

WORD ORIGINS

Tote Ever count the times you use, see, or hear the word "tote" in a day, in a week? Probably countless. There are tote bags and tote boards, and then there are the many times we "tote" something from one place to another. Well, "tote" is thought to have its origin in Africa, probably in south-central Africa, where some peoples use *tota* to mean "to pick up."

Yam Yams are delicious vegetables that are yellow-orange in color and grow well in the tropics. The word "yam" traces its origins through the Portuguese word *inhame* (a type of sweet potato) to the West African word *nyami*, which means "to eat."



WORD STORIES

Banjo For this word, there are two possible derivations. One says that "banjo" traces its roots to a mispronunciation of the word *bandore* by early African Americans. *Bandore* was the American pronunciation of the Spanish word *bandurria*, an ancient musical instrument that was similar to the guitar and banjo. The other says that "banjo" derives from *mbanza*, the name of a banjolike instrument in the Kimbunde language spoken in Angola, a country in southeast Africa.

Zombie

In West Africa, those who followed voodoo beliefs called their python deity "Zombie." Voodoo is a religion that is based on a belief in sorcery and the power of charms and curses. It began in Africa and has been practiced for centuries in the West Indies. It was in the West Indies that the voodoo belief originated that certain rituals could bring the dead to life. These bodies were envisioned walking along "half-dead" and were called "zombies."



EXPRESSIONS

Mumbo Jumbo

A great expression, and one that's used to mean rituals and words that are meaningless. The phrase started in the late 1700s with the Scottish explorer Mungo Park. On Park's return from a trip to Africa, he spoke of a practice whereby a husband disguised himself or a colleague as the evil spirit *Mama Dyumbo* (the name means "ancestor with a pom-pom"). This spirit would come masked and wearing a tufted headdress to the husband's house and frighten a wife who had been causing trouble among the other wives in the household. It is Park's adaptation of *Mama Dyumbo*—*mumbo jumbo*—that continues in use today.

"Speak softly but carry a big stick"

Most people associate this saying with the U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), who used it to mean that the United States should be polite and restrained, but prepared to exercise its military and economic power. Yet, records show that Roosevelt himself said that the proverb is West African in origin—"Speak softly and carry a big stick, and you will go far."

ILLUSTRATED BY TOM LOPES