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The trickster as a semiotic figure for construing postcolonial experience: Kwakye's "The Clothes of Nakedness"

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines an instance of the use of folklore by writers in postcolonial African societies to problematize postcolonial systems in fiction. The essay discusses how Benjamin Kwakye exploits the trickster character as a semiotic figure to construe the themes of survival and social and economic insecurity in *The Clothes of Nakedness*. The features of the trickster deployed include the spider imagery and his webbing across geographical margins, the use of trickery and manipulation as survival and power-building strategies, and the role of the trickster as a "hero-scamp" and villain. Towards the end of the narrative, the trickster is removed from focalization, and villainous events he engineers are construed as happening in spite of him. He reemerges at the end as the ubiquitous spider in whom all mysteries make sense. These strategies are related to postcolonial issues of corruption, socioeconomic marginalization, and international aid.

KEYWORDS

African continuities; African literature; narrative style; orality; postcolonial literature; trickster tale

The Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed is our trope for chiasmus itself, repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft, discursive act.—Henry Louis Gates (52)

Introduction

Since the 1970s, critics have shown that African writers have made the novel respond to the legacy of African folklore through native artistic techniques (e.g. Iyasere; Julien; Okpewho), making the African novel unique, in the sense that it is a composite of both African and European styles. In her contribution to this critical theme, Julien describes the ingenious use of folkloric forms in the African novel as a manifestation of intertextuality, which critics need to examine and analyze judiciously. The present essay discusses Benjamin Kwakye's use of the folkloric trickster as a signifying (i.e. meaning making) figure in his novel, *The Clothes of Nakedness* (1998), to present an ideational construction of the social problems of contemporary city life in the

capital of Ghana, Accra. Kwakye's art however goes beyond the intertextual incorporation of oral forms into his novel and the appropriation of the structure of the African folktale (Julien) to re-enact the folkloric trickster as a metaphor of the web of social complexities in postcolonial Ghana.

The Clothes explores the underlining themes of survival and socioeconomic insecurity. Among a socioeconomically marginal, albeit peaceful, group of friends, enters the protagonist, the intriguing and luxurious Mystique Mysterious. Embracing him is to fall prey to his entangling web, and those that dare challenge or ignore him have to contend with his infinite power. Faced with seemingly impossible choices, each character must struggle against forces that seem out of human control and attempt to extricate themselves from his fascinating web. The narrative revolves around how the life of Bukari, a man hitherto dedicated to his family, is destroyed when he meets the trickster and how his family and two friends get entangled in this drama. In our discussion of Kwakye's novel, we also make references to the trickster character in *A Cowrie of Hope* (2000), written by the Zambian novelist Binwell Sinyangwe, as both novels address survival and economic insecurity in the 1990s. While, in *The Clothes*, the protagonist is the trickster, in *A Cowrie of Hope*, the focus is on his victim. Both novels are complementary and illuminate each other in this respect. Before we proceed, however, we first discuss aspects of the trickster character in African folklore and contemporary Ghanaian popular culture to provide a conceptual context for the analysis.

The trickster figure in African folklore and Ghanaian popular culture

The trickster tale is a genre of storytelling found in many world cultures, and its defining feature is the presence of the trickster character. Although the trickster is sometimes human, more often than not, he is portrayed as a little animal, such as the hare, rabbit, tortoise, tsetse fly, or spider (cf. Finnegan; Owomoyela 961; Roberts 7; Yankah, "Folktales" 269).¹ In African folklore, in general, and Ghanaian folklore, in particular, the most iconic representation of the trickster is the spider (or Ananse). The use of animals as the iconic representation of the trickster allows for creative indirection "because the foibles or vices of some person or faction can be contemplated and discussed without outright confrontation" (Roberts 6). As has been noted by various critics, such indirection provides an artistic avenue for interrogating power structures in society and its ambiguity affords multiple interpretations (see Donkor 89ff; Shipley 19). As we will see later, Kwakye uses the technique of indirection not only in the universal, iconic name he assigns his protagonist, Mystique Mysterious, but also in his representation of the trickster character as a metaphor open to different and, sometimes, conflicting interpretations.

The folkloric trickster is associated with several roles, including but not limited to the villain, dupe, and hero (cf. de Souza, "Creolizing Anancy"; Owomoyela). The boundaries between these roles are however often fuzzy. It is this ambivalence that leads Abrahams to describe him as a "hero-scamp." His main weapon, as a villain, is his manipulative language and assurances of a good life and his tricks and schemes always end in the negation of social promoting factors. Awoonor accurately describes

him as amoral, an opposition to the normal world, and an instrument of disorder. In most situations, any good that results from his actions is inadvertent. For instance, in “Ananse and the Pot of Wisdom” (Akan, Ghana), Ananse collected all the wisdom in the world into a pot and hung it on a tree. When he sensed wisdom in Ntekuma, his son, he dropped the pot out of anger and wisdom spread throughout the world. Thus, although Ananse brought wisdom to the world, he only did so out of jealousy of his son. This dualism of evil and good in his actions makes him the embodiment of oppositions, a creator and destroyer, and a giver and negator (cf. Lock; Owomoyela 961–4; Pelton). His greed often leads him to overplay himself and become entangled in his own web, a motif, which brings out the moral value of the trickster tale, that is, good deeds are rewarded and bad ones are punished. Not all tales, however, have this didactic function because Ananse sometimes finds an escape route through which he extricates himself from his entangled web and his punishment may even be diverted onto innocent victims. As Owomoyela notes, the logic of this motif is that “if survival and ease are the ultimate human goals, whatever expedient conduces to them is ‘good.’ Thus, even deceit that leads to survival and ease must be ‘good’” (964).

