



Kente: Cape Coast Journal of Literature and the Arts

Online ISSN: 2579-0285

<https://doi.org/10.47963/jla.v1i2.1993>

# Kente

Cape Coast Journal of Literature and the Arts

An Open Access Journal

Online ISSN: 2579-0285

<https://doi.org/10.47963/jla.v1i2.1993>

Volume (1) Number (2) 2026

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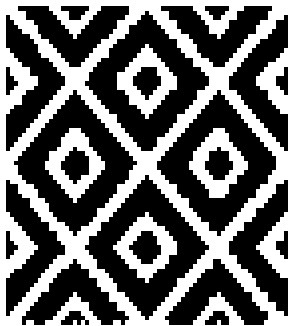
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## MYTH, MIGRANCY AND THE METROPOLE: AKAN-AFRICAN FOLKTALES AS A MYTHOCOLONIAL SYNTAX OF SURVIVAL

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### ABSTRACT

The quest for food has long been documented as a key structural paradigm in the African folktale tradition. The Akan *AnansesEm*, a subset of the tradition, does not deviate from this structural pattern. Many distinguished grammarians of the Akan folktale—Lee Haring (1972), Roger D. Abrahams (1983: 3), Ruth Minott Egglestone (2001), Lewis Hyde (1998: 20), Amissah-Arthur (2019)—maintain that the food trope represents the focal point around which the Ananse tale is organised. In spite of the above, there has been very minimal attempt to link the food quest to postcolonial African economic hardship and the economic migrancy that results from it. The present paper re-reads Ananse tales through the cross-disciplinary lenses of structural, postcolonial and mythopoetic theories to arrive at the conclusion that African folktales essentially provide a formulaic response to the existential hardship at home, or predict it. The tales demonstrate archetypal agency by revealing how the protagonists travel to the dangerous outskirts of the village or, defying all physical and metaphysical odds, venture into the forbidden forest of Sasabonsam, the archetypal Akan monster, to seek for a solution to the hunger at home. It is our argument that, whether they go by aircraft or rickety dinghy, whether by automobile or on foot across the Sahara Desert, whether they stow away, or travel legally, postcolonial Africans who migrate to Europe, America and elsewhere, in search for existential fulfilment are unconsciously re-enacting the quest for food as pertains in the Akan-African folktales. We suggest that the structural pattern of the tales Africans listen to as children provides a syntax for surviving threatening economic situations. The pattern furnishes a psychological blueprint for African self-preservation which unconsciously influences postcolonial Africans migratory practices.

**KEYWORDS:** Ananse folktales, African migration, Akan myths, colonial discourse, structural grammar

## **Introduction**

Many distinguished scholars of the Akan and African oral folktale tradition have noted the centrality of the food motif to the world of tales. The structural function of the motif is the fulcrum around which many grammarians of the tales construct their syntax. Whether we are looking at Ruth Minott Egglestone's tripartite structure of Ananse tales (2001), Alan Dundes' quadruple structure, Lee Haring's quintuple pattern (1972), or Amissah-Arthur's pornogrammar of the Akan folktale (2019), there is a recurring constant: the quest for food. Lewis Hyde, for instance, suggests that the "The trickster myth derives creative intelligence from appetite. It begins with a being whose main concern is getting fed" (1998: 20). For Roger D. Abrahams, "the focus on domestication [of crops and cattle] is of no little importance to an understanding of [the] stories[,] for one theme that informs and energizes them is hunger, indeed the constant threat of starvation" (1983: 3). The acute food shortage in the world of the Akan-African folktale often leads to the migration of the protagonist. On this quest, the protagonist must endure an arduous journey to the alien and dangerous evil forest at the outskirts of town in order to seek work and food from a mysterious character. The migrant then returns home to provide sustenance to the family. In spite of the substantial scholarship on the food quest in the African folktale, the pertinent questions of economic migrancy and the travails of the economic migrant in the mythical world of the Akan-African folktales have escaped any vigorous investigation.

The present study provides a structural reading of a select set of Akan-African folktales to postulate that the tales represent much more than evening entertainment in the African village or pedagogic narratives on social mores for African children, as standard criticism would have it. In our view, the tales formulate a grammar of economic intelligence, an archetypal syntax for survivalist decision-making in the face of the acute and volatile food in(security) at home. The syntax always begins and ends in the same pattern: the protagonist migrates to seek greener pastures and returns with resources to resolve the economic issue at home. We argue that the phenomenon of postcolonial African economic migrancy to the erstwhile metropolises of Empire—Europe and America—recalls Akan-African folktales as an unconscious paradigm for self-preservation, a blueprint for surviving economic hardship unconsciously imbibed from a lifetime of listening to and performing the tales. Thus, the dramatic rise in African economic migrations to all parts of the world—including the phenomenon of African 'Boat People' and those who trudge across the dangerous Sahara Desert in an attempt to reach Europe—may be regarded as a learned psychological response to the existential threats that often emanate from political, social, and economic factors in Africa. We suggest that the response is a learned mechanism because it seems inspired by the psychological syntax unconsciously absorbed from the grammar of the Akan-African folktale. This syntax is internalised by African children as they listen to the folktales adults tell. When these children grow, existential insecurities in adult life unconsciously activate the mental structures of survival learned from the folktales. In this sense, we may regard Akan-African folktales as a psychological prompter that dictates African responses to economic and other hardships. Our thesis, therefore, is that Akan-African folktales provide a mythopoeic grammar of survival in a postcolonial Africa often blighted by tribal conflicts, political violence, corruption, civil wars, poverty, hunger, and phenomenally poor leadership.

### Theoretical Frameworks

In his influential essay on the interrelations between myth and history, Richard Waswo argues that discourse—scientific, mythic, fictional, historical—generally has the capacity to influence human behaviour, to the extent of driving historical action (1998:542). In formulating what he calls “the constitutive power of discourse,” Waswo focuses on shifts in cultural thought, tracing its progression from myth to legend to history and to contemporary human action (1988: 54). Following Waswo, Shona N. Jackson articulates the constitutive power of myth and provides a mythocolonial perspective on how the oral traditions of indigenous peoples become the unlikely site for the performance of power (2005:86). For Waswo, as for Jackson, human life proceeds on ritualistic grounds, arguing that human action is constantly influenced by myth which is taken for history. Thus, life, for Jackson, represents an attempt to replicate the glorious folk stories and heroic tales of the dim past, even if that past has no factual basis. In this sense, art becomes not merely a reflection of life, but also a reflection for life, providing both inspiration and aspiration for human action. The ability of art to dictate to life is, perhaps, most compellingly demonstrated in the traditional African context, where artistic expression represents the backbone of the daily ritual of living. In many African societies, daily activities such as weeding of the farm, harvesting of crops, hunting, marriage, childbirth, child naming, funerals, war, festivals, religion, and indeed the entire business of life, become artistic discourses dictated by the appropriate linguistic, cultural, aesthetic, and performance protocols. Artistic expression, in this sense, becomes the very basis of reality. Waswo’s and Jackson’s views follow Roger D. Abrahams’ profound observation. According to Abrahams: “It would not be overstating the matter to note that in Black Africa, art is life and vice-versa, *not a mere reflection of humanity and community, but a directly engaged commentary on how things are or should be; rather than imitation, [art] heighten[s] and intensifie[s] humanity’s most important concerns*” (1983:9, my emphasis). Looked at critically, Waswo’s, Jackson’s, and Abraham’s theoretical/conceptual positions reflect ancient Akan philosophical thought prevalent in Akan totemism and proverbs.

