

Teaching Moral Values to the Youth through Ananse Stories among the Akan in Ghana

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Abstract

The Akan make up the largest ethnic group in Ghana and occupy the central part of the country, some parts of the Volta region in Ghana and eastern Ivory Coast. They have a very rich culture in the areas of language, tradition, chieftaincy and systems of inheritance. One of the old traditions that are fading fast is the use of Ananse stories in teaching members of society, especially children and the youth, about moral values and virtues. The folk stories were told mostly by older people to explain various issues and the lessons children had to learn from. The stories were told in homes and children in school were required to tell some of these stories to their classmates. Ananse stories often revolved around the main character Kwaku Ananse (the spider) who is portrayed as scheming, lying and cheating his way through life. This paper argues that Ananse stories, which are now being neglected in Akan society, are contributing to the moral decay the community is experiencing of late. Six Ananse stories are analysed in this paper to indicate how issues were explained through these folk stories. The article concludes that Ananse and other folk stories can be used as a way of teaching members of society, especially children and the youth, to return to African traditions that are rich and have sustained African societies since time immemorial.

Introduction

The Akan make up the largest ethnic group in Ghana. They occupy central Ghana, some parts of the Volta region in Ghana and eastern Ivory Coast. Adu Boahen (1975) cited by Quan-Baffour (2011:30) points out that the Akan are made up of 11 sub-groups and form 45% of the population of Ghana. Quan-Baffour (2011) asserts that the Akan ethnic group includes the Bono, the Fanti, the Asante, the Akyem, the Akwamu, the Ahanta, the Guan, the Kwahu, the Akuapim, the Sefwi, and Nzema. There are some groups in the Caribbean and others in Latin America that do not call themselves Akan but trace their origins from the Akan in West Africa. Devonish (2005) points out that a number of ethnic groups in Latin America such as the Surinam, Guyana and Carriacou, Coromantee and Jamaica appear to be culturally and linguistically Akan in origin. They have a very rich culture in the areas of language, tradition,

chieftaincy and systems of inheritance. The most distinguishing characteristic of the Akan is their matrilineal system of inheritance. Some distinguishing features distinctive to the Akan people include chieftaincy, Akan calendar, Akan religion, Akan art, *Oware* and *Admorobe* sign language.

One of the old traditions that are being eradicated is the use of *Ananse* stories in teaching members of society, especially children and the youth, about moral values and virtues. Some of their most important mythological stories are called *anansesem* (Vecsey, 1981:162). He adds that *anansesem* literally means spider story. *Ananse* stories generally, but not always, revolve around *Kwaku Ananse*, a trickster spirit, often depicted as a spider, human or another animal or a combination thereof (Vecsey, 1981:162). The folk stories were told mostly by older people to explain various issues and the lessons that children had to learn from them. The stories were told in homes mostly by adults; schoolchildren were required to retell some of these stories to their classmates. *Ananse* stories are folktales of the Akan people. Perrin (2007:5) avers that the *Ananse* stories spread around the West African sub-region while African slaves carried these stories along with them to the West Indies and the American continent. Americas (2013) notes that the Americas – also known as America – are comprised of two continents, North and South America, of the western hemispheres. Kehinde (2010:29) posits that the folktale is one of the forms of Nigerian folklore which also include myth, legend, proverb, aphorism, reminiscence, anecdote and joke. *Ananse* stories, just like many other stories and folktales, have been used over the centuries in African societies to teach members of society, especially children and the youth about ethics, morality, and honesty. These African stories – folk stories – were traditionally passed down by word of mouth from the elders and parents (but mostly mothers) to teach young ones ethics, morality and culture of the community (Pinto, 2008:1).

