

Kirikou and the Sorceress



Introduction

A tiny voice is heard from inside the womb of a pregnant woman: 'Mother, give birth to me!'

'A child who can speak from his mother's womb can give birth to himself', replies the mother.

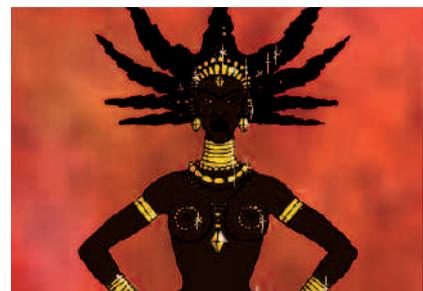
And so a little boy is born, cuts his own umbilical cord and declares: 'My name is Kirikou.'



The tiny Kirikou is born into an African village upon which a sorceress called Karaba has cast a terrible spell; the spring has dried up, the villagers are being blackmailed, the men of the village have either been kidnapped or have mysteriously disappeared.

'She eats them!', the superstitious villagers declare...

Karaba is a stunning but cruel woman, surrounded by fearless and servile robots. But no sooner has Kirikou delivered himself from his mother's womb than he wants to rid the village of Karaba's curse and understand the cause of her wickedness.



His adventure-filled voyage leads Kirikou to the Forbidden Mountain, where the Wise Man of the Mountain, who knows of Karaba and her secrets, awaits him.

Film setting and location: A village in West Africa

Film facts: The film is based on an African folk tale. Folk tales are traditional tales or legends handed down orally by a particular community over many years.

Compare with: The Lion King, Madagascar 2: Escape to Africa

Activities after viewing

The animals shown in the film are those that can be found in Africa including hoopoes, zorils, ground squirrels, wart hogs and snakes.

What animals can you spot in the film? Find out as much as you can about them.

Traditional African musical instruments can be heard in the film including the balafon, ritti, cora, xalam, tokho, sabaar and belon. Using your local library or the internet find out as much as you can about these instruments. Do you have instruments in your school that are similar? Visit the Kirikou website at www.kirikou.net

Characters and story elements in myths and legends

The National Literacy Strategy suggests that students in Year 3, Term 2 should study:

- ◆ myths
- ◆ legends
- ◆ fables
- ◆ parables; traditional stories, stories with related performance poetry from different cultures



and suggests the following activities at ages:

9 – to write a story plan for own myth, fable or traditional tale, using story theme from reading but substituting different characters or changing the setting

10 – to write alternative sequels to traditional stories using same characters and settings, identifying typical phrases and expressions from story and using these to help structure the writing

11 – to write new or extended verses for performance based on models of 'performance' and oral poetry read, e.g. rhythms, repetition

What kind of story is Kirikou?

The film is based on story ideas from one or more West African folk tales. These have been orally passed down through the centuries. Historical detail is not essential in African story telling. A story would consist of a village and sorceress with external characters embellishing the story. This kind of story might be told by a griot - a poet, musician and storyteller and the keeper of the oral tradition.

'Myths' and 'legends' refer to very similar kinds of stories - usually about gods or heroes with special powers. Such stories may also be used to explain certain beliefs or events in the distant past. The main difference between the two words is their derivation, 'mythos' from Greek and 'legend' from Latin. The story Kirikou might be related to myths and legends in terms of the boy as the hero and also because his selfless action saved his village. But a more direct relationship to European literature may come via folk tales and fairy tales, both of which are concerned with adventures involving magical powers and struggles between good and evil, usually with some form of moral attached to the narrative resolution. Again, there is little distinction between 'folk tale' and 'fairy tale' in common usage, both having a derivation from North European languages.

For the purposes of this resource, we will use folk tales to represent the tradition of European stories from the oral tradition. We should also consider those tales that originated much earlier but seeped into European culture from Arabia for example, Scheherazade or 'The Arabian Nights' during the eighteenth century

Plots

A useful start to learning about folk tales is to think about the similarities between the 'plots' of various stories (the events in the story as presented to the reader). A good source of ideas in this respect comes from the work of Vladimir Propp and his analysis of Russian folk tales. Most begin with a hero figure setting off on some form of 'quest' to find something or someone, or to rescue them from the clutches of an evil force. The hero leaves a community and sets out on a journey. There will be adventures on the way culminating with a confrontation with the evil villain.

After a battle or series of battles the hero triumphs. Often in these stories, the hero is sent on a quest to find something or someone precious, a princess to rescue for example. During the journey the hero will probably be helped by a wise person or 'good' magician who will provide a magic sword or some other kind of protection as the hero will be attacked or 'blocked' by agents of the evil force.

Folk tales also often involve characters in disguise or under a spell that may trick the hero, but in the end the hero will unmask them. Alternatively, the princess herself may be under a spell and disguised or unable to respond to her rescuer unless the spell is broken.