Akan totemism is a sacred system of zoomorphic symbolism based on Akan matrilineal clans called *nton* in Akan-Twi and *ebusua* in Akan-Fante. Each clan has a representative animal totem whose characteristics are believed to typify the identity and tendencies of members of the matrilineage. Akan totemic culture represents a highly nuanced socio-spiritual, sociolinguistic and socio-philosophical system in which each *ebusua* possesses a comprehensive lore of narratives, proverbs, anecdotes, songs, greetings, and insinuations. For instance, the Nsona Ebusua, with the crow as its totemic animal, has a specific proverb: “*Nsona, yEmmpir kwa*” (literally, Nsona, we are not restless for nothing), inscribing the crow as a trope for survival. The crow, known for its habit of snatching food items—and even objects which are of no possible use to a bird, such as soaps—becomes emblematic for the clan. The Akan have two seemingly antithetical philosophical positions on the crow’s behaviour. First, they privilege the bird’s sharp instinct for food and other necessities as a desirable survivalist trait. For instance, the crow intuitively knows where to find food and flies to secure it. This is an inborn sentience that caters to self-preservation. But Akan people put a premium not only on the instincts of the bird; they also privilege the bird’s calculated industriousness: its ability to migrate long distances in search of food or its clever use of reconnaissance, scouting, and subterfuge to snatch food. In this sense, we observe that flying becomes not merely an instinctive, compulsive act, but a carefully planned performance: a performance of survival. By leaping into the air, then, the crow assumes a heavy responsibility, propelled by two inborn, seemingly opposed impulses: an automatic, instinctive approach to

survival, which we code as the natural aspect of the avian's life; and the determined, scheming to secure food, which we code as the 'cultural' aspect of the avian's life—cultural because it is a conscious effort. It is the antithesis between nature (instinct) and culture (intention) that produces the dialectical tension in the crow as a metaphor for survival. This tension is what Akan philosophical thought calls "*Pir*" (striving/restlessness/restiveness) as couched in the proverb, "*Nsona, yEmmpir kwa*" (Nsona, we are not restive/restless for nothing). Indeed, the double negative in the Akan proverb and its English translation signal this philosophical friction. The fundamental logic projected by the crow totem is that: one must be dynamic and adventurous in order to achieve one's economic goals. The totem cautions that a sedentary approach to life leads to poverty and hunger. The wisdom inherent in the Nsona totem is captured by two other Akan proverbs: "*Anoma enntu a, obua da*" (A bird that will not fly sleeps in hunger) and "*Wo ti faako a, wo ti woadeɛ so*" (If you sit at one place, you sit on your troubles). All three proverbs inscribe the logic of the quest/motion—"pir" (be restive), "tu" (fly/migrate), "*m'ennti fako*" (do not be sedentary)—as the redemptive solution for the economic insecurity at home. The Akan philosophical thought expressed above finds its epitome in the character of Kweku Ananse, the archetypal Akan Trickster, who is the central and eponymous figure in the Akan folktale tradition (*Anansesɛm*). Ananse represents the quintessential embodiment of the concept of "*pir*" (movement/flight/migration/striving). Without movement, Ananse and his family face starvation. Thus, Ananse's sense of being is defined by a perpetual state of motion, realised as instability. He shape-shifts between anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms; he lives in human society but migrates to the ceiling of the building or the treetops or the forest, when the social situation becomes unbearable; he is the divine brother of Nyankopon (the Supreme God), but prefers to remain in the secular realms to obtain his sustenance on his own terms; he is the fool, but also the clever trickster; he is an artful thief, but also the benevolent culture hero who gifts humanity with light, language, speech, story, wisdom and technology (Amissah-Arthur 2021). Ananse's character, therefore, typifies the concepts of survivalist motion: "*pir*," "*tu*," "*ennti faako*." In other words, Ananse's life dramatises the tension between two antithetical economic states: the first being that of an unproductive, aboriginal, autochthonous state—represented by the home—which is no longer able to support life; and the second, an alien, allochthonous state—represented by the evil forest of the Akan-African folktale/foreign land, which promises sustenance, despite its dangers. Acknowledging this tension, Akan philosophical thought chooses migration over staying in a stale, static, and unproductive home, cautioning that: "*Wo ti faako a, wo ti woadeɛ so*" (If you sit at one place, you sit on your troubles).

We contend that, in the face of the bleak economic realities of postcolonial Africa, African migrants have had to re-imagine their folktales as a template for negotiating survival and self-preservation, as the European, American, and Asian economic grass seems greener at present than the grass at home. For these Africans, most of whom have lived in the vibrant oral folktale tradition, the grammar of the folktales—venturing into the dangerous but resourceful evil forest to obtain food for the starving village—becomes the linguistic resource for articulating and negotiating survival. By undertaking the hazardous journeys on foot across the Sahara Desert, or by sailing in overloaded dinghies across the Mediterranean to reach Europe, these Africans are essentially re-narrating or re-performing their folktales in the spirit of the "*yEmmpir kwa*" (restiveness) edict or the "*tu*" (fly/migrate/uproot) imperative of the Akan proverb. Artistic and mythical discourse, as Abrahams, Waswo, and Jackson rightly suggest, constructs meaning and reality, as they provide an unconscious plot for people to follow. Within the context of the dialogue

among the various frameworks—Abraham’s, Waswo’s, Jackson’s, and traditional Akan-African philosophical thought—we conceptualise Akan-African folktales as a mythocolonial drama whose structural paradigm provides an unconscious, ritualistic template of survival for the Akan-African. This template enables them to re-imagine and re-enact their archetypal tales in the context of economic migrancy, self-preservation, and centre-periphery relations.

### **Methodology**

Our methodological approach follows the syntagmatic structural logic pioneered by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968). In this logic, literary form is regarded as a systematic linearity where action is viewed as sequential and chronological, as already pertains in the text. “Thus, if a [text] consists of elements A to Z, the structure of the [text] is delineated in terms of the same sequence” (1968: xi). Deriving from this methodology, Propp concludes that there are:

Both constant and variable [elements] ... in the [folktale]. The names of the dramatis personae change (as well as the attribute of each), but neither their actions nor functions change. From this [he] draws the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages. This makes possible the study of the tale *according to the functions of its dramatis personae*. (1968: 20, original emphasis)

The Proppian paradigm reduces all actions in the folktale to thirty-one functions. In his system, a “function” is “an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action” (21). Though Propp’s work is based on his study of Russian fairytales, his work provides critical implications for the study of the structure of folktales and other folk narratives across many traditions. For the present study, his notion of narrative structure as a linear sequential system; his concept of literary “function” as a piece of action that has transformative implications for the story; and his observation that there are only thirty-one functions in the folktale, represent a methodological blueprint. Following Propp, we reduce each of the select set of Ananse tales to its barest, skeletal form in order to outline the pattern of transformational actions and functional consistencies. These delineated elements will be read as representing a structural paradigm of a specific body of Ananse tales: the tales of the quest.