Pinto (2008) alludes that the elders endeavoured to inculcate good behaviour, manners, hard work, obedience, fairness and submission to the authority of the ancestors and elders through storytelling. This paper argues that *Ananse* stories which are now being neglected in Akan societies, contribute to the moral decay African societies are experiencing of late. In this paper, six *Ananse* stories are analysed to indicate how issues were explained through these folk stories. The article concludes that *Ananse* and other folk stories can be used as a way of

teaching all members of society, especially children and the youth, to return to rich African traditions have sustained African societies since time immemorial.

Theoretical Framework

A socio-anthropological framework is used as the theoretical base for this paper. It uses the analytical and descriptive survey to discuss selected Akan folk stories in teaching the youth about moral values and virtues. The focus of the anthropological theory is on folklore in non-literate societies and cultures such as African and other indigenous societies such as the Aborigines (Dorson, 1963:101). Anthropologists such as Boaz (1891) and Bascom (1955) are of the view that folkloric accounts form ethnographies of individual cultures. The functions of folklore in such societies, according to Dorson (1963:103), include the mediation for political decisions, validation of conduct, releasing emotions, and much more in a cultural context. In addition, the anthropological theory applies content, function, and style to the analytical processes of folklore tales (Dorson, 1963). Dorson (1963) adds that content analysis of songs in different cultures, for example, shows the male-female relationship as shaped by the social structure in those cultures. Furthermore, Dorson (1963:103) notes that anthropologists separate folklore tales into parts to enable people to understand and appreciate them.

There are numerous functional uses of folklore in different cultures which, according to Dorson (1963:103), include the validation of belief, conduct and ritual, as an ego-reassurance mechanism in dreams, and the practice of divination. Jacobs (1959) cited in Dorson (1963:104) argues that some of the stylistic devices that are often used by people in different cultures include not only the obvious opening and closing formulas and conventional means of indicating the passing of time and location of place but also include stylised ways of depicting emotions. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990) cited by Quan-Baffour (2011:31) defines the word 'folk' as people in general. He (Quan-Baffour, 2011:31) adds that folklore can be described as the 'traditional beliefs and stories of people and about people'. In defining folklore, Abrams (1981) quoted by Kehinde (2010:30) referred to it as 'a short narrative in prose of unknown authorship, which has been transmitted orally. Kehinde (2010:29) adds that the different kinds of folktales of the *Ananse* stories are part of the

various kinds of narrative prose literature found in the oral traditions of the world. The use of the narrative prose is very common in the African culture as writing and documenting events and issues still rank low in African societies because of the high levels of illiteracy. Pinto (2005) notes that our heritage is created upon myths and tales; folklore plays a major role in traditional systems of education as it enforces conformity to social norms and validates social institutions and religious rituals (Pinto, 2005).

The anthropological theory is relevant to this article because it focuses on teaching moral values to the Akan youth through the use of *Ananse* stories. Just like most folktales from other societies *Ananse* stories are very important; Abrahams (1995) observes that they are fundamental ways of codifying cultures and traditions and dramatising the rationale behind them. In fact, folktales are very useful in solving both existential and essential problems in a society because each tale always ends with a message, a point and a truth to remember as one confronts life's problems. Kehinde (2005:30) alludes that 'storytelling itself is part of a large performing complex, one that exists not only to provide entertainment for traditional (oral-aural) peoples, but one that is at the centre of their moral lives as well'.

Some *Ananse* stories and their educational value for the youth

Ananse stories are important ways through which the youth are entertained and taught moral values and virtues in Akan societies. Some of the moral values and virtues taught include honesty, respect for authority, hard work, mores, kinship. The messages and lessons from all the stories are applicable to the daily lives and experiences of members of society, most especially the youth. The *Ananse* stories, bequeathed to us by our forefathers, have a lot to teach our youth in the face of moral decay, greed and laziness which have engulfed most African societies. Quan-Baffour (2011:31) uses an Akan-wise saying '*tete wo bi kyere, tete wo bi ka*' [our heritage has a lot to teach us, our heritage has a lot to say]. Six *Ananse* stories are discussed under five themes, namely: sowing division between people, the use of and prioritising of time, greed, judging others, and indecision.

