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By Madafo Lloyd Wilson
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The young boy went to his grandfather and said, "Grandfather, is it true that the lion is the king of the jungle?"

"Yes," said the old man, "but why do you ask?"

"Well," said the boy, "in all the stories that I read and even in the ones I hear, man will always defeat the lion. So, how can this be true?"

The old man looked his grandson in the eyes and said, "It will always be that way, my son, until the lion tells the story."

Since the beginning of time, storytelling has been an important event in the African and African American communities. Through storytelling, questions were answered, history was conveyed, and lifelong lessons were taught and learned.

Africa is the second-largest continent, with more than eight hundred different languages spoken among the various ethnic groups. Each group has its own term to describe the storyteller. In the West, the most common is griot [2], a French word denoting an expert in oral performance. However, among the Yoruba, the storyteller is called Akewi; called Maroka among the Hausa; and Imbongi among the Xhosa people.

These repositories of the past have the responsibility of preserving the principles and values of the people. They are musicians, poets, spokespersons, teachers, genealogists, and keepers of the people's history and traditions. Within their memory reside centuries of folktales, epics, myths, and legends passed on by way of oral tradition. It is in this spirit a scholar might remark, "When an elder passes on, it is as if a library has burned."

When Africans were brought to the Americas during the infamous slave trade, the slavers denied them many of the traditions they had practiced for thousands of centuries. The enslaved African was refused all connections with his rich African past. His name, which had substance and meaning, was taken away. And he was refused the right to pray to his gods or to speak his native language. Those who survived the horrors of the Middle Passage [3], the route traveled by the slave ships across the Atlantic from West Africa to the West Indies and America, brought with them the clothes on their backs and the stories they had listened to and told in the motherland—Africa. And they told those stories.

The most common form of storytelling among these enslaved people was the folktale. Most African folktales involve animals as the principal characters. In Africa, the stories may have been told about the hyena, lion, elephant, monkey, and trickster Anansi, the spider. Even though the tales retained their basic story lines, the characters changed to match the animal life of this new land. Tales about the lion, elephant, and hyena now featured the rabbit, fox, and bear—the stories we know as the Brer Rabbit [4] tales. These stories entertained the plantation owner, so he saw little problem with allowing this form of activity.

To the African in slavery, the Brer Rabbit tales became a source of identity. The African, in his lowly condition, felt a certain kinship to the rabbit. Though one of the smallest and weakest animals in the forest, the rabbit was also one of the swiftest. He could outsmart the bigger and stronger animals by using his wit. These versions of African folktales were entertaining to the enslaver, but they were also a source of information and strategy for the enslaved.

Buh Rabbit's Human Weakness

A head, that's a place to keep your thoughts, isn't it? You study up on things and everything you learn, you can keep right in your head. But every time you open your mouth, you got to take care something don't leak out . . . especially if you should keep it to yourself.

It's like the time the animals was having a big revival meeting down in the bottoms. Everyone was there—the rabbits and possums and coons and turkeys and geese. Folks came from all over to hear the preaching; and the singing and shouting went on all night. Four or five preachers were there, and every time one of them talked himself out, another one jumped up.

Well, there was a break in the action, and the preachers went off together in the cornfield to rest up for the next round of preaching. Preacher Coon say, "Brothers, all night long we been preaching about sin and human weakness. I confess to

my weakness, and I know it won't go no further. You know, I'm just crazy about apples and grapes. If I see some in a garden, I can't resist going in and taking a few."

So, Preacher Dog, he confess to stealing some of the farmer's meat, and Preacher Rooster confess to chasing the chickens. This went on, all the preachers confessing about their human weakness, until it was time to begin the next sessions of preaching. Everybody confessed except Preacher Rabbit. He just sat there. They asks Buh Rabbit if he didn't have no weaknesses.

He say, "Brothers, I got a human weakness, too. It's a real terrible human weakness. It's so bad, I just hate to tell you about it. My weakness is gossip; can't never keep anything to myself, and I just can't wait to get out of here and tell everything I just heard!" And bam! He was gone. The point of it all is that recognition of your weak points is good for your salvation. But when you make it a subject of conversation around those who will tell others your secrets, you got only yourself to blame.

Madafo Lloyd Wilson is a multitalented storyteller, musician, writer, producer, and director who resides in Wilmington. He is featured at storytelling festivals throughout the United States and Kenya, Africa.

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