### **The Data for the Analysis**

The study is based on an analysis of a select set of thirteen Ananse tales: three from Robert Sutherland Rattray’s collection of tales, *Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales* (1930); six from Christiane Owusu-Sarpong’s edited collection, *Trilingual Anthology of Akan Folktales* (1998); and four from William H. Barker’s collected *West African Folk-Tales* ([1917], 2010). To facilitate referencing, we itemise the tales as follows:

1. “How Okoto, the Crab, Got a Shell, and Aberewa, the Old Woman, Got White Hair” (Rattray, 1930: 31-35)
2. “When Someone Spoils Something Belonging to You (Accidentally), Do Not Accept Payment for It” (Rattray 1930: 89-93)
3. “Poor Orphan” (Christiane Owusu-Sarpong 1998:7-14)
4. “How Spear-Grass Came into the Tribe” (Rattray 1930: 213-219)
5. “The Reason Why All Hunters Are Poor” (Owusu-Sarpong 1998: 53-59)
6. “How Stomach Became King” (Owusu-Sarpong 1998: 74-80)
7. “Frempomaa Killed Her Only Child” (Owusu-Sarpong 1998: 95-99)

8. “The Golden Tail of the Queen Mother of Elephants” (Owusu-Sarpong 1998: 134-141)
9. “Life and Death” (Owusu-Sarpong 1998: 158-162)
10. “Thunder and Anansi” (Barker [1917], 2010: n.p)
11. “Tit for Tat” (Barker [1917], 2010: n.p.)
12. “Why White Ants Always Harm Man’s Property” (Barker [1917], 2010: n.p.)
13. “The Grinding-Stone That Ground Flour by Itself” (Barker [1917], 2010: n.p.)

The tales, taken from publications from 1917 (Barker’s), 1930 (Rattray’s), and 2010 (Owusu-Sarpong’s), provide data straddling a period of nearly a hundred years, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such data provides a diachronic perspective on thematic concerns of the Akan-African people from the colonial days to postcolonial times, enabling us to track the pattern of existential anxieties that dominate the Akan-African social and economic space, and how these anxieties are negotiated through literary expression.

### Formulating the Grammar

Following the Proppian logic, we conceptualise the select set of tales as a linguistic system comprising structural constants and variables. The interplay between the constants and variables produces a formulaic pattern that becomes a structural grammar of the tales, a narrative paradigm applicable to a particular cycle of Ananse tales: the tales that involve the existential quest motif. We start by delineating the structural consistencies or constants. All thirteen tales examined demonstrate a stable sequence of actions/functions which we systematise as follows:

- A. **Lack:** Almost all the stories begin with a severe lack, which threatens life, often a lack of food leading to famine (stories 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13). Sometimes, the threat is from a lack of wealth or a loss of an expensive object such as jewellery (stories 2, 3), or a mirror (story 2).
- B. **Villainy:** There is always a villain or a threatening circumstance that complicates the initial lack. For instance, in story 2 and 3, Ata Kuma loses the heirloom (beads and golden trinkets) and her villainous sister insists she pay back with things that are humanly impossible to acquire; in story 6, Head, Hand and Leg are sent out of the house by their father to fend for themselves; and in story 7, Frempomaa kills her son. Sometimes the threatening condition is the initial state itself: for instance, being sent out of the home to fend for oneself.
- C. **Migrancy:** The protagonist always departs from the homestead on a quest to resolve the lack. The trip, often described as “a long distance,” “a journey to the deep forest” (story 1,2,3,7,11), a journey to a “forbidden” or supernatural place, is fraught with life-threatening danger, but always takes the protagonist to a resourceful place. In most cases, the destination is an underground village, an old woman’s abode, or a town at the bottom of the sea (4,5,8,9,10). Stories 9 and 10, particularly, heighten the dangerous nature of the journey by locating the destination in the fearsome house of *Sasabonsam* (the Akan Devil) and the village of Thunder, respectively. In all cases, the protagonist takes this hazardous journey on foot. In one significant case (story 10), he goes by a rickety boat and flounders six times before he succeeds at the seventh try. This particular tale, for instance, preempts the perilous Mediterranean journeys undertaken by ‘African Boat People’.

**D. Tester and Reaction:** At the forbidden place, the protagonist encounters a benefactor or tester. This character puts the protagonist to work or gives the protagonist a test whose successful completion earns the protagonist a reward to alleviate the lack at home. There are two types of testers: the benevolent and the cheat. The tester is often characterised as *Nana Aberewa* (Old Woman) (story 1, 2, 3, 4, 8); a supernatural being such as *Sasabonsam* (the Devil), *Owuo* (Death), and Thunder (story 5, 9, 10). The testing character could also be a mystical object, such as a magical palm tree or a grinding-stone that grinds maize by itself (story 6, 13). There are three types of work/tests that the protagonist must successfully perform to earn the necessary reward from the tester. The following are the types of tests:

- i. **A Task with an Inverted Logic:** The protagonist is expected to perform a task with an inverted logic, where the ethos of the human world is suspended, and mystical rules apply. For instance, during harvest time, the yam that says “dig me” is not harvested; the one that says “don’t dig me” is harvested; the peels of the yams are cooked and real yam thrown away; the pounding of fufu (an Akan meal) is done using Old Woman’s nose as the mortar (story 1) and not the traditional wooden mortar. Also, to enter *Sasabonsam*’s house, which has no doors and windows, the protagonist spits into the air and onto the ground and closes his eyes in order to be mystically transported into the house. In the house, *Sasabonsam* eats meat and vomits gold (story 4). In another village, there is only one house and one inhabitant (story 9). The logic of the forbidden spaces and tests represents a complete reversal of reality as known in regular, human environments.
- ii. **A Demand for an Impossible Object:** The test may involve the protagonist having to secure impossible items such as *Etwie bowerE* (the claw of Leopard), *Aserewa perEbwo* (the nest of Sunbird), *Ponponponponsa* (Water That Gurgles), *Ahan Korɔ* (The Single Leaf on a Tree with a Single Leaf) and *Eson Hema Dua* (the tale of Queen of Elephants) (Story 2); the eyelash of Elephant, the nails of Leopard, the leaves of the sacred tree called *Ahum ne Ahum*, half of the pipe of the dwarf called *Adepa Akua* and the crust of dirt off the back on *Nana Abrewa* (Old Woman) (story 3). Obviously, these are impossible tasks for ordinary mortals, signifying the heroic logic of the quest and its tests.
- iii. **A Test of Character:** The protagonist’s reaction to the tests requires a significant demonstration of restraint and humility in the face of glaring provocations. He or she must show willingness to work in spite of the difficult and sometimes unfair rules that prevail in these forbidden places. For instance, the protagonist of story 1 does all the work every day—fetching the game, preparing the soup, harvesting the yams, and pounding the fufu—and yet she is denied food for eight consecutive days, until she discovers and calls the tester by the rightful name. Similarly, the protagonist of story 3 sweeps, washes, cleans, and sets *Nana Aberewa*’s house in good order, before the latter grants her request. In story 5, *Sasabonsam* consumes all the game Hunter and his son bring home. He denies them food for one week, until they learn to outwit him. In story 6, the siblings Leg, Hand, and Head become servants to their youngest brother, Stomach. When Stomach is hungry, Leg runs to the farm; Hand gathers the food, and Head carries it home, where Hand cooks and serves it to Stomach. The three brothers know no comfort until Stomach is satisfied. In story 9, the tester is *Owuo* (Death). The protagonist, *Ntikuma*, works for *Owuo*, fetching water, cooking, and serving

