



From Anansesem to Anansegoro: '*Literarising*' Akan Folktales

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Abstract

The quest for authentic and true African literary dramatic form lingers on. In the bid to correct the impression that literary drama in Africa is an 'alien form' has led to a number of experiments by several African playwrights. These playwrights make conscious efforts to explore their local cultural contents, social values and practices to create theatre that is unique to the African situation. This paper is an analysis of how Ghanaian playwrights, particularly Efuwa T. Sutherland experimented with the Akan folktales otherwise known as Anansesem (tales from the spider) in coming out with a literary dramatic form Anansegoro which is seemingly authentic to the Ghanaian setting. References are made to Efuwa Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Yaw Asare's *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* and Martin Owusu's *The Story Ananse Told*. The paper further discusses the issue of language and hybridity which seem to be the bane of most African dramatists in their quest towards authentic African theatre.

Keywords: Anansesem, Anansegoro, mboguo, hybridity, folk tales, Ananse, authenticity, African playwrights storyteller

1. Introduction

Literary arts in Ghana took grounds with the advent of the colonial masters when western education was introduced as a system of subjugating the African minds. This system of education resulted in the abolishing of several cultural practices and rituals of Africans; most of the beliefs were relegated to the background paving way for western culture and ideologies. The African, therefore, had a missing identity as far as writing creative works to suit their indigenous context.

Meanwhile, in Africa, most nations that were colonized and dominated by the colonizers, instituted some form of literary dramatic traditions which became one of the key catalysts to accelerate the assimilation of European culture by Africans. In view of this mind set, the process incorporated formal European literary theatre into Africa. Among these, however, were the introduction of cultural and leisure structures and programmes such as sports clubs, theatres and Independence Day Celebrations. This drive took place during the nineteenth century when formal colonialism was established and the suppressers wanted to feel at home.

Importantly, due to the illiterate nature of the West African people, literacy was introduced to them through the establishment of churches and schools by missionaries. As part of their strategies to brainwash the Africans, Europeans forms of drama written by the likes of Shakespeare and Moliere were introduced.

According to the study of Ernest Emeryonu with regards to African literature, asserts that;

The literary world was not prepared for the emergence of African writing when it did. Those who posed as its judges knew little or nothing of the true roots of written African literature. Some of them were gaining their first insight into the African social scenes and approached African writing for

its sociological rather than its literary interest (1971: 1).

This could account for the insufficient historical information on pre-colonial African theatre. The situation became worse when the newly African literates got educated by the colonizers in an alien culture and were endowed with new western beliefs and norms that were not African but inculcated into the system of governance. It appeared that the suppressive nature of the foreign systems and structures were seen in numerous forms including the nature of their didactic theatre which they sought to impose on Africans. As a matter fact, the idea took away the effective instrument of knowledge and rendering the people reliant on the European system of beliefs. Additionally, the Christian missionaries also disrupted the indigenous performances and replaced them with European performances and art that surrounded religious feasts such as Corpus Christi. Specifically, in Ghana, these enactments were done during Thanksgiving service which took place annually. The performances were mainly biblical stories such as the birth and crucifixion of Christ among others. These plays were to heighten the European identity in the African and to control his conscience. It appears that the missionaries resorted to the same tactics that were done by the Christians in the medieval era to win people to Christianity. This notion is further strengthened by Mda who reiterates that;

The colonialist intention of promoting drama among Africans was geared towards weaning them from their pagan and uncivilized ways. They conceived that an African drama must be based on dance, must be childlike and simple in form, and must involve story-telling and drumming (1973: 7).

Mda's reaction above indicates that the colonialists' idea of African drama obviously relegated to the background the traditional African forms because their intent was to only accept the indigenous practices that only fit into their civilizing mission. Hence, they, therefore, initiated the

European drama and theatrical forms into Africa without acknowledging and understanding the pre-colonial theatrical and dramatic forms.

