Kweku Ananse: A Psychoanalytical Approach

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ABSTRACT

The characterization of Kweku Ananse, the trickster figure in Akan oral narratives, is explored by means of Freud's psychoanalytical theory. Ananse is revealed as an incarnation of the id with little or frequently no intervention of the superego. He is lawless, asocial, and amoral. One systematically finds him engaged in activities directed at gratifying his instincts for pleasure without regard for social conventions, legal ethics, or moral restraints. Kweku Ananse's literary function in the Akan oral educational system appears to be an attempt to expose the danger that he represents in society. Besides, the audience sympathizes vicariously with our hero, who renders, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is inadmissible. Ananse narratives are cathartic, serving as tension-relieving aesthetic devices.

Kweku Ananse, the Akan trickster figure, is a problematic figure to read in terms of the narratives in which he plays an integral part. He is lawless, asocial, and amoral. One systematically finds him engaged in activities directed at gratifying his instincts for pleasure without regard for social conventions, legal ethics, or moral restraints. In short, he may be equated with the Freudian notion of the id, embodying instinctual, repressed, or antisocial desires. This characterization, however, should be seen as only partial. Kweku Ananse's literary function in the Akan oral educational system appears to be an attempt to expose the danger that he incarnates in society; in so doing, he serves to reveal the work of ideology in the society. Besides, the audience vicariously sympathizes with our hero, who renders within the fixed bounds of what is permitted an experience of what is inadmissible. Furthermore, Ananse narratives are cathartic, serving as tension-relieving aesthetic devices.

A significant feature of Akan oral literature is the popularity of the narratives about the spider Kweku Ananse. Indeed, Ananse lends his name to the oral narrative genre, known among the Akans as anansesem, that is to say, Ananse stories. He is a well-known figure to both the old and the young. One cannot speak with any
strictness of an Ananse cycle, for there is no fixed sequence in the order in which the episodes or narratives connected with him are told. There is, however, a considerable body of widely known narratives in which Ananse is the protagonist. The narrative performer selects from the wide traditional repertoire of basic themes and images and, in the arrangement of the parts, creates an original Ananse narrative. As a consequence of the interaction between narrative performer and audience, Ananse's social impact clearly goes beyond his brief appearance in the moment of narrative creation and performance. Thus we recognize an intimate and complex relationship or clustering between the artist/performer and Kweku Ananse as owner of the stories, the anansesem, as well as subject of the stories themselves. It is, in fact, this cluster that becomes the object of study when we attempt to "read" or psychoanalyze Kweku Ananse.

As with all patients, however, we need to examine his origins, his history, if we are to explain him to ourselves. Kweku Ananse seems to have existed since the beginning of things; his birth is not described in any of the narratives. He is equally immortal, for we never witness or hear of his death. He appears to be of supernatural origin related to Nyame, the Skygod. In one narrative, he is referred to as "Ananse the child of Nsia, the Mother of Nyame." Thus, he is supposed to be a uterine brother of Nyame. And yet, in another narrative, we learn of his marriage with Abena Akoma, Nyame's daughter. Thus, Ananse has a presumed relationship with Nyame that is at once complicated, even conflicted. But this does not elevate Ananse to the level of a god, for there are no shrines, no worship for our hero. In the narratives, Ananse is stripped of any divine trait.

Even though Ananse is a spider, he is presented in the stories told about him as an everyman or everyone, and attention is seldom drawn to his spider nature, his spider-ness. The audience only becomes aware of him as a spider in those limited narratives in which Ananse's physical appearance or habitat plays an etiological function. For example, one of the narratives explains why the hinder part of Kweku Ananse became big at the expense of his head, which became small. Another narrative gives an account of how the spider ended up bald. Other narratives provide an explanation of how, after a dishonorable adventure, Ananse retreated to dark corners and on rafters hiding away in shame and ignominy. There is a quality about Kweku Ananse, his spider-ness, so to speak, that is constant in the performance aspect of his stories—but is not readily apparent—and that may be central to a more insightful understanding of his ability to weave a web, a complex scheme.