him meals, before he (Ntikuma) obtains some meat, cocoyam, and cassava to feed his family. The objective of this type of trial is to gauge the protagonist's discipline, fortitude, forbearance, and uprightness.

E. **Reward:** The protagonist's reaction to the test—humility, obedience, fortitude, patience, uprightness—leads to the tester granting him or her a reward: the much sought-after resource that resolves the lack. Here, there are four classes of items that play the reward function: food, mystical objects, impossible items, and wealth. Let us examine these reward items.

1. **Food:** Of the thirteen tales studied, eight, representing 61.5%, indicate food as a reward. The coveted food items include: meat, yams, cocoyam, cassava, maize-flour and honey (story 1, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13). The centrality of the food trope highlights the importance of survival and existential concerns to the Akan-African literary imagination and cultural productions. The trope coincides with many oral traditions and folk histories that recount the pressures imposed by food shortages in the course of the great migrations that brought the Akan and other African peoples to their present geographical locations. Persistent in the communal and folk imaginary, the food trope is also indicative of the severe disruptions, ruptures and destruction caused by the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the agrarian economies of the peoples in the geographical area now called Ghana. These two factors may explain the preponderance of the food motif in not only the stories and songs, but also the traditional festivals of the Akan and other ethnicities in Ghana. From the savannah zones through the forest areas to the coastal plains of Ghana, traditional celebrations are either outright food festivals or oriented towards culinary values and ecological best practices. Classic examples include: Edina *Bakatue*, a fishing festival; Simpa *Aboakyir*, a deer-hunting festival; and *Kpini Chugu* of Dagbon and Mamprugu, a guinea fowl festival. There are also yam festivals: Akuapem *Odwira*, Akyem Abuakwa *Ohum*, Bono/Nkyeraa *Fofie* and Asogli Yam Festival. The *Kundum* of the Nzema and Ahanta, and *Homowo* of the Ga are all food based. Thus, the overwhelming presence of the food trope as a reward item in the tales is closely linked with the communal experience.
2. **Mystical Objects:** Seven out of the thirteen stories (53.8%) feature magical agents as a reward for the protagonist. The objects include a mirror through which the protagonist can see *Asamando*, the spiritual world of the departed ancestors (Story 2); a magical knife which hunts game by itself (story 4); deities who kill the antagonist (story 5); a palm tree that can predict the future (story 6); a talisman that gives the protagonist shape-shifting abilities (story 7); a pot that cooks food by itself (story 10); and a grinding-stone that grinds maize by itself (story 11). As seen from the above, four of the seven mystical objects acquired by the protagonist, representing 57.14% of all the mystical items, are food-producing agents (stories 4, 6, 7, and 11). This evidence reinforces the centrality of food and survival to the world of the tales.
3. **The Impossible Items:** Another set of items the protagonist earns are objects whose acquisition is either impossible or tantamount to a certain death. These items have already been listed above under the sub-heading: "A Demand for an Impossible Object" (story 2, 3). The acquisition of the body parts of Leopard and Elephant, or drawing water from a simmering water body, a possible reference to seismic activity, poses great danger to the

protagonist. The acquisition of such items has the function of inscribing the life-threatening precariousness of the quest. Two of the thirteen tales (15.38%) have this trope.

4. **Wealth:** Often coming in the form of money and gold, wealth is another important reward item. Four out of the thirteen tales studied, representing 30.8% of the tales, indicate wealth as the end product of the quest. For instance, in story 5, the farmer and his son initially go in search of food, but end up obtaining a huge haul of Sasabonsam's gold. That the wealth is obtained by working for the Devil indicates the dangers and hazards inherent in working and acquiring wealth in a foreign space. In story 7 and story 8, the protagonists work hard at the peril of their lives and return from their sojourns with huge bags of money and a gold ring, respectively. In story 13, the protagonist sells food to the starving community to earn himself a lot of money.

In all the stories, the protagonists' quests are based on acquiring the following items, arranged in the order of importance: food (61.5%), mystical items (53.8%), financial wealth (30.8%), and life-threatening items (15.38%). The evidence provides a good indication of the domains of control and resources that dominate the Akan-African folk psychology. It is a psychology that is hugely focused on self-preservation (food and wealth) and mysticism (mystical items). In the context, even mysticism is oriented towards self-preservation, with 57.14%, 28.57%, and 28.57% of all the mystical items oriented towards: food-production, divination for success, and self-protection, respectively.

**Return:** The penultimate function of the plot is the successful return home of the protagonist to resolve the lack. In this regard, twelve of the thirteen tales (93.2%) end with the protagonist making a return home after a difficult sojourn. Even in story 1, where the protagonist's return is not explicitly stated, there is an implied indication that she returns home.

**Resolution of Lack:** The final function of the plot is the resolution of the initial lack, which triggers the quest. Upon the protagonist's return home, and buoyed up by his or her new status as a resourceful person, the protagonist liquidates the original existential lack. If the lack was hunger, he or she returns with enough food to feed the family and sometimes the entire community. If the lack was financial indebtedness, he or she returns with substantial financial resources—typically bags full of money, a haul of gold or gold rings—to pay off the debt and rescue the situation. In pursuit of Proppian structural logic, we configure the delineated narrative functions as a formulaic structure. The structure represents the skeletal form of the plots of the entire set of thirteen folktales, highlighting their most basic, constant, and irreducible action units or functions:

**Initial State + Lack—Villain/Complication—Departure—Tester/Test—Reaction/Reward—Return/Resolution**

The formula can be interpreted as follows:

An **Initial State** of a **Lack** exists at the beginning of the plot. This initial lack is **Complicated** by a **Villain** who threatens the protagonist. The protagonist **Departs** from the community to a foreign land where he or she encounters a benevolent/malevolent **Tester** who **Tests** the protagonist. The protagonist **Reacts** positively to the test and gets the appropriate **Reward**. The protagonist **Returns** home and uses the reward to **Resolve** the initial lack.

