



Legacies that Survive Across Time and Space: A Critical Reading of The “Trickster” Character Anansi from West African Folklore

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Abstract

Africa has a wealth of legends and folktales that form an integral part of the collective consciousness of the country. The article is an exploration of the insight folktales can offer, as popular culture, for an understanding of the country's unique cultural tradition and orientation. The popularity of the folktales bears testimony to the fact the people of Africa continue to draw inspiration and strength from the basic concepts and philosophies of life developed by their forefathers thousands of years ago. The paper focuses attention on select stories centring Anansi, a trickster character from the African folktales of the Ashanti people of Ghana, a country in West Africa.

Keywords: African folktale, trickster character, cultural inheritance, collective consciousness

Folklores handed down through generations either by word of mouth or through carefully stored scriptures form the very backbone of every nation's cultural legacy. “Go back where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing it or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but know whence you came” (Field). Storytelling has a significant role in indoctrinating generations about cultural roots and strengthening bonds. A folktale is a story that originated from an oral tradition and is passed down to subsequent generations. Folktales employ a technique of narration in which the story progresses mainly through action and dialogue with lesser interventions in the form of descriptions or comments. At the same time, like all storytelling forms, they require the audience to actively participate in comprehending the story, deciphering the words, the gestures and the

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sound effects and creating their own visualisations of the tale. The strength of the oral tale is that the listener employs personal experiences and background to not only enrich but also individualise it. Oral literature, the oldest of all literature forms, includes proverbs, poems, and narratives. By imparting meaningful lessons in cultural literacy, they preserve and shape history and also convey both complex messages and simple ethics to the young. Africa has a wealth of legends and folklore that go back beyond human memory. African folktales serve as links connecting the past with the present and the future as well. These legends and folktales “are repositories of memory and serve as sources for indigenous histories, cultures and religions” (Adogame 9). They play a significant role in negotiating identities based on gender, age and education. They also serve to transmit artefacts of culture and tradition and impart moral lessons to prepare the young for the challenges confronting them. Sometimes the stories were acted out by the storyteller or even sung with dancing and drumming. The ‘moonlight tales’ emerged from the traditional practice of storytelling by the elders, sitting around a village fire under the moonlight. An exploration of Africa’s socio-cultural scenario will reveal that the society still draws inspiration and strength from the basic concepts and philosophies of life that evolved from orature ages ago. In African folktales, each culture has an animal-specific to it to demonstrate virtues like kindness, truthfulness and forbearance.

This study attempts to explore the “trickster” folktales as alternate ways of advocating the voice and aspirations of the people of Africa. The investigation specifically focuses on Anansi, the central character in the African folktales of the Ashanti people of Ghana, a country in West Africa. The character Anansi is the trickster spider of Akan origin, taken from the long-established culture, the Ashanti of West Africa. The term 'Akan' denotes a West African ethnolinguistic group comprising different subgroups. Among them, the most predominant is the Asante, also spelt Ashanti, who are based in Central Ghana. Ghana is immensely protective of the oral tradition. It is their strict adherence to the ancestral culture despite external influences, including the arrival of Christianity, that distinguishes the

Akans from the rest of the groups (Williamson 35). The Akans are known for their respect for elders and genuine regard for ancestral roots. They ascribe great importance to the preservation of the antiquity of their culture of many centuries. The book *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* discusses how human cultures have survived “threats to their existence through their ability to interpret, adapt to, and resist hegemonic cultures that are more powerful”. The historically marginalised groups develop cultural symbols to resist “annihilation from dominant groups by accessing forms of spiritual resistance” (Rodriguez 1). Many of the folklore are spiritually or religiously inspired. Ghanaian ethnic groups hold belief in the existence of a hierarchy of spiritual powers and Akan culture is inseparable from spirituality (Salm 39). The lesser gods are usually associated with elements of nature, like rivers, trees and mountains.

Anansi tales reflect mainly the elements of the Asante cultural framework. In West Indian Islands, "Anansi" is the name of a spider in the Ashanti language and of a spider with yellow stripes. The Ashanti term, *Anansesem*, means spider stories and is generally used for all folktales dealing with animals. Anansi has a place of importance in the religious sphere though there is no actual evidence to suggest that he was one of the gods himself. There are a lot of discrepancies regarding the story of his origin, as in the case of disparities that involve most folktales, mainly due to the modifications they undergo as they are handed down. In the folktales, he appears as a West African god who frequently assumes the shape of a spider and is considered to be the life force of all knowledge of all the stories on earth. But he is neither worshipped nor has any shrines to his name. Anansi also appears as a trickster, a rogue, and an animal with human traits. Tricksters from folktales not only entertain with their antics but also teach us a lesson or two. The trickster is a cultural phenomenon prevalent in several societies across the globe. Like most trickster figures in mythologies, Anansi is characterised by ingenuity and defeats his adversaries, illustrating the superiority of intelligence over brute strength. He outwits everyone, sometimes even the deities. He is wise but he can also be cunning, greedy and dishonest. Anansi uses his deviousness to overcome overwhelming odds and achieve what he wants. Anansi is