Theme 1: Teaching about sowing division between people

The title of this story is *Dea enti a kotokurodu ayaase akoo* [the reason why the wasp has a thin and curved waist]. Ananse was a lazy farmer who was ashamed of himself because his fellow men worked very hard to support his family. He decided out of envy to cause confusion between his neighbours who happened to be the ant, the hen, the hawk, the hunter, the snake, the stick, the fire, water, and the sun. He went to each of them and begged them to help him to clear a field for his farm as he was tired of begging his neighbours for food to support his family. All the neighbours were too happy to give support to their fellow man and promised to be there that day provided someone who could harm the neighbours was not present. Ananse assured each of them that he guaranteed them their safety as they were going to farm with him alone.

Early the next morning, all the neighbours arrived to find each other at the farm. They stood side-by-side and started working. Nobody noticed what happened: the hen pecked the ant, then the hawk asked the hen why she pecked the ant; but before the hen could answer the hawk caught the hen; then the hunter took his gun and shot the hawk, the snake bit the hunter, the stick crushed the head of the snake, the fire burnt the stick, water quenched the fire and the sun scorched all the water. The wasp was the first creature to arrive at the scene and was overcome with grief and emotion that he hit his abdomen so hard that it emaciated and curved instantly. The story ends with the statement *enti na kotokrodu ayaase akoo no* [that is the reason why the wasp has a thin and curved waist]. The story teaches the youth never to cause confusion between people in society as this can bring about hatred, disunity, confusion or even death. In addition, the behaviours and actions of others can negatively affect other innocent people who might not be part of the issue which causes the trouble.

Theme 2: Teaching about idleness and prioritising time to the youth

Ananse story on why some people are less intelligent

This story is titled *Dea enti a ebinom ye nkwaseafoo* [why some people are less intelligent/foolish]. Ananse out of greed decided that he wanted to be the only wise man in the world. He went about tricking people to lend him their wisdom so that he could add their

wisdom to his enabling him to ward off an attempt by some terrestrial beings who were planning to take away their land. All the people were grateful to Ananse and lent him their wisdom which he put in a gourd and sealed it tightly. However, his son Ntikuma was very sceptical about his father so he hid some of his wisdom. Ananse decided to climb the tallest Kapok tree to hang his wisdom leaving him to be the only wise person and allowing him control over every human being. The gourd was hanging around the front of his neck and he attempted to climb the tree. This prevented him from climbing the tree on numerous attempts. Ntikuma was hiding in a nearby bush watching the whole drama. He shouted to Ananse 'agya' [father] 'why not put the gourd behind you?' He was able to climb the tree following Ntikuma's advice but he realised that he did not have all the wisdom he wanted to have, so out of anger and frustration, he dropped the gourd which burst and scattered around the Kapok tree. News went around that wisdom was scattered around the big Kapok tree so everybody should go for some. Some people rushed and gathered as much as they could, while others decided to go later on but when they arrived all the wisdom was gone: '*enti na sebe ebinom anya nyansa*' [that is why some people are foolish]. The message conveyed here is that one should not delay doing important tasks. Today's youth often do not place priority on important issues instead they place entertainment, wasteful expenditure and fashion at the forefront over the quest for education and knowledge which one may say are most important and sustainable for their future.

