



Appreciating African Theatre through The Concept of Social Identity: The case of *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*

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Abstract

To a very large extent, the African Theatre agenda proponents aimed at creating and reviving the African identity. The evaluation of this agenda's success or failure cannot be used to put off the worthwhile initiative to create this framework. Leveraging on other well-established notions from different fields might help us understand the current conversation better and more thoroughly while also giving us the drive to move the agenda forward. Social Identity, an established theory in psychology, interestingly features categorization or identity as a crucial meeting point with African Theatre. Because drama is the reflection of life, this study will take into account particular social elements that could help categorize or identify a group of people. Tradition and culture cannot be undervalued in the African social identity discourse because they have become an essential part of our society. It is in the light of these that this paper considers the relationship between African Theatre and Social Identity based on Yaw Asare's play *Ananse in the land of idiots*.

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I. Background of the study

In general, social identity takes into account people's appreciation of who they are in relation to a specific association or group membership. Turner and Oakes (1986) defined social identity as the aspect of an individual's self-concept that is derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group. It is crucial to remember that Henri Tajfel and John Turner first developed the Social Identity theory in the 1970s and 1980s, as shown by (Turner & Reynolds, 2010), which established the idea of Social Identity as a mechanism to explain intergroup behavior (Turner, 1999). A person's intergroup conduct, as well as cultural customs and practices, such as their food, language, attire, rituals, way of life, and architecture, among other things, are significant markers of who they are. African theater and social identity are related, as was previously said, partly because both endeavor to define the identity of a certain group of people. According to (Smith, 2007), African Theatre is a custom or a daily or seasonal ritual that more fully embodies the spirit of the rite and further portrays the emotions of the African people. . This is a clear manifestation of the intergroup behavior in Social Identity being exposed in a description of African Theatre. Just as Social Identity presents criteria to define a group of people which will enable categorization that will in turn make identification easier, thereby providing the impetus for comparison, African Theatre also presents the totality of the way of life of the Africans, including their rituals, worship, and even performances. The categorization, identification, and comparison, referred to as the Social Identity theory stages are the main drivers in the evaluation of a group of people to be able to determine their identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). African theatre presents or portrays the real African by putting his real and true personality on stage in a performance. African theatre does not showcase and encourage artificiality but a true reflective representation is its hallmark. This explains why Abdallah, 2008 asserts that "for Africans to have a theatre that can be seen as authentic, it should be based on the rich cultural heritage, history and the totality of the people's experiences. This will of course include the rituals, music, and folklore of the people, encompassing their traditional drumming, dances, and even proverbs"

(p.2-3). Based on a logical inference, one can indicate that categorization, identification, and comparison, which make up the Social Identity Theory stages can be deduced from the above statement as a perfect way to determine the social environment, thus, knowing the particular group, such as ethnic/race of the people. One can also understand and appreciate the behavior and character traits as well as general actions. It, therefore, becomes possible to do any logical comparison with any other group of people. When one considers a typical African theatre, it is very possible to determine the social identity of the people on whom the playwright is basing the play. That is why since the creation of African theatre, it has fostered identity creation because to the African theatre writer, being able to identify a particular group of people with a particular style or convention of writing is important (Amponsah, 2016). Working on and defining identity indeed has been a major aim of the African Theatre. Collins (2011) stated that "since the country's independence, its political and cultural leaders have engaged themselves with the fundamental question of identity postcolonization. This search for identity is supported by the Ghanaian National Theatre agenda, which is a subset of the African theatre. The distinctive National Theatre Company's voice and purpose, as well as the development of Abibigromma's style, were both influenced by the pursuit of identity (p.3). It is our contention that Social Identity theory and African theater, whose primary focus leans toward identity searching and creation, share a special area in which it is possible to infer identity through plays.

The plays have particular features that will reveal the identity. It will make it easier to recognize the population that the play is referring to. When these components are examined, they will reveal the social identity (ethnicity) of the characters the play is about. With the aid of certain elements in the play *Ananse in the land of idiots* written by Yaw Asare, it will become evident that the Akan ethnic group of people are those being represented in the play.

