

## **Advocacy for Preservation of the Ecological Environment through Characterisation in Akan Folktales**

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### **Abstract**

As oral literature, Akan Folktales use a number of literary techniques including characterisation to promote traditional wisdom about life. This paper presents the various characters identified in some Akan Folktales selected from the author's collection (Mireku-Gyimah, 2009). The characters are generally categorised into human and non human. Through the literary device of personification, the non-human characters, being animals, plants, supernatural beings and geo-features such as stones or minerals are made to play roles as though they were all humans. Whether human or non human, these characters together constitute our ecological environment. The paper discusses how the dependence of the characters on one another and the actions and inactions of these characters can disturb the ecological balance with commensurate adverse effects on the life of the society. Unarguably, human beings are only one aspect of the global ecological environment. As we engage in various developmental activities, especially mining, we should do so with due respect to all other aspects of the ecological environment. It is concluded that unless we protect and preserve our ecological environment, we cannot continue to enjoy the quality life given to us freely by God.

### **1 Introduction**

The Akan Folktale genre is an aspect of the rich tradition of oral literature of Ghana and Africa. Like the folktales of other cultures, the Akan Folktales have been cherished over the years for the traditional sense transmitted through them by way of moral and ethical lessons geared towards the survival of both society and individuals. In fact, oral literature has a relationship with society and culture (Finnegan, 1970; Okpewho, 1992; Gyekye, 2003, Agyekum, 2007) and Akan

Folktales have, first and foremost, lessons about and for society. Thus, the Akan Folktales are closely tied to the Akan way of life: Akan language, philosophy, tradition and culture. In the Akan Folktales, therefore, certain norms, codes and standards of moral conduct are projected for the sake of individual and societal development.

As a literary work of art, the Akan Folktales also possess entertainment value apart from their didactic quality. The performance of an Akan Folktale provides entertainment sometimes similar to what a sport including boxing may offer (Mireku-Gyimah, 2010). Being very much an enjoyable activity, especially when performed, the folktales of the Akan, like those of other peoples, delight both their narrators and audiences whom, as noted, they also educate and socialise or, to borrow the words of Mason (2009), “delight and enchant as they release tensions”. Consequently, a number of them have been collected and documented (e.g. Rattray, 1930; Gyese-Appiah, 1997; Anon., 1998 and 2002).

The Akan Folktale utilises various literary techniques to bring to the fore its values. Its themes, characterisation and stylistic devices show the Akan Folktale to be highly utilitarian and beautiful. For example, it is concerned with universal themes of life such as love, birth and death, greed and deception, among others, and it uses proverbs, which are pithy statements, to hammer home its lessons for life. Indeed, most Akan Folktales end with a proverb, *εβε*, which neatly captures the moral lessons of the tale. Even when a tale does not end with a proverb, the moral lesson(s) would be implied and the audience would be sensitized enough as to note these for themselves. Further, the Akan Folktale uses various interesting characters in addition to human beings to tell and dramatise its stories. (This would be discussed further). Moreover, the Akan Folktale displays a preponderance of carefully laid out formulae for both narrator and audience for successful rendition. There are also interesting musical interludes that forestall boredom, among other notable benefits. Apart from the above-noted, the Akan Folktale is pregnant with literary devices of all sorts including sound and rhetorical devices as well as imagery or figurative language such as personification.

Some studies have been done on the moral value or ethics of the Akan Folktales in relation to theme and character (e.g. Opoku-Agyemang, 1992 and 1999; Gyese-Appiah, 2001). However, the focus of this paper is to explore the utilisation of the literary technique of characterisation and

the personification tool in the Akan Folktales to address the critical, topical issue of protecting and preserving the ecological environment - an idea which appears to have been lost on us about another value of the Akan Folktales, Ghana's heritage, Africa's heritage. Specifically, the paper discusses how the choice of characters and the roles the characters play underscore and advocate the need to preserve our ecological environment while it also highlights the relevance of the lessons drawn from the Akan Folktales to mining of our minerals for sustainable development.

