

THE AKAN TRICKSTER CYCLE: MYTH OR FOLKTALE?

BY

KWESI YANKAH

Co-Winner
Sixth Annual
Graduate Student
Term Paper Competition
1983

Copyright 1983
African Studies Program
Indiana University
ISBN: 0-941934-43-8

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper was originally written for a Seminar on Middle Eastern and Sub-Saharan African Prose Narrative, taught by Dr. Hasan El-Shamy of the Folklore Department. I am very grateful to Dr. El-Shamy for his comments on the draft of this paper.



Scholarship on the myth displays equivocation on the question of its presence or absence in Africa. On the one hand, there are several published collections of African narratives designated by their authors as myth, such as Woodson's African Myths, Beier's The Origin of Life and Death: African Creation Myths, Knappert's Myth and Legends of the Congo, and African Mythology written by Werner. Even so, there is evidence to suggest that not all such authors were certain of the category to which their collections belong. In the introduction to African Myths, for example, Woodson interchanges the terms folktale, myth, and legend (Woodson 1928: ix). On the other hand, scholars like Hermann Baumann and Ruth Finnegan doubt the existence of myth in Africa, but for different reasons. To Baumann, the Negro is devoid of the gift of myth-making (cf Radin 1952: 2). To Finnegan, however, scholars of the African 'myth' have not provided enough contextual information, for their collections to be truly classified as myth (Finnegan (1972: 361 et passims).

Part of this uncertainty on the question of myth in Africa is derived from the very winding definition of myth.

Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith, they are taught to be believed, and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt or disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred, and they are often associated with theology and ritual (Bascom 1965: 2).

Bascom goes on to add that myths account for the origin of various phenomena and features in the world. While this latter point seems to have motivated the categorisation of the collections by the authors earlier cited, not much attention seems to have been paid by scholars to the factors of belief and sacredness, which the earlier part of Bascom's definition highlights. The question then is, do we have a myth where only part of the definition is fulfilled?

The problem apparently diminishes in cultures where separate terms exist for fictitious and belief narratives such as the Herskovits (1958) report of Dahomey; but even here, as the Herskovits point out, the distinction is sometimes blurred. Earlier on, Boas (1916) had pointed out that no clear distinction can be made between myth and folktale in some cultures, and in 1940, based on his analysis of myths and folktales from the northwest coast of America, Boas concludes that the contents of folktales and myths are largely the same, the data showing a continual flow of material from mythology to folktale and vice versa (Boas 1940). Indeed, the overlap between myth and folktale has been well discussed in folklore scholarship (See Stith Thompson 1946: 367 ff; Maria Leach 1950: 778), and Stith Thompson would even consider myth a subdivision of the folktale.

It is significant to note, however, that the projected overlap between myth and folktale is hardly argued by scholars to be based on the question of belief or non-belief. Rather, most scholars have laid greater emphasis on content analysis and observed the overlap of motifs between the two genres, leaving relatively unexplored the extent to which the narratives interact with the socio-religious lives of the people who perform them. In the absence of this latter supplementary consideration, any test of the presence or absence of

specific folklore genres in various cultures is bound to be inconclusive.

Narratives involving the trickster bring into greater prominence the question of myth in Africa. Characterised by Radin as "creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself" (Radin 1956: xxiii), the trickster is bound to pose problems because not only is it represented by various forms in various cultures; there is also no unanimity in the extent to which it is sacred. In contemporary Egyptian culture, there are two trickster figures which are both human and are believed to have existed (El-Shamy 1980: 219-221). In Yoruba and Fon cultures the tricksters are deities. In several other parts of Africa the trickster is represented by various types of animal. Among most Bantus, it is the little hare. The tortoise is the trickster in some parts of West Africa. Among the Ila of Zambia, hare and tortoise co-exist as tricksters. The antelope, squirrel, weasel, wren also occur as tricksters in other parts of Africa. The spider, the best known trickster in Africa exists in Ghana, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, among the Hausa, Luo, Zande and Ng'bandi (Finnegan 1970: 315 et seq).

In spite of the lack of uniformity in the nature of trickster figures, trickster narratives have often attracted the label myth (Paul Radin 1956, Pelton 1980). Incidentally, this has not helped to boost folktale scholarship in Africa, since most African narratives displaying animals and etiological traits are automatically viewed as myth by some scholars. Yet a closer look at Bascom's definition of myth reveals that both content and context are relevant in the determination of myth, the implication being that it takes much more than content analysis on paper to tell a myth from other types of narrative. El Shamy would indeed include the intent of the narrator in the ingredients necessary for genre categorisation (El-Shamy 1980: xiv) and Ruth Finnegan bemoans the omission of the consideration of style, context and attitude in applying the myth label in Africa,

It emerges that in trying to distinguish different categories of African oral narration, in particular, potential myths, it may be more fruitful to look not primarily at subject matter but at context. Questions about circumstances in which a narrative took place, their purpose and tone, the type of narrator and audience, the publicity or secrecy of the event, and finally, even the style of narration may be more crucial than questions about content and characters. Unfortunately, it is precisely about these former factors that we are less often informed (Finnegan 1970: 366).