In Ghana and Nigeria for instance, colleges and schools were established that trained new writers that showed interest and had access to both indigenous and foreign dramatic forms. These writers saw an urgent need to recuperation their African traditional literary art forms of their history and native cultures. Osofisan states that:

These playwrights were all, without exception keenly tuned to the beating pulse of the age. The pressing problems, at least from their elitist perspectives as members of the ruling, western- educated class, bore on the cultural implications of the society's transforms. Hence they ploughed assiduously the theme of cultural alienation, trying to demonstrate, now the splendour of our ancient past, now the inanity or parasitism of certain recrudescing customs (2001: 119).

On the basis of this, the second generation of playwrights that emerged in post-colonial Africa came to the realization to decolonize their societies through the theatre by searching for alternative indigenous structures and dramatic forms. Gilbert and Tompkins reiterate the fact that "post colonialism's agenda is to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create an unequal relation of power based on binary oppositions such as us and them, first world and third world, white and black, colonizer and colonized" (1996, p. 3). This whole idea as adapted by the post-colonial writers was to clarify and redefine the place of the African as far as culture and heritage are concerned which was a zeal and active intervention of playwrights.

It was on the basis of these, writers such as Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, Ngugi wa Thiongo from Kenya and Efua Sutherland from Ghana, took it upon themselves to pick up the broken pieces as African cultural leaders in order to revitalize and project the African art forms.

Sutherland in her bid to promote African dramatic form premised her thoughts on the literary dramatic tradition that sprung up in the 19th centuries which later incorporated the African theatre. Sutherland having established what Anasesem meant that is, "tales of stories of Ananse" found it prudent to come up with the concept of Anasegoro, making Ananse plays into a theatrical convention which emerged through her experimentation. The fruition of her experimentation has now become an inspiration for some African playwright who wishes to promote and project African dramatic forms.

2. The Akan Folktales (ANANSESEM)

Before commencing a discussion of Anasegoro as a contemporary literary Ghanaian theatrical convention, we must first deliberate on Akan folktales because it is the rock from which the stream of Anasegoro emanates. In Africa, oral traditions in the form of proverbs, riddles, and folktales are handed down to us by our forefathers. We learn enormously of precious traditional beliefs, customs, and taboos of our people from these art forms.

These folktales are centered on animals that often play the role of the protagonist. One of the reasons for the personification of animals is the fact that, it would be arduous to understand our identities as human beings, had it not been for other animals who serve so conveniently and appropriately as a

structure for us humans to identify our own activity and reflection (Fernandez as cited by Peek & Yankah, 2004) ^[16]. This implies that human beings gain a better understanding of their identities and social structures by acknowledging their differences and similarities with animals. When humans engage in telling stories about animals they are mostly making an allusion to themselves and their situation. Through puzzles, riddles, proverbs, and tales, people are able to discuss themselves and their situations indirectly. Brockett (1982), agrees with Fernandez when he asserts that, most African cultures incorporate impersonation of characters in the presentation of stories or myths. These acts are major signs of dramatic development. The writers espouse the view that impersonation in whatever form promotes a more enhanced story, especially when the story being told evolved around animals.

Addo (2013) ^[1] also believes this as a very important component for the society because when animals are used as protagonists in folktales, certain follies and vices of undesirable characteristics of human nature can be brought to bear without risking frictions that are involved in the face to face confrontation of storytelling. For example, the monkey is seen as always 'fooling' when others are very busy. The parrot is also very chatty and the mull is extremely stubborn and does not yield easily. These are all traits that can easily be identified in humans as well. Also, in a country like Ghana that is mostly characterized by towns and villages, it becomes vital to avoid conflict or actions that will lead to disunity. Attention can, therefore, be brought to disharmonious behavior and congenial atmosphere through telling of tales. When we talk about African folklore, we are mainly talking about folktales, (Peek & Yankah, 2004) ^[16]. In Ghana, folklore is an integral and vital aspect of our daily lives. Georges and Jones point this out in the following words:

"folklore' denotes expressive forms, processes and behaviours that we customarily learn, teach and utilise or display during a face to face interactions and that we judge to be traditional because they are based on known precedents or models and because they serve as evidence of continuities and consistencies through time and space in human knowledge, through belief and feelings" (1995: iv).