As part of his scam heroism, the trickster character is skillful in finding difficult challenges to undertake in order to impress others and overcome his underdog status. In “Bader and the Wolf” (Dagara, Ghana/Burkina Faso), he embraces a challenge that scares away every member of his society, namely to find the head of a wolf for the ritual burial of the King’s wife in return for which he receives two cows. The trickster’s motivation for undertaking these challenges is the prize he receives, whether that is marrying the princess, getting a share of the king’s wealth, or some other grand award, like having all stories named after him. Thus, more often than not, the trickster tale ends “in disharmony, in a world torn apart by the trickster’s misdeeds, a world where crops have been stolen, animals slaughtered, spouses cheated and where friends have become enemies” (de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy” 175). The very nature of the trickster as an indeterminate signifying figure is the reason why his motivations often involve the attainment of short-term gain at the expense of social cohesion; he negates his seemingly good acts with evil intentions (de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy” 342).

The trickster’s role as a dupe, on the other hand, is exemplified by two motifs. The first is his portrayal as a gullible glutton whose insatiable desire for food and meat blocks his sense of judgment and this gluttony leads him to become the victim of another trickster (Owomoyela 963). The second motif is when his successive tricks make him a victim of a smarter trickster. This second trickster is normally a character whose social sense has developed as much as the original trickster so that he could use his knowledge to resist the latter’s exploits. In “Bader and the Monkeys” tale (Dagara, Ghana/Burkina Faso), for example, Ananse invented a game by which he lured monkeys into a cage and killed them for food. One day, a stubborn monkey comes by and insists that Ananse demonstrates the game to him. Ananse ends up being trapped in the cage instead and is killed by the monkey, reversing the role of trickster and victim. Such failures of the trickster, as instantiated by this tale, reflect his human limitation, although this humanity, as it were, is mostly projected onto a

personified animal character. At a deeper level of interpretation, the trickster, in this context, becomes, for the community that creates it, a psychological abstraction of a social challenge that motivates them to transcend their current intellectual capabilities in order to overcome it. This interpretation accords with documented functions of the trickster tale among slave communities in the Americas and the Caribbean (e.g. Gates; Abrahams; Deandrea), where African slaves found the trickster strategies as powerful tools of resistance.

The manifestation of the trickster as a motif of resistance is even more pronounced in his role as hero. In many tales, he is the singular character that relieves his community or a fellow animal from power abuse and, in the process, brings new knowledge. This is often in the form of eliminating an oppressive animal who threatens the life of other animals. An example is a story in which the rabbit saves the animals in the forest from an extinction that is threatened by the Wolf's greed. The story is in the context of a terrible famine that compels the animals to make a law allowing any of them to eat whatever animal they find themselves eating in a dream. The Wolf abuses this privilege by faking a dream every night in which he eats one big animal after the other. The animals live under the constant fear of death until the Rabbit decides to eliminate the Wolf by faking a dream in which the latter becomes his game. As a hero, the trickster's targets are, therefore, the powerful. He embraces difficult problems of his society and peers by challenging authority and encouraging his community to pursue new ideas, to stop being complacent and interrogate unexamined conventions. A good example of this motif is found in a Dagara tale, "Yāgaw-Naa" (literally, "wisdom is superior to the king"), in which the trickster rebelled against an oppressive king through a series of tricks until the king acknowledged the trickster's unbeatable wisdom and shared his kingdom with him. The trickster, therefore, appeals to oppressed and dominated groups as the epitome of resistance and positive change. For Afro-American slave audience, for instance, he becomes, at once, an icon of heroism, "their object of opprobrium and their scapegoat" (Deandrea 9).

The trickster thus has a psycho-social value. In a Jungian sense, he is a product of the collective unconscious of the community that creates it. He is an "archetype" that reifies both a community's psychological construal of reality, including past and present experiences, and their imaginative world of hope and freedom and of fears and failures (cf. Jung). In other words, the trickster is for the community a folk theory of experience, a means by which reality (including imaginative experience) is interpreted and preserved as collective knowledge. He embodies and stores for them collective memories that are constantly revised and transmitted as cultural heritage and for the edification of younger generations. The ambiguities and contradictions in his manifestations reflect the complexity and multifaceted nature of human experience. It is in this ability of the trickster to embody different meanings for the community that makes him a semiotic figure, a figure that signifies or that evokes interpretations.

Trickster strategies have continued to find expression in contemporary Ghanaian popular culture and new forms of literary discourse. The trickster character and trickster storytelling techniques have been "appropriated in urban contexts by hip-hop, political discourse, television drama, film, radio, internet memes, and social media

users” (Shipley 15). Such adaptation of trickster strategies has partly been spurred on by political factors. During Ghana’s independence in 1957, Nkrumah rallied support for a new “African personality” and there was also an urgent need to create a national culture and identity as a unifying force for the new nation that had emerged from ethnic diversity. The Ghanaian literary community supported this Pan-African movement and developed a new theatrical style based on the trickster storytelling techniques (cf. Donkor; Shipley). A notable example is the *Anansegoro* performances developed and popularized by Sutherland and her students. As Shipley also notes, “artists and ethnographers researched rural folk storytelling, condensing and transforming their formal, stylistic elements for the temporal and spatial constraints of modern staging” (7).

In the 1990s, President Rawlings promoted Ananse-style theatrical performance to regain popular support for his administration. In the words of Donkor, “he adopted the mantle of the African Personality and positioned himself as a patron of cultural performances” (53). The building of a new National Theatre and the *Concert Party* performances that emerged provided a popular stage for talents from all over the country to appropriate their knowledge of Ananse tales in advancing issues of national interests. There also emerged an adaptation of trickster storytelling techniques in a form of protest discourse. Yankah discusses how Nana Ampadu has successfully used the trickster-style technique of indirection as a metaphor in his music to critic the oppressive tendencies in the Rawlings administration. His song *Ebe te yie* (“some are better positioned than others”) is also arguably a protest against the oppressive military rule of the National Liberation Council, which overthrew the Nkrumah’s regime (Yankah, “Nana Ampadu”).