Journey

The hero's journey is a crucial part of the plot. The journey means that the hero will experience a different environment with the possibility of danger from natural and unusual disasters. There will also be meetings with strangers - human, animal and supernatural. In traditional European stories, journeys usually involve:

- ◆ forests (dark and mysterious)
- ◆ rivers (fast-flowing and treacherous)
- ◆ mountains (to be climbed to gain access to the unknown world on the other side)

Traditional stories come from a time before extensive travel when villagers would be unlikely to leave their own valley making the natural barriers of forest, river and mountain surrounding their village to be quite believable as obstacles to be overcome (as well as having symbolic qualities).

Task

Students could think about traditional stories like 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'Snow White' that involve journeys through a forest and compare them with Kirikou's journey that involves a river and a mountain.

The river nearly drowns the children of the village and the mountain bars the way to the fount of knowledge (Kirikou's grandfather). However it shows how pleasant and bountiful the land around the village might be if it wasn't cursed by Karaba.

Certain aspects of landscape are important in African stories, especially those from West Africa. Lone trees have various functions in an environment where water is scarce and the sun is hot. A tree will normally be the place in the village where the elders sit and discuss important matters under the shade of its branches. A lone tree outside the village might be a place of worship and contemplation, the tree being respected for its ability to live through the drought. A tree also affords a lookout spot for the village's defences and an ambush site from which invaders can be attacked. How many of these different functions are evident in Kirikou?

The big tree in Kirikou's village is a baobab. This is the tree beneath which the old man talks to the children and, significantly, beneath which Karaba and Kirikou stand at the end of the film, asking for acceptance. The baobab is a large tree that survives the climate and it is important in West African culture. It even has its own myth - the gods are supposed to have dropped the tree so that its branches went into the ground and its roots stuck up in the air.

Puzzles

Folk tales often present the hero with a puzzle to solve in order to progress on her/his journey. This may be a riddle or a signpost that points several ways. A classic puzzle would be a maze of some kind. In the film Kirikou there is an interesting sequence that works a little like a video game when we see Kirikou tunnelling to get under Karaba's lair to reach the forbidden mountain. The depiction of Kirikou's journey looks like the sections used to show tunnels in wildlife films. It is essentially a maze from which Kirikou escapes with the help of the squirrels.

The Kiss

Karaba kisses Kirikou and the curse is lifted. He is transformed into a beautiful young man. This scene is clearly echoed in European folk tales in which the kiss also signals the release of a spell e.g. the princess who kisses the frog to restore the prince or the kiss that is required to wake Sleeping Beauty. The kiss in Kirikou may be the director Michel Ocelot's invention in an African context - he has said that he changed the ending of the original story. There are some cultures where a representation of a kiss would not always have been acceptable.

The Use of Magic

Fetish - this word came into English via the Portuguese who used it for the gods of West Africa. Chambers Dictionary suggests that it is: 'an object believed to procure for its owner the services of a spirit lodged within it; something regarded with an irrational reverence.'

In this case, Karaba has turned the men of the village into her servants and these are the fetishes, which she commands. This story element is common in folk tales in many cultures. Students could suggest other stories or traditions in which the magician/villain has a servant, an object or an animal to act as a helper. The fetish 'character' tends to be extremely effective most of the time, but has a flaw of some kind and may 'turn' on its master.

Possible comparisons might be:

- ◆ brooms which go out of control in the Sorcerer's Apprentice sequence in Disney's Fantasia
- ◆ genie in the lamp in Aladdin
- ◆ vampire's servant in Dracula

The magic door in the termite mound that only opens to admit Kirikou is similar to the entrance to Ali Baba's cave that requires the secret words 'Open sesame'. We might decide that the termite mound, referring to a source of food and a symbol of industriousness, is, like the sesame seed in Arabia, an important part of everyday

local culture. The idea of an obstacle that only the hero can overcome, as the 'chosen one' is central to many myths. In English mythology it occurs in the story of Arthur, the future king who is the only one to draw the sword from the stone and in Robin Hood, who is strong enough to pull the bowstring.

Animals and Birds

Folk tales tend to treat animals and birds as characters, able to talk and reason. Animals can also be a threat or act as helpers for the hero.



Task

Students could think about which animals appear in Kirikou and what they do to help or hinder Kirikou himself for example:

- ◆ water drinker who blocks the tank
- ◆ skunk-like creature (a 'zoril' or 'zorilla') which attacks Kirikou in the tunnels
- ◆ snake or 'serpent' that works for Karaba
- ◆ warthog who guards the mountain
- ◆ squirrels who help Kirikou
- ◆ toucans in the grandfather's home

They could then think about their own environment and which animals they would chose to include in a story.