The advantage in paying heed to Finnegan's word is that it moves the scholar from his world of blind theoretical formulations to the illuminant hearth of folk activity. In the scholarship on myth in Africa, this has been the missing factor.

This paper takes a closer look at aspects of content, context and cultural impact of stories involving Ananse (Spider), the trickster figure in Akan narratives, in an attempt to highlight problems involved in categorising it as myth. It is based on (1) fieldwork I carried out in 1979 in some Akan areas and (2) Rattray's collections in Akan-Ashanti Folktales.

The Akan constitute a cluster of ethnic groups living mostly in central and southern Ghana. The most important (numerically) of Akan sub-groups are the

Ashanti, Fanti, Akwapem. My field work was based on the villages of Gomua Afransi, and Asaasane, both in the Fanti area. Rattray's tale collections among the Ashanti thus provide a useful supplement to enable generalisations to be made about the Akan trickster narrative. Below I present a summary of 10 narratives to which I shall refer in this paper. Below each tale I have indicated the relevant or nearest motifs. Most of the tales used here, however, are not listed in Aarne Thompson's Tale Type Index.

- (1) How Incrimination and Injury-Causing Came to the World Narrator: Mensa Aborompa: Age 20. Place: Afransi (Ghana)

God and Kweku Ananse are great friends. Ananse asks God one day, "which is more painful, injuries or incrimination?" God says, injury; Ananse says incrimination. In an ensuing argument God takes a knife and inflicts injury on Ananse. Ananse heals wounds, and mobilises other animals to dig a tunnel to the kitchen of God's mother-in-law (the mother of God's newest and most beautiful wife). Ananse arranges to sleep in God's house, and in the night sneaks to the kitchen of God's mother-in-law. Ananse defecates in the hearth, where fire is made. Meanwhile the tunnel underneath the kitchen is full of musician animals with drums. As God's mother-in-law sweeps the kitchen, she discovers feces; as she wonders she hears music in the background saying "God has defecated, God has defecated, God has defecated." Father-in-law is informed; he goes to check, the same song is heard. The public is attracted. God is informed about the incident. He attempts suicide, but Ananse dissuades him, and asks God's spokesmen to remind God of a riddle Ananse posed two weeks ago, to which Ananse and God disagreed on the answer. Truly, incrimination is more painful than injury. Ananse is proved right.

(Motifs N347.6 Falsely accused man's suicide; J628 Dissuasion from suicide, B297 Musical Animals.)

- (2) How Ananse Became Flat-shaped. Narrated by Owusu at Afransi (Ghana). Age 25.

God engages labourers to work on his big farm - it's sowing time. Ananse challenges God, he can retard progress on God's farm. God thinks it is impossible. On the day of work, Ananse fetches a gourd and fills it with nkyem birds. This is hidden underneath the soil of God's farm. As soon as work starts on the farm, the birds began a melodious song, "A type of gourd, a type of gourd, a type of gourd." Workers cannot resist; they abandon their tools and dance. God sends messenger after messenger to check what is happening, for the workers have not returned. But the messengers are also afflicted by the dance disease. God is informed about the incident. He goes to the farm himself. Meanwhile, sowing and harvest seasons are over. God confronts Ananse and rebukes him. He slaps Ananse on the head, and Ananse flattens, and can only crawl on walls.

(Motifs K826 Hoodwinked dancers; B297 Musical animals)

- (3) How Wisdom Spread (Narrator Kweku Antobani, Afransi)

Father Kweku Ananse and his wife Okondor and son Kweku Tsen are in a village. Ananse realises his son wants to acquire his wisdom; so he puts all wisdom in a gourd and moves out to throw it away. A tree had half fallen

across Ananse's path along the way. If he bends beneath the tree the gourd strapped at his back will crash, but he cannot climb across either. He moves back and forth several hours trying to pass by the tree. He is eventually saved by his son who counsels that he put the gourd down, pass beneath the tree and reach back for the gourd. Ananse realises he after all does not possess all the wisdom. He smashes the gourd against the ground; it breaks and wisdom spreads.

(See variant in Rattray 1930, p. 4. Motif L142.3 Son surpasses father in skill.)

(4) Why Ananse Lives in the Ceiling.

Narrated by Kojo Ananse: Age 55. Place - Asasane (Ghana)

Ananse steals yam from the farm of his father-in-law but a trap laid by the latter to apprehend culprits ensnares Ananse. Trapped, he begins singing, publicising the potential rewards in learning the technique of releasing. A hunter overhears Ananse; he is deceived into releasing Ananse and replacing Ananse's trapped leg with his own. Ananse escapes to tell his father-in-law that the thief is trapped. But the truth is out. Ashamed, Ananse jumps to the ceiling.

(Variant of Motif 713.1 Deception into allowing oneself to be tied.)

(5) Why Ananse's Head is Small and His Behinds are Big.