The Akan Ethnic Identity

There are varied perspectives on the origin and history of the Akans, but most of these perspectives present them as a powerful ethnic grouping not just in Ghana but in Africa at large. Akans are believed to be the first ethnic group of people that settled in Ghana, hence the name "kan" which means "first". (Asante et al, 2019), (Kyeremanteng, 2010). They constitute roughly 47.3 percent of Ghana's overall population, making them somewhat the largest ethnic group in Ghana (GSS, 2013).

The Akan ethnic identity is made up of a number of distinct ethnic groups, including Bono, Asante, Adanse, Twifo, Asen, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwahu, Sehwi, Awowin, Nzema, and Ahanta (Buah, 1998). One would want to believe that probably, their greatness does not reside in their sheer numbers but their spread across the country, with their presence being felt in almost all corners. Commenting on the Social Identity of the Akans, (Kissi & van Eck, 2017) believe that they are very much aware of it and hence make 'conscious', 'deliberate', and 'explicit' efforts to portray it. They further assert that the way Akans generally fondly and lovingly speak of themselves and their traditions is enough evidence for their appreciation of Social Identity. So the Akans are generally expected to shun unwarranted things in order not to bring dishonor. They communicate in the Akan dialects and engage in social, religious, and political exchanges. Although they are not entirely homogeneous, there are enough cultural similarities between them to allow for valid generalizations about the types of oral literature they produce. Proverbs, poetry in the drum language, funeral dirges, libation poetry, folktales, and folk music are all examples of Akan oral literature (Nketia, 1967). The Akan find enjoyment and beauty in practically every activity they engage in, including music and drama. Typically, the female vendors of various goods sing to draw in customers. Folk music is sung in a drum language that, unlike the preceding songs, only those who know about it can interpret for others. This is mostly due to the intimate linkages between the community's cultural and religious activities and the performance of poetry in drum language. According to Nketia (1965), public worship among the Akans serves as the setting for the dramatic enactment of belief through music and dance. Therefore, religious drums are seen as emblems of gods that should not be handled carelessly. Only the trained drummers have access to them, and ceremonies are typically performed before they are touched. The exception only applies in very few instances where young people are given special skills training. All of these attestations go in to solidify the assertion that Akans are very conscious of their Social Identity. It is to this end that African Theatre which has a strong interest in identity creation leverage the appreciation of Social Identity to create their plays to give indications of the people they may be reflecting. This is because theatre generally is supposed to be that which is used or employed to mirror and playback human experiences (Wilson & Goldfarb, 2000). It is therefore appropriate at this point to consider the play *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* to identify the various elements and features that may indicate the Akan tradition as being showcased and promoted.

Identifying the elements in *Ananse in the land of idiots*

Yaw Asare, the playwright, sees this play as a valuable contribution to "Anansegoro," the leading initiative to purposefully create a theater that might be viewed as an authentic Ghanaian theatre that will really reflect Ghana. It was based on the 'Anansesem' storytelling custom of the Akan people (Amponsah, 2008;

Deandrea, 2002). The play *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* is about Kwaku Ananse and his encounter with the people of Dim-nyimlira, the land of idiots. This play has ten characters including Ananse. The monarch of the realm is Dosey, and his wife is Fayasey. They have a daughter named Sodziisa who is engaged to Pootagyiri, a prince from a nearby country. The Priestess of Kompfi, who communicates with the gods, and Elder, who advises and assists the king, are also present. Akpala, a royal guard, Mbasila, a military captain, and a large number of maidens as well as other guards and attendants are present in the king's court. Two other interesting characters are Odudu who is regarded as an idiot, and 'Woman in the Crowd', who is planted in the audience. The play is divided into four parts or 'movements' as referred to by the playwright.