considered an intersectional figure connecting the world of humans with that of the Asante Supreme Being Nyame. However, Anansi wreaks havoc in both worlds, destabilising even the omnipotent Nyame. His engagements are notoriously deleterious as he often upends socio-biological rules by changing form, gender and executes heinous actions like eating his own children. The stories are not exclusive to West African ancestry as he has come to possess the status of a folk hero among all ethnic groups. It is believed that from Ghana, the stories spread through the whole of West Africa. Later during the Atlantic slave trade, the oral tradition took them beyond the seas to the Caribbean along with the slaves. As Anansi journeyed from West Africa to Jamaica, he was celebrated as a national folk hero. Anansi also survived a cultural transmutation and came to symbolise by his devious ways the resistance of the Jamaican people to slavery and repression. Anansi takes the moniker 'Nansi' in Guyana and other Caribbean countries. *The Magic Pot: Nansi Stories from the Caribbean* by Odeen Ishmael is a collection of popular folk stories from Guyana and other countries of the Caribbean region. The central character in the stories is Nansi, whose exploits form part of the folklore of these countries. In Haiti, he is called 'Ti Malice'. He can assume any shape he wants. Sometimes he takes the form of a man or even half-man and half-spider.

The study introduces a few children's books that treat the Anansi folktales in the hope that it will open up possibilities for influential research leading to new theoretical ideas. The paper analyses how the earlier archetype serves as the "template that a culture creates in order to shape the world into a recognisable and meaningful reality" (Bantley 79-180). The contemporary forms follow the legends yet become "fresh incarnation of the traditional" (Connerton 63). Anansi's tales are fine illustrations of the Beast Epic, a popular genre consisting of a protracted series of animal tales that provide satirical commentaries on human foibles. Although many of the stories are drawn from fables, the beast epic differs in that the moral lesson is disregarded.

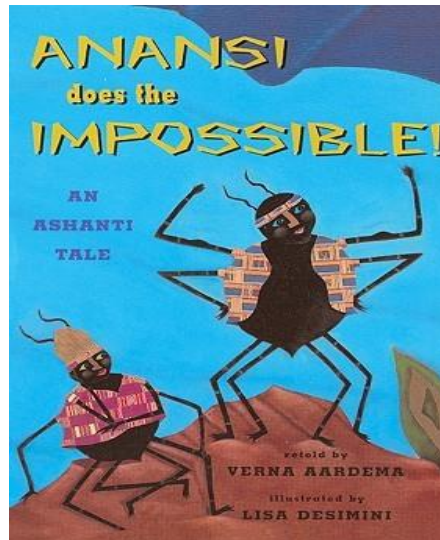


Figure 1: Verna Aaderma, Anansi Does The Impossible! An Ashanti Tale, 2000.

“Anansi Does The Impossible! An Ashanti Tale” is a folktale from Ghana that tells the story of how Anansi buys back the folktales from the Sky God. This African folk tale story claims to be where the Anansi stories begin. Anansi is a small spider that uses wile and courage to achieve the impossible. Long ago, at the time of the creation of the earth and the sky, all the folktales were owned by the Sky God. Anansi, that cunning little spider, was determined to buy them back. But the price he was asked to give was nothing less than a live python, one real fairy, and forty-seven stinging hornets. That was actually not a huge price considering the treasure of folktales that would come into his possession. But it was a daunting task for a spider. He decided to seek help from his clever wife, Aso. Thus Anansi joins hands with his better half in an ingenious scheme and achieves the impossible. Anansi succeeds in winning the stories and the villagers honour Anansi and Aso by naming the stories of West Africa ‘Anansi Tales’. In this retelling, the writer Verna Aardema presents a different incarnation of Anansi in this story where he is not the lazy, trickster spider. The story is different from the other Anansi stories. In most of the folktales, Anansi is a trickster playing nasty tricks on people. And his plans always backfire. In this story, the plan

