell, but he couldn't understand what was wrong.

"This farmer is much too smart for me" screamed the devil, and he disappeared, never to be seen again.

Now I'll put this story back where it belongs.