The major identified elements in the play which give credence to the Akan social identity include

- ✦ Setting of the play
- ✦ Language
- ✦ Rituals
- ✦ Eggs and mashed yam in red oil were part of the dinner.
- ✦ The usage of kente as marriage attire/gown
- ✦ Beating of drums

Setting

There can be little mistake that the drama is situated in Africa, even though the playwright obscures the location of his masterwork by giving the kingdom he writes about an obscure name in African history. This is due to the association between the play's opening scene's puberty ceremony and the consumption of mashed yam and eggs in some African societies (Anquandah, 2006). Once more, the raffia skirt and flywhisk worn by Priestess of Kompfi are symbols of the Akuapim priests and priestesses in general as well as the Akan people of Ghana (Larbi, 2002). This makes it obvious that the play is set in Ghana, a West African nation with a rich mineral heritage, a history of British colonization, and a history of the Transatlantic slave trade.

The employment of smock by King Dosey in his attempt to follow Ananse once it becomes evident that the kingdom has been deceived is another intriguing example of material culture that indicates that the play is place in Ghana, and by extension, Africa. The inhabitants of northern Ghana are known for wearing military smocks (Acquah, et. al, 2017). Furthermore, the play's inclusion of Ananse proves that the narrative is either set in Ghana or is connected to Ghana. Sutherland modified the Akan storytelling session (Anansesem) in Ghana into her Anansegoro theater tradition in Ghana, giving Ananse, the hero, a stock character (Asante, 2018). Here, Yaw Asare demonstrates his fervent devotion to the Anansegoro drama/theatre heritage.

Language

In *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*, Asare employs very simple and direct language that is easy to understand.

He quotes wise sayings that are both suitable and well-crafted. It is reported that if at sunset, able-bodied clients avoid your bad mushrooms near the heart of the market and carry them to the edges, the disabled will buy, Ananse says at the start of the play (pp. 3-4).

This proverb, which Ananse stated, indicates that he has outstayed his welcome at his previous employment and that it is now time for him to move on to a place that will be much friendlier and where his abilities would be most valued. Another saying among the elders is, "Elder, who am I, a blind mortal, to cushion the breaking of the sacrificial egg when the priestess throws it down?" (p. 13).).

This suggests that the priestess' decision is irrevocable and cannot be changed because she is the gods' representative and disobeying them will result in the gods' wrath. By using these regional adages into his play, Asare demonstrates his familiarity with oral tradition. It also enhances the artistic attractiveness of his creations. Again, Asare used straightforward language to appeal to a larger audience, both domestically and outside. Because he wants to make his play as African as possible, he also incorporates the native dialect of Ghana called twi into the English language. Ananse becomes frustrated with the situation and asks the audience to encourage him.

Ananse: Kweku Ananse, Kweku Ananse osee yiee!

Chorus/ audience:yiee, ... yiee,

Ananse : Ananse onyansafo Ananse osee yiee!.

Chorus/ Audience, yiee... yiee, Kweku Ananse oo.... Yiee!, onyansafo Ananse oo... yiee! aiyiee (pp. 20- 21).

Chants are used in the Ghanaian culture to encourage people to persevere through challenging situations, boost morale, or celebrate individuals. To set the priestess apart from other characters, Asare offers her a more elevated type of speech. Her speeches are rhyming and lyrical, and they are filled with wisdom and knowledge from long before.

Priestess: "And lovely dew-drops, dropping from the navel of an alien god, moisten quivering tongues of desire turning reason into pungent fumes of insanity," she said. As parrot-like features and rainbow fingers combine to mesmerize virgin nipples and cause them to swell into ferocious lust eyes, And make the ground

fertile for raping, raping, raping. Rape (p. 64). The priestess stresses rape to suggest that they have lost their virtue because of their gullibility.

Rituals

Asare divides his piece into four halves. Ananse, the main character, tells us in the first movement that he is heading to the Land of Idiots. After lusting after their hard, contoured bodies, he happens to see the maidens doing their ritual dance, which he dismisses as foolish. He starts to devour the food intended for the gods, thinking he would get away with it.

