

1 • Akan

Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire · Africa

LANGUAGE

Twi

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

These are told out loud, at night, by anybody who can hold a room, and the audience interrupts with songs.

WHERE

Ghana and eastern Côte d'Ivoire, in forest country where the spider in the story is one you can meet on a wall.

TODAY

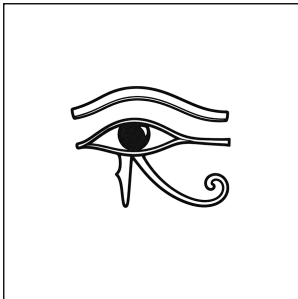
Anansi stories are still told and still published, and the Caribbean versions are related to them but are not the same stories.

IN THIS BOOK

32. How the Stories Got Their Name — page 153

33. The Pot That Would Not Go Up the Tree — page 157

A living tradition.



2 • Ancient Egyptian

Nile valley · Africa

LANGUAGE

Ancient Egyptian

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

These come from papyrus rolls, and several survive in a single copy, so what reaches us depends on which roll did not rot.

WHERE

The Nile valley and the Red Sea coast, in a country whose whole shape is one river with desert on both sides.

TODAY

The religion ended long ago and the writing stayed unreadable for fifteen centuries, until a soldier turned up a slab with three scripts on it.

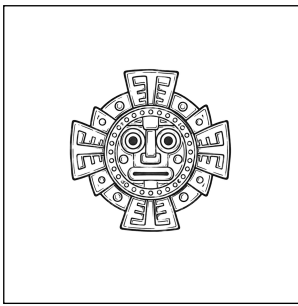
IN THIS BOOK

27. Eighty Years of Arguing — page 133

28. The Name the Sun God Would Not Say — page 137

29. The Island That Was Not There Afterwards — page 141

Known from written and excavated record.



3 • Andean

Huarochirí, Peruvian Andes · South America

LANGUAGE

Quechua

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

A single manuscript, taken down in Quechua around 1600 from people in one province, holds nearly everything that survives of this.

WHERE

Huarochirí, in the mountains above Lima, where the villages sit at heights that leave visitors short of breath.

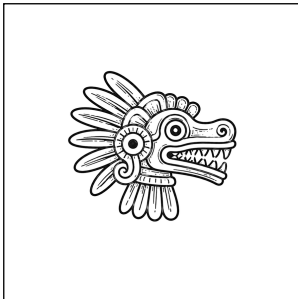
TODAY

Quechua is spoken by millions across the Andes, and the herders in these stories have descendants doing the same work on the same slopes.

IN THIS BOOK

41. The Llama That Would Not Eat — page 189

A living tradition.



4 • Aztec (Mexico)

Valley of Mexico · Mesoamerica

LANGUAGE

Nahuatl

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Nahua elders dictated these to scribes after the conquest, in Nahuatl, and the young men writing them down were their own students.

WHERE

The Valley of Mexico: a lake with a city built out into it, ringed by volcanoes the stories still name.

TODAY

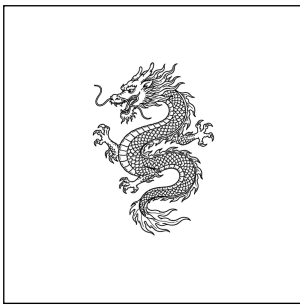
Around a million and a half people speak Nahuatl, and the sun of this account is carved at the centre of the famous stone.

IN THIS BOOK

39. The Small God Who Jumped First — page 182

40. The Ant Who Would Not Say Where — page 186

Known from written and excavated record.



5 • Chinese

China · East Asia

LANGUAGE

Classical Chinese

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Philosophers and court compilers preserved these while arguing about something else, so the earliest versions are often footnotes to another subject.

WHERE

The Central Plain and the Yellow River, in a country where the flood stories are about real floods that arrive on a schedule.

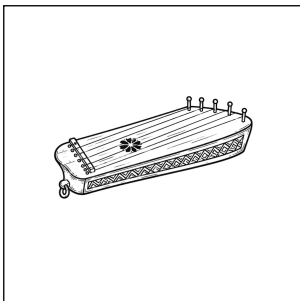
TODAY

The moon story runs the Mid-Autumn Festival, and hundreds of millions of people eat mooncakes under it without needing the plot explained.

IN THIS BOOK

- 19. The Woman Who Patched the Sky — page 96
- 20. The Archer and the Woman on the Moon — page 100

A living tradition.



6 • Finnish

Finland and Karelia · Europe

LANGUAGE

Finnish

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

A country doctor spent years walking through eastern villages writing down what singers sang, then arranged the pieces into one long poem.