## **2 The Characters of the Akan Folktales**

The characters of the Akan Folktales are both human and non human. Sometimes, there are even parts of these (e.g. see Mireku-Gyimah, 2009, pp. 576-581 and pp. 626-636, where Leg, Hand and Stomach are "full" characters in Tale 41, and Nightfall, Moonlight and Daylight are "full" characters in Tale 48 even though they are part human and part geo-feature respectively). Apart from the human beings, the Akan Folktale, quite remarkably, employs animals and objects of all kinds as characters. Indeed, the tales are noted for their preponderant use of nature, being the flora and fauna from the ecological environment as characters. The non-human characters portray their individual characteristics or properties in nature and thereby offer a variety of imagery. Most interestingly, they are made to live and act in a human setting through the literary device of personification. Sometimes, they even become symbolic. A typical personification is the fact that Ananse the Spider, the most famous character of the Akan Folktales, who lends his name to the stories as a cultural heritage, is an insect, and yet a family man, and has a first name "Kwaku", which gives him an identity as an Akan male born on Wednesday. Indeed, all Akan Folktales are commonly known as "Anansesem", which means "Spider stories", and whether Ananse forms part of the cast or not, the tale is still called "Anansesem". Some tales have only animal characters while others have human beings only but, most of the time, there is a mix of these.

The non-human characters of the Akan Folktales are personified in order to play roles and to live alongside human beings so that the daily lifestyles and actions of all of them, both the human and the non human characters, could be highlighted to make a point about humans and their relationships as well as the ecosystem which they all represent. Thus, whether human or non human, the characters of the Akan Folktales co-exist as family members, friends, neighbours or

colleagues who simulate daily human experiences in human society. The characters and the roles they have to play provoke humour and, mostly, we enjoy the entertainment such a ludicrous spectacle provides, in particular, when the characters are not only non human but also inanimate. Yet we also see and learn from their experiences, actions and reactions as they face various challenges of human life. Consequently, the fictive tale world which is their society reflects the real human society (Cauvin, 1980) and so becomes only a symbolic microcosm of it. Through it all, the wisdom of society is seen and preserved in the tales.

There are various protagonists and they are major characters. Some protagonists are the heroes with positive qualities or character traits, but others are anti heroes because they have negative qualities. The antagonists are usually the opponents of the heroes. They may also be the villains and their victims may have helpers who are usually minor characters. Often the characters change roles as they appear in different stories because the plots are diverse.

Most Akan Folktale stories are quite short with simple plots; in the longer tales, however, a story's plot is sometimes a combination of two or three episodes, usually with repetitive patterns and the different episodes may be related or not. When unrelated, the parts appear as different tales merged into one. From such structurally complex tales, we are able to observe a character's actions from beginning to end and note the character traits as revealed in the various plots forming the totality of a story. We can also grasp the moral lesson that emerges at the end of all the various narrative incidents that make up one whole story or tale. Thus, though a trickster or a bad character may be seen as triumphing at the initial situation or stages of a story, we are able to figure out the likely punishment and or sad end of that character during the resolution of whatever conflict has existed.

Similarly, we can observe the "counter" character, the suffering experienced and the reactions he or she shows to counter the bad character or say the trickster, and his or her reward as well as the statement of moral by the end. Hence, there are several major and minor characters since each short narrative or tale parades its own. Also the stories are actually the result of the actions of some of the major and minor characters combined. Thus, there are usually a major character and a minor character with one opposing the other. There could also be a minor one, who is a helper; thus, the role played by each character appears to be quite important as there does not seem to be any one hero.

It is posited in this paper that all the characters are drawn from the ecosystem and are of equal importance with each playing a vital role to keep the balance. The positive or negative role each character plays goes to highlight the need to safeguard the ecosystem for the benefit of not only human beings but also all other aspects of nature, of which the characters of the Akan Folktales are, indeed, composed.