As a human being, our hero is endowed with speech and his humor is proverbial. The laughter and humor that he arouses are clear indications that he is viewed as a human being for, as Henri Bergson has pointed out in _Le rire_, there is no humor outside the realm of what is human. In addition, our protagonist has one of the necessary traits of an individual being—a name, Kweku Ananse. In Akan society, a child has no legal existence, no status, until he is given a name on the eighth day after his birth during the "outdooring" ceremony. Ananse, then, appears as an allegorical representation of man.

Kweku Ananse faces the same life struggles as human beings. He is a social being married with children. For occupation, he is a traditional farmer, even though he is not noted for the strength of his hand in wielding the matchet like Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo: he prefers to steal rather than engage in hard work. He associates with all sorts and conditions of men and animals. He contracts friendships, but these
may be short-lived because, sooner or later, Ananse is certain to violate the sacred bonds of friendship.

Since Ananse interacts with members of his society, and he definitely knows enough about human nature to manipulate others to his advantage, he should be expected to be familiar with social codes of decent behavior. Indeed, in one narrative, we find him setting out to acquit his responsibilities as a son-in-law at his mother-in-law’s funeral.

However, in spite of this clear integration into society, Ananse appears to be operating in a hermetic field, in a “no man’s land.” Kweku Ananse is an opportunist and thief who will take advantage of whatever possibilities a situation may hold out for him. He ignores few opportunities for trickery and self-aggrandizement, and his greed is only matched by his viciousness. Whatever the circumstance, Kweku Ananse moves in and masters it, or he loses the game. He wins some, loses others, but always returns for more, incredibly returns to create challenges where they did not exist, and meet challenges where they exist.

The unbounded space in which Ananse operates seems to lack any point of reference; it seems to be only self-indulgent. This lack of a definable context can apparently be understood only as amoral, a world in which normal societal values are not operative, a world in which the morality of the society is put aside, a world in which human and humane values are totally ignored. Ananse’s morality can, indeed, be described as an absence of morality. Apart from being amoral, Ananse is lawless and asocial. This is to suggest that Kweku Ananse might be characterized as an incarnation of the id in Freud’s psychoanalytical theory. The id functions to fulfill the primordial life principle, which Freud considers to be the “pleasure principle.” Without consciousness or semblance of rational order, the id is characterized by a tremendous vitality. The laws of logic do not hold for the processes of the id. The id knows no values, no good or evil, no morality. Unchecked it would lead us to destruction and even self-destruction to satisfy its impulses for pleasure. Safety for the self and for others does not lie within the province of the id; its concern is purely for instinctual gratification without regard for the consequence.

In some narratives, however, Ananse appears as the champion of justice and resists arbitrariness. One Ananse narrative tells of a tyrant who could not bear to be contradicted. He put to death all those whom, by his tall stories and idiotic requests, he had provoked into gasps of unbelief. One day, Ananse visited him and, as might be expected, withstood all the provocations. Ananse invited him back and hid himself, having told his children how to handle him. The tyrant did well at first but soon broke down. When the visitor asked for water to drink from a cooler pot, he was told that the top layer belonged to Ananse who was away, the middle part to an aunt who would be furious, and only the bottom portion to the children who, obviously, could not reach it without disturbing the other portions. Trying to find out where Ananse was, the tyrant was told that in trying to pluck a fruit from a tree with his penis, he had broken it in several places, witness the red marks on the floor, and he had gone to fetch medicines (cited in Abraham 95). These examples exhibit a cunning logic and absurdity that is very much under control, unlike the Freudian id that is often associated with the instinctual, repressed, or antisocial desires of a sexual or aggressive nature.