It is in the context of these contemporary adaptations of the folkloric trickster strategies that we discuss *The Clothes*. In the next section, we will examine how Kwakye exploits the signifying potential of the trickster character and the technique of indirection in construing socioeconomic problems in the Ghanaian society. The novel is an instance of the use of an old semiotic medium to construe new problems that are occasioned by postcolonial circumstances. The trickster in *The Clothes* partly represents those ordinary Ghanaian urban dwellers “who often compensate for [their limitations] or lower social status with well-crafted premeditated acts of trickery” in the quest for survival (de Souza, “Trickster Strategies” 105). These reflect what Shipley has described as the “folkloric hustler” (1).

Trickster strategies in *The Clothes*

The protagonist in *The Clothes* is aligned with the folkloric trickster through a number of strategies. We will discuss these strategies around four topics, comprising the spider image of the trickster; lies and manipulation; and the trickster’s manifestation as hero-scamp, and dupe and villain (cf. de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy”, “Trickster Strategies”; Owomoyela; Yankah). These issues are interpreted in relation to themes of corruption, survival, and socioeconomic insecurity.

The spider image of the trickster: webbing across liminal spaces

The protagonist in *The Clothes* is endowed with the demeanor of the folkloric spider. His name, Mystique Mysterious is symbolic of his strange and wily ways. He is always seeking out spaces that give him an opportunity to hide from his evil deeds and “yet provide an insider view of society and access to potential victims” (de Souza, “Trickster Strategies” 105). Just like Ananse in his web, Mysterious walks with calculated steps and consummate deliberation, the only swiftness in him being the motion of his tongue. The following depiction of his movement at the opening of the novel heightens his spider image:

He moved slowly, like a bored chameleon. It was as though his steps were a chore performed with difficulty but necessary for the accomplishment of compelling objectives. At his sides, *his arms swung steadily, unhurried, like noiseless pendulums*. The only swiftness in his movements was the sharp motion of his tongue, *flickering through his lips and back again*. Perhaps his eyes moved quickly too, surveying people and places as he passed by. (emphasis added, 1)

This description of the protagonist matches the spider and the maneuvers of the animal trickster in African folklore (see e.g. Owomoyela 961–2; Donkor 2, 66–70). The extract foregrounds the deliberateness of his walk by the use of circumstantial (or adverbial) elements of manner, such as “slowly,” “steadily,” “unhurried,” and those of comparison such as “like a bored chameleon”; “as though his steps were a chore performed with difficulty”; and “like noiseless pendulums.” The description of the movement of his arms, in particular, gives the reader a perceptual image of the spider. Towards the end of this physiological construction of the trickster, the slowness of his walk is contrasted with his alertness and the swiftness of his tongue, “flickering through his lips and back again.” This meticulous depiction of Mysterious both reflects processes by which the spider catches his game and the recurrent image of the trickster in African folklore. Ananse is renowned for his carefulness in seeking hideouts and in getting around his victims as well as the smartness of his talk, which is often mimicked by the storyteller as nasalized speech. Mysterious displays a similar linguistic endowment, for instance, when he apologizes to Fati on behalf of Bukari:

The depth and length of the apology left Fati speechless. She simply nodded and looked past Mystique Mysterious at her husband, whose face was riddled with guilt. Fati’s anger vanished. Why had she allowed herself to get so worked up when she should have known that her husband was among friends. She smiled sweetly and said, that is all right. (88)

Kwakye uses the tongue imagery and the eloquence exemplified in this extract to align Mysterious with the folkloric trickster.

Another characteristic of Mysterious that aligns him with the folkloric spider is his portrayal as a liminal being who is difficult to be perceived but whose social sense is “sufficiently developed to enable him to manipulate others to his advantage” (Feldmann 15). The extract below describes him as a mysterious dweller of the limen:

Or perhaps his gaze was fixed unwaveringly ahead. It was impossible to tell, because his eyes were *hidden behind a pair of dark sunglasses, his barrier* against the curiosity of those who were drawn by his unnatural quality of energy and power. This was the man they called Mystique Mysterious. (1; emphasis added)

This extract describes Mysterious from the viewpoint of the community of his victims. The use of the hedging device “perhaps” in both this and other passages to depict the direction and target of the movement of his eyes shows how difficult it is to decode his purpose in any determinate manner. This characterization of the trickster is foregrounded by imagery of obscurity, which resonates in each of the lexical items in the italicized part of the extract above. We also find this image of obscurity in the comparison of his movement with the chameleon, “He moved slowly, like a bored chameleon” (1), which invokes the chameleon’s ability to camouflage itself with the color of its environment. In spite of this obscurity, Mysterious’s unnatural energy and power is fascinating and draws to itself potential victims, just like the spider’s web. The obscurity and mystery that surround him is, thus, an ingenious representation of the hideouts of Ananse as well as the mysteries that often surround his misdeeds. Since he is meant to be a dweller of the limen, there is absolutely no information on where Mysterious comes from, where he stays, or his family, and, when he is not with his prospective victims, he retires into hibernation, the margins of his web, as it were. He is everywhere and yet nowhere.