Narrated by Kofi Egyin: 35 years old. Place: Afransi (Ghana)

Ananse and his son Kweku Tsen set out to look for food during famine. They meet three women bathing in a river - they are indeed spirits. Ananse asks to join; the spirits agree. Ananse's son is not invited. The spirits teach Ananse a song but warn him not to sing it anywhere else. He agrees. But on their way he asks his son to remind him of the song's tune, so that he could sing at home as lullaby. His son declines. Ananse remembers the song, sings it and his head disappears. His son calls for aid from the spirits. The spirits plant Ananse's head back and warn him. It happens again. On the third occasion, the spirits take Ananse's decapitated head and smash it on his behinds. That is why Ananse's behinds are big and his head small.

(Motif A2355 Why spider has small waist; A2241.5 Why spider is cursed; D517 Transformation for disobedience; C481 Singing tabu) See a variant of this tale in Rattray, p. 16.

(6) How Deafness Came to this World.

Narrator: Yaw Asaber; Age, approximately 30. Place: Afransi.

Ananse makes a farm with his family, his wife Okondor, and children Kweku Tsen, Tsipuropuro (one with oversized head), Nankonhwea (Thin-legged) and Efudohwedahwe (Belly-at-the-point-of-bursting). When the crops are ready for harvest, Ananse suggests that they all go to their home town (mother's town) for a month since the crops would otherwise be consumed before maturity. They all leave. Ananse pretends leaving, but comes back to consume food on farm. Ananse blames his wife and beats her. Adowa, the antelope, intervenes and asks for the distance to the home town of Ananse's wife, and that to Ananse's home town. That would determine who was nearer the farm. The home

town of Ananse's wife is three towns away. Ananse says his town is beyond the following town - Ko bu (Go-and-harvest-crop), Konoae (Go-and-cook-it) Kowee (Consume-it) and Kopasarpasar (Go-for-a-leisure-walk). The antelope rules in favor of Ananse. Ananse inflicts more beating on his wife. Alligator intervenes, and when told of the names of the towns beyond which Ananse's town and his wife's are, he implicates Ananse based on the names of the towns Ananse utters. Other animals, in admiration of the alligator's interpretive wit (the sensitivity of his ears), seek to acquire his wit. They put a stick in alligator's ear, empty it and put the contents in their ears. This left the alligator deaf.

(Variant of Motif K1867 Trickster shams death to get food; H602.3 Symbolic interpretation of names; J1149.6 Thief detected by answer to question.)

(7) How Ananse Got Aso (his wife) in Marriage. (Rattray, p. 132)

Akwasi the-jealous-one lived with his wife Aso. He was impotent. God rules that he who will impregnate her may take her over as his wife. Ananse takes up the challenge, contrives to get large quantities of meat and takes it to the couple's house. As they eat together, Ananse puts a purgative drug in the man's food. Meanwhile Ananse has given his name as Rise-up-and-make-love-to-Aso. At bed time, the medicine takes effect on the man, and he suffers, crying out Ananse's name ("Rise-up-and-make-love-to-Aso") for help. On hearing this, Ananse draws the woman's attention to her husband's orders. The woman obliges and Ananse makes love to her. This happens several times that night. The woman gets pregnant - the begotten child is cut into pieces and scattered, spreading jealousy all over the world.

(A1375 Origin of jealousy; Motif XIII.7 Misunderstood words lead to comic results; Motif K1354 Seduction by bearing false order from husband or father;) Variant of Type 1563, Both? See also Folktales of Egypt, p. 222.

(8) Why Ananse Runs When on the Surface of Water. (Rattray, p. 138).

Ananse and Dog set out to build a village. On their way, they indulge in a game of binding each other. Dog binds Ananse and threatens to sell him. He is saved by Crocodile. Crocodile goes to Ananse's house the next day. Ananse attempts to kill him. Crocodile escapes. Ananse tries again and is grabbed by Crocodile, but manages to flee. That is why Ananse hastens on water. He is afraid of Crocodile.

(9) How Ananse Got a Bald Head. (Rattray, p. 118)

Ananse's mother-in-law dies. He observes custom by paying money to the bereaved, and donating two cloths, woolen blankets, pillows, etc. At the funeral, Ananse declines to eat, to portray his anguish, but keeps hiding hot boiled beans under his hat. He pretends that he has to leave for a hat-shaking festival in a neighboring village. In the presence of others, he begins singing while the beans under his hat burn his head. He can no longer bear the pain; he throws off his hat and is betrayed. That is how Ananse got a bald head.

(10) How It Came About that Ananse Went Upon Rafters. (Rattray, p. 248)

Ananse goes to the funeral of God's mother. On his way, he hides sheep, monkey and kingjay bird in a sack, and sings nice dirges at the funeral with the help of the hidden animals. Ananse is congratulated and admired. He is given so much food, but eats alone without giving to his hidden colleagues. During the 8th day funeral celebration, Ananse is invited to repeat the performance. His colleagues refuse to help him. Out of shame, he jumps up the rafters.