Unfortunately, he runs into trouble when he is apprehended by the royal bodyguard and taken to the king's palace to await his fate. The priestess orders him to die, but he persuades them to spare his life, and they do so despite the priestess' wishes. He has to weave the clothing for the prince and princess to wear at their approaching wedding, according to his end of the contract. In the second movement, Akpala, who is supposed to be watching after Ananse, is sound asleep as he is busy weaving the cloth. The princess and her attendants arrive to perform for Ananse, who argues that it is essential to observe and weave the fabric in the proper patterns. Ananse takes advantage of the chance to seduce the princess and then tricks Odudu and Akpala with honey after deciding to retain her for himself. In order to let him pass for the prince, he persuades Akpala to assassinate the prince. In the third movement, the prince shows up to take his measurements, which enrages Akpala, who already harbors animosity toward him due to an earlier event. He is therefore unafraid to kill him and bury him in the forest. Ananse poses as the prince in the fourth movement and marries the princess. Akpala wants a portion of the royal treasures, and Ananse once more deceives him by using honey to cover his mouth. Then he is able to persuade the populace that Akpala has been taken over by the evil spirit of Ananse and has to be executed right away. After leaving with his princess for Boyele, Ananse reports the prince's passing to Odudu. Investigations reveal the complete truth, but the empire is powerless to act since Ananse fled with the only boat the land has to provide, and it would take months to build a new boat and travel to him, by which time he would have established a powerful kingdom and prepared a large army for defense.

Asare creates realism based on historical occurrences, and this can be reflected in his writing style. Regarding the staging, he provides a picturesque, in-depth, and vivid stage description of all the people and objects. He describes the scene of the ritual ceremony in the first movement.

Another aspect of the folktale used by the writer is ritual music. Seven people simply dressed in white loincloths and short sleeveless white blouses follow the priestess, who is covered in raffia and carries a white flywhisk. A dinner of mashed yams in oil is carried by the leading maiden in a conical earthen dish. Six boiled and shelled eggs are evenly distributed around the bowl's rim and around the yellowish food. The conical heap of eggs has a seventh egg affixed to the top. Three female singers/acolytes follow at the back, each of them wearing a long white cloth knotted around their busts. A big water calabash is being held by the acolyte in the middle. Four guy drummers, each sporting a naked chest and sporting a

Asare has made sure that the play can be simply staged by doing this. Every detail of the staging set has been described and laid out. He allows for the use of many sets on a single stage without switching between scenes. This also makes it simple to visualize the actors, props, and background scenery on stage. The stage can then be vividly imagined by the reader without actually seeing it. This makes it simple to get the conclusion that Asare is an excellent designer who is also quite imaginative. The way that Asare alters the priestess' speech pattern with changing phrases is another significant stylistic element worth mentioning. She belongs to a different group because of the brief staccatos in her talks. Asare distinguishes the priestess' speech from that of a typical person by doing this, implying that her commands are from the gods and must never be disregarded (p. 12). Asare also uses comedy as a medium, and he makes use of humor frequently.

Ananse: o...no...No! Please, shift that arrow to the right... that's my heart you're aiming at. Shift it a bit please (p.7).

Although it is a matter of life and death, Asare purposefully utilizes comedy to lighten the mood and calm his audience so that we can pay close attention to what is happening.

The served meal of mashed yam in oil with eggs

Both Akan and Ga cultures have a custom of making mashed yam in oil, also known as a sacred dish comprised of hard-boiled eggs, mashed yam, and palm oil. Ot) is frequently served at special events following the birth of the third, seventh, or tenth child of the same sex (sacred numbers in the Akan and Ga cultures); at the naming ceremony for a new baby (an "outdooring"); the purification of the mother after birth; at puberty ceremonies for girls; at festivals associated with twins, whom the Akan and Ga people consider sacred; at harvest festivals, after the first and third weeks following a family member's death, when not only family members eat oto but the house is also sprinkled with oto to appease the deceased, and on particular Akan calendar days known as "Bad Days" or Debone. Dabone is founded on the idea that on specific days, the spirits that live in forests or farms will be offended if anyone enters their domain. As a result, people stay inside and away from their fields to avoid running into or irritating the spirits. So, both the living and the dead receive oto.

In addition, *oto* is the traditional dish made to thank the *nsamanfo* (spirits) by eating a meal, *oto*, with them on other significant events in ordinary adult life, such as recovery from illness, escaping from accidents, and birthdays. It is thought that the *nsamanfo* detests meals with a lot of seasoning. *Ot*) is therefore served without salt or pepper.

