

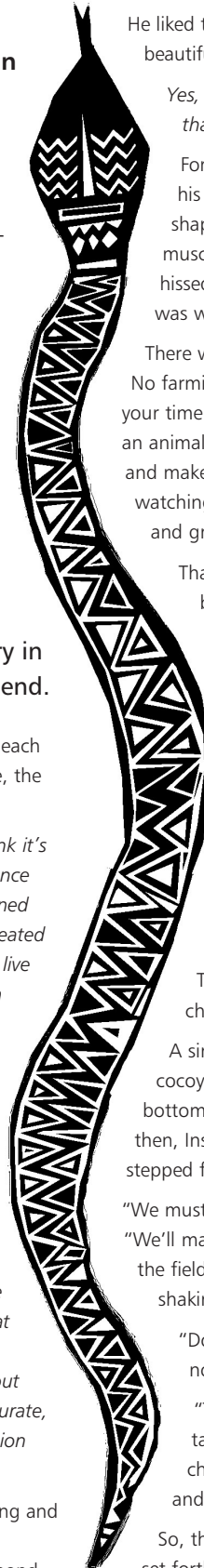
A retelling of a traditional children's story from Sierra Leone

This retelling is based on a traditional story from Sierra Leone by **Usifu Jalloh** and re-retold by **Dylan Theodore**. The plot remains the same; only descriptions have changed in order to try to engage contemporary children. It is intended to be read aloud. Lion Mountain is used as a place for the imagination, as well as Sierra Leone itself – the source of so much creative inspiration in this resource. The sections in italics are optional. They constitute the storyteller speaking ‘directly’ to the listeners and are intended to encourage children to use their imaginations and inventiveness. They maintain that traditional fiction can convey truths about life, no matter how outlandish the setting and characters, just like Aesop’s fables or Anansi stories. It suggests that science often brilliantly describes events or occurrences, but may not always explain them. Teachers will find their own ways of using the story in class, but one interesting idea is suggested at the end.

It was long, long ago when all the animals were farmers and told each other stories and lived on Lion Mountain. One year at harvest time, the snake was...

Hang on! You don't think this story isn't true, do you? You think it's just one of those "once upon a time, long ago" stories. Well, once upon a time, not so long ago, this story was true, and it remained true until humans came along with their own story. Humans created – "evolution"! Once evolution comes along, animals can't just live up on Lion Mountain, farming and telling stories, oh no! A lion can't just have sharp, white teeth and be proud of them – the lion must have a reason for having sharp, white teeth. It's no good the deer just being able to bound along like a pogo stick – with evolution she has to have a reason for bounding like a pogo stick (a reason such as avoiding those sharp white teeth snapping at her backside). But that wasn't the worst of humans bringing evolution. The worst was that the animals' stories started to sound silly. An animal had only to say "in those days the animals grew cassava" and the humans would laugh at them. In the end, the animals became too shy to tell their stories any longer. But what the animals knew, and what the humans forgot, is that their stories could be true without being factual. Take this story about the harvest and the snake. No one is saying it's all real and accurate, but maybe it's full of truth – the kind of truth you find up on Lion Mountain. Let's see...

First, meet snake. When the other animals were digging and planting and watering and weeding, you could find Mr Snake (as he liked to be known, not Leo Lion, or Gerry Giraffe, not friendly names), by the pond.



He liked to use the pond as a mirror, so that he could gaze at his four, beautiful, shapely, muscular, smooth-skinned legs...

Yes, legs! Snake's legs... if any of the humans in the class still think that a snake with legs is silly – wait! We'll come back to that later.

For in those days, the snake had four legs. Mr Snake was so proud of his legs, he would lie on his back and juggle melons to keep them shapely. He would do press-ups and snake-thrusts to keep them muscular. Some nights he would stick waxing strips on them and hissed in pain as he tore them off (don't ask me *how* I know), but it was worth it so long as they came out smooth, like, well, snakeskin.

There was one thing he would not do and that was work on the land. No farming, no digging, no weeding, no way! When you like to spend your time strutting round Lion Mountain on the most fantastic pairs of legs an animal ever had. When you have to stop every few steps to glance down and make sure they're in perfect shape. When you're sure everyone else is watching and admiring, the last thing you want is to make them all hard and grubby through farming. Let the others do it!