Anasesem is an Akan word coined from two words; Ananse (the spider) and asem (word/statement). These two words put together, form Anasesem which means "tales or stories of Ananse" or "Ananse's words" among the Akan people of Ghana. Undisputedly, the art of storytelling is a common African tradition among numerous ethnic groups in Ghana. Distinctively, these ethnicities refer to this art with various terms in their local languages. For instance, the Ewes (people from the Volta region) refer to the art as "Gli" the Gas (people from the Greater Accra region) term it "Adesa," the Nzema call it "Nworya", while the Walis have it as "h'lima" among others. However, in the language of these various ethnicities, Ananse, the common hero is known by different terms that still refer to the spider. The Gas call him Anaanu, the Ewe, "Yiyi" and the Nzemas, "Kedeba".

Basically, this implies that the concept of folklore is colossal and it embodies all that we say or do in life. Owusu (1988) ^[15] also states that storytelling or epic narratives are a subset of folklore.

However, one may ask why is the spider always portrayed as a heroic character among all other animals in the Ghanaian folktales? Ananse has been characterized by many scholars as an ageless hero, supreme/mythical being, and Odumankoma's (the Almighty God's) chosen one. (Peek & Yankah, 2004) [16].

Ananse: I ...am...Kweku Ananse....Oh yes....Kweku Ananse himself! Kweku Ananse... Odumankoma's Head-weaver; master craftsman in the guild of divine craftsmen; Legend of Tailless tales; One who manipulates creation from the fringes of a vibrant web; Hunter extraordinary; Fellow of the cult of cosmic linguist; Supreme strategist, Odumankoma's mystery messenger who flies the skies without wings and crosses rivers without a boat

The above words are what Ananse uses to describe his persona in Yaw Asare's *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*.

Ananse wavers between animal and man. Thus, his socio-cultural relevance to the whole society may be determined based on how he is depicted in stories; the world in which he operates, the socio-cultural context and the motive behind his actions. He is portrayed as self-centered, cruel, unscrupulous, vain, unappreciative, constantly rebelling against societal norms and values of man. Others also describe him as lawless, anti-social and immoral because his actions are usually geared towards satisfying his own desires for self-gratification without regard for social conventions and moral restraints.

This is also corroborated in the same play when Ananse in another breath says; Ananse: "I am sometimes referred to as the Tickling trickster, the cunning crook, and many ill-gotten names"

When viewed in this perspective, there is the tendency that his value within the society may be shadowed and his character misunderstood. Tekpetey (2000) in his article, *Kweku Ananse, A psychological Approach* points out that Ananse's literary function in the Akan oral educational system appears to be a deliberate attempt to expose the danger he poses to society in spite of the fact that most times the audience empathises with him; especially when he operates within the framework of what is permissible and lawful in the society. Artistically, Ananse is depicted as a man. Traditionally his first name in most narratives is 'Kweku', a day-name given to a Wednesday-born son in Ghana. In Ghana, it is highly unlikely for animals to be given a day born names. In most narratives, Ananse is often presented as a family man with a wife and four children. His wife is called Aso among the Ashantis and Okonore Yaa among the Fantis. His eldest son is Ntikuma, followed by Tikenenkenen, Afudohwedohwe, and Nankonhwea. The elder son's name "Tikenenkenen" means the ability to think fast and make prudent and pragmatic decisions. Ananse's children are believed to have inherited traits from their father which are most desirable in people.



Fig 1: An artistic expression of Ananse

Ananse employs witty, dubious and cunning means to turn situations in his favour, according to some scholars like Amponsah (2015), he defies his status as a legendary hero since tricksters are frowned upon in the Ghanaian society. But Sutherland argues these words in defense of Ananse:

Ananse represents a kind of everyman. Artistically exaggerated and distorted to serve as a medium of self-examination. He has a penetrating awareness of the nature and psychology of human beings and animals. He is also made to mirror in his behavior fundamental human passions, ambitions and follies as revealed in contemporary because he is most often overreaching himself, he ruins himself and ends up

impoverished. Ananse is artistically a medium for society to criticise itself, exterminate Ananse and society will be ruined (1975: v).

Ananse has therefore been made into a psychological representation of people in the society and how they behave and react to all manner of situations.

