

Extracts: Cultural Myths and Legends

Read through the below cultural myths and legends extracts. These extracts should help get you thinking about your own writing and how you could build a story around your own cultural myths and legends.

'The Star's Tears' from Papua New Guinea

Slone, Thomas H. "The Star's Tears." In *A River of Stories*, compiled by Alice Curry, 96. London: Commonwealth Education Trust Books, 2011.

Many mornings we see small drops of water on leaves, on stones, and on grass. The ancestors say this dew has a story. The ancestors' story goes as follows: long ago, before we existed, Star hung in the sky and spoke with Sand. The two had a contest.

Sand said to Star, "You and I must count how many of us there are. Who has more, sand or stars? Who will win?"

So Star and Sand began to count.

Sand counted how many stars there were in the sky. Then Star spoke, "Ok, you counted how many of me there are. Now I shall begin to count how many of you there are."

Sand lay down and fell deep asleep. Star counted and counted the grains of sand. But Sand was too numerous for Star to count. Star was able to count the grains of sand on the surface, but could not count the grains of sand below the surface. Sand won the contest, and Star was ashamed. Star was truly embarrassed. Tears welled up from Star's eyes and fell.

So in the morning we often see Star's tears on the grass, on stones, and on tree leaves.

'Rain and Fire' from Namibia

Rode, Linda. "Rain and Fire." In *A River of Stories*, compiled by Alice Curry, 102-103. London: Commonwealth Education Trust Books, 2011.

Once upon a time Rain and Fire argued about who was the stronger.

"Oh," boasted Rain in her silvery, watery voice, "I can make so much water fall upon the earth that the rivers are flooded and the houses are washed away completely."

"Humph," Fire answered in a smoky, husky voice, "so what? I can burn down woods and trees and houses so that nothing but black ashes remain."

Rain said: "You're not as strong as you think. I can quench your flames in an instant. They have no power against water."

Fire said: "Pooh, I'll soon dry your little streams with my heat."

"Let's see then," said Rain, and she gathered all the heaviest clouds together. Before long the first big drops began to fall. Fire took a seat on a dry camel-thorn log in the long grass and soon the first little flames were licking at the wood.

Then Wind came past. He looked at Fire and he looked at Rain and he said: "I'll help both of you. I'll whip the raindrops from the clouds and I'll chase along the flames. Then you can decide once and for all which one of you is stronger."

Rain made the water stream across the veld, but Fire quickly licked up all the water and dried out the veld.

A wise old tortoise that had floated to the top of an anthill said: "In water you can swim and survive, but against fire you can do nothing. Fire burns you to death."

Rain bowed her head and said: "Yes, that is true." And she went to hide high up in the clouds.

"Well, that's how it is then," said Wind and blew himself far away from Fire.

"I told you I am stronger," Fire cackled, but took care to call back his flames before they scorched the wise old tortoise.

'The Messenger of the Moon' from Malaysia

Skipper, Mervyn. "The Messenger of the Moon." In *A River of Stories*, compiled by Alice Curry, 84-86. London: Commonwealth Education Trust Books, 2011.

There was a drought in the Elephant country. There hadn't been a drop of rain for weeks. All the pools and the lakes had dried up, and instead of a beautiful broad river to bathe in, all the elephants had was a little muddy trickle of water which was hardly enough to give them each a drink, not to speak of a bath.

So the King of the Elephants sent a messenger out to see if, in another part of the country, there was any water to be found. The messenger travelled for many days over the hills and through the jungle, and everywhere he found the lakes had all dried up and the pools were all gone and the rivers were just little muddy trickles of water.

But at last, after many days of travelling, he came to a river where the grass was still green and the water was lovely and deep, and after drinking a little and giving himself a shower-bath, he hurried back to the King to tell him the good news. As soon as the King of the Elephants heard it, he told all his people to follow him, and set off to find the wonderful river.

Now the river belonged to a tribe of monkeys, and when some of the monkey people saw the elephants coming they went to their King and said, "What shall we do, O King? The elephant people are coming, like mountains walking, to take our river from us."

The Monkey King called all his people together and asked the oldest and wisest monkeys to tell him how he could stop the elephant people coming and drinking up their river. Some said one thing and some said another, but none of them could tell him how the elephant people could be stopped from drinking up their river.

At last a little baby monkey jumped up and said, "I will stop these elephants from stealing our beautiful river and drinking it all up."

The monkey people all laughed at him and cried, "How will you, a little whipper-snapper that a baby elephant could crush under one foot, stop a whole tribe of elephants?"

"That is my business," said the little monkey, "just you wait and see!"