Even as we move inexorably toward an understanding of Ananse’s morality and psychology, we must consider his status in society. One gets the impression that he
is a person of “low class,” a despised being. In one narrative, Kweku is referred to as “a mere masterless man” (Rattray 55). Kweku Ananse once went to the Skygod to purchase *anyankosem* (that is to say, Skygod stories). The Skygod asked him: “Will you be able to buy them? Great and powerful towns like Kokofu, Bekwai, Asumegya (these were powerful states in the Asante Kingdom) have come, but they were unable to purchase them, and you who are but a mere masterless man you say you will be able?” (Rattray 55). Indeed, in consideration of his size, he may be considered a helpless and insignificant member of the society. The ends to which Ananse's trickery is directed, his efforts and activities may be recognized as a striving for some kind of acknowledgment. Kweku employs his keen intellect for the service of this goal. Despised, he develops a philosophy of the acquisitive way of life through self-reliance and trickery, both as compensation and survival technique. This is how he intends to redeem himself. His ambition even goes as far as to attempt to secure the status that will place him at par with Skygod. And this is why he went to the latter to bargain for *anyankosem*.

When Ananse asked for the price of *anyankosem*, Skygod told him they could only be bought with the Python, the Leopard, the Fairy, and Hornets. Ananse responded with bravado, “I will bring some of all these things and I will even add my old woman, Nsia, to the lot.” Ananse went and cut a branch of palm-tree, and cut some string creeper as well and set off for the stream. As he was going along he engaged in this monologue, “It’s longer than he is, it’s not so long as he; you lie it’s longer than he.” The Python, that had overheard this imaginary conversation said, “What is it all about?” Ananse answered, “Isn’t it my wife, Aso, who is arguing with me that this palm-branch is longer than you, and I told her she is a liar.” The Python said, “Bring it, and come and measure me.” Ananse took the palm-branch and laid it along the Python’s body. He said, “Stretch yourself out.” And the Python stretched himself out, and Ananse took the rope-creeper and wound it until he came to the Python's head. Ananse then told the Python, “Fool, I shall take you to Skygod and receive *anyankosem*.” Next, Ananse looked for a gourd and filled it with water and went along through the bush. When he saw a swarm of Hornets, he poured out some of the water and sprinkled it on the Hornets. Ananse then poured the remainder upon himself and cut a plantain leaf and covered his head with it. He then addressed the Hornets saying, “As the rain has come, had you not better come and enter my gourd so that the rain will not beat you; don’t you see that I have taken a plantain leaf to cover myself?” The Hornets said, “We thank you.” All the Hornets flew disappearing into the gourd. Father Ananse covered the mouth and said, “Fools, I have got you and I am taking you to receive *anyankosem*.” Then, Ananse went to look for the Leopard’s tracks and having found them he dug a very deep pit and covered it over, and came back home. Early the following day, he went off and found a Leopard lying in the pit. Ananse said, “Cousin, I have told you not to get drunk, and now, just as one would expect of you, you have become intoxicated, and that’s why you have fallen into the pit. If I were to say I would get you out, next day, if you saw me or likewise any of my children, you would go and catch them.” The Leopard said “O! I couldn’t do such a thing.” Ananse went and cut two sticks. He said to Leopard, “Put one of your paws here, and the other one there.” And the Leopard placed them where he was directed. As he was about to climb up, Ananse lifted up his knife, and in a flash, it descended on Leopard’s head and he fell into the pit. Ananse got a ladder, descended into the pit and came out with Leopard. He said, “Fool, I am taking you in exchange for *anyankosem*.”
Finally, Ananse carved a wooden doll and tapped some latex and plastered the doll’s body with it, and he mashed yams and put some in the doll’s hand. He then tied a string around the doll’s waist and went and placed it at the foot of a tree, where Fairies come to play. And a Fairy came along. She said, “Akua (referring to the doll), may I eat a little of this mashed yam?” Ananse tugged at the string and the doll nodded her head. The fairy ate some and then when she finished thanked the doll. But there was no answer. The Fairy then slapped her as correction for her lack of good manners, and her hand stuck there. She took the other hand also and slapped the doll, and that one too stuck. She pushed it with her stomach and it stuck too. Ananse then came out and tied her up and said, “Fool, I have got you. I shall take you to Skygod in exchange for anyankosem.” Thus, Ananse was able to satisfy the apparently impossible conditions imposed by Skygod for purchasing anyankosem, and the oral narratives among the Akans thenceforth became known as anansesem (Rattray 55–59).

