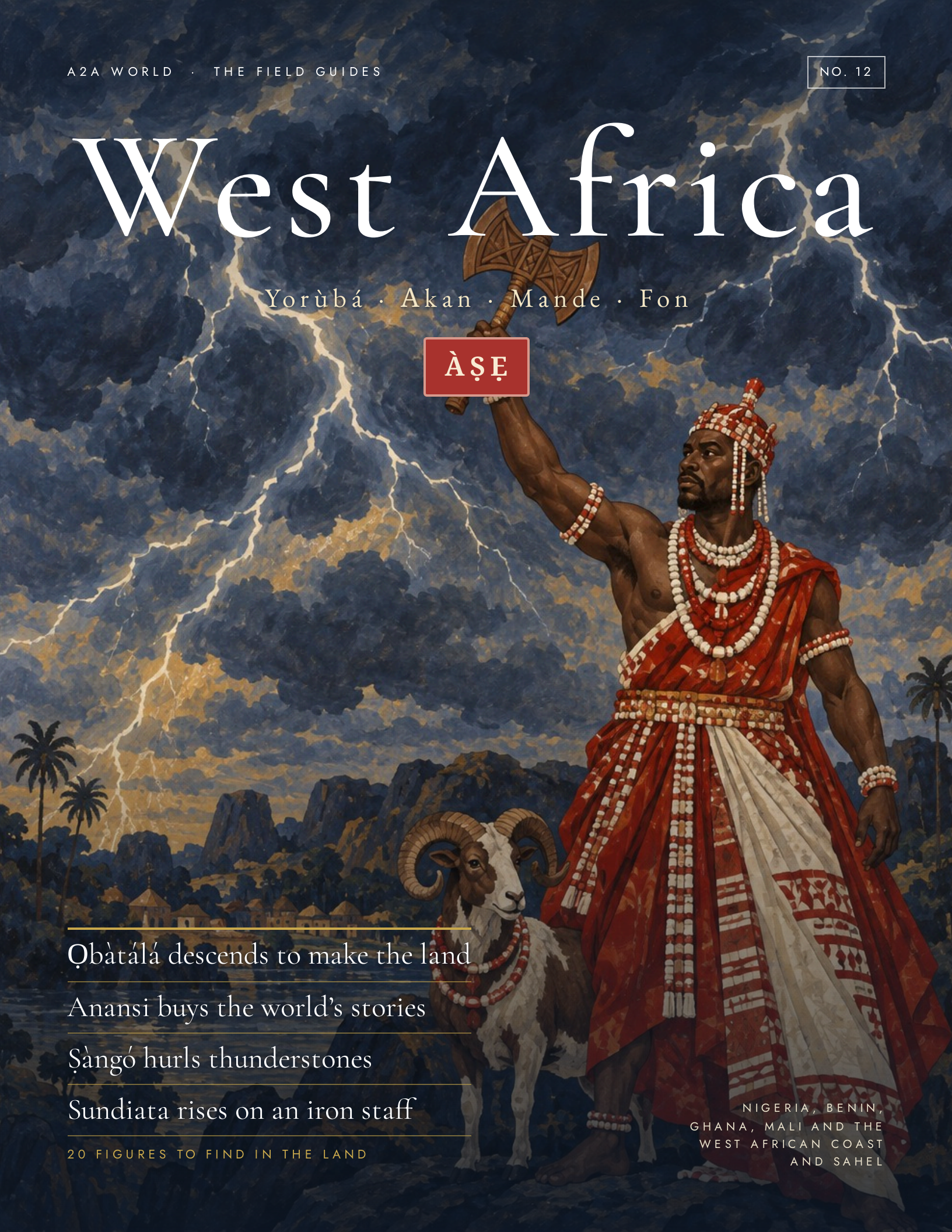
A2A WORLD · THE FIELD GUIDES

NO. 12

West Africa

Yorùbá · Akan · Mande · Fon

ÀṢẸ



Ọbàtálá descends to make the land

Anansi buys the world's stories

Ṣàngó hurls thunderstones

Sundiata rises on an iron staff

20 FIGURES TO FIND IN THE LAND

NIGERIA, BENIN, GHANA, MALI AND THE WEST AFRICAN COAST AND SAHEL

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Aido-Hwedo, the rainbow serpent, coils around the world and holds it up

INTRODUCTION

West African Mythology Field Guide

West Africa holds some of the world's richest living mythologies, carried across centuries by priests, diviners and griots — the hereditary keepers of history, genealogy and song.