Ananse story on why the crab has no head

The story *nea enti a okotoo anya tire* [why the crab has no head] educates the youth, once again, on prioritising important issues. The story says that when *Oboo adee* [the Creator] formed all humans and animals, he first created the other body parts and left the head. He set a day aside to mold the head for everybody and assigned each being a set time for his/her head. The crab lived with his parents deep in the ocean and had the habit of moving from one friend to the other drinking and partying. His parents tried on numerous occasions to warn him to desist from this bad behaviour to no avail. On this particular day, he left the house very early on the pretext of going to *Oboo Ade* for his head. Instead of heading directly to *Oboo Ade*, he decides to visit the house of the fish but was told that the fish had gone for his head upon his arrival. He then goes to the house of the crocodile miles away but was told that

the crocodile had gone for his head. Instead of giving up on seeing his friends, he decides that his best friend among the three, the lobster, will be waiting for him and so he goes to visit the lobster with his beautiful head. By the time the crab reaches *Oboo Ade*, it was very late and *Oboo Ade* had finished his work for the day. *Oboo Ade* was very annoyed with the crab when he explained his story. As *Oboo Ade* was holding a stick, he used his magic to break the stick in two, fixed them on the crab's shell as his eyes and sent him away. The message is *afekubona amma okotoo anya tire* [too much friendship is what prevented the crab from having a head].

Today's youth are mostly found in the company of their friends, some of whom have questionable and acrimonious characters, which one does not realise at first until they reach the point of no return. The youth are also advised to have clear priorities in life; they are advised to take care of important issues and not follow others aimlessly.

Theme 3: *Ananse* story that teaches about greed

The title of this story is *dee nti a akyekedee akyi apaepae* [why the tortoise has a cracked shell]. Some terrestrial beings invited all the birds for a feast but the birds heard that those beings were very clever. The birds discussed among themselves to take the tortoise along for him to be their spokesman because of his wisdom. The tortoise was known by all animals to be the most intelligent animal. When they approached him with the suggestion, he indicated that he would have loved to accompany them, but they all knew that he could not fly. Each of the birds plucked some of their feathers and gave them to the tortoise that looked splendid in his multi-coloured feathers. On their arrival, the birds met their hosts; they discussed and debated their culture, and had a lot of fun. The other terrestrial beings were surprised by the beauty of the tortoise and his eloquence. The birds felt very proud of tortoise and the impression he had made to the other beings. The birds were provided with the most delicious food and drinks by the hosts. Just before they sat to eat, the tortoise informed the birds that it was the hosts' tradition for each person to have a special name for himself before being served. The tortoise made all the birds to pick their own names. After that he said his name was 'all of you'. When the food was served, the tortoise asked, who is it for? They said it is for all of you. The tortoise told the birds 'this is for me, they will bring yours' so he ate all the

food and the drinks while the other birds watched salivating. The hosts did not intervene since they thought that was the tradition of the birds to allow their leader to eat first.

The birds went to the tortoise, took away their feathers and flew away. He wanted to send a message to his wife but none of the birds was prepared to take his message. On the way the vulture turned and went to take the message. The tortoise told the vulture to tell his wife to bring the mattresses, pillows, clothes and rags so that he could throw himself down and land on them. The vulture, instead, told the wife to bring out the hoes, cutlasses, pangas and all the hard stuff from the house. Since the tortoise was very high up in the sky he could not see what was being carried out of his house. When they were finished he threw himself down, and what a fall it was. Upon impact, his shell broke into pieces. They took him to a very powerful medicine man who 'glued' the pieces of the shell together. However, after the healing the cracks remained *enti na akyekyedee aki apaepae no* [That is why the tortoise has cracked shell].

The lesson from this story teaches young people to eschew greed, cheating others or taking advantage of their generosity. In addition to that people have to learn that others can decide to revenge if they choose to avenge the wrong things others do to them.

Theme 4: Teaching about judging others by facial and physical appearance

Ntontom ne aso [The mosquito and the ear] is the title of this story. The ear was a beautiful woman who was the daughter of a great king. When it was time for her to get married, the king sent messages across his kingdom for noblemen and men of substance who were interested in his daughter to meet the king and the beautiful daughter for consideration. The mosquito was a young bachelor who knew the young lady and secretly admired her, so he went there first. The king and the daughter were very annoyed to see the mosquito as a suitor. They said to the mosquito 'look at how thin you appear; how long do you have to live for you to look for a wife'? The mosquito felt very humiliated and went away. The young lady finally got married to a rich prince, but not long after that the prince got sick and passed away. Since that time, whenever the mosquito passed near the ear, the mosquito would make it a point to pass close to the ear to make noise letting the ear know he is still alive.