Ananse’s aims and objectives account for his behavior, which normally would be described as motivated by greed. However, as we have noted earlier, his psyche is propelled by abundant energy and in a direction that apparently frees him from ethical restraints. Thus, greed, or acquisitiveness, informs all his actions. However, this greed is mainly directed towards procuring of basic human needs, at which he seems quite adept, in addition to recognition, fame, and honor. Ananse’s greed equally explains his deficiencies. He is selfish, cruel, unscrupulous, vain, without gratitude to those that help him, and insensitive to the suffering of others. He is a parasite exploiting all opportunities to get something for nothing or almost nothing. He is constantly rebelling against accepted social behavior. Among other things, he may even be considered the evil nature in mankind. However, to see him in this starkly oppositional mode is to miss his use value within the society and to misread him. Both the anansesem’s and Kweku Ananse’s value emerge in the articulation with the audience’s established normative ideas of right behavior; therefore, they, the audience, constitute an ego-superego dyad, in concert with Ananse as id. Kweku Ananse’s protean nature—spider- (pretender god)-man—is emblematic of the artist’s creativity and ability to become any and every other for the audience, both affirming and undermining the established social order.

Kweku Ananse’s psychology cannot, strictly speaking, be understood in Freudian psychoanalytical terms, since as putative brother to the Skygod Nyame, he exists outside the bounds of the mortal world, even as he simultaneously occupies the ideological space of our lives. To attempt to psychoanalyze Kweku Ananse is to attempt the analysis of a being with infinite personalities; since, as “owner” of the “stories” in which he has his being—having appropriated the anyankosem and transformed them into anansesem, he becomes the form and content, the medium and the message, inextricably bound to us, his audience; yet outside our ability to hold him steady, to fix his meaning or definitively determine the origins of his “antisocial” or “heroic” behaviors.

The term “trickster” implies intelligence and cleverness, and apparently Ananse deserves the appellation. There is an Akan saying, “Wo ho hu se Ananse” (meaning “You are as wonderful as Ananse”). Reference to “spider plans” among the Akans and in Ghanaian society in general imply cleverly woven plans, which Ananse, in his inimitable manner, would have contrived. Our hero shows cunning in the execution of theft, guile in his verbal exchanges and shrewdness in his negotiations and bargaining. Yet,
although we find Ananse performing clever tricks, and he is usually depicted as a very wise being and, indeed, reputed to be the wisest among all of Skygod’s creations, we also find him falling into foolish mishaps out of greed, which can be considered his tragic flaw. We find him at times displaying outstanding stupidity.

One day Ananse swept up all knowledge, gathered it and placed it in a gourd. He then declared that he would climb a tree and go and hang it on it, so that all wisdom on earth would be finished. When he reached the tree where he was going to hang it, he took a string and tied it to the gourd and hung it in front of him and set himself to climb the tree. He strove again and again but it was in vain. His son who was standing by said to him, “Would it not have been better if you had turned round the gourd and put it on your back?” Reluctantly, Ananse took the gourd and put it behind him. When he reached where the branches began to spread out from the stem, he said to himself, “I, Kweku Ananse, I might as well be dead, I collected all wisdom in one place, yet some remained which I did not perceive and my child, this sucking infant has shown it to me.” He seized the gourd and cast it away. That is why everyone got wisdom and anyone who did not get there in time is, sebe (excuse me), a fool (Rattray 5–7).