The Ananse narrative is mentioned in a few publications - Rattray (1930), VanDyck (1967), and Pelton (1980). But while Rattray's collection and translation of tales are excellent, his comments on the tales are rather brief. VanDyck and Pelton, on the other hand, deal with Ananse as depicted mainly in Rattray's collections. The disadvantage in subjecting Ananse to a scholarly analysis without direct contact with the people in whose stories it lives, is admitted to by Pelton,

Here I sit, in the grip of a Canadian winter, looking out a window at pine trees and three feet of snow. I read stories in English, not Akan, printed and collected, not heard individually, and I grapple with them in solitude, grasping them and the culture out of which they arise only with great difficulty (Pelton 1980 : 20).

But even after grappling with trickster figures among the Akan, Yoruba, Fon and Ogo-Yurugu (all in West Africa) and acknowledging differences in respect of sacredness, between Ananse and the other trickster figures, Pelton is still compelled to conclude that, "The most distinctive feature of the West African trickster (is) his association with divination (Pelton 1980: 273). This is, of course, not true of Ananse. But for a scholar operating, perhaps, with mythic presumptions about the trickster in Africa, the conclusion seems inevitable. The truth is that scholars need not generalise about the trickster in the face of a wide range of differences in their significance and characterisation in various cultures.

The sacred or secular nature of Ananse and the narratives associated with him may be determined by discussing the way he is depicted in the stories (whether animal or human), the world or worlds in which he operates, the social context of Ananse narratives and Ananse's socio-cultural significance to the Akan as a whole.

Let's begin by posing a basic question. Is ananse, the animal the same as Ananse in the trickster narrative? The absence of a categorical answer to this, at this point, is based on the fact that Ananse oscillates between man and animal.

In morphological and artistic terms, Ananse is depicted as a man. His first name in the narratives is Kweku, the day-name given to human males born on Wednesday (See Nketia 1955:37). Even though animals may be given names in

Akan, hardly are they given day-names. But Ananse is not a younger male in the narratives. He has a full-fledged family - a wife and four children, who are consistently named and characterised wherever they appear in the narratives. His wife is Aso among the Ashanti, (as in Tale 7), and Okondor among the Fanti (as in Tale 6). His eldest son, Kweku Tsen (Tales 3 and 5) in Fanti and Ntikuma in Ashanti, has a human first name. The rest of Ananse's children are depicted as possessing anomalous, nevertheless human, physical attributes - Afudohwedohwe (Belly-likely-to-burst), Eti-kenen-kenen (Big, big, head) and Nankro-hwea (Thin-legged) (Tale 6). Ananse's family is thus a human family with droll physical features, at the center of which is the hero himself, always on the move, and commuting between the human, non-human and supernatural worlds, cheating, generating cultural phenomena, committing adultery, fooling and being fooled.

The world of Ananse as in most animal tales, is depicted as a human-inhabited village, with farms, and neighbors (Tale 6). But details of the domestic setting is never revealed since the hero is hardly stationary. In Tale 7, he moves to outwit a man who cannot impregnate his wife. In the process he impregnates the man's wife, and takes her over. His whole family is thus founded on an act of adultery, which Ananse considers pardonable because it was at the command of the sky-god himself. In Tale 4, Ananse's victim is again human (a hunter), and so is Ananse himself. Ensnared in a trap that would have betrayed his roguery and gluttony to his father-in-law, Ananse tricks a hunter into the trap that had seized his foot, and thereby regains his own freedom. The funeral Ananse attends (in Tale 9) also depicts him as human. The case is more convincing here because he displays sensitivity to traditional custom, and contributes cash, cloths, blankets and pillows to mourn the death of his mother-in-law. Ananse's decline to eat at that funeral, even though a trick, successfully portrays him as a man, fully conscious of Akan funeral custom.

But the human figure in Ananse tapers off occasionally and betrays animal tendencies. In Tale 9, it is realised how despite Ananse's human image, attention is still drawn to his bald head as an insect. In Tale 10, Ananse the insect jumps up the rafters; and as he attempts to kill the crocodile and fails (Tale 8), he assumes the trait of hastening while on waters - a trait Ananse can possess only as an insect. But need we conclude that the dual image of Ananse in the stories is conflicting and unmotivated?

One possible way out of the problem of identity is to postulate that the human figure is meant to antedate the insect, and that Ananse suffered degeneration from man to animal, the penalty for duping. This would be supported by the etiological character of Ananse narratives, and the fact that narrators telling stories of how Ananse acquired his animal features, normally begin by saying for example, "I am going to tell you how Ananse walks up the rafters." From this point of view, such stories as well as several others in the Ananse cycle, would constitute an account of the fall of Ananse, as well as the general creation of the world. This would tie up with a possible view of Ananse as a culture hero who sacrificed his form for the sake of generating culture.

