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Section: Cultural Heritage



Reclaiming Ananse: Discussing the trickster's relevance in contemporary Ghanaian society

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Abstract

In stories told across some African cultures, there is often, the mention of a trickster character. In Ghana, among the Akan speaking tribes, the trickster character is the spider, referred to in Akan as Kwaku Ananse. There is also the use of the hare, rabbit, and chameleon in some cultures in Africa and the Caribbean. For many of these cultures, the use of these animals as trickster characters in folktales represents a cultural affiliation that creates identity, instills values and preserves history. However, over the years, the relevance of trickster characters like Ananse, featured in contemporary storytelling, has been questioned and overlooked. The aim of this paper is to project the relevance of Ananse by presenting the diverse ways in which the trickster character reinforces the cultural identity, economic value, and historical affiliation that it affords the Akan societies that feature him in their folktales. This discussion would be archived by shedding light on the socio-cultural, political, and economic relevance of Ananse. The paper argues for Ananse's importance by taking a look at society's perception of him as a trickster. Ananse's relevance is highlighted through a critical discussion on how playwrights such as Sutherland, Mawugbe, and Asare present Ananse in their plays as a reflection of the Ghanaian society. The paper concludes by asserting that an extermination of Ananse means an extermination of the Akan society.

Keywords: Ananse, anansesem, folktales, storytelling, trickster

Introduction

Traditional storytelling cultures across Africa often feature a trickster character, who often, is an animal of some sorts. Baker Jr. (1989) posits that since time: “man has had a keen interest in animals (if not out of intellectual curiosity, at least for self-interest)” (Baker Jr., 1989). Baker explains that this interest has led man to create stories using animals. This explains the presence of animals in African folktales, and there are several featured animals across different African cultures. For instance, Ogbalu (2014) states that in Igbo culture, the trickster character is the tortoise. Other cultures feature other animals like the lizard, hare and the rabbit. However, over the years, as African societies evolved, the presence of these animal characters have been faced with some opposition.

For instance, in my profession as a teacher educator, one core responsibility is to visit our students under training while they are on internship at various educational institutions. On one such visit, the head of a private school complained to me of how a parent had come to the school upset that her child had been given a picture story book that featured the trickster character, Ananse. As far as the parent was concerned, there was nothing worthy of study or entertaining about the character of Ananse, and as such, the book, and the character, Ananse, could not be a good story source for her child.

Although Jamaican scholars like Lattibeaudiere (2020) also believe that Ananse has outlived his purpose for the black person in the Caribbean, and as such, a trickster character like the chameleon holds more value because the chameleon’s “colour shifting better encapsulates ambivalence in Caribbean nationals,” (Lattibeaudiere, 2020) and this holds true for their Jamaican experience, Ananse is still relevant in the Akan society. One reason being that the Akan society is the society of origin of Ananse. Another reason is that Ananse represents the singular racial and ethnic presentation of the Akan society; unlike in the Jamaican situation where the society is a multi-racial and multi-cultural society.

As a teacher educator, I have come across incidents involving the rejection of Ananse among Ghanaian parents, as well as, other individuals from diverse works of life. And one would ask, why? The answer in my opinion is simple, the historical and cultural importance of Ananse has not been successfully passed down to contemporary society. As such, some members of the Ghanaian or Akan society do not fully understand and appreciate the historical and cultural relevance of the character of Ananse. For instance, there is even an Akan cliché to support this perception—when someone is giving a narration of any sort, and those he or she is narrating to, do not believe what is being said, they would say: “do not tell me an Ananse story.” This statement suggests that the individual doing the narration is considered a liar. Such a statement exemplifies the perception that Ananse is considered a liar, and everything negative in the society. Unknown to those who use this cliché, it has unconsciously affected their psyche and response to Ananse. For instance, Horton (2019) in her blog, *The neuroscience behind the use of words*, posits that what we say, over a period of time, affects us on a “deep psychological level.” (Horton, 2019) We might not be conscious of it, but over time, we fashion our lives and actions, as well as inactions based on ideologies spoken, that have been internalized. Bargh (2014) research findings also supports the argument that humans are unconsciously affected by what they say and hear over time. Bargh explains that our choices when it comes to the purchase of goods and services are affected by unconscious thoughts that have been built over time, and we might not even be aware of these thoughts. It is for this reason that a parent would come to the school authorities upset that her child brought home an Ananse story, but would be happy if that child had brought home a *Snow white and the seven dwarfs* story.