### **3 Data Collection, Analysis and Discussion**

#### **3.1 The Data**

Three Akan Folktales from the author's collection (Mireku-Gyimah, 2009) are selected for this paper, that is, to demonstrate how characterisation in the Akan Folktale advocates the need for preserving nature or the ecological environment. The selected tales are entitled: It Does Not Pay to Be so Greedy (Tale 1, originally Tale 1), How we Got Upstream and Downstream (Tale 2, originally Tale 43), and *Kwaku Ananse* the Spider, *Nanka* the Puff Adder and *Akokɔnini* the Cock (Tale 3, originally Tale 42). It is to be noted that only three tales are used because of lack of space, but there are other Akan Folktales from which lessons on the same advocacy could be drawn (e.g. Mireku-Gyimah, 2009: "How Adwene the Catfish Came to Live in Water", pp. 327-334; "How Anyamesem or Skygod's Tales Became Anansesem or Spider Tales", pp. 493-496; Rattray, 1930: "If Someone Does Good to You Show Your Thanks by Doing Him Good in Return", pp. 16-19, "How it Came about that Hunters are Poor", pp. 81-89; Gyese-Appiah, 1997: "The Story of the Tiger and the Rat", pp. 31-33, "The Story of the Village Birds", pp.73-75; and, Anon., 2002: "When You Have Ten Children, You Should Love Them Equally", pp. 170-207, "It is Unwise to Marry a Woman You Know Nothing About", pp. 208-224).

#### **3.2 Analysis and Discussion**

The characters in the selected tales can be grouped into two: human and non-human characters. There are five sub-groups in all namely, human, animal, plant, supernatural and geographical characters. However, there could be some overlapping; for instance, the Stone in Tale 1 is supernatural but also a geo-feature; and, at the same time, part human (it has some human features). While Tale 1 and Tale 2 have mixed character types (animals and a geo-feature, and human and supernatural respectively), Tale 3 has only animal characters. The various non-human characters in the tales are all found in the ecological environment of the study area.

### **3.2.1 Tale 1: It Does Not Pay to Be so Greedy**

The characters of Tale 1 are: *Ananse* the Spider, (insect), *Aboɔ* the Stone (geo-feature), *ɔtwee* the Maxwell's Duiker, *Nantwie* the Bull, and *Opuro* the Squirrel (animals). Tale 1 does not have any human character. The animal characters are all males and are given the respectable title of "father" – Father Ananse, Father Duiker, Father Bull and Father Squirrel. Each of them has a family but we do not meet the wives and children, who are only mentioned to give the audience a hint of the real sense of responsibility that lies on the Akan man as breadwinner and head of family. Duiker, Bull and the other forest animals that die are victims. The main characters are Ananse and the Squirrel.

In Tale 1 ("It Does not Pay to be so Greedy"), the story has it that a severe famine forces Ananse to go into the forest to hunt for food to feed his wife and children and, of course, himself. During the search, he comes across a strange stone with two eyes, eyelashes and a beard. When he shouts at the stone to express surprise about the features of the strange stone, he is hurled down and he nearly dies. Armed with the nasty experience and the knowledge that the weird stone can kill, Ananse lures his desperate neighbours one after the other to the site of the strange stone, ostensibly to find food, but on reaching the place, each of them quickly shouts to show his amazement about the extraordinary features of the stone and is thrown down very violently. In each case, the fall is fatal. When they die, their carcasses become food for Ananse and his family. Ananse carries on killing the animals in turns till he almost exterminates all animals from the forest. Then Squirrel who has learned Ananse's tricks from a tree-top determines to come down and stop Ananse from killing the animals any further. Squirrel allows himself to be lured by Ananse to the location of the wonderful stone, but pretends to be daft and intentionally refuses to comment on the weirdness of the stone. Eventually, in a frantic move to teach the Squirrel to shout surprise at the stone's features, Ananse unconsciously exclaims the surprise himself, and he dies eventually after being hurled down.

The protagonist of the story, Ananse, can be seen to be ingenious inasmuch as he is able to device a means of finding food to satisfy his hunger and also fulfil his obligation as family head; thus, he may even be hailed. However, it is also true that Ananse is a negative character on account of his villainy as a greedy person who exploits his colleagues and tricks them to death in order to satisfy his egoistic ends. For Ananse, the end justifies the means. Unlike him, his

antagonist, the Squirrel, is remarkable for his positive character and stance as a selfless neighbour. Indeed, Squirrel can be referred to as the real hero of the story.