3. Anansegoro-the making of a literary theatre

The evolution of the Ghanaian theatre as outlined by Asiedu (2011) [3] has moved from traditional performance, concert party or popular theatre, theatre for development and now to literary theatre. The latter being the only form of performance

based on the literary material. Literary theatre can be described as a play in a written form and it also constitutes a form of literature.

In Africa, the nations where European occupation and domination was established early led to some form of literary dramatic tradition springing up. This led to the incorporation of formal European literary theatre into African theatre. Towards the end of the nineteenth century when formal colonialism was established, the colonizers who settled in Africa wanted to feel at home so they introduced cultural and leisure structures such as sports clubs and theatres. In West Africa, literacy was introduced to the people mainly through the establishment of churches and schools by missionaries. Along with this, European forms of drama such as Shakespeare and Moliere were introduced as well.

Having established what Anansesem means and the role played by the folkloric character, Ananse, in the folktales, it is now prudent to elaborate on the concept of the Anansegoro as a theatrical convention which emerged through the experimentation of Theodora Efuia Sutherland, a Ghanaian playwright, in post-colonial Ghana.

Sutherland transformed the traditional Akan spider tales known as Anansesem into a new dramatic form called Anansegoro. In the Ghanaian context, 'agoro' defines all manner of traditional games including concerts, drumming, dancing, singing and acting.

According to Banham (1994)^[5], in Ghana, the traditional roots of drama in the oral culture became extremely significant for the forms, themes, and to set the tone for what has become New Ghanaian Drama. Sutherland adhered to the call to revive Ghana's cultural identity which was lost due to colonial encounter with the imperial forces of Europe. She exploited the oral traditional format in her experimentation of Anansegoro.

Okpewho (1992)^[13] points out that through exploration, modern writers make selective use of elements of the oral tradition which bore a limited relationship to the oral tradition. Even when familiar characters are used, they are deployed in an unfamiliar setting and in a somewhat altered order of relationship.

Anansesem existed already, but Sutherland explored and adapted it in her creation of Anansegoro, thereby changing it from narrative to play, making it Ananse plays. Asiedu believes that:

"by adopting this folkloric character's name in developing her Anansegoro, Sutherland was affirming the African playwright's role as the conscience of the society; as the one that holds the mirror up for society to see itself and to take necessary steps towards positive vale" (2011:312).

The Marriage of Anansewa came as a result of the experimentation of Sutherland's concept on Anansesem. She used the elements of Anansesem to expose the ills of the society and to promote the enviable rich Ghanaian traditions. On the basis of her concept, notable playwrights like Efo Kodjo Mawugbe, Yaw Asare, and Martin Owusu were inspired to create their plays based on the Anansegoro tradition. Among their works were Ananse-Kwaku-Ananse, Ananse in the Land of Idiots, The Story Ananse Told. The title of these plays literally suggests Ananse as the central figure of the plot.

4. Features of anansegoro

As indicated above, Anansegoro is a unique genre created by Sutherland based on the Akan oral traditions known as Anansesem. This is often narrated by a storyteller who is purported to own or tell the story. Generally, Anansesem takes the form of communal games which involves a narrator, music (mboguo), dance and audience participation. It is well rooted in the Ghanaian heritage. From this account, one major feature of Anansegoro is the storyteller. In Martin Owusu's *The Story Ananse Told*, (1971) Ananse is the storyteller who begins the prologue of the play by telling the audience his mission and who he is.

Ananse: once upon a time, there was a hunter...

Okpewho expresses that, "the most significant element in the relocation of the oral narrative tradition in the dramatic form of Anansegoro is the storyteller because he is central to the action in *The Marriage of Anansewa*" (1992:313).

Another feature of Anansegoro is the use of music and songs. This is referred to as mboguo as seen in Anansesem. Traditionally, the mboguo element was used to interrupt abruptly when the audience realized the inconsistencies of the story. This artistic feature finally culminated in a call and response performance. Mboguo was also sung when the narrator does not tell the story well but decides to add his or her own fabricated version to the extent that the meaning of the story is totally watered. Presently, the meaning and implications of Mboguo have undergone some transformations which have been accepted by the art fraternity. In view of this, Mboguo is now integrated into the stories as part of the plot and are performed in context, led by the storyteller. Performance wise, mboguo is contributed by all others present including the audience. Sutherland explains that mboguo may be reflective of a mood or aimed at guiding the pace of the performance or inspiring the general assembly (p.61). During this musical interlude, the audience is welcomed to dance along amidst the drumming and singing and the songs are mostly related to the theme of the action at present. For instance, in the play *The Marriage of Anansewa*, the action begins in act one with players who give foreshadow of what is to happen through mboguo.