These psychological explanations shed light on the reasons behind the societies’ response towards Ananse. Although there are several factors that contribute to the disregard of Ananse’s role in the society, this discussion would focus on a single factor. However, before the discussion delves into that, it is important to understand who Ananse is and what he represents.

Who is Ananse?

Ananse is the Akan word for spider. Therefore, in the Akan traditional storytelling, Ananse is presented as a spider, and a trickster character. Ananse is a male trickster character who was born on a Wednesday. He is called Kweku Ananse. Kweku or Kwaku means born on a Wednesday. Yankah (1983) states that “even

though animals may be given names in Akan, hardly are they given day-names." (Yankah, 1983) However, Ananse has been singled out for this special honor of a day name. In Akan storytelling, he is presented as an adult male, and a married man with a wife and four children. Ben-Daniels (2009) explains that Ananse is an integral part of the pastime of Akan rural communities. In the stories told, he is presented as the trickster character with an anthropomorphic nature. As a trickster character, Ananse and the stories that feature him are an embodiment of education and entertainment among Akans. However, Ananse, and his role as a trickster character is not a sole preserve of the Akan speaking people. He is equally known in other parts of the world. And in his role as a trickster and a spider, he represents diverse meanings and has diverse significance to different groups of people.

For instance, Ivan Van Sertima describes the trickster character, Ananse, as "the character in the tale who is in revolt against the mores of his own group, he is the presocial man, that is a figure which preshadows social man." (Sertima, 1989) This description of the trickster is what was given him by African-American slaves as well as Africans under colonial oppression as a way of revolt against the oppressive systems of slavery and colonialism, respectively. This description of the trickster shows his historical relevance as a character that helped in creating a psychological safe haven for oppressed people of African descent, home and abroad. As such, the little trickster character, Ananse, a spider, outwits the lion in tales, and conquers kings and entire cities. This anthropomorphic role that Ananse coverts, just like other folktale characters from other cultures is therapeutic for the slave working in pain on western plantations, it also served the same purpose for communities under colonial rule. These stories that featured the antics and power of Ananse overturned the power dynamics. Therefore, if the slave is powerless in reality, he is powerful in the stories. If this is how important the trickster character was for the slave and the colonized, then what happened to the trickster's role in contemporary Ghanaian society where Ananse originated?

As earlier mentioned, this discussion will focus on a single factor. This factor is based on the perception that Ananse as a trickster character, represents everything ill and negative, and as such, he is not a character worthy of emulation. This is an unfortunate misconception, and this misconception presently swings in two directions—the first being that Ananse is an antique; the second being that Ananse is a trickster who should not be tolerated. The second misconception is the focus of this discussion, and that is to prove that this is not the case. Ananse, like every other trickster character in folktales is a representation of that society's cultural, historical and moral affiliations. In order to appreciate Ananse's role in society, we must fully understand who and what Ananse and trickster characters in general represent.

The representation of the trickster character

According to Odom (2013):

A trickster is typically male, possesses a quick wit and sharp tongue, and more often than not refuses to obey the understood laws and regulations of his society. However, in analyzing Ajapa, Ananse, and Brer Rabbit, one can see that each trickster plays a unique role within his culture. (Odom, 2013)

Again, Odom (2013), writes, that according to Scheub (2012), "many trickster tales are etiological—they offer explanations of why certain aspects of society are accepted and why others are rejected" (Odom, 2013). This suggests that trickster characters by their nature and depiction explain the dynamics of the society that uses or depicts them in their tales.