hatched by Anansi and his wife is executed successfully. Several folk cultures consider women imprudent and not worthy of respect. But the Ashanti people who live in Ashantiland (formerly known as Ashanti Empire) on the Gulf of Guinea, are a matrilineal community. Here Anansi's wife Asa is presented as a smart, resourceful woman who ably helps her husband accomplish the seemingly impossible task. The ideophones and sound effects, along with the sprightly dialogues used by Aaderma, create the feel of a "read-aloud" story for children. The artwork using deep colours captures the essence of the story and brings to life the forgotten roots and traditions of West Africa. The illustrations showing Anansi in a defiant stance challenging the Sky God, a massive, incorporeal form, are symbolically significant. It is believed that all the stories in the world belong to Anansi. "African Tales (One World, One Planet)" by Gcina Mhlophe and Rachel Griffin is a beautiful collection of tales from several African countries: Namibia, Malawi, Lesotho, Swaziland, Senegal, Ghana, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The book includes another version of "Anansi and the Impossible Quest". It offers a brief country introduction before each respective tale and a detailed list of sources for each country in addition to the magnificent artwork that embellishes each page. "Anansi and The Box of Stories (On My Own Folklore)", adapted by Stephen Krensky, also tells the same story of the sky god Nyame who keeps all the stories of the world to himself. But he agrees to trade the stories if Anansi would perform four seemingly impossible tasks. "Anansi & the Moss-Covered Rock" retold by Eric A Kimmel and illustrated by Janet Stevens, is another brilliant trickster story. Anansi discovers that a strange moss-covered rock in the forest has the power to put to sleep for hours anyone who comments on it. They wake up hours later, unable to comprehend what had happened. Anansi uses this knowledge to trick all other animals and steal their food. But Anansi is outwitted by Little Bush Deer, who was hiding in the forest bush and watching it all. She invents a plan to teach Anansi a lesson and make him return all the food he had stolen.

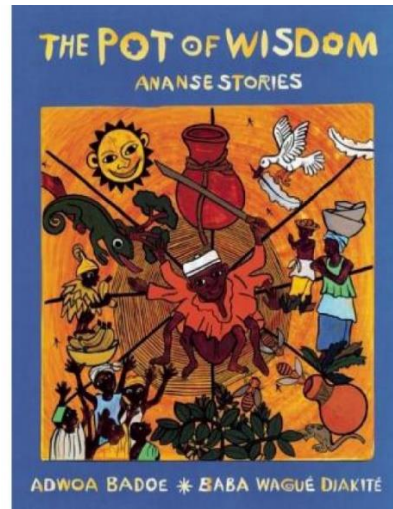


Figure 2: Adwoa Badoe, *The Pot of Wisdom: Ananse Stories*, 2008.

“The Pot of Wisdom: Ananse Stories” by Adwoa Badoe is a collection of ten Anansi stories, Badoe heard when she was a child. The illustrations by Malian artist Baba Wagué Diakité brilliantly complement the stories. These ‘pourquoi’ stories enlighten and entertain the readers with amusing revelations regarding how the pig lost his trunk and ended up with a snout, why the chameleon changes its colours, why Ananse spins webs rather than flies, and various other enlightenments about West African animals. In the story “Why Ananse Lived on the Ceiling”, the spider trickster climbs up to the highest corner of the house, ashamed as he is, at being caught stealing food from his sons. In “Ananse and the Feeding Pot”, Anansi is depicted as being jealous of his own son, Ntikuma. He suffers humiliation before the entire village because of his inability to follow directions. “Ananse Becomes the Owner of Stories” chronicles the spider’s adventure while capturing an entire house of honeybees, and “Ananse, the Even-handed Judge” presents his attempt to attend a funeral and wedding at the same time that ends disastrously. The vibrant illustrations present an assemblage of West African animals also.

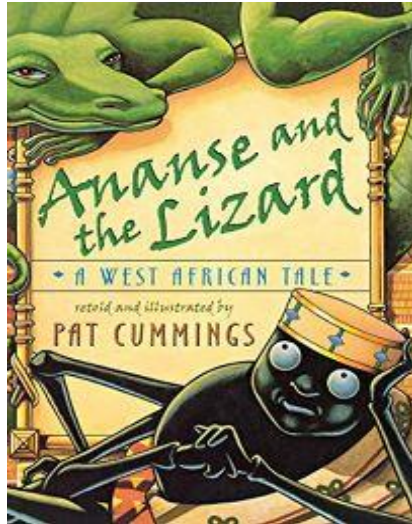


Figure 3: Pat Cummings, *Ananse and the Lizard: A West African Tale*, 2002.