This guide draws on four great traditions: the Yorùbá orisha, the Akan stories of Anansi, the Mande epic of Sundiata, and the Fon cosmos of Mawu-Lisa. Through the Atlantic diaspora these traditions also shaped belief and storytelling in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti and beyond.

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CONTEXT

How West Africa Holds Its Myths

West African myth is primarily oral. It lives in praise poetry, divination verses, proverbs, drumming, masquerade and the performance of griots. Written collections are recent and record only part of a living, changing body of knowledge.

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SOURCES

Ifá divination literature (odù Ifá) of the Yorùbá, recognised by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Epic of Sundiata as performed by Mande griots (e.g. the version recorded by D. T. Niane, 1960). Akan Anansesem (spider stories). Fon traditions of Dahomey.



A griot sings the past to the kora beneath a baobab at dusk

THE GRIOT

In Mande societies the griot (jeli) is a hereditary historian, musician and adviser. Griots memorise genealogies and epics over generations and perform them with the kora or balafon. A society's memory lives in their voices.



Anansi lays the python, the hornets, the leopard and Mmoatia before the sky god Nyame

THE FEATURE

Anansi Buys the Stories

How stories came to the world.

The sky god Nyame owns all stories. Anansi pays his price by capturing the python, the hornets, the leopard and the fairy Mmoatia, and the stories become Anansi's — and everyone's.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A python, hornets, a leopard; a box of stories.

Kwaku Anansi Akan

The spider; trickster and storyteller.

Anansi is small but clever, often greedy, and usually outwits those stronger than himself. His stories travelled to the Caribbean, where he is Ananse, Nancy or Aunt Nancy.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A spider; a web between branches.



The spider's web, strung between two branches

ÀṢẸ

In Yorùbá thought, àṣẹ is the power to make things happen — the life force by which the creator brings the world into being and which flows through the orisha, people, words and objects.



I · CREATION

I How the World Was Made

Sky, water and the first land.

Above: Ọbàtálá pours earth from a snail shell as the hen scratches it into land

Olódùmarè

Olorun

The supreme creator; distant in the sky.

The source of all àṣẹ. Olódùmarè does not usually act directly in the world but entrusts its shaping to the orisha.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *The open sky; light above all.*

Ọbàtálá and the Creation

Orisha of purity, clad in white.

Ọbàtálá descends from the sky on a golden chain with a snail shell of earth, a hen and a palm nut. He pours out the earth onto the waters, and the hen scratches it into land at Ilé-Ifẹ̀.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A chain from the sky; a bird scratching soil; land spreading on water.*



Ọbàtálá shapes people from clay; Olódùmarè gives them breath

The Shaping of People

Clay figures given breath.

Ọbàtálá shapes human beings from clay, and Olódùmarè breathes life into them. In one telling, after drinking palm wine he shapes some imperfectly, and becomes protector of those born with differences.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *Figures of clay; a potter at work.*



Mawu, the moon and the night; Lisa, the sun and the day

Mawu-Lisa

Fon

Twin creator of moon and sun.

In Fon tradition the creator is a pair: Mawu, female, linked to the moon and night; Lisa, male, to the sun and day. Their balance orders the world.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A sun and moon paired; two figures joined.*

Aido-Hwedo

Fon

The rainbow serpent who carries the creator.

The great serpent carries Mawu as she shapes the world; its winding body forms rivers and valleys, and it coils beneath the earth to hold it up.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A serpent coiled in a circle; a winding river; a rainbow.*



II · THE ORISHA

II Powers of Nature and Life

The Yorùbá orisha, honoured across Africa and the Americas.

Above: The Ọ̀ṣun River winds through the sacred grove at Òṣogbo

Ṣàngó

Shango

Thunder and lightning; a double-headed axe.