The validity of the above explanation would rest eventually on Akan's attitude to Ananse, to be discussed presently. Within the context of the Akan narratives themselves, the postulation above does not hold. First, Ananse may

maintain a human figure throughout some stories (e.g. Tale 7), and an animal figure in some others (e.g. Tale 8). Secondly, even though Ananse's actions lead to the generation of various cultural features and phenomena in the stories, yet some of these phenomena such as the spread of wisdom (Tale 3), the spread of deafness (Tale 6), etc. are unintended consequences of Ananse's actions. Far from making a conscious effort to generate these traits in the culture, Ananse seeks his selfish ends as his primary motive, and causes the attributes or qualities to be generated only in the cause of his betrayal and exposure. In Tale 3, wisdom spreads only because Ananse did not want it to. In Tale 5 Ananse gets a bald head only as punishment. Thirdly, even in stories where Ananse does not appear as a character (for example, stories in Rattray pp. 199-211) an etiological statement may appear in the title, conclusion or in both. This diminishes the likelihood that Ananse is THE culture bearer in Akan tales. Nor can we distinguish stories involving Ananse from other fictional narratives in Akan. Fictional narratives in parts of Akan are referred to as Anansem (stories of Ananse) whether Ananse appears or not, but this is only because of his popularity as a peculiar character in Akan narratives.

A more plausible explanation of Ananse's dual image in the stories seems to be that, as a wondering figure commuting between human, animal and supernatural worlds, Ananse needs a multiple physical characterisation to enable him to cope effectively with his manifold tasks. This explanation assigns an artistic motivation.

As Ananse pitches his wit against other animals (as in 8), or dupes, in soliciting the help of other animals (as in Tale 10), it is only dramatically appropriate that the immense size of other animals, such as dog, and crocodile, is juxtaposed with the spider's miniature image. As Ananse operates in the human world, his wit becomes more conspicuous only when we view him as an underdog. Thus in the human world, Ananse is a human being, but his other image as an insect projects itself into the psyche of the audience and deepens the dramatic irony wherever he outwits man (Tales 4 and 7).

But Ananse's character is given a more complex dimension by his association with the supernatural. In Tale 5 he interacts with spirits; and in Tales 2, 7, and 8, Ananse interacts directly or indirectly with God. To Ananse, duping and outwitting need not respect supernatural boundaries. In Tales 1 and 2, Ananse and God are great friends - a rare juxtaposition in the light of the fact that God is generally not depicted as friends with any other character in Akan tales. Further, it seems that in almost all instances that God occurs in the narratives, there is a conflicting interaction between Him and Ananse. In fact, in 16 stories involving God that I examined (from my own collections and Rattray's), God is mentioned with Ananse eleven times. And while in cases where God interacts with other characters, those characters solicit God's intervention to solve a problem, wherever God and Ananse interact, the two are at cross purposes. In Tale 1, Ananse is depicted as inflicting embarrassment on God; this leads to a suicide bid on the part of the supreme being. In Tale 2, Ananse's strategem leads to retardation of progress on God's farm; and in 10, Ananse plays a dirge trick at the funeral of the sky-god's mother-in-law. In all these, of course, Ananse is eventually exposed, but we note his arrogance and habit of confrontation with religious superiors. We note the daring impulse that precipitates direct conflict between Ananse and the supreme deity. In this sphere of activity, where Ananse freely interacts, and is even in conflict with the supreme deity, our mind begins to wonder if Ananse is not a god or demi-god.

We are reminded here of the Greek god Prometheus who practices cunning on Zeus (Kerenyi: 1956). We recall such trickster deities as Eshu of the Yoruba people, Legba of the Fon, and Ogo-Yurugu in Dogon narratives, who freely interact with the supreme-deity (Pelton 1980). And our mind strays to the trickster stories of American Indians whose characters hare, turtle, bear and wolf are also regarded as spirits (Radin 1956: 118). Unlike these, however, Ananse is not depicted as a god in the tales, neither is he associated with divinity, as are Eshu, Legba and Ogo-Yurugu. He is just a human-like buffoon and a trickster who defies extraterrestrial boundaries, and creates humor and irony by rubbing shoulders with, and outwitting his physical, mental, social and religious superiors.

Yet one cannot escape the dilemma Ananse poses outside the realm of the tale. While on one hand, the evidence of his possible relevance to Akan history or traditional religion is sketchy, it cannot be ignored either. There are, for instance, no references to Ananse in some of the significant scholarly works on Akan religion (cf Rattray 1927, Opoku 1978), neither are there references to him in current religious practices (traditional or modern). However, Christaller in his Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages refers to the term Ananse Kokuroko (the Great Spider) as the nickname of Onyame, the Supreme God. The association of 'Ananse' with God here is, however, not explained by Christaller and it is not clear the extent to which this nickname of God's was in popular usage in the early part of this century and before. It is likely, though, that this nickname was applied to God only in the tales, since the list of 'praise' names currently applied to God by the Akan in their day-to-day lives does not include Ananse Kokuroko, even though it includes other appellations that have been used over a long period of time (See Opoku 1978). The application of the appellation Ananse Kokuroko to God in the tales, is also not borne out by past and present collections of Akan tales. Yet one could surmise that if it was in evidence in Christaller's undocumented observations of Akan tales, the appellation could be depicting God's ability to make possible things that are impossible, just as Ananse does in the tales.