In “Ananse and the Lizard: A West African Tale” retold and illustrated by Pat Cummings, the Chief announces that he will give his daughter’s hand in marriage to anyone who can guess her name. He would also receive half his fortune. Ananse comes upon a guard saying the daughter’s name Ahoafe and decides that he would be the guy to win her. He brags to the other animals about how he discovered the name of the Chief’s daughter. The Lizard, however, turns out smarter than Anansi. He gets Anansi to reveal the girl’s name and wins the Chief’s daughter. Anansi swears to tear him apart limb by limb if ever the lizard happens to cross his path again. The story tells us that this is the reason why lizards always seem nervous and always stick their necks out, looking in all directions. In the story, it is the lizard who is shown as devious and wicked. The spider is an upright, helpless character and not the trickster as he appears in other stories. This story carries the message that strangers are not to be trusted. This is one of the tales where the spider’s plan of trickery backfires. “Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti” by Gerald McDermott is based on another folktale circulated orally among African people. In this tale, Anansi the Spider, one of the great folk heroes of the world, is presented as a trickster. He is, nevertheless, a

wise and affable creature who triumphs over bigger adversaries. In this traditional Ashanti tale, Anansi, a spider with human-like qualities, names his sons according to a specific ability each one possesses. He then goes off on a journey and gets in trouble. Anansi is saved from Fish and Falcon by his sons, who use their unique abilities to help Anansi. Upon being rescued, Anansi proclaims that he will reward the son who rescued him with a beautiful white light. Now he is unable to decide whom he should reward and calls upon Nyame, the God of All Things, to find his way out of the dilemma. Anansi asks the God of All Things to hold the light as he decides the winner. However, the spider family starts arguing, and Nyame, vexed by this, puts the light up in the sky forever. The story thus offers an explanation for the white light in the sky at night. Gerald McDermott adapted this popular folktale by combining the traditional with the modern, the vibrant colour with conventional African design motifs and genuine Ashanti language cadences.

In “Ananse’s Feast: An Ashanti Tale” retold by Tololwa M. Moel, Ananse lives up to his name as a mischievous trickster. However, it is impossible not to like Ananse, who is so witty and resourceful. In this story, Ananse the spider is the only one who has food stored away and all the other animals are starving. Ananse’s friend Akye the turtle smells out the food and ends up at his house. When Akye, the turtle, knocks, Ananse feels obliged to invite him to share his food. Anansi dupes his friend into leaving the table several times, during which Ananse finishes all the food. Even though Akye recognises that he has been tricked, he remains nice. But later, the turtle turns the tables on his friend by inviting Ananse to a feast at the bottom of the river. Ananse is able to stay underwater only by the weight of the pebbles he carries in the pockets of his robe. But Akye insists that he removes the robe as a matter of courtesy. But as soon as he takes off the robe, he is pulled upwards and Ananse starts drifting away from the food. The turtle thus pays back in the same coin. The story ends with Akye describing how delicious the feast was, causing Anansi more distress. The story teaches a lesson on how guests are to be treated and also on the importance of friendships. Most of the stories end with Anansi learning a lesson in the end. According to Christen, Anansi exemplifies the duality of human nature and the negative aspects of antisocial behaviour, forewarning

"the presence of greed, trickery, and disruptiveness in the world" (10).

The folklores provide invaluable insights into the culture and tradition of the Ashanti, and hence revived as part of the indigenous effort to reflect the experiences, struggles and cultures of African countries without any influence from the West. Rewriting the folklores and narratives that form part of the oral tradition is a postcolonial attempt at valorising their native heritage to compel the Western world to take notice of the culture that is truly their own. They become a counter-discourse to set right the wrongs done to them by bringing about a restoration of the beauty and value of their cultural past and tradition. The trickster theme has been used to describe both the authors and the contemporary literature of postcolonial Africa. Assuming the role of political critics, the writers become tricksters exposing and outwitting the colonial and post-independence negotiators of oppression through stories told from the perspectives of the powerless. Underscoring the dissident character of African postcolonial literature, Nadia Gada refers to the African creative writers as "intellectual tricksters" (Dube 57). Roger Kurtz goes further to say that sometimes "entire texts function as tricksters, making subversive reading available" (317). The trickster perspective is the recognition of vulnerability and not powerlessness against oppressors. A trickster reading perspective underscores the power to resist, subsist, and release oneself from the forces of oppression. It would not be incorrect to say that in the collective consciousness of the country, the myths actually survive in these folktales that are the true artefacts of every culture. Indeed, folktales have always been a vital way to transmit important information, as well as moral lessons. They are often contextualised both in terms of time and space. Yet the folktales are not only timeless but also universal. The right way to preserve folktales is to reimagine and reinvent them to resonate with the present. As they are symbolic expressions, adding a contemporary twist to the traditional folktales would ensure their continued presence in this age of science and reason more efficiently.