The trickster’s web is symbolically constructed in the novel as liminal spaces, a number of locations associated with the socioeconomically marginalized and which are connected by the trajectories of the protagonist’s movements. Like Ananse, Mysterious finds spaces at the edges of society that grants him easy access to his victims while allowing him a safe distance (cf. de Souza, “Trickster Strategies”; Owomoyela). These marginal spaces comprise “Kill Me Quick,” Bukari’s residence, and the 441 Crowd. Mysterious enters “Kill Me Quick,” a small drinking bar where the local gin *akpeteshie* is sold. The name of the bar is reminiscence of the *Kum-me-preko* (“Kill me once and for all,” Akan) demonstration of 1995 organized by a coalition of opposition leaders in Ghana known as Alliance for Change to protest against the introduction of a 17.5% value-added (VAT) tax on goods and services by the Rawlings administration, an attempt to meet the requirement of the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) (cf. Donkor 84). As Donkor notes, “VAT was intended to make up for the loss of revenues caused by the concurrent lowering of the corporate tax rate and the elimination of import and export tariffs”, in effect, shifting “revenue burdens away from large-scale businesses and toward consumers” (84). VAT therefore increased “the tax burden on the poor” often raising the prices of goods and services beyond the reach of the common people (Donkor 84). Unsurprisingly, the organizers of the *Kum-me-preko* demonstration described the situation as a “gruesome policy measure” (Donkor 84). Thus, although “Kill Me Quick” literally represents the deadly effect of the sustained consumption of *akpeteshie*, in the context of the *Kum-me-preko* protest, it connotes the cry of frustration by the ordinary people like Bukari and his friends, Ntim and Ansah, who commune here to drink their lives away. Mysterious intrudes and invites Bukari, an unemployed immigrant from northern Ghana, to walk home with him and offers him a job, demonstrating the trickster’s expertise in knowing whom to pick as a victim. The migration of Bukari with his family to the capital city is itself significant to the theme of survival. In real life situation, northern Ghana is one of the poorest and deprived regions in the country and many natives of this region, like Bukari, migrate to southern settlements such as Accra to make

a living. Mysterious thinks that the best way to effectuate his plans for Bukari is to “approach him in his hour of utmost need when he was most vulnerable and ready to be influenced” (3). Thus, like Ananse, he displays an awareness of his victims’ expectations and uses this awareness to manipulate them (de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy”). In “How Bader married the Princess” (Dagara, Ghana/Burkina Faso), for example, Ananse positions himself on the usual trail of mother wild-cow with her delicacy in hand and at a moment when she is very hungry. He offers her the food at her request and she falls in his trap by inquiring of the source of the delicious treat. Ananse misleads her, traps her horns in a tree and milks her.

Similarly, Mysterious’s successes and triumphs are doubtful and temporary. Like the wild-cow, Bukari is caught in Mysterious’s trap when he innocently declares, “I do not know how to thank you” (32). Mysterious demands fifteen percent of Bukari’s monthly salary as a sign of gratitude: “Will you deny me this simple request, Bukari? You know I did not have to pick you, but I did. Will you deny me a small accommodation so that I too can eat?” (33). This exchange reveals that the driving force of Mysterious’s trickery is survival and sustenance. He is a sophisticated destitute who compensates for his nakedness by exploiting desperate people like Bukari. His desires, however, go beyond material needs. He continues this trickery in Bukari’s residence, another marginal space, where he seduces Fati. He chooses a time when Bukari is not at home and lures her to drink liquor: “Madam, you will not deny a visitor’s request, especially after I have prepared the drink myself ... Will you not just take a sip?” (109). This consistent use of rhetorical questions by Mysterious serves as a manipulative rhetorical strategy with which he appeals to the values of the other person.

The most significant liminal space exploited by Mysterious, however, is the 441 Crowd at Nima. This crowd is a group of young men, mostly unmarried, who lounge on street corners in the evenings after toiling at menial work of all kinds. Mysterious descends in the group from nowhere. He approaches these men in his luxurious clothes, maintains a distance, and surveys them to ascertain their potential needs. He offers them cigarettes, money, and cocaine: “The crowd sniffed on it and again thanked him for his beneficence” (74).

These people have been paid little at work and “crave food to fill their stomachs and conversation to soothe their minds” (25). Among other issues, they talk about the hustles of the day and the problems of ordinary men like themselves, which are reinforced by the selfishness of rich people: “In this world of theirs, they could criticize these people, heap them with insults, cover them with scorn. Together, and with words, they could savor a triumph over their bosses, which they could not achieve with their actions” (26). The 441 Crowd is thematically a significant socioeconomic margin in the Ghanaian, and, by extension, African society and a lucrative geographical margin for the trickster. It is a representation of the ordinary Ghanaian worker and the economic hardships they are confronted with in a capitalist postcolonial society. The crowd signifies the failure of the postcolonial social structures and governments to fulfill the expectations and ideals of independence. Their talk is the kind of discourse Scott refers to as the “hidden transcript” (see also Afful and Mwinlaaru). This refers to a discourse of resistance that goes on behind the corridors of power among dominated groups, and it is opposed to the normative “public transcript”

used by these groups with their superiors. It is thus a critique of power in hegemonic communities by the powerless when they are safely distant from their superiors. The hidden transcript of the 441 Crowd clearly critiques the social and economic inequality in the Ghanaian society. As Yankah (“Nana Ampadu”) notes:

Since Ghana’s independence, constitutional governance has been constantly suspended and freedom of expression stifled by various oppressive governments. Newspapers have been shut down, journalists have been arbitrarily detained and tortured, and dissident politicians have been jailed and sometimes maimed. Under such circumstances of fear and tension, journalists have resorted to allegories, proverbial discourse, and song or folk tale metaphors that are either politically motivated or adopted by audiences as clandestine discourse (229).

It is against this tensed political atmosphere of the period up to the 1990s during Rawlings’ regime, that the discourse of the 441 Crowd becomes relevant as a protest discourse. Kwakye’s choice of Nima as the location of the 441 Crowd supports this interpretation since, in real life, Nima is a hub for low class working and unemployed youth and has been associated with crime and with political vandalism during President Rawlings’ regime in 1990’s (cf. Donkor, Ch. 3; Yankah, “Nana Ampadu”).

The dubious business and political barons as well as sophisticated criminals who prey this vulnerable youth are symbolized in *The Clothes* by Mysterious. Like Ananse, he always occupies and spins around the geographical margins of society to strike at people for his selfish short-term economic benefit at the expense of social harmony (de Souza, “Trickster Strategies” 105). In *A Cowrie of Hope*, the domain of the trickster is not the margins of society but the market, a microcosm of society from an African perspective, and, unlike Mysterious, his deeds and operations are known to regular sellers and buyers in the market. His victims are vulnerable and naïve sellers like Nasula who come from the village to seek buyers for their hard-earned farm produce. Also, unlike Gode, who strikes his victims and run for refuge, Mysterious is a sophisticated trickster who seeks challenges and is ever present. In the next section, we explore his trickery and manipulative power, which are the tools by which he spins his entangling web across liminal spaces.