The dilemma of identifying Ananse is further compounded by the contribution of J.B. Danquah, a well-known scholar of Akan religion. Danquah in his book The Akan Doctrine of God reiterates the view of archaeological researchers that "the identification of Ananse, the mythic personage, with ananse, spider, is an aetiological mistake, arising from a "confusion of names" (Danquah 1968: 199). In this view, the name Ananse is a cognate of the Babylonian mythic personage of folktales, called Oannes, or Iannes or Eunanes who is supposed to have taught mankind wisdom. This thesis rests further on research findings that the name Akan is genetically related to the Babylonian name Akkad or Akara or Agade, and that the Akan language is similar to the language spoken by the people of Sumer and Akkad. Danquah summarily asserts that Ananse of the tales was conceptually and originally a person, not a spider, and that he was transferred from the Babylonian world (Danquah 1968: 200).

Much as Danquah's thesis sounds plausible, however, it fails to account for the near ubiquity of the spider, as the trickster in several areas of Africa, and in other parts of the world. In most of these areas, it may be added, the spider in the tales, and that in the real world, are both represented by one word, whose sound sequence is not necessarily similar to ananse. It may be granted that the trickster in the West Indies and parts of the New World is variously represented as Miss Nancy, or Aunt Nancy, which constitute a direct

derivation from Akan ananse and are apparently a carry-over from West Africa during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Yet the spider is the trickster among the Azande, where he is Ture, the same vocabulary for the animal spider (Evans-Pritchard 1967); he is the trickster among the Ngbandi of the Congo (Knappert 1971), and exists in Hausa tales as the hero (gisso). Among the Limba, the hero spider is wosi (Finnegan, 1967), identical in name with the insect spider. The use of the same word for the two entities is also evident among the Gbaya (Wanto) and the Sara of Chad (Sou). But the Spider trickster is not in Africa alone. He is found also in some American Indian cultures. He is, for instance, the trickster among the Dakota tribe where he is Ikto-mi, a word that also means the insect spider (Radin 1972: 132).

The spider's near ubiquity in trickster tales in general as well as the absence of two separate ethnic designations for the animal and the hero spider in other known cultures beside Akan, reduce the thrust of Danquah's thesis tracing the Akan Ananse to Babylon.

The knot is not completely unravelled, however; for the spider is one of the designs on staffs of Akan royal spokesmen or 'linguists', the spider being considered linguistically witty and said to be the originator of language. This feature brings to mind the verbal artistry of Eshu, the trickster god in Yoruba mythology (Pelton 1980). But the depicted link between Akan royal spokesmen and Ananse is apt; for one of the significant features of Ananse in the Akan trickster cycle is his fondness for linguistic 'double-entendre' at climactic moments in the plot; this is made evident in Tales (6) and (7), where Ananse uses verbal ambiguity to outwit his opponents.

If Ananse's religious significance in the Akan world view cannot be asserted with certainty, one could suggest, perhaps with corroborative evidence, that it is the wily character of Ananse that the stories seek to stress, rather than his relevance to the sacred. The adroitness of the spider in spinning an intricate web out of its own saliva is admired, so is the artistic value of the web. But do we forget the spider's web-trap?

Akans observe the spider in admiration as it builds its web and rests at a nook waiting patiently for a prey. When the fly or a smaller insect falls in its web, it approaches in cautious steps within striking distance. But the spider's web is like a hangman's noose; the more you try to free yourself of it, the more you get entangled. The spider may thus have the prey wrapped up in his sticky web, without any effort on his part. The spider then springs on his trapped prey, winds more web around it, swings it in circles to make it dizzy and unconscious, then makes a meal out of it. The spider's craftiness in trapping and tying reminds us of the tying game he plays with the dog (Tale 8), and his contrivance to trap the hunter (Tale 4). Ananse's wit is thus, in part, an extension of his known features in the Akan world. But this wily image of the spider has no trappings of the sacred in the Akan society.

The spider is not a totemic animal either; and even though there is a class of animals in Akan, such as the elephant and some species of antelope, that are believed to have stronger spirits and are normally accorded religious veneration by the Akan (Nketia 1973), the spider is not one of these.

In the realm of Akan traditional literature, Ananse is occasionally mentioned but only in allusive reference to his role in the stories. "The

spider did not sell speech" (Akrofi, n.d.: 112), goes an Akan proverb (this is related to the spider design on staffs of spokesmen). In other words, speech is free, and not part of the trickster's monopoly. The theme here is an antithesis, yet a reminder, of Ananse's selfish attempt to keep wisdom to himself (Tale 3). Another proverb: "When the swallow lands in the neighboring house in an attractive display of agility, Ananse says the swallow is his son-in-law; but when in that same process, the swallow breaks pots, Ananse says he knows not the swallow." Here it is Ananse's opportunistic character that is highlighted. We are reminded here of the tale (Tale 10) in which Ananse exploits the voices of other animals in a dirge, but forgets them when he is given food. In the Akan laments, there are also occasional references to the spider as in the lines,

Your children and I will feed on the spider
The mouse is too big a game. (Nketia 1955:48).

The argument highlighted above in dissociating Ananse from the sacred and linking him with imaginative fantasy is supported by the social context and stylistic frames of Akan narratives.