Also, Oburumu (2023) writes that:

trickster tales feature a clever, devious animal or character whose pranks usually cause trouble for another character. In most instances, the trickster goes away gloating and unpunished, though in some tales there is a turnaround and the trickster falls prey to the mischief he started. The trickster figure is found all over the world. Sometimes, this figure is either creative or subversive. They are mischievous, cunning, and humorous and usually have the ability to

switch between animal and human form. (Oburumu, 2023)

Oburumu (2023) posits that the character and presence of the trickster is a world-wide phenomenon, and that trickster characters are anthropomorphic in nature—they switch between human and animal forms. Likewise, Sekoni (1994) in his research on the trickster character delineates that the depiction of the trickster either elicits sympathy from his audience or elicits disdain and rejection. However, sympathy, rejection, or disdain, or dislike, is not the feelings that the trickster character should elicit from audiences. But because these negative feelings are somehow what the trickster elicits from his audience, trickster characters like Ananse are losing their relevance in the community.

In order to understand the relevance of the trickster to the community, we must understand the importance of the story or tale which features the trickster character, and the storyteller. This is because, the storyteller is the portal through which the trickster travels and exists. The trickster, as a character, is the embodiment of the story. For instance, Chinua Achebe, in his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, emphasizes the sanctity of the story through the scared role of the storyteller when he states through a character that “it is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spike of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.” (Achebe, 1987) Achebe’s statement insists on the importance of the story and its role in shaping the society. There can be no story without the storyteller, and there can be no storyteller without a story. Likewise, the trickster who exists within the confines of the story, and is introduced by the storyteller.

Again, in some Eastern and South African cultures, before the storyteller begins to tell a story, the audience welcomes the storyteller with a chant: “see so that we may see.” This chant suggests that the storyteller is a seer, and through his eyes the audience will see and understand their world and themselves better. If this argument holds, then it supports the fact that the trickster is an important aspect of the community. As such, Ananse is an important part of the Akan community, and his relevance cannot be argued. Perhaps it is for this reason and more that Efua Theodora Sutherland describes Ananse as an “everyman.” And Yaw Asare describes him as “custodian of moral, ethical and philosophical norms”; while Efo Kodjo Mawugbe awards him the honor of custodian of stories. In order to understand why these playwrights award Ananse such honor, there is the need to discuss how Ananse is featured in their respective plays.

Ananse’s relevance as portrayed by Sutherland, Mawugbe and Asare

In her play, *The marriage of Anansewa*, Efua T. Sutherland capitalizes on the trickster’s anthropomorphic nature, and presents him as a single parent to his daughter, Anansewa. When the play opens, Ananse introduces his audience to the daily financial struggles of the lower classes of society, who actually make up the majority of the society. And it is based on this premise of the daily financial struggle for survival that Ananse sets in motion his grand scheme to secure for his daughter, a wealthy and worthy suitor. He tells his daughter that: “step by step, my feet are in motion under the direction of my mind, and I am on the road to free you and me from want.” (Sutherland, 1975) As the plot unfolds, the audience are witnesses to how Ananse promises his daughter’s hand in marriage to four different chiefs, and how these chiefs, in Ananse’s own words “begin to oil the wheels of custom” by sending Ananse money. When the Chief of Sapa and Togbe Klu, send Ananse money, he immediately decides to go to church, and also renovate his house. Ananse feels empowered to go to church because he can now afford to go in a fine kente cloth, dip his hands in his pocket at offering time when they call those born on Wednesday to step forward and give. He says: “you will see Kweku depositing alongside the best of the spenders.” (p.24) Ananse’s intent and action after receiving monies from his daughter’s suitors show his thirst for the middle upper-class way of life. People in the upper middle class live comfortable lives, and can afford the fine things of life. They are not obscenely wealthy, but they are not struggling either. Ananse who was struggling before, now moves to the middle upper-class. After receiving so much money from the four chiefs to improve his life and that of his daughter, Ananse quickly spins a plot to disentangle himself from the web of lies that he has neatly woven when all four chiefs set a date to wed Anansewa. In the end, when his plot to make Anansewa feign death in order to get just one chief to marry her works, the audience is quick to judge Ananse again as the trickster up to his old tricks and getting away with it. However, there are significant lessons to be learnt from this play.