The trickster’s craft of survival: trickery and manipulation

As we mentioned earlier, the social sense of the trickster character is sufficiently developed to empower him to manipulate others to his own advantage (cf. de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy”; Owomoyela 961–4). The motivation behind Mysterious’ actions is to maximize his egoistic short-term gratification at the expense of social cohesion, and he disguises his deception with seeming benevolence. This trait is captured by Kwakye in the title of the novel, *The Clothes of Nakedness*, which he derives from the Akan proverb: *Se kwatirikwa se ɔbɛ ma wo ntoma a, tie ne din*, literally translated as “If nakedness promises you a cloth, be aware of his name.” “Nakedness” is personified in this proverb as a symbolic indeterminate human figure, and its signifying semblance with the trickster character is “camouflage,” that is, “the naked one who promises garments.”

Kwakye’s adaptation of this symbolic sense of “nakedness” to characterize his trickster character is significant to the theme of survival and economic insecurity. Scholars

of African folklore have related the motives of the trickster figure, especially in tales among Africans in the Diaspora, to economic problems (see Abrahams; de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy”; Donkor 17–18). de Souza, for instance, suggests that the themes of survival and gluttony in Afro-American tales can be explained by the fact that slaves in the Americas faced problems with food and other basic commodities of life and that Ananse’s strategies for survival were useful to them for their own survival.

However, while we cannot relate the character of Ananse to specific socioeconomic problems in the history of African people with certainty, we argue that tricksters in contemporary Africa and represented in *The Clothes* by Mysterious are a product of a myriad of socioeconomic problems that are occasioned by ineffective postcolonial structures and that their surviving strategies parallel those of Ananse in African folklore. Kwakye’s novel thus instantiates the “ongoing reinvention of Ananse” and shows that “the Ghanaian figure of Ananse is an ethos that lives in and through history, not outside or above it” (Donkor 18). The metaphor of nakedness heightens the trickster’s destitute status; he is the “have-not” who camouflages his underdog status with luxury and survives on his enormous power to manipulate others. In this sense, Mysterious is like Gode, the trickster in *A Cowrie of Hope*. Gode migrates from his village to the city in quest for a better livelihood, and his trade is to dupe poor village women such as Nasula of the highly demanded Mbala beans. Like Mysterious, his hook for manipulation is fashionable clothes and an attractive expensive car. However, unlike Mysterious, Gode is a one-dimensional trickster and does not “signify.” He acts out only one group of the tricksters that Mysterious represents.

Mysterious, on the other hand, is a signifying figure, representing different manifestations of trickery and embodying corruption in different power structures of society. His manipulation in the novel comes in many forms. First, he uses his powerful personality against the young folks of the 441 Crowd to his selfish ends. He tells a man in the crowd that marijuana is the source of knowledge and the beginning of wisdom. When the young man challenges him that it is illegal to smoke, he declares: “Nothing I give you is illegal!” He boasts further: “I am what is legal and what is not” (28). These declarations evoke one motif of the folkloric Ananse, namely he knows neither good nor evil and he enables all values to come into being (cf. de Souza’s, “Creolizing Anancy”; Owomoyela 961–4). The universal authority evoked by Mysterious’ utterances and the antithesis in: “I am what is ... and what is not” (28) are symbolically significant in this respect. They show the indeterminacy and universality of his personality. He at once signifies the corruption and the legitimization of illegality by powerful individuals, groups, and state institutions in postcolonial Ghana. He tells Bukari: “Trust me, you can do whatever you want when you are with me and not get caught. You can get away with murder” (85–86).

In *A Cowrie of Hope*, this corruption and the power it gives the trickster is played out when Gode is arrested by a police officer. The police officer is ordered by his corrupt superior to release the criminal. Nasula had also been informed by people in the market that it was fruitless and even dangerous for her to pursue Gode since he had bought the support of senior police officers and could openly victimize his pursuers. In *The Clothes*, however, all we are presented with is Mysterious and his victims, and he embodies at once a trickster like Gode and sociopolitical power.

Apart from his powerful demeanor, Mysterious feigns solidarity to manipulate his victims. For instance, on his second visit to the 441Crowd, he produces cigar and feigns interest in their discussions. He bonds with them and produces them with cocaine. His aim is, however, to make them addicts so that he could make money out of them. We are also told that his second aim for this generosity is to endear them to him, protecting himself from infiltrators like Ansah. After sharing in their laments on low salaries, Mysterious is still bent on extorting money from them. Just as Ananse, therefore, the motivations for his benevolence are towards self-aggrandizement. His purported intention is not to add positive value to society as a whole.

Mysterious further deploys endearment and his adult experience to trick and hurt Baba, Bukari's son. He tells the innocent boy that Adukwei, his girlfriend, is growing up and some older men are beginning to get attracted to her. Mysterious tells him to buy her things. He offers Baba a job as a newspaper vendor and, as usual, persuades him to pay a "small commission" to him. His fake affection towards Baba endears the boy very much since he could not get this emotional bond from his own father, who has been busy with his womanizing and drinking spree, a habit that has been sowed and nurtured in him by the very same Mysterious. Having endeared Baba enough, Mysterious finds a way to destroy Baba's relationship with Adukwei. He sets a trap for the gullible boy by finding him a new job to trim grass at Mr. Denyi's yard. Baba is so mesmerized by Janet, Denyi's daughter, that he sees her as a goddess and Adukwei as a beautiful girl. He breaks Adukwei's heart and gets laughed off by Janet. This seeming unprofitable venture acts out one aspect of Ananse in Mysterious, which is to disrupt social cohesion and harmony, as is his intention in "Ananse and the Pot of Wisdom."

