

Adams Bodomo

# Ananse in Search of a Fool in Town: A Folktale from Africa

Folktales or fairytales are a significant genre of oral literature in African languages and cultures. In traditional African societies, in the villages of African, in the evening and at night, family members often relax after dinner and begin to tell folktales. Children and young adolescents often constitute the main audience of these folktale performances as they are expected to learn a lot about the cultural mores of their society through these folktales. In this paper a folktale from the Dagaare language of Ghana about *Ananse/Badere in search of a Fool* in the village is presented. Then the moral lessons embedded in the folktale are briefly discussed. Finally, we compare this to the folktales of Europe, especially the Scandinavian folktales such as the *Giant who had no Heart in His Body*.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Mr Spider, or Ananse (in the Akan language of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire) or Badere (in the Dagaare language of Ghana and Burkina Faso), is a well-known hero in African folktales. His character is known to always have all kinds of tricks up his sleeves as he interacts with other characters. In this story below which is parallel-

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1 This story was told to us by Mr Anthony Dakura Yidamba and it is being considered for publication in a future book titled *Folktales of the Dagaaba of West Africa* edited by Mark Ali and Adams Bodomo.

texted<sup>2</sup>, that is, which is written in both the language of the people whose folktale it is and in an international language, in this case English, we see Badere/Ananse on a mission to find out who is the village fool.

### Bádéré Dambóli Bóóbó

Bádéré lá bēbe a táá o náábó a yeli ká o bóóró lá zóle ka o ne ó na kó a náábó ɔɔ. Lɛ lá ká ó bó a zóle léé a te bale.

Dááre kangá ka ó iri nyógé a náábó, a moɔ vũũ póó, a kpe né mɔpelaá póó. Be lá ká ó te be a kyé máng kyeere: “Némbúong bé kye a waa zóle? O sobá wa ka té ɔɔ n náábó nga.” O wa te banná ka Galénggáa lá a áge wa geré ka o boole, “Galénggáa!”ka Gaalénggáa sage, “Gãã!” Ka Bádéré yeli, “Zóle ka N bóóró ká ka N ne o ɔɔ n náábó nga.” Ka Galénggáa yeli, “Gãã!” Ka Bádéré soore o “Fo bá wongi N náng yeli a yélé kó fó bé? “Ka Galénggáa la boreng yeli “Gãã!” Lɛ la ka Bádéré tééré o zú póó ká o nyé lá o zóle na.

Bádéré bóólé lá Galénggáa ka bá kó náábó na. Ba náng wa béré béré a nandaaré zaá bare ka Bádéré yeli ko Galénggáa ká ó dé a kondógéléé sígí né baá te onge kōó wa né ka bá dógé né a néne. Ka Galénggáa ɔge “Gãã!” Ka Bádéré súúrí déé iri ka ó pórré kyé dé a kondógéléé gaa né a baá ná te onge a kōó.

Galénggáa nang wa nyé ka Bádéré gaá lá a baá báaré ka ó dé a náábó néme zaá a te bó zíé sógéléé kyé wa tú bogí dé a náábó zóóré ũũ kyé ká o sã fěě lé. Sána na Bádéré náng wa te yí a baá waaná né a kōó ka Galénggáa zo te nyóge a náábó zóóré a tágerá kyé konó: “Gãã! gãã! gãã!” Ka Bádéré dé a kondógéléé zá ngmáre a kyet zo

gaa te tára ka Galénggáa lá a nyóge náábó zóóréng a tágerá kyé konó.

Ka Bádéré te nyóge a táge né o ma dógébo zaá venennenene, ka fogírí, a zóóré náng vóó a bogí póó. Ka Bádéré yeli Galénggáa ka o nang zólé lé na ká ó are be. Kyé dé a náábó zóóré kúlí né; ká o na kúlí te sééré né lá báwáá.

Sángá ná Bádéré náng wa kúlí lá ka Galénggáa méng kúlí te bóólé ó pógé ané ó bíírí ka bá gaa te tuo a náábó néne gaa né ba yírí a te bingi dógérá ɔɔrɔ.

Ka née ningeng sã dambóli bá wuli ká o e lá dambóli. Kángkáaráá móóréé.

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### Mr Spider in Search of a Fool

Once there lived Mr Spider and Mr Crow (in a big community where people challenged one another with their wisdom). One day Mr Spider announced that he had a very fat cow which he wanted to eat with the most foolish person in the community. He had tied up the cow in the bush and went on thus “Who in this community is a fool? I want a fool with whom to eat the fattest cow.”

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2 Parallel-texting is a method I use to bring to life the folktales I write about. Very often folktales in minority languages are talked about in literary works by simply translating the folktale into English or pother major languages of the world, thus ignoring the source language. In my parallel text, which is best produced side by side the reader gets the chance to see the folktale in its original language and its writing system (even if they can't read the text).

Before he could repeat Mr Crow came flying past. “Mr Crow,” called Mr Spider, “I am looking for a fool to eat this fat cow with.” And Mr Crow replied “Well<sup>3</sup>?” Mr Spider went again “Have you not understood what I said?” And again Mr Crow said “Well?” After the third enquiry Mr Spider thought he had gotten the fool he was looking for and so they set out to kill the fat cow and prepare the feast.

After slaughtering and cutting up the meat Mr Crow was sent to the river with a pot to fetch water so they cook the meat. As usual Mr Crow responded, “Well,” (I don’t understand, I don’t, don’t, don’t.). Mr Spider said “You are really a fool” and took the pot himself and went to bring the water.