Derived from our application of the statistical-scientific methodological approach of Proppian structuralism, this formula represents the structural grammar of the Ananse tales of the quest. In other words, this grammar is the overarching set of functional principles that governs all the Ananse quest tales. Looked at critically, it is not merely a grammar of human survival, but also of migrant agency and productivity. It is a formula for the performance of the “*yɛmmpir kwa*” (restiveness) or the “*tu*” (fly/migrate/uproot) edicts of the traditional Akan thought. Though Ananse stories are often told to children, the grammar of the tales indicates adult pedagogy. What this means is that the Ananse tales of the quest and its grammar are a powerful, utilitarian template of adult behaviour casually and openly offered to children, in the guise of storytelling and entertainment. The template might assume a crucial psychological dimension later in adult life, as it could dictate and influence strategies of survival and self-preservation. In this sense, the grammar becomes a latent code given to the Akan-African children to help unlock themselves from the existential strictures and economic cages that are bound to emerge in adult life. From this perspective, the performance of Ananse tales to children represents a playful but potent initiation into the secrets of self-preservation. There seems to be a paradox here, then: the grammar of the Ananse tale as a *secret/serious* code that is *plainly/playfully* given to all. This inherent paradox represents the very essence of Ananse and Anansesɛm, the Akan trickster and his mythopoeic oral tradition. They both exist on the borderlines of reality. Ananse and Anansesɛm, therefore, represent ancient Akan philosophical models of discursivity and dialectical negotiation, often employed in the service of reconciling and reconfiguring antithetical positionalities where glaring social and economic disequilibrium makes life unsustainable. After many years of listening to and performing these tales, the grammar of the tales and their inherent paradoxes are internalised in the collective unconsciousness of the Akan-African child to be reactivated and reperformed on the much larger and more decisive proscenium of adult life.

### **The Mythocolonial Syntax**

What is mythocolonial? A grammar derived from mythical material is already oriented heavily towards mythology, but what about the “colonial” in the “mythocolonial?” In other words, how does mythology, traditionally associated with primordial thought, engage with modernity and postcolonial experience? Postcolonial discourse—in both its literary and critical forms—has comprehensively documented the failure of the African Dream after independence. The oeuvres of Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and other writers articulate the initial shock and disillusionment that resulted from the corruption, nepotism, and dictatorship of the immediate post-independence African leadership. The works of the contemporary generation of African writers, such as Kofi Anyidoho, Mawuli Adzei, Amma Darko, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and many others, focus on similar and newly emerging concerns, including gender and political violence, ecological and human rights issues, lack of job opportunities, economic inequalities and mass impoverishment. With these issues forming the basis of a prolific culture of misgovernance in postcolonial Africa, many disillusioned Africans scramble to travel out of the continent to access better living conditions. The direction of such migration is often towards the erstwhile colonial metropolises: London, Paris, Lisbon, Berlin, Brussels, Rome, Madrid, and the United States of America. In this regard, we recognise a structural correlation between the African experience in the mythopoeic world of the Ananse tales and the contemporary logic in postcolonial Africa. In our view, the same grammar operates in both contexts.

In what represents a conceptual metaphoric situation, the grammar of the folktales coincides with the existential grammar of contemporary postcolonial Africa. We demonstrate the correlation as follows. The first function of the folktales, an “initial state of a lack,” mirrors the state of economic deprivation in postcolonial Africa. In the tales, this function involves various forms of economic hardship—famine, starvation, poverty, and lack of resources—which situation strikingly reflects the reality in many postcolonial African societies. This initial function is compounded by the second function, where a “villain” or “complication” makes life worse for the already impoverished characters in the tale. This second narrative function maps to the governance and leadership conundrum in postcolonial Africa, a context often characterised by dictatorships, failed and bastardised state institutions, compromised judiciaries, weakened chieftaincies, and, ultimately, failed leadership. The function of the ‘villain’ therefore maps to African leadership or situations that produce intense political, social, economic, and psychological pressures to worsen the plight of the already deprived peoples of Africa. In the folktales, the threat to life does not come from only the ‘villain’; it is sometimes produced by a ‘complication’ linked directly or indirectly to the villain. In real life, this function weighs heavily on all postcolonial African societies as they struggle to negotiate nationhood amid ‘complicated situations’ such as: foreign aid, International Monetary Fund conditionalities, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex Asexual+ (LGBTQIA+) legislations<sup>1</sup> and the challenges associated with HIV/AIDS, ecological degradation and climate change. In Ghana and South Africa, for instance, a key complication is illegal mining—“galamsey” in Ghana and “zama zama” in South Africa—which destroys farmlands and poisons sources of drinking water with toxic chemicals. The cumulative effects of the functions, ‘villainy’ and ‘complications’, lead to another function: ‘Departure’. In the context of the folktales, ‘departure’ involves travelling out of one’s community to work in a resourceful foreign land in order to obtain the necessary resources to resolve the lack at home. In real life postcolonial African experience, ‘departure’ often means migrating to the erstwhile colonial metropole, usually Europe and America, and, by extension, any foreign space that is perceived, even marginally, to be more resourceful than home. These migrations happen in periodic waves and involve a set of constants and complex variable elements. We briefly provide an annotation of the categories of ‘departure’ below:

**Departure<sup>1</sup>:** A late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century migratory phenomenon, this wave sends the first-generation of African intellectuals and political thought leaders to Europe to acquire a Western education. As first-hand witnesses to “the destabilization and the dismantling of the [African] continent’s indigenous states by European powers,...the theft and industrial-scale exploitation of their lands by colonial administrations,...the indignity of forensic control of their peoples and...the deconstruction of the spiritual fabric of the[ir] cultures (Casely-Hayford 2024: vii),” this group of young, dynamic and politically-conscious African intellectuals enrol in prestigious European and American universities. Their objective is to acquire the coloniser’s intellectual frameworks, theories and philosophies with which to combat colonisation. Recognising that the colonial ideological machinery is an assemblage of parochial, capitalist, political, legalistic, pseudoscientific, cultural, and racist Eurocentric frameworks, these African intellectuals go to Europe to acquire the tools and vocabularies that empower them to mount an intellectual challenge against the colonial institution and seek reforms, redress, and a better deal for Africa. Within this context, scholars such as John Mensah Sarbah, Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford, Kobina Sekyi,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thediversitymovement.com/lgbtq-alphabet/>; retrieved: June 21, 2025