That year, harvest time was close and last year's food stores had all but gone. Fresh new food would soon be on the way. While the animals did a few last-minute jobs, Mr Snake sat under the mango tree, eyeing his limbs and humming 'Simply the Best!' But, as night fell, he began to feel hungry. His food was all gone. What could he do?

The next morning at breakfast, Brother Chameleon rolled the last of his gari into a tasty ball and popped it into his mouth. But as he looked across at the fields, it popped straight back out again as he yelled, "Our crops, they've been got at!" "What do you mean?" shouted the others, hurrying over - all except Mr Snake, who was posing as statues of himself to see how big his muscles would bulge.

There was no mistake. The cassava, corn, and millet were all chewed and nibbled at. What could be doing it?

A similar thing happened the following morning. This time, the cocoyam was trodden on and bitten into. "We've got to get to the bottom of this!" roared Brother Leo. "But how?" replied the others. Just then, Inspector Tortoise, a cunning and determined sniffer of clues, stepped forward.

"We must set a trap," he whined. Animal heads nodded in agreement. "We'll make a figure out of sticks and rags and set it up at the entrance to the fields. In the dark, it'll look just like a human!" Animal heads began shaking. Like a human? That was going too far!

"Do you want to catch this thief or not?" Tortoise demanded. The nodding returned.

"The best way forward is this, we'll cover our scare-thief in sticky tar. That way our culprit will have no escape!" At this, the animals cheered and snorted, and roared and bellowed, and squeaked and... well, you get the picture.

So, that night, the moon glinting on his four fabulous legs, Mr Snake set forth quietly and sneakily to feast on the fruits of the others' hard

work. Then, right in front of him, he could make out the scary silhouette of what looked like a human.

“Why be scared?” he thought to himself. “With my powerful legs, no-one dares get in my way!” So, he asked the figure to move. No reply. “In that case,” exclaimed Mr Snake, “I will be obliged to use the full force of my shapely, smooth-skinned legs! Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

With that, he swung out his front, right leg, which landed on the figure with an odd, puffy sound. It had no effect other than his leg stayed put. The stranger just stood there in silence. Mr Snake wound up his other front leg and landed a squelchy left to the body. “I’ll show you!” he hissed. Mr Snake was beginning to lose his temper with this stubborn whatever-it-was, who now had hold of his two front legs.

Mustering his remaining strength, Mr Snake swung both his back legs up into the soft, warm belly – and that’s where he stayed, glued by the legs, right up to his snake-hips. All night long, the mysterious stranger never said a single word.

As the sun came up and the tar dried hard, Mr Snake came to see the full ridiculousness of his predicament. The animals gathered round, looking at first surprised and then very stern. After all, it was one of their own. Brother Lion, in his anger, could not resist a few sharp cuffs across the reptile’s helpless backside, in return for such wicked behaviour. Then, the Snake (no longer *Mr Snake*) had to say “sorry” for being so vain and stupid, to each and every animal, until the tears of shame started in his eyes and they knew it was time to get him down.

As it turned out, Tortoise’s plan was rather too successful. The Snake was totally stuck, no matter how much they pulled. “If we pull any harder, you’ll come away without your legs. If not, you’re stuck here,” they warned.

“Life without my lovely snake legs?” He thought. Then again, they were why he was in this mess. What’s worth keeping, what’s worth losing? *Mmm*. He paused a moment, then shouted: “Pull harder!”

Well, now you know why that to this day, snakes have no legs.

Now, as I say, if there are still any humans out there who think that it’s silly for a snake to have legs, think about this: Slow worms are lizards, they used to have four legs, but now they have none. How can that be? Slugs used to have shell-houses like snails, they were molluscs, but now they are a go-faster, lightweight model. How can that be? And you? You have a tailbone and no tail – how about that?

Please don’t just say, “it’s evolution”, get on up to Lion Mountain with the others. Work out the story of how these things came to be. Use your imagination to dig and plant and water and weed. And while you’re up there, bring us back some truth. That way, no one need laugh at your stories.

Follow-up ideas

Devising *How it came to be* stories

Children’s literature is rich in stories about how creatures came to be as they are. The final paragraph encourages children to create their own folklore (they could choose any animal, including humans). Discussion around this story and their own ideas should be fruitful. They might include a moral, or pose a moral question about particular behaviour. Oral retelling, drama and visual art could all be powerful vehicles. Percussion rhythms might provide a powerful soundscape.