THE EXCEPTION WHO PROVES THE RULES:
ANANSE THE AKAN TRICKSTER

BY

CHRISTOPHER VECSEY
(Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, N.Y., U.S.A.)

Recent studies of the Trickster in world folklore\(^1\) have indicated his role as threat to the rules of societal and cosmic order. He is a paradoxical figure whose antics mock the seriousness of rules, the sacrality of beliefs, and the establishment of rituals. He is a vagabond, an intruder to proper society, an unpredictable liar who throws doubt on the concept of truth itself.

As a folklore figure he is both human and divine, a person and an animal, creative and destructive, a success and failure. His tales are sometimes myths, sometimes legends, sometimes connected with ritual, sometimes not. They can be entertainment, education, a form of humorous rebellion. They can evaluate, explain, and reflect upon realities, thereby making those realities clearer and more profound to the people who tell and hear the tales.

By breaking the patterns of a culture the Trickster helps define those patterns. By acting irresponsibly he helps define responsibility. He threatens, yet he teaches, too. He throws doubt on realities but helps concentrate attention on realities. He crosses supposedly unbreakable boundaries between culture and nature, life and death, and thereby draws attention to those boundaries. Societies “not only tolerate” Trickster tales, but “create and re-create”\(^2\) them because they serve the vital purpose of questioning and affirming, casting doubt and building faith upon the most important societal concepts.

It is my purpose in this paper to examine the Trickster tales of the Twi-speaking peoples of West Africa, the Ashanti and other Akan. My interest is not in the stories as folklore, the relationships of their motifs to world folklore;\(^3\) rather, my aim is to discover the meanings of the Akan Trickster tales to the Akan. I wish to see them in their cultural context. I know that one can find similar episodes of similar Tricksters in the other areas of the world. Elsewhere the
same episodes may have a human, or hero, or deity as the main actor. The environment may differ and the society’s attitude toward the tale may differ. One can see, for example, how Americans refashioned their African and European tales to suit their new situations in the New World. Folklore is a means of cultural communication; I want to see what Trickster tales communicate to the Akan.

In West Africa, as throughout the rest of Africa, the most common prose narratives are Trickster tales. Hare, Tortoise, and Spider are the chief actors, varying from location to location. Tortoise is most popular among the Yoruba; Hare is more prevalent in the grasslands; Spider is most common in the forest areas. There are also human Tricksters. Among the two million Akan of Ghana and environs the Trickster is Ananse, the Spider.

The Akan are culturally homogeneous, speaking mutually intelligible dialects of Twi. The folklore forms a relatively unified bloc, including proverbs, music, and prose narratives. Not only are the same themes found in Trickster tales among the Ashanti, Fante, Brong and other Akan, but they are told in the same manner, apparently with the same attitudes and applications. With the little available material (there are few collections of Akan folklore), often not indicating the origin, place, people, date, and other important data, it is impossible to reconstruct a regional map of the tales collected and it is worthwhile to think of the Akan as a cultural unit. As many foreign elements as the Akan have adopted, they have incorporated them into Akan patterns, applying their cultural meanings to new rites, gods, and folklore. It is proper to think of Ananse, the Akan Trickster, as a single character whose tales communicate the same basic meanings to the various Akan groups.

The Akan make great use of oral traditions. Their sacred histories have been memorized and recited by trained specialists. No specialists, however, are needed to recite the Trickster tales or any of the other folktale which the Akan simply call Anansesem, that is, Ananse tales. All Anansesem, whether they deal with Ananse or not, are considered to be untrue stories. They are not myths in any sense of the word. Anyone can tell them, although only at night or at a ceremonial occasion, for example, at the funeral of a respected story-teller. Before the narrator begins his tale, he will say that the story is not true. The one hundred or more Trickster tales and the