"Oh life is a struggle, oh life is a pain, oh life is a struggle, oh life is a pain in this world"..... While life is whipping you; rain also pours down to whip you some more. Whatever it was that man did wrong at the beginning of time must have been really awful for all us to have to suffer" (p.1).

This statement sets the tone for the play and gives us an indication of Ananse's status. Yeboa-Dankwa (1992)^[18] notes that there is a close relation between folktales and songs and those songs are mostly a feature of folktales. In discussing the functions of mboguo, he (Dankwa) states that the mboguo uplifts the morale of the audience. They also participate fully in the narration and this is especially good as it improves interaction between the storyteller and the audience. The songs also enable the audience to be awake and alert. They also give the storyteller a break as the audience take over for a while and allow him to rest. Dzisenu (2000) points out that, "the mboguo are also convenient pauses in the story, which mark the small units, the scenes of the performance and provide transitions between situations. The mboguo gives life to the story and ensure that its narration leads to a success.

The use of the property man is also another important feature of Sutherland's *Anansegoro*. In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, the property man remains in full view of the audience from beginning to end. He doubles as an actor and a property man by handing out props such as Anansewa's typewriter and envelopes as evidenced in the staging process. His role and presence are to ensure the smooth flow of the play. At certain times, he plays the role of a prompter who reminds other players of things they may forget. For instance, in act two of *The Marriage of Anansewa*, he sets the chair and side table for Ananse to sit on; he then commands the property man, 'serve my gin here' (p.22) to which the property man complies. The property man also appears to be at the receiving end of the frustrations of some of the characters. When Ananse gets upset over the turn of events, he lashes out at the property man to fan him hard. Christie also scolds him for not pleasing Ananse in his duties (p.43).

Effective audience participation is a major feature of a traditional Anansesem which Sutherland employed in her concept. The audience form part of the performance. Sutherland comments in the foreword to her play:....though the specialist controls the main flow of the story, their performance requires the participation of the audience...People come to a session prepared to be, in storytelling parlance, hoaxed... Hence in the course of a particularly entrancing story, it is normal for an appreciative listener to engage in the following exchange:

Narrator: I am hoaxing you and will keep on hoaxing you! (mirisisi wo, mesisi wo bio!)

Listener: Keep hoaxing me! (sisi me!)

Asare (2006) in his *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* strengthens this participation by placing Ananse in the midst of the audience. He makes it clear that they are there to watch a play and calls on them to support him when he needed morale to boost him up.

Ananse: what have I got myself into?..yes, I need inspiration from you Look ... to think... to create... to scheme... to plan strategies. You must inspire me. Here then, chant for me! Kweku Ananse, Kweku Ananse osee yiee!

Chorus/Audience: Yiee.....yiee! (p. 21).

Affiah and Osuagwu (2012) ^[2] posit that in oral performance, which Anansesem is a typical example, the audience is actively involved. The text is not experienced and enjoyed in the cold comfort of one's room. The narrator carries along the audience, who are usually deeply involved in the process of performance and who expect both benefit and delight from the performance as much as the performer does. In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, both the storyteller and Ananse try to carry the audience along. The audience on its part joins in singing and also makes comments and other forms of contributions. The interaction with the audience is very vital because it creates an intimate relationship between the storyteller and the audience. In order to achieve this audience-performers relationship, Sutherland reconfigured the stage by breaking away from the conventional proscenium apron setting. This drew the audience closer to the action because the apron which hitherto separated them had been taken off.

5. The issue of language and hybridity

One major challenge faced by playwrights in producing an

indigenous dramatic piece is the selection of language because oral traditions thrive on the Ghanaian local language as a tool to translate its ideas. Most often these oral traditions or Anansesem lose their authentic and aesthetic value as a result of playwrights trying to organize them in other languages other than the original.