So the little monkey went off and climbed a tree that leaned over the river and waited for the elephants. Soon they came along, hundreds of big old-man elephants and hundreds of big old-mother elephants and lots of little baby elephants who could have crushed the little monkey with one foot; and the ground shook under their tread, and the trees bent as if a strong wind were blowing, and all the leaves trembled. The little monkey did not tremble. He said in his squeaky voice, "Stop! Stop, all you elephant people! If you go another step further you will be sorry for it!"

The elephants all stopped and looked up, and when they saw a little monkey on a tree branch they laughed, and their King said, "Who are you, small hairy thing, that tells the elephant tribe to stop?"

"I am the messenger of the Moon, and the Moon owns all this river," said the little monkey. "There she is, bathing in it at this moment, and if you dare disturb her she will be very angry, and will certainly eat you all up!"

The elephants all looked at the river, and there, sure enough, was the Moon bathing in it.

So they all gathered at the bank of the river and talked about what was the best thing to do; some said one thing and some said another, but before they had made up their minds, a little baby elephant, trying to push his way to the front so that he could hear what his elders were talking about, fell, flop! into the river.

At once the Moon stopped bathing and began to rush up and down and round and round, as if she was terribly angry. The Elephant King, thinking he was going to be eaten, gave a wild scream and rushed away; and all the elephant tribe, the big old-man elephants and the big old-mother elephants and all the little baby elephants, rushed after him, falling over each other in their hurry.

The baby elephant who had fallen into the river pulled himself out as fast as he was able, and ran too. But after a while, noticing that the Moon wasn't following him, he stopped, and as he

was very thirsty, he came tiptoeing back to the river, and there was the Moon, bathing herself quietly again. So he gently put his trunk into the water and took a little sip; and then, as the Moon did not seem to mind, he took a long gulp, and then he slipped down the bank, splosh! into the water and gave himself a shower-bath.

When he had had enough, he ran after the rest of the elephants to tell them that it was all right and that there was nothing to be afraid of. He had not gone very far when he met his mother, looking very pale and anxious. "You young rascal," she said, "wherever have you been? I was quite sure the Moon had caught and eaten you!"

"Caught and eaten me?" said the baby elephant, "No way! That moon you were all so afraid of was only a reflection. I've just had a lovely shower-bath in her river, and if you all come back you can have one too!"

"Hold your tongue, you cheeky little thing, and come along," said the mother elephant, cuffing him over the head with her trunk, and hurrying to catch up with the rest.

So the elephant tribe went back to their own country and the monkey tribe kept their beautiful river.

'The Ice King' from Canada

Demille, A. B. "The Ice King." In *A River of Stories*, compiled by Alice Curry, 142-143. London: Commonwealth Education Trust Books, 2011.

Where the world is grey and lone

Sits the Ice King on his throne –

Passionless, austere, afar,

Underneath the Polar Star.

Over all his splendid plains

An eternal stillness reigns.

Silent creatures of the North,

White and strange and fierce, steal forth:

Soft-foot beasts from frozen lair,
Noiseless birds that wing the air,

Souls of seamen dead, who lie
Stark beneath the pale north sky;

Shapes to living eye unknown,
Wild and shy, come round the throne

Where the Ice King sits in view
To receive their homage due.

But the Ice King's quiet eyes,
Calm, implacable, and wise,

Gaze beyond the silent throng,
With a steadfast look and long,

Down to where the summer streams
Murmur in their golden dreams;

Where the sky is rich and deep,
Where warm stars bring down warm sleep,

Where the days are, every one,
Clad with warmth and crowned with sun.

And the longing gods may feel
Stirs within his heart of steel,

And he yearns far forth to go
From his land of ice and snow.

But forever, grey and lone,
Sits the Ice King on his throne –

Passionless, austere, afar,
Underneath the Polar Star.

‘The Fringe of the Sea’ from Jamaica

Hendricks, A. L. “The Fringe of the Sea.” In *Give the Ball to the Poet*, edited by Georgie Horrell, Aisha Spencer and Morag Styles, 94-95. Commonwealth Education Trust Books, 2014.

We do not like to awaken
far from the fringe of the sea,
we who live upon small islands.

We like to rise up early,
quick in the agile mornings
and walk out only little distances
to look down at the water,

to know it is swaying near to us
with songs, and tides, and endless
boatways,
and undulate patterns and moods.

We want to be able to saunter beside it
slowpaced in burning sunlight,
barearmed, barefoot, bareheaded,

and to stoop down by the shallows
sifting the random water
between assaying fingers
like farmers do with soil,

and to think of turquoise mackerel
turning with consummate grace,
sleek and decorous
and elegant in high blue chambers.

We want to be able to walk out into it,
to work in it,
dive and swim and play in it,

to row and sail
and pilot over its sandless highways,
and to hear
its call and murmurs wherever we may be.

All who have lived upon small islands
want to sleep and awaken
close to the fringe of the sea.