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First, Ananse is not representing himself. He represents the society. Efua Theodora Sutherland emphasizes this by giving him a first English name, George. In the play, he is George Kweku Ananse. The reason is to make Ananse more acceptable to his audience, and remove the preconceived bias of him being a trickster who is up to no good. The audience cannot judge Ananse without judging themselves. After all, Ananse does not own a farm land or property. Ananse is also not trying to elevate his social and economic status by all means necessary from the working class to the upper middle class. It is the members of the audience who are doing everything possible to change their social and economic status, and for some, they do not care how they attain that status. It is also the members of the audience who are the owners of lands, who are working single parents or couples. In fact, it is the members of the audience who are doing everything ethically or unethically possible to survive in the hard times humanity is faced with. Therefore, yes, Ananse is an “everyman.”

This description of Ananse as an everyman resonates with the Akan myth of the origins of *Anansesem*. Sutherland explains that *Anansesem* is the body of stories told among Akans. Some of the stories feature the trickster Ananse, some do not. The myth of how *Anansesem* came to be traces *Anansesem* as Odomankoma’s creation. As recounted by Efo Kodjo Mawugbe, in the beginning, the stories of the Akans were preserved by God, and so, they were called *Nyankosem*. Then God decided to transfer the custody of stories, *Nyankosem*, to any of his creation who would prove worthy of the task. After a keen contest set up by God himself, Ananse, the spider, proved worthy of being the custodian of stories, so God transferred the stories into Ananse’s care, and the body of stories told changed name from *Nyankosem* to *Anansesem*.

This myth consecrates the importance of Ananse in the Akan society. The originality of his role is not just being a trickster creating a psychological safe haven for the oppressed under slavery or colonial rule. Ananse’s antics and situations do not need the audience sympathies, disdain or rejections. And this is because Ananse is not representing himself. He is representing the society. Efo Kodjo Mawugbe’s play, *Ananse-Kweku-Ananse*, reiterates his continuous importance in the society.

In Efo Kodjo Mawugbe’s *Ananse-Kweku-Ananse*, a contest is set to find a new bearer of tales. Ananse’s title as the bearer of tales is being keenly contested by other prominent storyteller figures and entertainment icons from the Ghanaian society. There is Ampadu, a highlife musician whose songs are usually about tales from the community. He steps forward to contest Ananse’s title. Azuma Nelson, who Mawugbe refers to as “the man who single handedly positively placed Ghana in the spotlight at a time when the African continent was dark with socio-political and economic turmoil,” (Mawugbe, 2009) also steps forward to contest Ananse for his title. There are other contestants who step forward, but by the end of the contest, Ananse wins, and retains his title as custodian of the body of Akan tales, Anansesem.

Ananse’s victory is significant because it reinforces his all-important role within the Akan community. In his conversation with the virgins, they ask him:

2&3rd VIRG: Why at all are you like that?
5th VIRG: [Approaches Ananse] Must you always cause trouble wherever you go?
ANANSE: Who... me?
ALL VIRG: Yes you, Ananse-Kweku-Ananse.
ANANSE: Who says?
ALL VIRG: Even a day-old child in this village knows who you are.
ANANSE: Believe me, I am no troubleshooter. I am now a baptized born-again God-fearing communion-receiving creature.
1st VIRG: In other words what you mean is that the old Kweku Ananse is gone
ANANSE: Exactly.
1st VIRG: [To chorus] And that he is now a new and a more FEARFUL creature.
(Mawugbe, 2009)

The above conversation between Ananse and the virgins depicts a dark comedy. Ananse is being portrayed as a villain, an individual without moral scruples, and a bad nut in society. However, his response

is loaded when he says that: "I am now a baptized born-again God-fearing communion-receiving creature." (Mawugbe, 2009) By this response Ananse indirectly refers to the community and the audience gathered in the theatre, watching him, judging him, and laughing at him. They are unconscious of the fact that they are watching themselves through Ananse's actions and deeds, judging their own follies, and laughing at themselves. The reference to Christianity is to draw the audience's attention to the fact that although the society is gravitating towards Christianity, avarice, greed, and corruption is still on the rise. And Ananse is not to blame for this. Ananse is only there to remind us of who we truly are.