But, apart from these observations, we realise much sense in the apparently funny and puerile traditional story as far as the ecological environment and the need to safeguard it is concerned. Ananse's action in Tale 1 shows how the ecological balance could be disturbed if a positive action is not taken like that of Squirrel the real hero, to counter the negative one like that of Ananse, here the anti-hero. Notice how Ananse's plan to satisfy his personal need could lead to the extermination of all other animals in the forest, representing the fauna. Had Squirrel not foiled Ananse's extinction plans, no matter how belatedly, one could imagine the devastation that Ananse could have caused. Since, in all their variety, the animals, which are the source of the conflict in this story, are also part of the God-given ecological environment, any attempt to cause their extinction from the forest would definitely destroy the eco balance and spell catastrophe for humans and their activities in the society. In fact, no reason would be plausible enough to warrant the destruction of the animals in the forest. Thus no one is to be allowed to finish these resources, even in the name of development. The analogy is clear: as we humans engage in developmental activities, particularly mining, with the objective of providing job opportunities and satisfying our needs, we should do so with due regard for the life of animals otherwise, we would disturb the ecological balance.

Squirrel's heroic action is a pointer to the urgent need to guard and protect the animals in order that the world will be stable for all its inhabitants. The Squirrel therefore becomes symbolic of all the agents who have been charged to safeguard the ecological environment such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Notice the selflessness of Squirrel in the action he takes which could have cost him his life. Symbolically, Ananse represents everybody: male and female. Indeed, he has been variously referred to as "everyman" (Sutherland, 1997) and a "symbol of the evil nature in man... the principle of disorder" (Tekpetey, 1979). Yet, Squirrel could also be said to be everyman but as a worthy example to emulate: his boldness, self-denial and willingness to protect animals and hence the ecological environment.

As far as mining is concerned, the extraordinary stone in Tale 1 could be symbolic of our minerals and the strange power of the stone could be said to be the attraction of our minerals. The disrespect of ridiculing the stone by exclaiming surprise at its strange features is analogous to mining the stone or mineral with the wrong methods. It is pertinent to observe that the consequence of showing such disrespect towards the stone is usually capital punishment. In the same vein, any exploitation or mining of the mineral with wrong methods eventually leads to disastrous consequences, which could be fatal for human beings and society. That Ananse and the other victims who exclaim about the stone's weird looks suffer serious consequences suggests that even in their natural state as ore, our minerals should be handled with care and respect. Using the right methods to mine and thereby preserve the ecological environment can bring prosperity but anything short of protection and preservation for the ecological environment would lead to havoc. Thus, the tale once again reveals traditional sense that advocates respect for the ecological environment through its characters, which may be as "dumb" as a stone.

Tale 1 also holds the traditional wisdom enshrined in the Akan proverbs which say that "greed does not pay" and "greed goes hand-in-hand with death". Structurally, the tale captures these pieces of wisdom at the tail end of the story but even reinforces them right from the beginning as can be seen in the titular statement: "It does not pay to be so greedy". Notice that Ananse succeeds many times in killing others who are his neighbours to fatten himself and his family, as observed in the several situations in which his tricky action is repeated and the uncountable number of different animals he traps in the process, but his end finally comes. Let the greedy therefore hear the wisdom communicated by the Akan Folktale. Let the agencies entrusted to protect the environment sit up.

### **3.2.2 Tale 2: How we Got Upstream and Downstream**

The characters of Tale 2 are: *Agya Bɔfoɔ* the Hunter, *Sasabonsam* the Forest Devil, a Woman carrying ("ɔ)doka" (fermented palm wine). There is a mix of character types including human, a man and a woman about their businesses. The main characters are the Hunter and the Forest Devil. We do not meet any family members. We note that Forest Devil - as a devil - is frightening by physical appearance and is also noted to be mischievous, unprincipled or ill-natured.