Thus, although Ananse is seen to be wise, he is also stupid. These two aspects of his nature may appear to be contradictory. But his dualistic nature is revealed in other areas. Kweku Ananse is a combination of trickster and culture-hero. He reduces the world to order and helps mankind with innumerable benefactions. One of his praise-names is “Ananse oboo adea, Ananse kokroko ode nsee” (meaning Ananse, the creator, Ananse who owns the beginning of things). Ananse is responsible, for example, for introducing the hoe, that indispensable tool for the farmer, in Asante lands.

Here is the story of how the hoe came to the Asante people. Kweku Ananse and his children lived with Porcupine. And the Porcupine began work for the first time on a new farm, and Kweku begged him to let him have a piece of land to cultivate. When Ananse and his children were hoeing, the Porcupine went home to eat. And when the Porcupine returned, he took up his hoe and applied it to the ground uttering some incantations. The Hoe turned over a large tract of land. After work, the Porcupine took his hoe and hid it. But Kweku Ananse saw where it was hidden. Very early the next day, Kweku went and took it to his farm, and applied it with the same incantations; however, he did not know how to make it stop. The Hoe continued hoeing till it reached Skygod’s water. From there it came to the land of the white men and the men took it and looked at it and made others. That is how European hoes came among the Asante people. Formerly, it was only the Porcupine who had one (Rattray 43).

Indeed, in many Akan oral narratives dealing with how things came about, how things were created, Ananse is there moving on the outskirts of creative activity, frequently becoming himself the creator. Many good and useful things are discovered, invented, taught, or originated by him. However, he is equally at the origin of evil in society in accordance with his title, “the owner of the beginning of things.” Thus, the culture-hero is also mischief-maker responsible for what is evil in creation. He brings about order but he is also the originator of chaos. In one anansesem we learn that Ananse is responsible for the introduction of all the hideous diseases in the society.

Ananse went to Skygod and said, “Sir, give me your sheep that you keep and sacrifice to your soul on Saturday and let me kill it and eat it that I may bring you a beautiful maiden in exchange. Skygod gave him the sheep and Ananse set out for his
village and killed the sheep and ate it. Ananse then went to a village where there was not a single male and married all the women and lived with them. One day a hunter came there. When the hunter left, he went and told Skygod that Ananse had killed his sheep and given it to some women to eat and married them. Skygod sent messengers to go to that village and bring all the women. The messengers went and brought the women with the exception of one who was ill. After their departure, Ananse said to the sick woman, “What can I do with you, you can't do anything for me.” The sick woman asked him to go and bring a gourd. When Ananse brought it, she asked him to give her a bath and pour the water into the gourd. The woman then became very beautiful and Ananse married that which was already his. Now, the hunter came again and saw this woman, and went and reported to Skygod that Ananse had made a fool of him and brought him the ugly women and kept the beautiful one for himself. Skygod again sent messengers to go and bring that woman. Now, Ananse went and got the gourd into which all the hideous diseases from the woman had been poured, and covered it with an animal skin. He stretched a skin over another gourd and gave it to his son. Ananse beat on the drum and sang and his sons danced. The crow saw them and ran to inform Skygod that Ananse had a dance, which was fitting for him and not for Ananse. Immediately, Skygod sent messengers to Ananse to go and bring the dance. Ananse told the messengers, “This dance of mine, we only dance it in the harem and if Skygod agrees then I shall bring it along.” Skygod agreed. Ananse went with the drums to the harem and Skygod came and danced with all his wives. When the woman who had been sick saw that Ananse had stretched a skin over the gourd in which were all her diseases, she refused to dance. But Skygod forced her, and when she was about to dance, Ananse struck the woman with the gourd and the diseases scattered. That is how, we are told, syphilis, stomachache, headache, leprosy, smallpox, diabetes, madness came among mankind (Rattray 77–81).