The message and the lesson for the youth in this story are that one should not discriminate against people on the basis of the outward appearance. In the current times of contagious diseases and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, one cannot determine by looking at another's physical appearance whether a person is infected or suffering from an illness. It also does not mean that thin people are sick, whilst fat-looking people are free of illnesses.

Theme 5: Teaching the youth about indecision

Dee enti a apan aka nsensenmu (why the bat is caught hanging in-between) is an *Ananse* story which explains why the bat lives like a bird at one time and at another, as a mammal. God called the bat to come to him just after he had been created and he responded to God, 'I am on the way coming'. On his way to see God, the earth also called him to come immediately and again he responded to the earth, 'I am on the way coming'. Because of the bat's indecision regarding who to go to first, he kept on moving towards the sky and the earth. Whenever he was called by God the bat said, 'You see I am walking towards you. Look, my legs are pointing towards you'. Whenever the earth complained about bat's delay, he said, 'You know I am a bird, I fly towards where my head is'. The message conveyed by this story is that it is because of the bat's indecision that he hangs between the earth and the sky with his legs pointing up and his head pointing down, and also in certain situations appearing as a bird and in other situations as a mammal.

The story of the bat teaches the youth that they should be honest and firm in dealing with people or issues. If not, they will be like the bat that hangs in between because of his indecision. Young people are not focused in choosing courses of study, careers and even marriage.

Discussion

The author is of the view that several factors have contributed to the gradual neglect of *Ananse* and other African folktales in Ghana and elsewhere. One of the reasons include the perceptions among some sections of society that *Ananse* and other folktales are old fashioned. Such people, including academics, associate modernity and civilisation with the western way

of life. There are examples of well educated Africans who do not speak their mother tongue and refuse to teach and practise their customs and traditions in their homes, but rather prefer to communicate using European languages with their children. In addition, there are increasing forms of multimedia entertainment that the younger generations prefer for entertainment purposes rather than listening to folktales. Besides that, working parents do not have the time to tell these stories to their children as they are often exhausted from a day spent at work. Watching television has now replaced the telling of these stories as entertainment. Some schools even use American and European tales instead of *Ananse* and other indigenous folktales to teach children. Meanwhile, the author believes that *Ananse* stories, and other African indigenous folktales that were used as traditional pedagogical instruments, still serve socio-cultural, religious, educational and socialisation benefits when addressing challenges such as greed, laziness, drug and alcohol abuse that are faced by African youth. *Ananse* stories and the diverse interpretation that underlie them are essential parts of oral and narrative tradition that leave lasting impressions and memories on the minds of young people. They are essential for the preservation of the traditions, customs and culture of a given community's constructive characteristics.

The author suggests that researchers and African indigenous knowledge practitioners factor new trends in multimedia to appeal to the youth to increase their interest in these folk stories. Examples could be the use of animated films and comic books.

Conclusion

Folklore, of which folktale and folk stories form part, is an important source of entertainment in cultures that rely more on oral literature and arts in explaining various phenomena and their environments. *Ananse* stories carry messages and serious educational teachings about moral values and virtues such as honesty, faithfulness, hard work, reciprocity, kindness, patience. Some of these virtues are being eradicated at an alarming rate because traits such as greed, corruption, nepotism, laziness, lack of respect have become the order of the day in our modern society. This paper concludes that reintroducing *Ananse* stories in schools and societies can go a long way in inculcating desirable values in the youth to make them better people. The use of modern forms of multimedia entertainment tools can enhance the interest

of the youth in this all important African tradition.

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Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies Vol. 23(1) September 2013

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