Attoh Ahuma (Ghana); Bandele Omoniyi (Nigeria), Marc Kojo Tovalou Houenou (Benin), Pixley Isaka Seme (South Africa), among many others, took various degrees from the European academy. They returned home after their studies fully equipped to mount an intellectual assault on the colonial machinery.<sup>2</sup> “They had the sophistication to understand that while Europe’s African territories were won by Gatling gun and canon, [Africa’s] autonomy and dignity would best be regained in law courts and through an unrelenting campaign waged upon the bigger stage of international political opinion” (Casely-Hayford 2024: viii). This pioneer group of scholars, journalists, and lawyers knew that “It would be through words of legislation and petitions that Africans would seek to build their own beachhead in response to Empire” (Casely-Hayford 2024: viii). To put this distinguished generation of African scholars in the proper historical and intellectual perspective, we crave the licence to digress a little here. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s widely accepted definition of the term, ‘Postcolonialism’, “cover[s] all the culture[s] affected by the imperial process *from the moment of colonization* to the present day.” In other words, ‘Postcolonialism’ “is concerned with the world as it exists *during* and after the period of European imperial domination” (my emphasis) ([1989], 2002:2). If Ashcroft et al.’s insightful definition is valid, then, it is to this first generation of African intellectuals/thinkers we owe the distinction as originators of Postcolonialism.<sup>3</sup> It is this generation of scholars that defines and formulates the initial principles of liberation of the colonised, inscribing the spirit and letter of what has come to be known as postcolonial studies. Taking inspiration from the early anticolonial Akan-African kings and queens, such as the exiled Nana Kobina Gyan of Elmina and others, these scholars produce the first African intellectual treatises, cultural essays, political theories, novels, drama, poetry and debates. For instance, Kobina Sekyi, regarded as an “original African philosopher and political theorist,” produces an oeuvre of unpublished works—essays, manuscripts and literary pieces—covering the period 1910 to 1952 and running into almost twelve volumes (Langley 1979:4), aside from his numerous publications. To this generation of African scholars, therefore, belong what might be legitimately called the first postcolonial literary works in Africa: *Marita: or the Folly of Love* (1884), the first novel written by an African; J.E. Casely Hayford’s *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation* (1911); and Kobina Sekyi’s *The Blinkards* (1915) and *The Anglo-Fanti* (1918).<sup>4</sup> These literary works, in addition to the critical essays, help sustain an intellectual assault on detrimental colonial policies, such as the Marriage Ordinance of 1884, the Land Bill of 1892<sup>5</sup> and the Municipal Ordinance of 1926<sup>6</sup>. The incendiary nature of some of these literary and intellectual material accounts for the reason some of these works are published under pseudonyms. For instance, the novel, *Marita: or the Folly of Love* and

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<sup>2</sup> See Ayo Langley’s compendious *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa 1856-1970*. London: Rex Collings, 1979 for a comprehensive overview on modern African intellectual training and political thought.

<sup>3</sup> The trio of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha, often credited as founders of the field of Postcolonialism/Postcolonial Studies, would actually come much later.

<sup>4</sup> The novels of the distinguished Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor and others do not represent the foundation of modern African literature nor the inception of Postcolonial Literature, as has often been assumed. These writers take their themes, concerns and, even, literary forms from the earlier generation of nationalist writers.

<sup>5</sup> See the chapter on John Mensah Sarbah’s “Fanti Customary Laws” in Ayo Langley’s *Ideologies of Liberation of Black Africa 1850-1970*, p. 88

<sup>6</sup> See J.E. Casely Hayford’s submission against the introduction of the Municipal Ordinance of 1926. The ordinance sought to sever the relationship between the chiefs of southern Ghana and the generic body of the people they ruled. The opinion is published in *The Gold Coast Leader*, December 18, 1926, p.34. It is available at: [https://history.genie.stanford.edu/gold\\_coast\\_leader/gold\\_coast\\_leader\\_10352](https://history.genie.stanford.edu/gold_coast_leader/gold_coast_leader_10352)

the scorching critique of the Marriage Ordinance of 1884 titled, “The Marriage Question,” are both published under the pennames, “A. Native” and “Credence”<sup>7</sup> respectively. It was an imperative at the time that the colonised intellectuals hide their identities to avoid harassment from the colonial authorities. Effectively, therefore, it is this generation of African intellectuals and nationalists that defines and inaugurates the discursive framework of Postcolonialism. In what may constitute an instance of intellectual parochialism, however, this first generation of African intellectuals is often denied its due recognition and dismissed merely as the anticolonial generation. Following Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2002:2), it is logical to suggest that the anticolonial is already in the postcolonial and decolonial, and the generation in question must be accorded the rightful recognition as the founders of the field. We now return to our substantive discourse, that is, mapping the narrative grammar to real-life experience in postcolonial Africa.

**Departure<sup>1</sup>** which produces the illustrious first generation of African thinkers, is, therefore, an imperative act of existential necessity: the need to acquire European intellectual resources to confront the colonial ‘villainy’ and its ‘complications’ at home.

**Departure<sup>2</sup>:** This occurs from the immediate pre-independence to the early post-independence era, a period that falls roughly between the late early 1940s to the mid-1960s. The great age of decolonisation, this period witnesses the increasing demand and push for self-governance by Sub-Saharan African countries, leading to the independence of Ghana in 1957. To take up the leadership and nation-building responsibilities that await the removal of the coloniser, the second generation of African intellectuals follow the footprints of the earlier generation to pursue Western education. The overwhelming majority of these migrant intellectuals go to the colonial capitals, specifically London, Paris, and Lisbon. To this generation belong Kwame Nkrumah, Kofi Abrefa Busia (Ghana); Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria); Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya); Julius Nyerere (Tanzania); Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), and others. The inheritors of the original anticolonial/postcolonial/ decolonial intellectual heritage bequeathed by Casely Hayford’s generation, many from this second generation, eventually lead their nations to freedom. Departure<sup>2</sup> is, therefore, a political and administrative imperative to secure the foundations of the newly independent Africa.

**Departure<sup>3</sup>:** Happening between the mid-1960s and 1980s, this epoch constitutes the beginning of economic migrations from Africa. Disillusioned by the mismanagement of the African economies and the failure of the new African political leadership to meet the developmental needs of their peoples, many Africans migrate to Spain, Italy, and Germany to seek greener pastures, bringing about the “Hamburger/Borger” migratory phenomenon in Ghanaian parlance. “Hamburger/Borger” is a reference to Ghanaians who migrate to the German city of Hamburg to seek work. In time, ‘Borgership’ comes to represent economic migration to Europe. A common feature of Departure<sup>3</sup> is that the “Borgers” often return home to flaunt their newly acquired wealth and material resources, thus inducing others to migrate. Departure<sup>3</sup> is, therefore, a hugely crucial existential intervention for the economic survival of many Africans.