Recognition of the huge possibilities of popular culture media for rigorous inquiry, drawing out the undercurrents of mythology and folklore, has resulted in increased awareness about cultures across the

world. Of late, there has also been an exploration of alternative mediums for the preservation and transmission of folklore, transcending the boundaries of language, time, age and geography. Anansi stories have several variants, and the one in the US goes by the name “Aunt Nancy”. He is also known as Ananse, Kwaku Ananse, and Anancy. Anansi, the Spider, makes his appearance in the television program ‘Static Shock’, as a major superhero from Africa. Anansi belongs to a lineage of heroes who derive his powers from an ancient amulet which grants powers of illusion and the ability to adhere to any surface. Neil Gaiman’s novel ‘American Gods’ features Anansi under the name Mr Nancy, along with other mythological characters. Another novel, ‘Anansi Boys’, by the same author, is not exactly a sequel. However, it tells the story of the sons of Anansi as they discover each other and their heritage. The character of Mr Nancy, an incarnation of the West African trickster god Anansi appears in both books. Interestingly the name of the spider-man of the West African folk tales has been adopted by an English rock band called “Skunk Anansie”. In an arc of DC Comics’ Justice League of America, the team has an encounter with Anansi. Anansi appears in different avatars, the most common form being a large, other-worldly spider with supernatural powers. Marvel Comics brought out a mini-series titled “Spider-Man Fairy Tales” in which Spider-Man takes on the role of Anansi. In the PC game, “Pandora’s Box”, Pandora unleashes chaos in the form of seven trickster gods into the world, and Anansi is one of them. Numerous folklorists have expressed concern over this migration “from folklore into popular culture where they become stereotyped, standardised, exploited, commodified, and repackaged in a number of ways” (Brunvand xxvii). This could very well herald the death of the oral-narrative genre.

Another significant issue that merits deliberation is the fact that Anansi is part of an exclusively oral tradition and would have gone through transmutations during the process of transference to the literary tradition. It was Robert Sutherland Rattray (Captain R. S. Rattray) a Scottish anthropologist working for the British colonial government in Ghana, who had recorded many of these tales in both the English and Twi, a dialect of the Akan language. One of the first compilations of folk stories for children was compiled by Sir Phillip

Sherlock in his *West Indian Folktales* (1966), which also included retellings of the exploits of Anansi. Andrew Salkey, a Jamaican author, considered a pioneer in West Indian children's literature, is the author of *Anancy's Score*. Salkey used for narration a mix of Creole with Standard English, both in the speech of his characters and also for the portrayal of the narrator (Stevenson 55).

Though the main thrust was on instruction and moralising, there is also the propensity to use the tales to generate jocularity when the oral and folk tradition passes into the literature (Foster 77). Yet it cannot be denied that the recent development of the narratives from the oral tradition to the electronic or popular culture forms has resulted in lesser variations to the traditional story. As far as the legends transmitted orally, there was the risk of minor details being modified to rectify ambiguities. But the contemporary adaptations have eliminated this threat to a large extent as these, along with the online circulated legends, are recorded in letters and can preserve them in their true uncorrupt form as if they are set in stone. The folklores are indeed worthy of academic importance and scrutiny as cultural identities are under constant threat from the onslaught of modernism. Folklores serve to frame the identity and activate memories about their true culture. They impact social and ethical behaviours by playing the more responsible role of a form that is constructive and didactic. They also reveal the negative side of humans including emotions of jealousy, hatred and rivalry. They are a form of cultural resistance achieved through a revival of mythological and historical narratives. It is possible to trace their impact on cultural and collective memory. Collective memory is a crucial social construct that can preserve and shape the cultural and sociopolitical identity of a nation. Appreciation and contextualisation of the folklores within memory and culture studies will pave the way for rigorous inquiry and draw out the undercurrents of the oral tradition. Credibility has always been an issue with myths and folktales in the modern age. Even when the modern mind distances itself from the characters and situations, the perpetuity of the mythical realms throughout all time gives these stories a primordial essence and a universal appeal. They can also function as springboards to discussions on ethical standards and varied worldviews.

Finally, to sum up the discourse, it may be understood that culture is concerned with identity, aspiration, and customs and practices that serve purposes such as ethnicity, heritage, norms, meanings and beliefs. Myths are stories that sensationalise values, ethics and customs of life. This is also true of the folktales that transmit social myths and ideology through narrative structures and conventional formulas. By virtue of its raciness and kinetic quality, folktales still continue and will remain the best possible vehicle for cultural transmission in this age of globalisation and cultural homogenisation.

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