The use of Kente as a wedding gown.

Kente is a significant piece of clothing since every element of its aesthetic design serves as a means of expression.

Each of the cloth's hues has a symbolic meaning: gold denotes prestige and tranquility, yellow denotes fertility, green denotes rejuvenation, blue denotes a pure spirit and harmony, red denotes passion, and black denotes kinship with the dead and spiritual awareness. Long, 6"–10" broad strips or bands of fabric are sewn together to form kente cloth sheets. Each of these bands is made up of panels with contrasting patterns. Through a complicated interplay of the warp (the threads drawn from left to right during weaving) and weft, each weaver produces this patchwork effect (threads oriented up and down).

These warp and weft motifs form a repertoire of craft work, as Asante weavers give each one a name that indicates clan, social status, or sexuality, such as *AberewaBenemeaning* "a wise old man symbolized wisdom and maturity." Other Kente design names form proverbs reflecting the Asante ethos and worldview. *Owu nhye da* ("Death has no fixed date") is said to encourage people to right living, as death may come unexpectedly and allow no time for penitence. *Nkum me fie na nkosu me aboten* ("Don't kill my house and then mourn for me in public") cautions against the two-faced and duplicitous impulse of human nature. Clever color combinations with diverse warp and weft designs produce richly emotive and individualized Kente meanings. Proverbs' spoken rhetoric was materialized in kente cloth, which the Asante then used as sartorial text.

Beating of Drums

Drum rhythms carry significant signals on all occasions, including those of unity, valor in battle, respect for elders and chiefs, and coming of age, as shown in *Traditional Drumming and Dances of Ghana*. John Tanson, a music editor and scholar, recorded the music of six Ghanaian tribes in the 1970s. The resulting album highlights the significance of drumming and dance, particularly in the track "Talking Drums." The track notes come with images of some of the dances and rituals.

According to Nketia (1963), the Ashanti use three basic drumming techniques: dance mode, discourse mode, and signal mode. The signal and speech modes of drumming are only played for communication, but the dancing mode is mostly played for pleasure purposes. Ashanti drumming, in contrast to traditional drumming in Western cultures, is frequently employed as a way of communication.

The *atumpan*, or "talking" drums of the Ashanti people, are the best example of using drums to communicate. Each *atumpan* drum has a high tone and a low tone, and they are always played in pairs. According to Nketia (1963), these two drums are used to imitate the highs and lows of the regional Twi language, which is a tonal language, by playing with "a constant flow of beats, often lacking in regularity or phrase" (p. 28). A large portion of the elder age can understand the drums just as well as they can understand someone speaking to them, however many members of the younger generation struggle to understand the words played on the *atumpan*.

The Ashanti utilize *atumpan* to communicate in a variety of social contexts, from summoning students back to class after a break to communicating with a dancer in the middle of a dancing circle.

In keeping with the Ashanti drumming's communicative nature, one highly useful function of shrine drumming is to inform anybody nearby that a healing ceremony will shortly take place at the shrine. The sound of the drumming "goes extremely far from the town," a shrine administrator responded when I questioned why it is part of the shrine ritual. If someone is far away, he can tell that anything is happening at the shrine when he hears the sounds.

II. Conclusion

Using the lens of the Akan's consciousness of Social Identity as a major form of identity and who they are as a people, it can be concluded that indeed the above identified and analyzed elements incorporated in the play are that of the Akan. One of the formidable traditional cultures in Africa is the Akan culture. Akan art is diverse and well-known, especially when it comes to folktales stories.

Because African theatre promotion and development to a large extent has to do with dealing with identity as a people with a unique way of life, it became necessary and proper to consider it along the meaning and ideals of Social Identity to advance this scholarship. Categorization and the ability to determine a group of people based on specific elements seem to be the meeting point of Social Identity and African Theatre. So the proponents of the African Theatre agenda, knowingly or otherwise have been aptly leveraging some of the inherent merits of social identity to advance their course of identity creation. It is also submitted that discourses

should attempt to draw parallels across the different fields (Psychology and Theatre/Literature), as has been espoused in this study not only for clearer understanding but to present fresh and intriguing perspectives.

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