**Departure<sup>4</sup>:** This wave of migrations, occurring between the 1990s and 2000s, is a response to the continual economic and political instability in Africa. In this epoch, Africans of various

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<sup>7</sup> See the critical article titled, “The Marriage Question” by a native who writes under the pseudonym, “Credence,” on the Marriage Ordinance and published by *Gold Coast Leader* of December 22, 1906. Read an electronic copy at: [https://history.genie.stanford.edu/gold\\_coast\\_leader/gold\\_coast\\_leader\\_2596](https://history.genie.stanford.edu/gold_coast_leader/gold_coast_leader_2596)

competencies—both the highly-skilled and unskilled—head out of the continent to work in Europe, America, and Asia. With neocolonial interventions such as the American Green Card Lottery offering citizenship to the highly-educated and professional demography, African human capital flights to rejuvenate the American and European economies. Unlike the cases of Departure<sup>1</sup>, Departure<sup>2</sup> and Departure<sup>3</sup>, the posturing of Departure<sup>4</sup> migrants indicate their unwillingness to return home. For instance, Ghana has one of the highest rates of visa overstays in the United States, with 21% and 7%, respectively, of students and tourists failing to return home after visiting<sup>8</sup> (*Daily Graphic Online*, 2025). To resolve the economic hardship at home, which necessitates the departure, Departure<sup>4</sup> migrants resort to the use of modern internet-based telecommunication and banking technologies to connect with loved ones and transfer funds home.

**Departure<sup>5</sup>:** This is the phenomenon of African ‘Boat People,’ a term which “generally conjures images of individuals departing Africa across the Mediterranean towards Europe” (D’Orsi et al. 2017: 353). The phenomenon starts gradually in the 1990s, with North Africans using boats to illegally reach Europe after Italy and Spain introduce the visa system. The practice increases dramatically from the 2000s, with Sub-Saharan Africans joining and outnumbering North African migrants (Haas 2008:9). A recent study on West and Central African migrations to Europe via North Africa provides instructive insights. The report indicates that the overwhelming reason for migrating (73.8%) is economic, with 57.14% of this number citing lack of job opportunities at home and 28.15% pointing to the socio-economic appeal of the destination, citing factors such as education, welfare systems, and social security (Allie et al., 2021: 4).

**Departure<sup>6</sup>:** It is insightful, also, to note that while 5% of all African migrations are directed towards North America and Europe, 90% of all African migrations actually occur within the borders of the African continent in the forms of inter-country and intra-country migrations (D’Orsi et al., 2017: 353). The inter-country economic migrations proceed from the landlocked Sahelian region southward to relatively stronger economies such as Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, and Nigeria. In addition, there are lateral movements eastward and westward across borders. Running parallel to the inter-country migrations are the intra-country southward migrations. In Ghana, this phenomenon involves the rural-urban drift, which brings young people, mostly from the northern regions, to the cities and ex-colonial capitals in search of better opportunities. Looked at critically, whether on the inter-country or intra-country front, there is a lot of movement southward towards the sea and former colonial enclaves. In the context of our grammatical discussion, ex-colonial spaces, such as Cape Coast, Accra, Takoradi (Ghana), Abidjan (Cote d’Ivoire), and Lagos (Nigeria), become, in the psychology of the internal African migrant, functional/metonymic representations of Europe. The perception of these spaces as the psychological annexes of Europe then drives the human traffic southward as these spaces come to represent the ideal economic destinations. In this context, the proliferation of Nigerian businesses on the streets of Accra and vice versa, and the “Kayayei” phenomenon that brings young females from the rural north of Ghana to become market porters in Accra, should be read as the same psychobehavioural syntax as the grammar of the Ananse tales.

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<sup>8</sup> See Pacome Emmanuel Damalie’s report in *Daily Graphic Online*. June 30, 2025.  
<https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-21-ghanaian-students-overstayed-in-us-minister.html>;  
retrieved: October 9, 2025.

From our systematic categorisation and analysis of the function of Departure, it is evident that the structural function of Departure in real life reflects that of the narrative grammar. In the narratives, as in real-life experiences, the grammar is the same, overwhelmingly dictated by intense economic pressures. Indeed, even the hugely intellectual migrations of Departure<sup>1</sup> and Departure<sup>2</sup> may be understood in the context of economics; that is, securing the African national, cultural, and economic freedoms from the threat of colonial exploitation, given that colonialism is a hugely economic ideology. The crucial point we are trying to establish here is that all the migrations—whether out of Africa or within the continent or within the nations—are merely an expression of the same grammatical principle derived from the folktales. In other words, all six waves or types of Departure are merely a re-enactment of the Akan-African and analogous concepts of survival, such as “*yɛmmpir kwa*” (we are not restless for nothing), or “*wo ti faako a, wo ti w’adeɛ so*” (if you sit at one place, you sit on your issues), or “*anoma enntu a obua da*” (a bird that would not fly, sleeps hungry), or, indeed, Ananse’s migratory paradigm of swinging between worlds. All these pieces of ancestral Akan thought project one fundamental logic: movement is survival. This realisation indicates that, under existential threat, the Akan-African tends to utilize the psychological and interpretative facility acquired through the folk poetics: Ananse tales, proverbs, clan aphorisms, and other cultural tropes.

#### **Tester/Test and Reward:**

In the narrative grammar, the protagonist meets a tester or benefactor in a foreign land; the character tests the protagonist by setting him or her a task for which a reward is given. The difficulty of the task is compounded by the fact that life in the foreign land is either governed by an inverted logic; or the task itself is humanly impossible; or the activity provides an extreme test of human character. In other words, the foreign land in the folktales, often described as an evil forest, represents a hostile space that confronts the migrant protagonist with insurmountable social and labour challenges. This unit of the narrative grammar parallels the actual lived experiences of real-life African migrant workers in Europe, America, and elsewhere. African migrants, both the high- and low-skilled, often report discrimination, racism, exploitation, and dehumanisation in many parts of the world. To typify these challenges, we will cite the classic case of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the distinguished Kenyan writer and intellectual. Ngugi recounts an incident that occurred in 2006 in San Francisco, in the United States of America, where a white hotel manager orders him to leave the lobby of the very hotel he is lodging in. In the view of the manager, an African does not belong in the luxurious space. In spite of the fact that Ngugi stays in one of the most expensive suites in the hotel; in spite of the personal apologies later rendered by the Chief Executive Officer of the hotel group; and in spite of the fact that the hotel group issues a public apology in the newspapers; a purported worker at the hotel posts a distasteful remark online justifying the action of the offending white manager and insinuating that Ngugi not only reeks of body odour, he also wears dreadlocks and filthy clothing. Ngugi responds: “I don’t wear dreadlocks, was not even seeking service, [and] wore a reasonably decent dashiki.” He continues, “somebody saw dreadlocks and what images they conjured up in the head, where there were none” (2012)<sup>9</sup>. In another incident, while in a queue waiting to use an automated teller machine, a white

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<sup>9</sup> See “Time for Africa to Reclaim the Black Body,” Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s speech delivered at the University of the Free State, South Africa on 25 May 2012 on the occasion of African Union Day Celebration, and published in *New African Magazine*, July 26, 2012; <https://newafricanmagazine.com/news-analysis/politics/time-for-africa-to-reclaim-the-black-body/>; accessed: October 17, 2025.

man demands he go ahead of Ngugi and his (Ngugi's) wife because, to the white man's mind, Ngugi and his wife are "cashing a welfare cheque," what Ngugi describes as "monetary handouts from the [American] government" (*New African Magazine* 2012). At the time of these two incidents, Ngugi's wife was a Senior Social Worker in the New Jersey State Administration, and Ngugi himself the Eric Maria Remarque Professor of Languages and Professor of Comparative Literature and Performance Studies at New York State University.<sup>10</sup>