WHERE

Karelia, on both sides of a border that has moved several times, in forests where the lakes go on for a hundred kilometres.

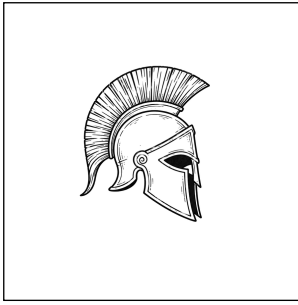
TODAY

The singing mostly stopped, but the poem became the national epic, and Finland keeps a public holiday for it in February.

IN THIS BOOK

- 9. The Machine Nobody Can Describe — page 51
- 10. The Harp Made from a Fish — page 55

Known from written and excavated record.



7 • Greek

Aegean, Hellas · Europe

LANGUAGE

Ancient Greek

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Poets wrote these down early and often, and the versions that reached us are the ones people kept copying.

WHERE

They belong to the Aegean: islands, harbours, olive terraces, and a sea you can cross in a small boat.

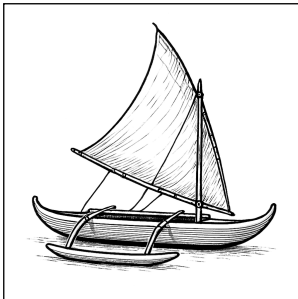
TODAY

Nobody makes offerings to these gods now, but the names are everywhere — on maps, in medicine, in the word for panic.

IN THIS BOOK

1. The Girl Who Ate Six Seeds — page 18
2. The Weaver Who Would Not Look Down — page 22
3. Wings Made in a Locked Room — page 26

Known from written and excavated record.



8 • Hawaiian

Hawaiian archipelago · Oceania

LANGUAGE

‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Chanters carried these in memory, and in the nineteenth century Hawaiian writers printed them in Hawaiian-language newspapers to keep them.

WHERE

The archipelago, and in particular the volcano country of Hawai‘i island, where the fire goddess is said to be living now.

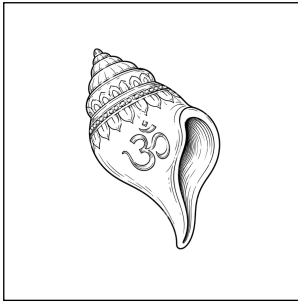
TODAY

Offerings are left at Kīlauea today, ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i is being taught to a new generation of speakers, and hula schools still chant these lines.

IN THIS BOOK

44. The Day That Was Made Longer — page 203
45. The Fire That Was Looking for a Home — page 207

A living tradition.



9 • Hindu

Indian subcontinent • South Asia

LANGUAGE

Sanskrit

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Two vast epics carry most of these, and neither has one author or one version; reciters shaped them over centuries and shape them still.

WHERE

The subcontinent, from the Himālaya to the southern forests, along rivers whose names appear in the stories and on modern maps unchanged.

TODAY

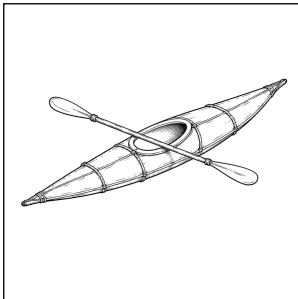
This is living religion. Hanumān has temples in most Indian towns, and Tuesday is his day in many of them.

IN THIS BOOK

17. The Baby Who Mistook the Sun for Fruit — page 88

18. The River That Had to Be Slowed Down — page 92

A living tradition.



10 • Inuit

Greenland, Nunavut, Alaska • The Arctic

LANGUAGE

Inuktitut

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Elders tell these, and much of what is written down was recorded by people who were told carefully what could not be repeated.

WHERE

Across the Arctic — Greenland, Nunavut, Alaska — over a distance greater than the width of Europe.

TODAY

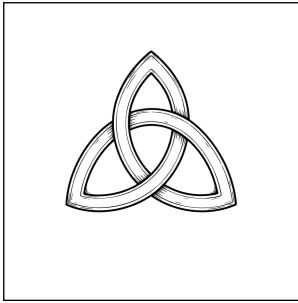
Inuit communities govern themselves in Nunavut and Greenland, and the sea-woman story is taught in their own schools in their own language.

IN THIS BOOK

35. The Woman at the Bottom of the Sea — page 167

36. The Boy Who Got His Eyes Back — page 171

A living tradition.



11 • Irish

Ireland · Europe

LANGUAGE

Irish

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Monks copied these into large books between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, and their handwriting is why anything survives.

WHERE

Ulster, Connacht, and the coast of Mayo, in places you can drive to, several of which have a road sign about the story.