A deeper motivation of this social disruption between the lovers becomes clear, however, when we put his dealings with Baba within his larger master plan to disorganize Bukari's family. Knowing that the strength and happiness of the migrant family is their unity, he schemes against this harmony so as to make them vulnerable and pathetic, thereby increasing the force of his hold on each one of them. This interpretation is in consonance with Ananse's quest to increase his power by gathering all the wisdom in the world to himself or, in a Hausa tale, where he consults with a wise woman to grant him more cunning, and, in order to fulfill the conditions for this quest, tricks the lion, the elephant and dingo to obtain their tears, tusk and hide respectively (de Souza, "Creolizing Anancy").

On the other hand, we may perhaps link the power-increasing strategy of Mysterious allegorically to imperialist capitalist programs that were designed by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in the 1990's to redeem postcolonial African economies, which were devastated by years of corruption, military regimes, and civil unrest. Just as Mysterious attaches draining conditions to the jobs he gives his victims, the aids provided by the SAPs of the international financial institutions, for instance, came with conditionalities that ended up complicating the socioeconomic problems they were meant to resolve, and making African economies increasingly vulnerable and more dependent on foreign aid (cf. Donkor, Ch. 2; Yankah, "Nana Ampadu"). As mentioned earlier, in Ghana, one consequence of the implementation of SAPs by the Rawlings

administration was the introduction of VAT, which increased the tax burden of consumers while lowering corporate tax and eliminating import and export tariffs (cf. Donkor 84). In *A Cowrie of Hope*, Sinyangwe foregrounds the hardships of the 1990's with the refrain "these were the nineties": "The years of rule of money. The years of havelessness, bad rains, and the new disease.² The harsh years of madness and evil" (122). As the narrator also notes, Kamwala market strikes Nasula as a "mound inhabited by huge, hungry tribes of termites in search of a livelihood" (115). This is the context in which tricksters like Gode and, in fact, Mysterious emerge. While all these problems continue to stare many African economies in the face, the argument we make here is that Mysterious is a multivalent figure who signifies different parties in this socioeconomic drama. He is, at once, a social underdog, "a folkloric hustler" (Shipley 1), as it were, who has placed himself high on the social ladder through trickery, as in the case of Gode; the embodiment of oppressive corruption among public officials, as we see demonstrated by the senior police officer in Nasula's case; and an iconic representation of the duping effect of conditionalities attached to international monetary aid. Anyidoho cites an interesting case in which a Ghanaian commission of inquiry mandated to investigate corruption "seemed to have come to the conclusion that the tendency to misuse public office for personal gain may in fact have something to do with the dominant presence of Kweku Ananse in Ghanaian folklore" (qtd. in Deandrea 24). Writing against the endemic presence of trickster strategies in Ghanaian popular culture, Shipley also notes that "the unintended consequences of presenting the trickster as a model of Ghanaian cultural belonging create a complex blend of sincerity and parody as social values" (1). In the context of *The Clothes*, however, we would argue that the trickster is, *inter alia*, an artistic representation of corruption in the Ghanaian society.

In summary, Mysterious carries deep meanings to the surface, meanings that are multiple and tend to be conflicting. In this light, he is a new manifestation of Ananse, the folk semiotic resource for construing variable social problems. In the next section, we will further discuss two roles that Mysterious shares with the folkloric trickster, namely, his villainy and scamp heroism, as Abrahams puts it.

Hero-scamp and the mysterious villain

In trickster tales, Ananse is sometimes presented as a hero-scamp, sometimes as a sheer villain and sometimes as a dupe, although occasionally all these elements are depicted in one story (de Souza, "Creolizing Anancy"; Owomoyela 961-4). In *The Clothes*, he is presented as a hero-scamp and a villain. Just as de Souza ("Creolizing Anancy") observes of Ananse, "when he assumes the role of hero, his heroic deeds are always performed through trickery and thievery" (353). His heroism is situated within the context of the economic hardship in postcolonial Ghana. Mysterious emerges from this context as the providence who frees the suffering people from the grips of poverty and joblessness. He presents himself to the three jobless regular customers at "Kill Me Quick" as the one who will alleviate their poverty, the superiorly dressed gentleman in the midst of a marginalized social group. He indeed brings great, expected joy to poor Bukari and his family, who have migrated from northern

Ghana to the capital city in search of a meaningful life and have been jobless for eight months: “Mystique Mysterious was the bearer of new light. Tonight would decide it. Beaming, Bukari leapt to his feet and walked into the bedroom to deliver the good news to Fati” (22). Hitherto, Bukari’s source of comfort was to drink away his life with his friends at “Kill Me Quick.” He is now fascinated by the wealth and social power of Mysterious and the great comforts of life he has introduced him to within the few days they have met. Unsurprisingly, Bukari considers Mysterious to be the determiner of what is evil and good. We see a similar situation with his interactions with Baba. He gives the young man the fatherly love he yearns for and a job to keep the girl he is deeply in love with.

As has already been indicated, however, like the folkloric Ananse, he is not a true hero with the qualities of courage and honesty (de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy”; Owomoyela 961–4). He drains Bukari’s meager income with his high commission and strategically introduces him to a new world of expensive drinks, night clubs, girlfriends, and prostitutes, on which Bukari wastes his share of the income. Having kept Bukari busy with his new lifestyle, Mysterious seduces his lonely wife and succeeds in convincing his son that his father is irresponsible.

Further, another property Mysterious shares with Ananse is that not only is his role as hero questionable, but also the good that results from his actions is incidental (Wadlington; Paulme; de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy”). We see this in one of his visits to the 441 Crowd, where he bravely saves a little boy from being hit by a car, risking his own life in the process. Mysterious’s act of saving the little boy was by instinct and he himself thought undeserving of the enormous praise he received although it added to his power and prestige over the vulnerable motley crowd. As de Souza (“Creolizing Anancy”) observes, it is by doing good inadvertently that the trickster retains his identity as “a creature of the limen”; that is, as an indeterminate or multi-dimensional signifier who does not occupy one role at a time (354).