Remembered as a powerful early king of Ọ̀yọ́ who became the orisha of thunder. He hurls thunderstones and is drummed for with the batá drums.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A double axe; a ram; storm clouds.*

Yemọja

Yemoja, Yemanjá

Mother of waters.

Orisha of the Ògùn River in Nigeria and, in the Americas, of the sea. She is mother of many orisha and protector of women and children.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A woman in flowing water; waves; shells.*

Ọ̀ṣun

Oshun

Sweet waters, love, fertility.

Orisha of the Ọ̀ṣun River. Her sacred grove at Òṣogbo is a UNESCO World Heritage Site where an annual festival is held.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A river through a forest; a mirror; brass.*

Ògún

Ogun

Iron, the forge, roads.

Ògún clears the path through the forest with his iron machete so the other orisha can come to earth. He is patron of all who work with metal.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A blade; a cleared path through trees.*



Èṣù's hat, red on one side and black on the other, divides two friends

Èṣù

Eshu, Elegba

Messenger; guardian of crossroads.

Èṣù carries offerings between people and the orisha and opens or closes the way. Stories show him testing people with ambiguity — a famous tale tells of a hat red on one side and black on the other.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A crossroads; a figure in two colours; a gateway.*



III · TRICKSTERS & TALES

III Anansi and the Wisdom Stories

Cleverness, greed and the gift of stories.

Above: Tortoise falls from the sky feast in his borrowed feathers

Anansi and the Pot of Wisdom

Why wisdom is shared.

Anansi tries to hide all the world's wisdom in a pot at the top of a tree. Struggling, he is advised by his young son to tie it to his back; in frustration he drops it and wisdom scatters across the world.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A pot at the top of a tree; something spilling.*

Tortoise

Ìjàpá

Yorùbá trickster.

The cunning tortoise of Yorùbá and Igbo tales — in one, he tricks the birds into lending him feathers to fly to a feast in the sky, then falls, and his shell cracks into pieces.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A tortoise; a cracked, patterned shell.*



A pestle strikes the low sky, and the sky withdraws upward

Sky and Earth Separate

Why the sky is far away.

Several West African traditions tell that the sky once lay close to the earth until a woman pounding grain struck it with her pestle, and the sky withdrew upward.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A woman with a raised pestle; a mortar; a lifted sky.*



IV · EPIC & PLACE

IV Sundiata and the Sacred Land

Kings, heroes and holy places.

Above: Sundiata rises on the iron staff as Sogolon and the village look on

Sundiata Keita

Sunjata

Founder of the Mali Empire (13th century).

Born unable to walk and mocked as a child, Sundiata rises one day on an iron staff, which bends, and grows into the ruler who unites the Mande peoples.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A figure rising on a staff; a bent iron bar.*

Sogolon

Sundiata's mother; the buffalo woman.

Foretold by a hunter, Sogolon is a plain woman linked to the spirit of a buffalo. She marries the king of Niani and bears Sundiata.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A buffalo; a woman with a hunter.*



The arrow tipped with a white cock's spur flies toward Sumanguru

Sumanguru

Soumaoro Kanté

Sorcerer-king of Sosso.

A powerful blacksmith-king whose magic makes him invulnerable, until Sundiata learns his secret and defeats him at the Battle of Kirina with an arrow tipped with a white cock's spur.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *An arrow; a rooster; a blacksmith's forge.*

Ilé-Ifẹ̀

Sacred city of the Yorùbá.

Where the land was first formed and the first people were made. Its classical bronze and terracotta heads are among the masterpieces of world art.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A crowned head; a hill rising from flat land.*

The Niger River

Joliba

Great river of the Mande world.

The Niger carries the history of Mali; rivers throughout the region are honoured as spirits, and many orisha are identified with particular rivers.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A great river curving through dry land; a river with an inland delta.*

A NOTE ON RESPECT

These are living religious traditions practised by millions in Africa and the diaspora. Many sacred matters are reserved for initiates and are not included. Names and spellings vary by region and language; note the source a telling follows.

The plates in this issue are interpretive illustrations, not historical artefacts.



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