The telling of anasesem is not restricted to a particular social, religious or economic class in the Akan society. Every Akan is potentially a narrator of anasesem. In the curriculum of primary schools in Ghana, there is often provision for the telling of Ananse stories, and children often take advantage of this to sharpen their creative abilities. In this respect, anasesem differs from Akan court literature whose sacredness makes its enactment the monopoly of a restricted class of specialists. If stories of Ananse are not sacred, their stylistic frames confirm this.

The opening formula of Akan tales varies from one area to another; but they all depict the absence of truth in what follows. Among the Ashanti the introductory formula - Yense se, nse se o - means "We don't really mean it, we don't really mean it, (that what we are going to say is true.)" Among the Fanti, the opening formula may be "Okodzi wongye ndzi" - "Okodzi is not meant to be believed", to which the audience replies, "Wogyie sie" - "It is meant to be kept (and passed on)." In this dialect, the imaginative story is referred to by any of the following terms - anasesem, okodzi, or fien. (In Ashanti, it is invariably, anasesem) Occasionally, the opening formula may be "Anasesem da bi o" (Ananse tales, sometime ago), to which the audience respond, "Da bi ara ne nde" (Past days are the same as today). This underlies the timelessness of tales in Akan.

Upon the declaration of the opening formula, participants are ushered into a world of fantasy and play (Huizinga 1955). The order of reality is temporarily suspended, and narrators and audiences assume roles. In the course of the tale narration, there is frequent dialogue between narrator and audience in which the audience may seek permission to sing, or ask questions pertaining to the truth in the narration. In Tale 5, for instance, as soon as the narrator used the opening formula and said, "I am coming to show how Ananse's hinds became big and his head became small," he was interrupted by the question, "Were you there?", to which he replied, "Yes I was there." On the narrator's reference to Ananse and his son going to look for food, he was interrupted again with, "Were you walking with them?" The response was positive. When the narrator referred to the spirits bathing in the river, he

was asked, "You saw it with your own eyes?" The reply was, "With my own eyes; its not a hear-say." And intermittently in tale-telling, such comments as "You are really cheating us (telling lies)," are heard.

The significance of such dialogues is that tale participants are conscious of the world of fantasy into which they have been thrown. But the narrator is also aware of his responsibility for not only re-enacting the tale, but also lending it a dimension of realism. So he maintains the playful dialogue; he was there when the event was enacted; it is not a hear-say. He was an eye-witness, not an "ear-witness."

But the narrator is not a complete liar; for his tale partially reflects the flaws in human society; it mirrors the punitive action meted out to frauds and tricksters such as Ananse. Above all, his tale does not completely twist cultural truth. Ananse's donation of money, cloths and blankets at the funeral of his mother-in-law is in fulfilment of a traditional custom; so is his singing of dirges and abstinence from food at the funeral of his mother-in-law. However, the wish of the supreme deity that the impotent man's wife be impregnated by another, stands reality on its head. The significant point to note in all this is the interplay of the various levels of reality in the tale, and how this is manipulated by the narrator.

As the Akan tale ends, the closing formula once again underlines the supremacy of the aesthetic in the tales. "This is my story which I have related, if it be sweet, if it be not sweet, some may take it as true, and the rest may praise me for it" (See also Rattray 1930).

The Akan trickster narrative (or for that matter the generality of Akan narratives whose stylistic frame has been discussed above) can hardly be classified as a belief narrative.

Bascom's definition of myth highlights the belief, sacred and etiological character of myth. This is partially affirmed in the Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend. Myth in this dictionary is, "A story presented as having actually occurred in a previous age, explaining the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious beliefs..." (Leach 1950: 778). In both of these definitions, there is an interplay between content and context in the criteria for myth. Bascom's words "...in the society in which they are told (myths) are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past," reveal the necessity for context to be considered; and Leach's, "A story PRESENTED as having actually occurred... (emphasis mine), highlights context as well.

The trickster narrative in Akan, partly, satisfies the etiological part of the definition. As has been pointed out, most narrators of Akan trickster narratives feel bound to make an etiological statement as a preface and conclusion to their performance. This feature is, however, not exclusive to the performance of tales in which Ananse appears: Akan narratives in which all the characters are human, may also be enclosed in etiological statements. Ananse is not a divine or sacred figure in the narratives either. Thus even if the criterion was content only, the ingredients necessary for myth, would not be fully satisfied here. In terms of social context and style, the trickster narrative is not a belief one; it is not to be believed, neither is it believed. It is neither sacred nor of relevance to historical reality.

Among the Azande of Sudan, the Spider (Ture) trickster is sometimes referred to as God Ture in the stories (Knappert 1971); he is the diarrhoea spirit, and also the first man to descend from heaven. This is also true of the Ngbandi (Nappert 1971: 167). But even here, as Evans-Pritchard points out, there is uncertainty as to whether Ture is believed by the Azandes to have existed or not (Evans-Pritchard 1967: 23-32). And even if he did, the problem of myth or folktale? would still arise since Ture narratives are presented as fiction.