If this is the plight of the high-skilled African migrant, let us examine the fate of the low-skilled counterpart. In many European countries, the agricultural, domestic, and health work sectors rely heavily on low-skilled migrant labour from Africa and Asia. Many of these migrants have temporary or irregular legal status and, therefore, experience acute exploitation (Palumbo 2024; 229), especially in relation to "pay, working hours and rest, safety, working conditions, methods of surveillance and housing situations" (Palumbo 222). A recent study conducted among migrant health and care workers in the United Kingdom—seven of them from Philippines and eight from Africa—reveals the systemic challenges: there is generally low income, irrespective of the type of workplace or visa status; seven of the migrants studied are paid lower than the National Minimum Wage; of these seven migrants, four work in private homes and three in institutional settings; those with irregular visa suffer even more exploitation with two earning less than £5 per hour; another earns less than £3 per hour with the employer deducting accommodation from her salary. Diwa, one of the interviewees, laments: "It [the pay] is rarely enough for my basic needs like rent, ...food, clothing" (Thiemann et al., 2024: 33). Other discriminatory challenges migrant workers, especially those on Overseas Domestic Worker Visa, encounter include: acute emotional and mental pressures, degrading accommodation, illicit surveillance, safety and health concerns, contractual challenges and human right abuses<sup>11</sup>.

From the racist experiences of the African elite—Ngugi wa Thiong'o and his wife readily come to mind—to the exploitation of both high- and low-skilled African migrant workers, the **Tester/Test** and **Reward** functions coincide with the hostility, dangers, vulnerability and threats the migrant protagonists of the folktales encounter in the resourceful but uncanny "Evil Forest" of the tales. This realisation indicates the predictive and visionary logic of the Ananse tales.

### **Return and Resolution**

We come to the final pair of grammatical functions from the oral folktale narratives. In the tales, '**Return**' implies the physical return of the migrant protagonist to the place of origin. The return always involves the repatriation of foreign resources to salvage the needs at home. Since the original need is mostly poverty and famine, the migrant returns with economic resources—food, bags of cash, a haul of gold, gold rings—to feed the family and the community. Thus, the function of '**Return**' is to '**Resolve**' the lack at home, making the two functions, '**Return**' and '**Resolution**', natural equivalents. Let us apply the functions to the real-life situation as pertains to the African migrant experience, and find out the convergences and divergences, if any.

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<sup>10</sup> See "Time for Africa to Reclaim the Black Body," *New African Magazine*, July 26, 2012; <https://newafricanmagazine.com/news-analysis/politics/time-for-africa-to-reclaim-the-black-body/>

<sup>11</sup> See Inga Thiemann et al., *UK Agriculture and Care Visas: Worker Exploitation and Obstacles to Redress: Research Report*, Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, March 2024. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379039620\\_UK\\_agriculture\\_and\\_care\\_visas\\_-\\_worker\\_exploitation\\_and\\_obstacles\\_to\\_redress](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379039620_UK_agriculture_and_care_visas_-_worker_exploitation_and_obstacles_to_redress); accessed: October 17, 2025.

In real-life terms, the function of 'Return' becomes quite nuanced, often becoming a metaphorical rather than a literal, geographical phenomenon. For various reasons, some African migrants reject the option of a physical return, choosing instead to *return electronically* through the transfer of money back home. The dramatic development of the money transfer business, from the pioneering Western Union and MoneyGram to the sudden explosion of brands and transfer technologies, attests to the significance of the concept we have termed 'electronic return'. Just like the migrant protagonists of the folktales, the real-life migrants' remittances play a very crucial role in resolving the need back at home and in the larger community. For example, between 2010 and 2019, Africa received from US\$55.6 billion to US\$86.4 billion in remittances sent by African migrants working within and outside the continent. All geographical areas of the continent enjoyed the inflow, with North Africa (43%) and West Africa (39%) receiving the highest (82%) of the total at the subregional level. Again, Egypt (31%) and Nigeria (28%) received the highest (59%) of the total at the national level in 2019 (African Union 2021: 42-3). While these remittances serve critical existential purposes at the familial level, they provide critical external funding for social and economic development at the national and continental levels (African Union 2021: iii). The corollary of the huge migrant African investment in the continent is that this group of Africans has been recognised and officially incorporated as a useful constituency into the political, social, and economic development agenda of Africa.<sup>12</sup> From the above, we realise that both the AnansesEm migrant worker and the real-life African migrant worker share a strong grammatical bond in the sameness of the migrant experience and the sameness and importance of the resources they bring home. Both produce material items (food and money) and immaterial items (knowledge/skill), even though the type of knowledge and skill may differ. It is also obvious that the resources they both repatriate, even if the modes of the repatriation differ, play crucial roles in resolving or helping to resolve the economic issues back at home.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we have tried to provide a structural reading of Akan-African folktales, specifically Ananse tales, in an attempt to find their correlation with the pattern of the lived experiences of postcolonial African life. We identified a consistent set of occurrences/actional units in the select set of thirteen folktales. These constant elements followed a specific formulaic pattern, which represents the grammar of the tales, grammar in this context meaning a fixed syntactic structure that applies to the plots of all the tales studied. In this sense, the tale is recognised as a verbal performance, an utterance, not merely because it is narrated verbally, but because its meaning derives from a structural design: a syntax. We called this syntax: structural or narrative grammar. We applied the narrative grammar to the postcolonial African contemporaneity. We discovered remarkable convergences between the narrative grammar and the real-life experience of African migrants. We found out, for instance, that life in postcolonial Africa followed the same structural paradigm as pertains in the Ananse tales. Indeed, it seemed that the postcolonial African migrant made the same existential choices as the characters in the mythopoetic world of Ananse, as if the latter dictated instructions to the former on how to live life in a difficult world.

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<sup>12</sup> See the following two African Union Commission publications: *Agenda 2063: 'The Africa We Want' Framework Document*, September 2015 and *2<sup>nd</sup> Diaspora Focal Point Workshop Report: 27-29 November, 2018*, Khartoum, Sudan, 29 November, 2018.

We conclude that the Ananse tales that are narrated to the Akan-African child represent a subtle, psychological formula for self-preservation. This formula gets embedded and lies latent in the subconscious of the African child until dire economic challenges in later adult life unconsciously activate the template for self-preservation. We conclude, also, that in view of the pre-emptive logic of the Ananse tales, that is, the tales' ability to predict life—a situation where literature does not imitate life, but life literature—the Akan oral folktale tradition must be recognised as Wisdom Literature. This would not be a far-fetched conclusion. Indeed, in the Akan mythology, Ananse is the archetypal wiseman who at one point has a monopoly over all wisdom, but he shares it with humankind. His stories and lore, therefore, constitute a primordial body of divine and mundane wisdom.

### Author Bio

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