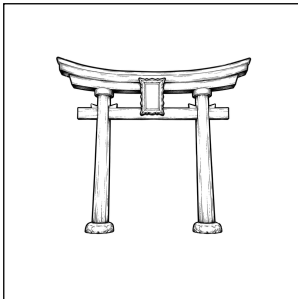
TODAY

Ireland teaches these in school and argues about them in pubs, and the swans of one of them hold a preservation order.

IN THIS BOOK

- 7. The Boy Who Took the Hound's Place — page 43
- 8. Nine Hundred Years on the Water — page 47

Known from written and excavated record.



12 • Japanese

Japanese archipelago · East Asia

LANGUAGE

Japanese

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Two eighth-century compilations record these, and the second deliberately prints several competing versions side by side rather than choosing.

WHERE

Takamagahara for the gods, and for the rest, real geography: Izumo, a river, and shrines reachable on an ordinary train.

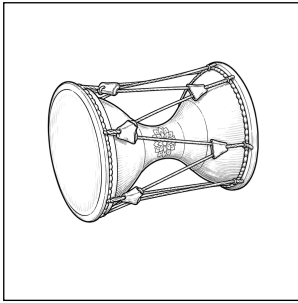
TODAY

Shinto is practised now. The shrine at Ise comes down and goes up again every twenty years, and the next rebuilding has a date.

IN THIS BOOK

- 23. The Door That Was Opened by Laughing — page 114
- 24. Eight Heads and Eight Bowls of Wine — page 118

A living tradition.



13 • Korean

Korean peninsula · East Asia

LANGUAGE

Korean

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

A monk called Iryeon compiled these in 1281, and he says when he is copying an older book he can no longer show you.

WHERE

The peninsula and the country north of it: pine mountains, river crossings, and walled towns founded by people the stories name.

TODAY

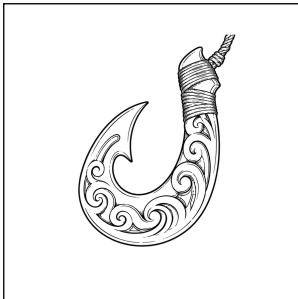
Korea marks one of these founding accounts with a national holiday every October, and the archery story reaches television most years.

IN THIS BOOK

21. The Bear Who Waited in the Dark — page 105

22. The Boy Who Told the Fish to Rise — page 109

A living tradition.



14 • Māori

Aotearoa (New Zealand) · Oceania

LANGUAGE

Te reo Māori

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

These are held by iwi, and different iwi tell them differently on purpose; whakapapa decides who may tell which part.

WHERE

Aotearoa, and the ocean crossed to reach it — the North Island is the fish in one of these stories.

TODAY

Te reo Māori is an official language, taught in schools and broadcast daily, and Māui appears in films made by Māori film-makers.

IN THIS BOOK

42. The Fish That Became an Island — page 195

43. The Children Who Pushed Their Parents Apart — page 199

A living tradition.



15 • Maya

K'iche' highlands, Guatemala · Mesoamerica

LANGUAGE

K'iche'

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

One book carries the central narrative, written in K'iche' in the sixteenth century by people setting down what they already knew.

WHERE

The highlands of Guatemala, and Xibalba, which is under the ground and is reached through a cave.

TODAY

More than a million people speak K'iche', the book is a school text, and the ball game it describes is played again in several towns.

IN THIS BOOK

- 37. The Ball Game Under the Ground — page 175
- 38. Made of Mud, Wood, and Finally Maize — page 179

A living tradition.



16 • Mesopotamian

Sumer, Akkad, Babylon · West Asia

LANGUAGE

Sumerian and Akkadian

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Scribes pressed these onto clay tablets four thousand years ago as school exercises, which is precisely why so many broken copies exist.

WHERE

The flat country between the Tigris and the Euphrates: irrigation ditches, mud-brick cities, and the oldest writing anybody has found.

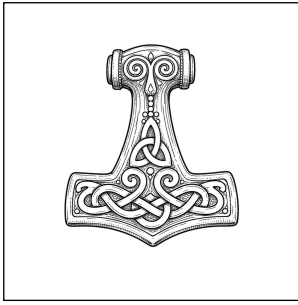
TODAY

No one has spoken these languages for two thousand years. The tablets are readable again because scholars spent a century learning how.

IN THIS BOOK

- 11. Stones Tied to His Feet — page 61
- 12. The Eagle and the Snake Who Swore an Oath — page 65

Known from written and excavated record.



17 • Norse

Scandinavia, Iceland · Europe

LANGUAGE

Old Norse

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Two Icelandic books carry most of what survives, and one was written by a politician who wanted poets to keep understanding the old images.