In the case of the Akan, Ananse is not considered sacred in the stories, neither is he believed to have existed as a human being. He is simply a wily jester in the imaginative world. To this extent, Linda Degh's characterisation of the folktale as fictitious and "cited as lies by storyteller and commentators" (Degh 1972: 60) is congruent with the situation in the Akan trickster narrative.

The secular view of Ananse presented in this paper, however, need not be construed as a claim that characters sacred to the Akan do not occur in Akan narrative sessions, or that the Akan do not have myths. As regards the former, it is noteworthy that beside the sky-god, Onyame, river gods occasionally appear in Akan fictional narratives. Here, even though the deities are presented within the realm of fantasy in the tales, the Akan still accord them their due veneration in the real world. And do the Akan have what may be classified as myth?

Myth exists among the Akan. There is, of course, the well-known story of the separation of God from man, which is known all over Africa, and even exists among the Greek, Aztecs and Polynesians (cf Radin 1952: 5). The widespread existence of this motif reduces its sacred significance among the Akan. In fact this story sometimes appears in tale-telling sessions. On the other hand, there are more serious accounts of creation that are held sacred, for example that embodied in the message of the talking drums - the talking drummer is considered divine among the Akan. According to this account, God first created Esen (the court crier) to establish order; then came Okyerema (the talking drummer) to represent knowledge (of history and lore), and finally Kwawu Kwabrafo (the executioner) to represent death (Opoku 1978: 22). This is beside sacred and belief accounts of clan origins, which are not told in story-telling sessions, but are related by clan elders on special occasions. In none of these sacred accounts is Ananse mentioned, however.

The Akan trickster cycle, it has been argued in this paper, has no trappings of the sacred and is better considered as fiction. In arriving at this conclusion, we did not make a mere content analysis of narratives, neither did we yield unquestioningly to the connotation of mythology often foreshadowed by the word Trickster. Rather, we related the Akan trickster cycle as well as its hero, to the socio-cultural context in which they live, contending that in the narratives involving Ananse, we are in no way dealing with Akan mythology, religion or belief systems, but with a figment of imaginative delight. The late 19th century anthropological interpretation of "talking animals" in Africa, the oft-asserted significance of totem animals to the 'savage', the concomittant charge that primitive peoples could not draw a line between themselves and animals, the subsumption by Paul Radin of a diverse range of narrative heroes under the label Trickster, need not predispose the mind of the folklorist toward predetermining genre categories of predominantly illiterate peoples.

Contextual studies of narratives in Africa could dissolve Finnegan's doubt about the existence of myth in Africa; but contextual studies would also reveal that clever animals that talk in Africa do not necessarily belong in the mythological realm.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aarne, Antti and Thompson, Stith
1964 The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography.
Helsinki.
- Akrofi, C.A.
N.D. Twi Mmeseem (Twi Proverbs) Accra: Presbyterian Book Dept.
- Bascom, William
1965 The Forms of Folktale: Prose Narratives, Journal of American
Folklore 78 (1965): 1-19.
- Beier, Ulli
1966 The Origin of Life and Death (African Creation Myths) London:
Heinemann Books.
- Boas Franz
1916 Tsimshian Mythology, 31st Annual Report of the Bureau of American
Ethnology.
1940 Race, Language & Culture. New York.
- Christaller, J.G.
1933 Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Languages.
Basel.
- Danquah, J.B.
1968 The Akan Doctrine of God. London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd.
- Degh, Linda
1972 Folk Narrative, Folklore and Folklife, ed. R. Dorson. Univ. of
Chicago Press, pp. 53-83.
- El-Shamy, Hasan
1980 Folktales of Egypt. University of Chicago Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.
1967 The Zande Trickster. OLAL. Oxford.
- Finnegan, Ruth
1967 Limba Stories and Story Telling. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
1970 Oral Literature in Africa. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Herskovits, M. and Francis Herskovits
1958 Dahomean Narrative: A Cross Cultural Analysis.
Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Huizinga, Johan
1955 Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture.
Boston: Beacon Press.

- Kerenyi, Karl
1956 The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology. In The Trickster, Paul Radin. New York: Schocken Books.
- Knappert Jan
1971 Myths and Legends of the Congo. London: Heinemann Books.
- Leach, Maria
1950 Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend. New York: Funk and Wagnalls.
- Nketia, J.H.
1955 Funeral Dirges of the Akan People. Achimota.
1973 Abofodwom. Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation.
- Opoku, K.A.
1978 West African Traditional Religion. Jurong: FEP International Private Ltd.
- Pelton, Robert D.
1980 The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Radin, Paul
1952 The Trickster. New York: Schocken Books.
- Rattray, R.S.
1930 Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
1932 Religion and Art in Ashanti. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Thompson, Stith
1946 The Folktale. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
1955-58 Motif Index of Folk Literature (6 vols.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- VanDyck, Charles
1967 An Analytic Study of the Folktales of Selected Peoples of West Africa. Ph.D. Dissertation. Oxford University.
- Werner, Alice
1925 African Mythology. The Mythology of all Races, Vol. vii. Boston.
- Woodson, Carter Godwin
1928 African Myths. Washington: Associate Publishers.