As in several folktales, however, the trickster sometimes fails to reach his goal for a number of reasons (see de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy”; Owomoyela 961–4). He sometimes meets someone who has learned his trade and uses the same tricks as himself or who simply refuses to cooperate with him. De Souza (“Creolizing Anancy”) gives an example of a Jamaican tale in which Ananse and his companion lure animals into their trap by fastening a rope around them until monkey comes along and refuses to indulge in their game. Smart animal characters as monkey are represented in *The Clothes* by Bukari’s close friends, Ntim and Ansah. After closing a good deal with Bukari, Mysterious next target was Ntim: “Mystique Mysterious found Kofi Ntim’s unexpected eloquence daunting and his reasoning sharper than he had anticipated” (56). He offers Ntim the same deal he offered Bukari, but Ntim questions him: “What is in it for you?” (55). For Ntim, nobody does good for altruistic purposes, at least not Mysterious. Ntim disagrees to give Mysterious 15% of his monthly earnings but 7% for the first year and 5% for the second year. For the first time, he has been “forced to accept a lower rate than he had intended, but he had still made the deal – it was better than nothing” (57). After Ntim decides to stop paying the commission and consequently got beaten by three unknown men, he stubbornly bargains with Mysterious to pay two and a half percent as commission. Mysterious

describes Ntim: “You are a shrewd and tough businessman ... Bukari has not even dared suggest a reduction in his contribution” (138).

Unlike Ntim, Ansah is a very quiet, reserved character. Like Monkey in the Jamaican tale, he simply refused to make friends with Mysterious when the latter approached him. Although Mysterious knows that Ansah does not drink liquor, he tries to influence him to drink so that he could get inside his thoughts. Ansah retorts: “No you can’t. I used to drink once. I will never go back to that habit” (121). Ansah seems to have suspected Mysterious the first day he saw him, and the trickster sees him, in turn, as a threat since he has been sneaking on him during his visits to the 441 Crowd at Nima. Ansah watches him as he supplies the group with hard drugs and later tries to turn them against him. When Issaka informs him of Mysterious entering Bukari’s room, Ansah runs to fight him and prevents him from raping Fati.

Ntim and Ansah thus constitute two different kinds of foil to Mysterious. Ntim is sanguine, witty, smart, and eloquent, and knows the craft of the trickster. But he uses his craft to protect his self-interest against the trickster. Ansah, on the other hand, is phlegmatic and an indefatigable person who does not only refuse to be duped by the trickster, but tries to prevent him from duping others. Thus, while Ntim, in a way, “dupes” Mysterious, Ansah tries to expose him and become the hero. The challenges they pose to him shows that he is a human trickster living in a human society, and not a divine being without limitation, an observation which corroborates many studies on African trickster tales (e.g. de Souza’s “Creolizing Anancy”; Owomoyela 961–4; Donkor 61–4). Mysterious is, nonetheless, a trickster who seeks challenges and must reach his goals by any means.

Towards the end of the novel, he switches from his role as hero-scamp to the role of a villain, another property of the folkloric Ananse (cf. de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy”; Owomoyela 961–4). One interesting observation about Mysterious, however, is that he is physically removed from acts of victimization of which he is apparently the remote author. The narrator does not let us see the trickster’s direct involvement in the suffering of his victims. He is rather retired to the margins of his “web” and readers are allowed to presuppose or assume him as the architect of the mysteries. It is this presupposition that maintains cohesion among the chain of otherwise disjointed mysteries towards the end of the narrative: the beating up of Ntim, the death of Bukari and Madman, the arrest of Ansah in connection with Madman’s death and his subsequent conviction and execution. All these events happen in spite of Mysterious and our attention as readers is focused on the happenings and the victims, while their originator and victimizer remains a mystery to be recovered by the reader’s awareness of the presence of the trickster in society.

Kwakye ingeniously arranges these events in a way that aids the reader to connect the trickster, or, indeed, “The Mysterious,” to them, and at the same time, allowing some elements of doubt. For instance, we are told that Ntim stops paying commissions to Mysterious, who has been out of focalization for some time. However, no sooner had Ntim got beaten up by three unknown crooks, than Mysterious appeared to bargain a new commission with him. This scenario again tends to be a fictional reflection of the disadvantaged position of the ordinary Ghanaian citizen on the negotiation table especially during the years after independence and in the

revolutionary periods of the 1980s and 1990s. In the course of the 1995 *Kum-mepreko* demonstration against VAT that has been mentioned earlier, for instance, armed supporters of the Rawlings regime attacked the demonstrators and killed four people, a situation described by the *Ghanaian Chronicle* as “Hitlerism in Ghana” (Donkor 85).

Also, following his strong sexual desire for Fati, Mysterious succeeds in getting her alone in her house, gets her tipsy and, but for the intervention of Ansah, would have raped her. When this news gets to Bukari, he becomes frustrated and accuses his wife of being unfaithful. Bukari soon realizes his folly and decides to extricate himself from the “web” of the trickster, but he loses his job and gets run over by a car. His life is only useful so far as he satisfies the selfish ends of Mysterious, and when this situation changes, the trickster, apparently, exterminates him.