In Tale 2 (“How we Got Upstream and Downstream”), the story is about a Hunter and the Forest Devil. *Agya Bɔfoɔ* (Father Hunter) goes to the forest on one hunting expedition and comes across a stream which he “nurses” and develops to serve as a source of drinking water for his community. But Sasabonsam the Forest Devil always decides to dirty this source of water after he has come round to enjoy some. He actually does this each time after he has drunk his fill. Hunter becomes worried about the poor state in which he always comes to find the water. Alarmed, he lays ambush for the fellow who pollutes the stream. He discovers the culprit to be Forest Devil whom he catches in the act and confronts. A fierce fight ensues between Forest Devil and Hunter. Eventually, Hunter prevails; he manages to knock out the Forest Devil and sets the fiend’s hair on fire. Forest Devil seeks the help of a passer-by, a woman carrying fermented wine. The woman accedes to the request of Forest Devil to pour some of her wine on the hair to soothe him, but the wine acts like petrol and rather inflames the fire worsening Forest Devil’s jeopardy. Forest Devil finally falls down prostrate along the river in anguish and dies. Where his head points to along the stream becomes *asutifi* literally meaning the “head (source) of the stream”, upstream, and where his legs point to along the stream becomes known as *asunaafɔ* literally meaning “the leg of the stream”, downstream. This is how we got upstream and downstream.

Tale 2 is etymological in nature; that is, seeking to explain how a thing came to be named (Rattray, 1930). The explanation offered in this story as to “how we got upstream and downstream” could be dismissed as flimsy. However, it is undeniable that doses of traditional wisdom transcend the story as a whole through the various roles played by the characters. Paramount among these is the cherished idea of protecting the stream by Father Hunter for the benefit of all nature.

The action of the negative character in this story, Forest Devil, who is also the antagonist, is serious and despicable in that it disturbs a whole community. Water is life and destroying the source of water for a whole community, which becomes the source of conflict in this story, is tantamount to bringing death upon the society. Therefore, it is no wonder that the fight to put things right becomes so fierce that, quite paradoxically, it also causes a death even though it is now the death of only the villain, the morally depraved Forest Devil. But do we not find parallel cases of local communities (symbolised by the Hunter) in conflict with some mining companies,

especially the illegal miners (symbolised by Sasabonsam the Forest Devil)? While the local communities want to protect rivers and streams that serve as their sources of water, the mining companies pollute the rivers and streams through careless mining. The pollution of rivers and streams could eventually lead to flood and water-borne diseases.

Again, it takes the selfless dedication of the Hunter to stop the Forest Devil from continuing to pollute the stream. Notice that, as a devil, the physical appearance of Forest Devil is frightening while inwardly, he is wicked and ill-natured. As in Tale 1, the Forest Devil, like Ananse, is paid back in his own coin. Hence, the death of Sasabonsam the Forest Devil becomes symbolic of the death of such evil-minded ones, the infamous two - Ananse in Tale 1 and Sasabonsam in Tale 2 - being archetypal examples.

### **3.3.3 Tale 3: *Kwaku Ananse the Spider, Nanka the Puff Adder and Akokɔnini the Cock***

The characters of Tale 3 are: (Kwaku) Ananse, (insect), Cock (bird) and Puff Adder (reptile). There is no human character. The main characters are Ananse and the Puff Adder. The Cock is a helper to Ananse. Puff Adder, we observe, is a dangerous creature with a frightening physical appearance: it is “a large venomous African viper that inflates its body when alarmed” (Anon., 2005).

In the story of Tale 3, Kwaku Ananse the Spider cultivates a very big oil-palm plantation, but when it is time for him to harvest the fruits, Nanka the Puff Adder establishes himself firmly on one of the oil-palm trees and prevents Ananse from coming to the farm. Puff Adder frightens Ananse into eating his (Puff Adder’s) shit. Ananse’s belly swells with the generous size of Adder’s faeces which he has been forced to eat and feels uncomfortable. The intimidated Ananse is so frightened and worried that he is unable to continue with his farming activity and he grows lean. Then, one day, he meets Cock who inquires about Ananse’s condition. On hearing Ananse’s story and seeing his pitiable looks, Cock personally offers to be Ananse’s advocate. He accompanies Ananse to the farm the next day, confronts the Puff Adder and eventually fights him very fiercely to save Ananse from his predicament. The fight results in the death of Puff Adder, who is chopped into pieces by Cock. The triumphant Cock leads Ananse to the house while announcing the victory by crowing. Thus, anytime the Cock crows, it is announcing the victory song.