The Wise Man/Woman

As distinct from the magician/wizard, folk tales usually refer to an older member of the community with a long memory and wise words for the hero. In Kirikou there are two older characters. The old man in the village is largely ineffectual because he believes in superstition. Kirikou's grandfather who lives 'on the other side of the mountain' is the genuine article. The contrasting characters might be seen to suggest that being old doesn't mean that you have nothing to offer (traditional respect for age) but on the other hand, being old isn't a guarantee of wisdom. Seniority and wisdom is sometimes signified by headgear and it is noticeable that the old man and Kirikou's grandfather, both wear hats. At the end of the story, Karaba helps Kirikou, in his new guise as a man, to wear a skirt of leaves and a hat, confirming his new status.

The Moral

Does Kirikou have the moral message associated with folk tales? Certainly the speech that the grandfather delivers is focused on the weakness of the villagers in accepting everything about their current situation when there is a perfectly rational explanation of most events. In response to Kirikou's question about Karaba's likeness for eating human flesh, grandfather says that she likes 'yam in a spicy sauce, just like you'. The triumph of rationality comes about because of Kirikou's selfless devotion to the cause of freeing the village from Karaba's hold and because he never gives up. When grandfather calls Kirikou 'my son', he suggests that his rationality works through Kirikou.

This does sound a little like a 'modern' moral for a traditional tale. How do we square it with the obfuscation surrounding the reasons for Karaba's pain? Does the eventual rehabilitation of Karaba suggest that rationality and liberal values have finally triumphed?

It is hard not to come to the conclusion that Michel Ocelot has changed the moral of the original story. He has said that in the original story, Kirikou killed Karaba:

'The second topic is that one should never fear 'sorcerers' and that you will achieve what you want, not by believing in superstition and lucky charms, but by taking matters into your own hands. My heroes are independent: Kirikou, his mother, his grandfather and Karaba.'

Other themes came naturally too, from very African topics such as the importance of the family and of the group, a certain harmony with the body, to universal topics such as war of the sexes – (the sorceress is a beautiful woman and she fights her battles with men), altruism, shrewdness, forgiveness, time ticking over, love – that between a man and a woman of course - but also that between mother and son, an emotion not dealt with in traditional folk lore.

It shouldn't be forgotten that Ocelot is making a version of Kirikou's story and the story itself may be an amalgam of different stories from the oral tradition. There is no reason why a traditional story should not be updated, but you may feel that this leads to some confusion of value systems. In one sense the story seems very traditional with the male hero effectively 'saving' the princess (i.e. Karaba) from evil. The mystery of Karaba's original crime begs the question of what she did, but the modern sensibility finds the action of the men reprehensible whatever her crime - perhaps they too had been seduced by an evil force?

A solution may be to ask students what they think Karaba had done or what made the men act so cruelly. In terms of the traditional gender roles, there is no reason why students rewriting parts of the story should not write about a girl as a hero and a man as the sorcerer (and the importance of a 'wise woman').

Further Tasks

Three projects in writing, speaking and listening are possible to meet NLS requirements:

Change the ending of the story. Taking the original ending of the story, Kirikou decides that he must kill Karaba to save the village. If he does kill her, what happens next? Are the men restored to the village when she dies, does the land become fertile again? How do the villagers treat Kirikou? (This could be a group discussion).

Using a storyboard, students could devise their own way of presenting a particular scene from the film, drawing characters in the frame and providing dialogue and sound effects.

Students could prepare their own simplified version of the story, set in their own home region about a boy or girl and a magician who terrorises the community. What would the magician do, where would s/he live? The simple story could be written down or told to a small group.

Traditional West African Village Culture



The film makes reference to several aspects of traditional African culture.

Baobab: great West African tree with an enormous trunk. In Kirikou, the big tree beneath which the old man talks to the children.

Savannah: this is the general name for the open country of many parts of Africa, characterised by a flat landscape of occasional low trees and bushes.

Task

Students could investigate these terms and learn something about African social geography or they could think about their own environment and domestic life and work out what the equivalent might be in the UK.

Calabash: at the beginning of the film, when Kirikou is born he jumps into a big bowl, the calabash. This is made from the dried out hard shell of a large vegetable gourd (students could imagine these having seen a squash or pumpkin in a supermarket). The calabash is used for many things and has great symbolic importance in the traditional village as an essential part of everyday life. Later Kirikou 'wears' another small gourd made into a ladle, on his head.

Cassava or manioc: the women in the film are often pounding something with a giant pestle and mortar. This is likely to be cassava or manioc, a large root vegetable that produces an edible starch. The bitter cassava has a poison, which must be washed out first. The washed, cooked tubers are then pounded and made into a starchy paste or porridge called foo-foo. This is a staple food across West Africa and similar pastes can be made from plantain, yam or maize or sweet potato.

Task

Students could find the last two items on a trip to a street market selling African or West Indian vegetables, or indeed, many supermarkets. The image of the woman pounding the paste is, like the calabash, an important symbol of village life, privileged in the film by a low angle shot of Karaba, his mother, as seen by Kirikou.

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