Due to this, Kenya's Ngugi Wa Thiong'O deliberately wrote in his native Kikuyu because his audiences were his people and his message was primarily for the people of Kenya. Alemseged Tesfai of Eritrea also wrote in his native Tigrinya, because he sought to reach his people in a language not understood by his colonizers. Today, most Zimbabwean writers write in "Ndenglish" which is a combination of Ndebele and English.

In English-Speaking African countries, especially in West Africa, the writers were educated in English and when they began to write for their people, it appeared as though they did not have much of a choice in the language to use. Osofisan (2011) expresses that they wrote flexibly in English when addressing their colleagues but the irony was that, they were severely concerned with the degradation of their culture which was brought about by colonialism. They, therefore, focused their subject matter on restoring the heritage of the African history to show that the African was already civilized and did not need the colonial master to show him the path to civilization. He adds that in Nigeria, English is the main language of drama because it is the lingua franca of the state. This was because the country possessed several indigenous languages and to select one as a national language would have led to chaos and rebellion. This issue mirrors the Ghanaian scenario. The problem that arises with English as a choice for literary works is that only a minority of the people are fluent in this language because one had to be schooled in order to be literate.

Osofisan explained that the dilemma was therefore in the choice of language because if the writers wrote in English there was the tendency to include only a minimum information on the national culture of the people but if they wrote in the mother tongue, then they would be ignoring a great proportion of the nation's population who belong to the other ethnic groups and did not speak or understand the language of the author.

In order to instigate social change, one must produce literature that can be accessible to the masses of his people. Etherton lends credence to Osofisan's statements by reiterating that "the language used in African drama is a problem for which there is no easy solution. The choice of language is a problem which faces each African playwright every time he sits down to write a play because he is monolingual" (Osofisan, 1982).

Addo (2013) ^[1] on the contrary, believes that the use of monolingual is problematic because the African playwright still has his mother tongue but perhaps he chooses to write in English because he has been educated to read and write in that. Addo's statement is, however, true because writers like Kobina Sekyi and Ngugi Wa Thiongo wrote some of their plays in their native tongues. It must be noted that based on the continual struggle for cultural identity, there arose a need for authenticity in order for the author's message to reach the people with clarity. It was on the basis of this call that Sutherland experimented with Anansesem which gave birth to

her Anansegoro concept. However, due to influence from European dramatic forms and structures, there was a need for hybridity to sustain the current cultural trends for a more enhanced Ghanaian theatrical presentation.

In view of this, some writers needed to find a new language to express themselves, and after combing through archives of traditional cultural form, they created a hybrid kind of theatre. Most often in African plays, as discussed, writers combine both foreign and the local languages in order to achieve authenticity. On the basis of this hybridity, Sutherland finally settled on the Akan and English language to create her traditional concept of theatre with all other theatrical elements in place. Evidently, this hybridity and theatrical form have been well employed by the various playwrights of the Anansegoro convention. Imperatively, culture is very distinctive in every society because it differs from one society to another. African writers portray their culture to the outside world through poems, music, drama, and novels among others. Sutherland as a prolific playwright succeeded in projecting Ghana's cultural values through Ananse stories and has given it a full theatrical expression in terms of style and form. Currently, Anansegoro forms part of the theatre tradition in post-independent Africa. In this genre, contemporary Ghanaian playwrights make conscious efforts to explore the indigenous socio-cultural structures such as their history, cultural beliefs, practices, customs, systems and the totality of the Ghanaian experience. Consequently, this theatre form can easily be identified and described as a true reflection of Ghanaian theatre.

6. Conclusion

Anansem, the art of storytelling, through the pen and creative prowess of Sutherland, metamorphosed into Anansegoro, a unique dramatic form that reflects the Akan local tradition. The genre prominently features Ananse (spider), otherwise known as Kweku Ananse, the storyteller. Through her experimentation, she has been able to literalize the Akan folktales into a more accepted traditional literary form which has become an inspiration for most playwrights in Africa. Sutherland's contribution has also brought focus and clarity to Ghanaian theatrical presentations which promote and projects a true reflection of Ghanaian theatre

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