Tale 3 is somehow etiological in that it seeks to account for some observed occurrence in the universe. Finnegan (1970) observes that aetiological tales are those tales “in which an explanation is given for some present behaviour seen in the world or a known characteristic of some animal or a bird.” Here again, the explanation as to cock-crow being a victory song to celebrate the triumph over Puff Adder could be dismissed as unimportant; still, the characters and their roles are important regarding our quest for eco balance and human survival.

In Tale 3, we find that the protagonist, Ananse the Spider, is a farmer and his economic activity as a farmer confirms the agrarian nature of most communities of the Akan and Ghana as a whole. We note that Ananse’s oil-palm plantation is big and the fruits are ready for harvesting, indicating his success as a farmer. Indeed, farming is life to our hero just as it is to farmers in most Ghanaian societies. Thus, by terrorizing and preventing the victim, Ananse, to go to the farm, the antagonist, Puff Adder, totally deprives Ananse of his economic activity in addition to food and, therefore, Ananse’s survival. Ananse’s predicament is so serious that he is badly transformed from a prosperous entrepreneur to an impoverished victim, whose very existence is threatened. Notice that but for the timely intervention of Cock, the real hero, Ananse could have died having lost so much weight.

But that is only at the personal level for Puff Adder’s hideous behaviour has serious repercussions for the whole of Ananse’s community as well. Ananse’s farming activities, we observe, involve no less a tree than the all-useful oil-palm tree, which signifies opportunity but, more importantly, food and cash. The image of the oil-palm tree allows the audience to gain an insight into the productive and lucrative nature of Ananse’s profession, and perhaps to laud his efforts at making such a large-scale oil-palm plantation. Ananse may be likened to, say, a chief farmer if not a national best farmer in Ghana. By preventing Ananse from harvesting the fruits of his labour and also from getting the farm produce to those who need it not forgetting those who could gain employment thereby, Nanka the Puff Adder shows himself to be a public enemy, for he causes much suffering not only to Ananse but also the society itself. Here again, the analogy is clear: if mining companies (represented by the scary Puff Adder) frustrate the activities of genuine local farmers, especially those engaged in food and cash crop farming (represented by Kwaku Ananse), we shall become hungry and we shall become poor.

As in the first two stories, in Tale 3, Cock, like Squirrel in Tale 1 and Hunter in Tale 2, has to intervene to restore order, at the peril of his life. The three deny themselves and fearlessly take the necessary steps to restore the equilibrium by eliminating the menacing and recalcitrant wrongdoers. The Squirrel, Hunter and Cock who play the vital role of foils to the villains act as saviours to bring hope in the face of hopelessness in times of chaos. The moral and ethical lessons conveyed through the roles played by the characters would be appreciated by most mining companies. If they do not take the necessary steps to protect the ecological environment, concerned stakeholders will fight to stop the mining activities of the companies.

#### **4 Conclusions**

This paper has presented the Akan Folktales as oral literature and discussed how the various characters and the roles played by them in the three selected Akan Folktales make a statement that encourages the protection and preservation of the ecological environment. It has also underscored the relevance of the lessons of the Akan Folktales to the mining of the various minerals for personal and national development.

We note the composition and variety of the characters in our selected stories and make the point that by personifying stones, insects, spirit beings, reptiles, trees and birds and allotting them roles side by side human beings to tell the stories, the Akan Folktales demonstrate that nature is a composite whole which must be respected wholly. The stories woven around all the varied characters about the protection and preservation of the ecological environment is that human beings and non human beings occupy the world and live together. If one occupant decides to engage in acts that are detrimental to others, the eco balance is disturbed and all the members suffer directly and indirectly. Of course, there will always be saviours to oppose those who would want to disturb nature, but the price to pay may be too dear. Tale 1 condemns killing of animals; it advocates the protection and preservation of animals, Tale 2 abhors the pollution of streams; it advocates the preservation of streams and rivers and Tale 3 condemns destruction of plants (farms); it advocates the protection and preservation of plants (farms). The animals, streams and rivers and plants constitute part of the ecological balance. Thus, through the literary technique of characterisation and the device of personification, what the Akan Folktales seem to say is: Do sensible mining so that after extracting the wonder stone for our developmental activities, we shall still have the various plants and animals for food and clean water for drinking

to ensure our survival as humans. It is then that we can enjoy the quality life given to us freely by God.

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