Therefore, socially and culturally, Ananse cannot be replaced by his contestants. Although they have contributed to the communities in which they find themselves, they cannot replace Ananse because from a cultural point of view, Ananse is an archetypal and mythical character ordained by Odomankoma himself to be custodian of tales. Moreover, the belief in the existence of Odomankoma is accompanied by moral principles. And as such, Ananse and Anansesem performs as a moral compass for the society.

Another example of Ananse's relevance is in Yaw Asare's play, *Ananse in the land of idiots*. In the play, Ananse is able to dupe an entire community, including the King, by enticing him and his elders with two pieces of kente cloth. The king does not heed the warning of the priestess of Kompi not to trust Ananse and spare him, but to punish him for desecrating their land by eating the food meant for the gods. By the end of the play, Ananse kills Pootagyiri, the king's would-be son-in-law, and marries Sodziisa, the king's daughter. Then Ananse absconds with his bride and half the kingdom's fortune. The initial reaction would be to single out Ananse again at his antics. However, Ananse's role in this play takes us back to our historical past and reveals our gullibility as a people, and the active part our ancestors played in the capture and enslavement of our kinsmen and women, as well as in our colonization, and continuous neo-colonization. In fact, when the play opens, Ananse comes on stage to introduce himself to the audience and engage them in a conversation about his identity and role in the society. A woman in the audience interjects Ananse's introduction of himself and the way society vilifies him by asking him: "what did you do to deserve such terrible appellations as you call them? Surely there must be some trait in your nature and character that may have earned you such names!" (Asare, 2006) The woman's question and comment reveal society's perception of Ananse as a trickster whose behavior in tales has no bearing on the society. Society distances itself from Ananse. However, Ananse replies that: "you see? What did I say? Your world misunderstands me! No one accords me my proper place as the prime custodian of ethical, moral and philosophical norms." (Asare, 2006).

Ananse's economic relevance

Due to the fact that the society fails to see the relevance of Ananse, we equally fail to see his economic importance. For instance, there are less and less published tales featuring Ananse as a character. However, there are more publications on the market featuring western children stories characters such as Snow White, Princess Fiona, Cinderella, among many others. Ben-Daniels (2015) laments that children literature books are not present in government run schools. Most government run schools do not have libraries. The privately run schools who have libraries stock foreign books because "the education of children in private schools is biased towards Western formal educational models." (Ben-Daniels, 2015) It is not just the libraries that stock foreign books, the walls of these private schools have white children as well as western story characters, thereby supporting the growth of their economies against ours. However, the publication of local tales that feature Ananse as well as other characters from other ethnic groups or clans will not only entertain and educate our children, but would also create income for writers, publishers and artisans. After all, most children going to school presently prefer to carry school bags with pictures of foreign story characters, and these bags and other accessories are imported. It would be more profiting to the local economy if such accessories were made in Ghana, and featured local story characters. For instance, Leti Arts, a gaming company in Ghana, made efforts to create gaming apps that featured Ananse. However, the average contemporary Ghanaian child is not keen on such games because Ananse is not a story character that they grew up knowing. If such locally created businesses like Leti Arts thrive and expand, more jobs would be created for different groups of people.

Conclusion

From a cultural perspective, Ananse is a teacher in the Akan society. His stories are created as tales to teach the difference of good and evil, right and wrong. Perhaps this is why Sutherland refers to Ananse as “an everyman.” His role as “an everyman” makes it easy for Yaw Asare to present him from a political and historical perspective that takes us back to our colonial past, and then reconveys us to our present neo-colonial existence. Efo Kodjo Mawugbe on his part reminds us that although we have all the contemporary entertainers such as Koo Fori, Ampadu, and Azuma Nelson, Ananse’s role can never be usurped. Ananse can also not be replaced. The perception that Ananse corrupts our society is flawed. Ananse serves as a moral compass who also has economic viability. As such, holding on to Ananse as a society is important. The role of the trickster is to create identity through affording us as a people, some economic, cultural, and historical affiliations. After all, the Akans have the saying that: “*Sankofa. Ye san ko fa, yen kyi.*” If you go back for something you lost or forgot, it is not a taboo. And Ananse cannot be a taboo.

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