The last victim is Ansah, who is obsessed over Bukari’s death and is determined to show that Mysterious is responsible for the murder. While he is busy plotting against Mysterious, Madman, who disgusts Ansah so much, is found dead on the roadside, stabbed with a knife. Ansah is implicated and arrested, based on evidence provided by, supposedly, false witnesses. Mysteriously, his fingerprints are found on the knife and he is convicted and sentenced. As we wonder how Mysterious vanished from all these events and just when Ntim thinks he is finally done with this trickster,

... out of the silence, Kofi Ntim *thought he heard* someone call his name. He stopped and *looked behind* him and saw the shadowy form of a man outlined against the dusky sky. He *looked harder* and *realized* it was Mystique Mysterious. And that Mystique Mysterious was smiling. Then Kofi Ntim *knew* that Mystique Mysterious *had not* gone away. He would never go away. He would always be present in the background, watching and waiting; but a man like Kofi Ntim could widen the distance between them (121; emphasis added).

This extract, which is the ending of the narrative, is significant for unveiling the architect behind the mysterious suffering that has gone before. The extract foregrounds the obscurity and liminal nature of Mysterious. This imagery is depicted by the effort and uncertainty that accompanies the mental and behavioral processes Ntim is engaged in, as he struggles to recognize Mysterious (e.g. “thought he heard,” “looked behind,” “looked harder and realized”) as well as the uncertainty of referring expressions that label the perceived figure (i.e. “someone,” “the shadowy form of a man”) and his locative circumstances (i.e. “out of the silence,” “outlined against the dusky sky,” “in the background”).

Unlike Ananse, therefore, this human trickster is a powerful product of a complex modern society whom Kwakye has created to satirize the sophistication of deception, corruption of social and moral values, corruption within the socio-political structures and “the vagaries of international capitalism” (de Souza, “Creolizing Anancy” 355). He is able to hire people to assault his enemies, arrange for a used man to be knocked down by a car, and manipulate legal evidence. The extract above foregrounds his universal signifying character and social omnipresence: “He would never go away. He would always be present in the background, watching, and waiting” (121). The reference to “the dusky sky” as the location of the figure and the awe surrounding the description in general, perhaps, aligns the trickster with God, by which

he shares the omnipresence and cleverness of the divine. This observation is supported by the fact that the sky is considered as the abode of God in Akan (or African) cosmology, as it is in many other cultures. Besides, the spider, is connected with the divine in African folklore. Among the Akan, for instance, one of the praise names of God (Onyankopong) is *Ananse Kokroko a ɔbɔɔ wiase* (i.e. “the Great Spider who created the universe”) and, as many studies (e.g. Hyde; de Souza; Owomoyela 964; Yankah, “Folktales” 269) have observed, there are several folktales that suggest Ananse’s ability to connect between gods and mortal beings (see also Donkor 61–66 for a detailed discussion). The Ghanaian scholar Kwesi Yankah (“Nana Ampadu”) also notes that “Nyame [i.e. God] and Ananse are almost always engaged with each other, and they are almost always at cross-purposes ... Unlike Nyame, whom Akan belief places up in the skies, or humans, who are identified with the earth below, Ananse is often found in transit between the realms, moving impulsively back and forth across these borders” (63, 66). He is indispensable.

The essential existence of the trickster is echoed in the Akan expression *Wo kum Ananse a, ɔman bɛ bɔ*, which translates as “If you exterminate Ananse, society will be ruined” (Sutherland). Another related characterization of Ananse in musical interludes (i.e. *mboguo*, Akan) and comments from the floor during story-telling is *ɔdomfo-kumfo* (i.e. “a necessary evil” or, literally, “he who saves and kills at the same time”), an expression which corroborates the *yin-yang* conception in Chinese cosmology as a balance between good and evil. Thus, like the trickster tale, *The Clothes* ends with a lesson: tricksters like Mysterious will always be in one’s community and one needs an ambivalent character like Ntim to survive their schemes. The world of the trickster “is one in which every creature must live by his or her wits or perish, and one in which all is fair in the pursuit of self-preservation” (Owomoyela 962). As Toni Morrison (qtd. in Opoku-Agyemang and Asempasah) observes, the story in the oral tradition does not end; it is an ongoing process with a deliberate ambiguity that excites the listener (or reader) to think about the little moral at the end. This strategy is clearly marked in *The Clothes*.

Conclusion

In summary, this essay has examined how Kwakye exploits the folkloric trickster as a semiotic (or meaning making) figure to construe the themes of survival, corruption, and socioeconomic insecurity in *The Clothes*. The essay has shown that the trickster elements Kwakye uses include the spider image and his webbing across liminal spaces, the use of trickery and manipulation as a means of survival and power building, and the trickster’s manifestation as a hero-scamp and a mysterious villain. With these strategies, he creates a signifying character who represents the evils that have characterized the metropolitan urban centers of postcolonial Ghana, and, by extension, other African countries with similar situations, such as Zambia.

Regarding postcolonial economic issues addressed by the novel, the essay has mentioned migration of people such as Bukari and his family from deprived communities to urban centers in search of a livelihood and the associated joblessness and frustrations encountered by these people. The discussion also considered the poor motley Crowd of

441 as an epitome of the socioeconomically marginalized. Their discourse, which we have described as “the hidden transcript,” (Scott) reveals the unfairness in the public institutions and their dissatisfaction with the corrupt sociopolitical structures in the Ghanaian society. Their miserable state and their interactions with Mysterious reveal how vulnerable they are to abuse and as “tools” for crime and insecurity.

It has also been discussed that Mysterious himself develops from these miserable socioeconomic conditions into a sophisticated trickster-criminal who wields social power to manipulate and victimize others. His victimizing activities further reveal the weakness in the security and legal set-up of the country and how justice can unfairly be manipulated. The essay finally demonstrated that Mysterious appeals to the marginalized of his society as a hero, a Jungian archetype of success. Further research is needed to exploit the indigenous techniques used by novelists to address the different postcolonial complexities in African fiction and those of other postcolonial contexts.

Notes

1. In Ghanaian folklore and also in other African cultures, the trickster character is normally a gendered male. Among the Akan of Ghana, Ananse normally has a wife, called Aso, and a son, called Ntekuma.
2. “New disease” refers to the HIV AIDS pandemic across Africa in the 1990s.

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