Thus, Ananse may also be perceived as the principle of disorder. In this respect, he visibly defies the general theme of Akan oral narratives, that is, the affirmation and support of the fundamental values of the society. He seems to be aligning himself against these values or he simply ignores them. The literary function of Kwéku Ananse in Akan oral narrative tradition becomes clear. If, on the whole, the narratives point thematically to the need for social order, Ananse is the artistic recognition of that which evades this order; he is ruled by human vices. He provides within the fixed bounds of what is permitted an experience of what is unacceptable, for he definitely operates outside the fixed bounds of custom and law. The audience, however, sympathizes with Ananse. The tolerant and admiring attitude towards the hero primarily stems from the comic effects achieved in the Ananse narratives. As we know, extraordinary feats by tiny and apparently helpless persons constitute a familiar subject of humor and empathy. Second, we personify this seemingly “underdog” creature. Furthermore, Ananse narratives are cathartic: they serve as tension-relieving aesthetic devices, for the narratives seem to suggest a lifting of restraints. The members of the audience purge themselves of tensions built up by social restrictions and thus of their latent desires to be involved in Ananse-like adventures. Like the Spanish *picaro*, Ananse is also the spirit of revolt against the rigidity and tyranny of tradition.

Within Akan oral narrative tradition, Ananse is not considered a hero, in the sense that he is not a model, which the members of the community strive to emulate; he is only viewed as a hero of comic narratives. But Ananse displays heroic qualities.
Like the hero, Ananse may go off on an odyssey and accomplish Herculean tasks. He is the last resort to solve knotty problems about which many have despaired; and he is able to provide the key for unraveling mysteries. Indeed, he can turn defeat into victory for a whole community. In Ananse, then, are the seeds of the hero, the hero being the symbol of perfection, the embodiment of all that is good in the society, the one who upholds the ideals of the society, the affirmation of Freud's superego.

If, on the one hand, Ananse is superior to humans because of his superhuman qualities, on the other hand, he is inferior to them because of his lack of moral restraint. The problem seems to be located in Ananse's unrestrained vitality, his potent force, which has not been placed in an acceptable value system. His psyche embodies extremely energetic and creative unrestricted pre-social characteristics. His energy can therefore be used indiscriminately for good and for evil, for constructive and for destructive purposes.

In the final analysis, Ananse narratives must not be seen as a separate aspect of Akan oral narrative tradition, but as an integral element of the entire tradition, inseparable from the other oral narratives. They must be seen in conjunction with the other characters, other themes stressing the need for social order and harmony. The true hero in Akan oral narratives is Ananse brought under control. The answer to understanding Kweku Ananse, the trickster, and why he is so integral to Akan society, is to recognize the importance to remind ourselves of the need for change and irreverence in a society that also prides itself in the determinate authority of its sociopolitical institutions. Kweku Ananse underscores and represents the need for the artist/raconteur who can become “the owner of the stories,” if only for a moment.

While Ananse narratives also form a kind of comic relief and provide emotional outlets, they also have a thematic function in the oral educational system: an attempt to give direction to Kweku Ananse’s potent force. In view of our hero’s dangerous potentialities, he must learn that he represents a serious threat to society: he stands for untamed passions. This is why his unchecked, selfish greed is exposed for the dangerous evil that it represents in the community. Order is always-and-already to be restored, not necessarily in its old incarnation, but in a socially responsive community. Ananse represents restrained energy, energy channeled into socially useful functions.

Perhaps the ultimate message in the Ananse narratives is that there can be no lasting social harmony when the unrestrained pursuit of individual profits at the expense of the common good becomes the goal of men. In Ayi Kwei Armah’s Fragments, the protagonist leaves Ghana to pursue further studies in the United States of America. On the eve of his departure, his uncle gives him a very useful farewell piece of advice. As it is customary during ananseem sessions, let us conclude with Uncle Foli’s words of moral guidance:

Gain the wisdom
to turn your back on the wisdom
of Ananse.
Do not be persuaded you will fill your stomach faster
If you do not have others to fill.
There are no humans who walk this earth alone. (6)
WORKS CITED