WHERE

Iceland, Norway, and the cold coastlines between, where winters are dark enough to make a story about the sun being eaten sound reasonable.

TODAY

The old worship ended a thousand years ago. The poems did not, and four days of the English week still carry these names.

IN THIS BOOK

- 4. The Bride Who Ate an Ox — page 31
- 5. The Goddess Who Kept the Apples — page 35
- 6. The Ribbon That Held a Wolf — page 39

Known from written and excavated record.



18 • Persian

Iranian plateau · West Asia

LANGUAGE

Persian

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

One poet spent about thirty years assembling these into a single enormous verse history, and he says so himself, at length, inside it.

WHERE

The Iranian plateau — Alborz, Zabulistan, and the cities along the roads that crossed it.

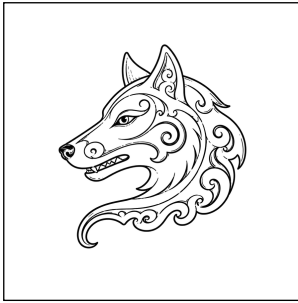
TODAY

Iranians recite this poem now, in the same language, and professional reciters perform it to audiences who know when to join in.

IN THIS BOOK

- 13. The Baby Left on the Mountain — page 69
- 14. The Blacksmith's Apron — page 73

A living tradition.



19 • Turkic

Oghuz lands, Anatolia, Central Asian steppe · Central Asia and the Steppe

LANGUAGE

Oghuz Turkic

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

A storyteller called Dede Korkut frames every tale, arriving at the end to give a name and a blessing.

WHERE

The Oghuz lands: grazing country between the Caspian and Anatolia, told among people who moved with their herds.

TODAY

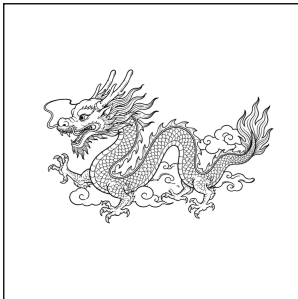
Turkey, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan all claim these tales, teach them in school, and disagree publicly about who owns the storyteller.

IN THIS BOOK

15. The Boy Who Fought the Bull — page 77

16. The One-Eyed Giant of the Oghuz — page 81

A living tradition.



20 • Vietnamese

Red River delta, northern Vietnam · Southeast Asia

LANGUAGE

Vietnamese

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

A fifteenth-century collection of strange tales holds the narrative, and the official court chronicle records the same events as history.

WHERE

The Red River delta and the mountains behind it — rice country that floods every summer, exactly as the story says it does.

TODAY

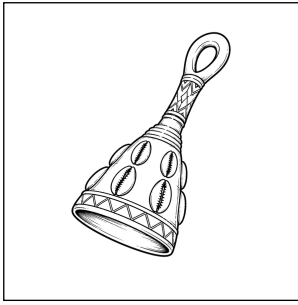
The founding kings have a national holiday every spring, and enormous crowds climb the hill at Phú Thọ in the heat to mark it.

IN THIS BOOK

25. The Hundred Children in the Egg Sac — page 122

26. Why the River Rises Every Year — page 126

A living tradition.



21 • Yoruba

Yorubaland (southwestern Nigeria, Benin) • Africa

LANGUAGE

Yorùbá

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

Named narrators and diviners told these to collectors in the twentieth century, and Yoruba scholars have been writing about their own tradition ever since.

WHERE

Yorubaland — Ilé-Ifẹ̀, Òṣogbo and the towns around them — and, after the slave trade, cities on the far side of the Atlantic.

TODAY

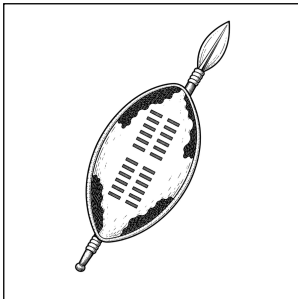
Òrìṣà devotion continues in Nigeria, Brazil and Cuba, and the yearly festival at Òṣogbo fills a protected grove beside the river.

IN THIS BOOK

30. The Chain Let Down from the Sky — page 145

31. The One They Left Out — page 149

A living tradition.



22 • Zulu

KwaZulu-Natal, southern Africa • Africa

LANGUAGE

isiZulu

WHO TELLS THESE STORIES

These belong to a named genre, inganekwane, told mostly by older women to children, with a formal opening the children answer.

WHERE

KwaZulu-Natal: grassland, cattle country, and the hills between the Drakensberg and the Indian Ocean.

TODAY

isiZulu has more first-language speakers than any other language in South Africa, and these tales are printed in school readers in it.

IN THIS BOOK

34. Two Messengers and One Road — page 161

A living tradition.