When Mr Spider had left for the water, Mr Crow collected and hid all the meat in the bush. He then buried the tail of the cow leaving a part of it sticking out.

When Mr Spider appeared Mr Crow quickly ran and took hold of the tail of the cow and started crying out: “Help! Help! Help!” Mr Spider dropped the pot of water and ran to assist Mr Crow in pulling at their cow (which supposedly was) trying to escape. Mr Spider pulled the tail with all his strength and the tail came off at once.

“Now you, the fool that you are,” Mr Spider said to Crow, “...you will go home with empty hands. As for me I have this tail which I will use for dancing”. Crow said “Well.”

When Mr Spider left Mr Crow went and called his family members to come and carry all the meat home and made a big feast.

A person may look like a fool but may not be a fool after all. That ends my story.

## 2. Analysis of the Folktale

Now, as one sees at the end there is a moral, and every child in any Dagaare village in Ghana or Burkina Faso (where Dagaare is spoken) on hearing the folktale also quickly understands the moral of the story.

But there is much more to this story than the moral, and that is what I want to concentrate on. Folktales in most cultures – from a cross cultural perspective – have a universal feature of how characters try to read the minds of other characters to relate to them, either in a beneficial win-win relationship or in order to exploit the relationship. Folktales therefore are very COGNITIVE and I want to claim that all folktales are about characters manipulating the minds of other characters.

I want to support this with one of my favourite Scandinavian folktales<sup>4</sup> titled *The Giant Who had No Heart in His Body*. This story can be read here: <https://www.storyberries.com/fairy-tales-the-giant-who-had-no-heart-in-his-body-by-asbjornsen-and-moe/>

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3 The word “Gää” is actually an imitation in Dagaare of the noise the crow makes.

4 I spent about 10 years in Norway as a scholar at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology between 1988 and 1997

This is a story written by Peter Christen Asbjornsen and Joergen Engebretsen Moe. It is about a King who had seven sons. He sent out six of them to look for their brides. They found their brides but in trying to look for a bride for their brother left back at home they ran into a terrible Giant who turned them into lifeless statues as he had at home a pretty bride he didn't want other men to come for. After not hearing from his brothers, the little prince left at home set out to look for them. On the way he met and helped several characters – a raven, a salmon, and a wolf. He helped them in several ways and they in turn helped him to find his brothers and to fight the Giant for his princess and for turning his brothers back to life. The story ends well as the seven princes rode back home to a feast prepared for them by the King.

Of course the Dagaare folktale and the Scandinavian folktale are completely different stories. One is shorter and involves fewer characters and the other is longer and involves many more characters. But there are many similarities as far as the nature of folktales in a universal perspective is concerned.

From a formal or structural point of view, the first similarity is anthropomorphism – the attribution of human characteristics to animals and other non-human beings. Folktales in most, if not all, parts of the world involve anthropomorphic techniques like personification. In the folktale from Africa we see that the spider and crow are acting like human beings. In the Scandinavian folktale we see that the raven, the salmon, and wolf are personified and take on human activities like speaking and communing with the prince. Personification enables the listener or reader of the folktale to see things from a human point of view and therefore to interact with these characters as if they were interacting with real human beings.

From a functional perspective, the second similarity is that folktales in most, if not all, parts of the world have edutainment values. Folktales are meant not only to entertain but to also educate.

The audience of the African folktale comprises usually mostly children listening to them told by an elder or some other members of the family. In our example the children would enjoy the suspense and they would want to see how Badere with his usual tricks of always trying to see if he can take advantage of people will succeed this time with Mr Crow. They begin to empathize with heroes and despise anti-heroes. Eventually Mr Crow in this case would be the hero because of the way he succeeds in making a fool of Badere when it was Badere who set out to do that. The Scandinavian folktale would teach children about brotherly love and valour in getting out there and fighting for oneself and one's honour.

More importantly these folktales teach children a lot about the moral and value systems they grow in. In rural African societies it is mostly through folktales and other literary genres like proverbs, riddles, and witty sayings that children learn about the values of their society: of farming, hunting, catering for one's family, filial piety, and so on. Folktales are a major source of education among the Dagaaba of northern Ghana.

Finally, let me return to the theme of the COGNITIVE nature of folktales as a universalism. The claim is that eventhough folktales are situated in particular

cultures and therefore are culture specific, folktales are also very universal in the way characters relate to each other. In every folktale characters strive to read each other's minds and influence each other, either for win-win relations or to manipulate minds in order to take advantage of each other. The Spider in African folktales is a quintessential mind manipulator.

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have drawn attention to the fact that folktales or fairytales are a significant genre of oral literature in African languages and cultures. While this genre may be under threat in the face of social media and other forms of edutainment, in traditional African societies, in the villages of African, in the evening and at night, many family members still relax after dinner and begin to tell folktales. It is from these traditional literary forms and performances that children and young adolescents learn about the cultural values – lores and mores – of their society. I have discussed essential features of this genre by presenting a folktale from the Dagaare language of Ghana about *Ananse/Badere in search of a Fool* in the village.

But it has also been argued in this paper that while folktales are often peculiar to certain societies and therefore culture specific, there are some universal features about this genre. To illustrate this, I compared the folktale from my traditional African society with one of my favourite folktales of Europe, the Scandinavian folktale titled *The Giant who had no Heart in His Body*.

As we have seen, even though these two tales are rather different there are some universal features in them both in terms of techniques of characterization (personification) and functionality (edutainment).

All traditional cultures and cultural practices are specific to their environment but most cultures also have some common, universal features about them, and to understand the world in a better way we need to research these specificities and commonalities.

### References

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