

Painting the Unwritten: Hybrid Literacies in African Popular Fiction

By

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Abstract

In this paper, I invoke Kwaku Anansi, the Ashanti-Akan trickster god embedded in oral traditions of storytelling in a living dialectic of survival and inversion across the African diaspora. This paper is about my meditation on painting and sculpture as a space fused with orality and writing. Anansi's migration from Ghanaian oral tradition to Jamaican patois, Surinamese Sranan, and global pop culture opens significant questions on collaboration and storytelling which I explore here.

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Introduction

Hybrid Orality in Visual Forms

According to Walter Ong, human culture evolves through transformations in communication from sound (orality) to sight (literacy) to electronic sound (secondary orality) (Ong, 1967/1982). This thesis investigates how Akan Anansi¹ trickster tales originally told in oral traditions, when written through literate and visual forms, can re-oralize itself creating a narrative hybrid loop².

This thesis proposes that the orality integral to Anansi stories which is rooted in Akan performative communal repetition, and sacred delight (Pelton, 1980) can be re-embodied in new media epic painting and sculpture that function as living, iterative canvases of griotage, where visual panels, layered carvings, and sequential art mimic the digressive, audience-responsive structure of oral performance.

In oral tradition, interiority refers to the embodied, pre-reflective, and communal depth of knowledge that resides within the speaker–listener dyad and the living moment of performance, rather than in any external artefact such as a story in written form. (Ong, 1967/1982) Exteriority, by contrast, according to Ong (1967) is the projection of this interior depth³ into durable, shareable forms such as written text. Ong (1967) claimed that the nature of human consciousness and its relationship with technology (writing) made exteriority more pronounced. I find painting and sculpture fall within an in-between space of these categories.

In this thesis, I test Pelton’s (1980) analysis of Anansi as a character who navigates ambiguities, by applying it to Wiredu’s (1992) claim that oral traditions have been underutilized for what Akan oral epistemology has the potential to generate. In my making process tied to this thesis, I use sculpture and painting in dialogic expression to emphasize how Akan oral epistemology needs further exploration. I also assess Ong’s “technologizing of the word”⁴ by treating writing,

¹ Anansi or Ananse is the Akan trickster god associated with mythology. He is associated with myth and mythmaking because among the Akans (pre-dominantly residing in Ghana, Ivory Coast and nearby areas, stories are named after Ananse. Stories in Akan dialects are known as Anansesem which means Ananse stories. Ananse stories are a source of entertainment born within oral tradition. It also involves some dynamics in its mode of storytelling (such as singing, and call and response) that emphasize the communitarian ethic in many African societies. Through-out this paper I use both Anansi and Ananse. In Jamaica, he is known as Nancy or Mr. Nancy. In Suriname he is known as Nanzi or Anansi. The ambiguity to the correct spelling is created to indicate the character has more to do with orality than writing.

² Hybrid loop refers to a narrative experiment. It is a renewing circuit in which ideas derived from written texts (which exist in the oral tradition – proverbs, song lyrics, folktales) are composed visually, to be re-oralized—that is, designed for public performance, communal or digital re-narration, re-oralization, reinterpreting and recreating). For example, in one exhibit a synopsis will be given of an Akan-folktale in a description next to the canvas. As discussed below in “Spirit is a bone” the origin of why Ananse’s head is smaller than his hind parts is layered over an allegory highlighting the encounter between European traders and Akan chiefs. In the exhibition of this piece the audience will create a collage in clay tiles by drawing/writing their reactions to the story using adinkra symbols and memes in the manner of commentary.

³ I intend to play with inner thought processes associated with orality, in painting. See also, next footnote.

⁴ Ong (1982) argues that orality generally transitions into something more tangible because of technology, although, ideas can remain tangible (not merely mnemonically) for centuries absent of visual representation – as in the case of Homer. Ong (1982) positions the written word as a progression or evolution of oral language. According to Ong (1982) language developed text in the form of alphabets, which led to writing which in turn led to print. The printing press became the blueprint or template for industrialization by abstracting the word in oral thought forms into

comics, and sculpture as extensions of performance, not replacements. There are modes of understanding facilitated by poesis that go beyond discursive logic. Blending painting into sculpture is a semblance for making poetry and discourse visible in how language fails sometimes and how oral forms still remain as the ground for pushing dialogue forward. Sculpture must inform painting and vice versa. Ananse is both metaphorical and figuratively the catalyst for this visual aesthetic investigation based within orality. Throughout the elaboration of this format in making and writing, artificial intelligence (AI) is employed in my artmaking and writing process. For example, below, in the analysis of “In the Egg-Time” there is a poem generated in iambic hexameter verse by AI based on the idea of an encounter describing the arrival of two versions of Anansi on the shore of the Gold Coast or pre-colonial Ghana. The poem was created to form the text in a comic strip style relief sculpture piece to give the atmosphere but also form the impression of how Ananse stories can be retold in new Art Spaces and in alternative forms of orality. There are also examples at the end of this introduction that are attempts of re-creating Anansi stories outside the realm of fable into history yet maintaining the spirit of Anansi stories in fables. Anansi stories have been told and retold by Akans who left the Gold Coast and this thesis examines what a contemporary contribution to this retelling implies.

Kierkegaard (1843/44) and Rovelli (2020) provide a hermeneutic lens that emphasizes relational meaning in this project. As an anchor for defining my outlook on the world in relation to making art, I find the concepts of Kierkegaard useful for aligning my faith with my practice. There are moments when making art is less rich in meaning than certain moments. The reasoning behind what being alive in this world means to me as an individual and individual among others is tied to the act of making art. I find that, Kierkegaard’s interpretation of faith within the category of a test is useful for making sense of how Ananse operates. Rovelli⁵ is a recent discovery whose ideas emphasize relationality as a fundamental principle in understanding the physical universe. Rovelli categorizes truth and being as events of relation. Concepts on the eternal, the particle, or the person mainly exist in the category of an encounter. Anansi’s literate orality in Akan thought is not an archived idea. It has a fluid presence that is recursive, residing in the imagination. I found the Jamaican Anansi stories as amusing even though they are briefer than the ones collected in Ghana by Rattray. Anansi is in some sense a psychological motif for navigating ambiguities in the human psyche. In the ritual telling of Anansi stories, the listener actively responds to a kind of greeting that demonstrates that he or she is attentive to the realm that is being entered. Conclusively, the listener is also reminded that the story has become intertwined with his or her consciousness and he or she may do with it as he or she pleases. In Akan dialects, formally in the Ananse story-teller’s concluding remark, he says something to the crowd to the effect of, “the story has been placed on top of the listeners head, and whether the story is pleasing or not, it is the purview of the listener to do with the story what the listener likes.” Therefore, the inquiry into how Anansi’s epic oral tradition can be adapted to new media is

physical objects -arranged into a frame- duplicated for specific social purposes (Ong 1967/1982). Today, print has evolved into something else.

⁵ Carlo Rovelli is a theoretical physicist primarily engaged in the field of quantum gravity and is one of the founders of the theory of loop quantum gravity. He has also contributed to the history and philosophy of science, developing the concepts of relational quantum mechanics and thermal time.

addressed in this thesis considering comics, painting, and sculpture as ritualistic artifacts that require re-enactment. This approach transforms the reader or viewer into a co-storyteller, thereby enhancing the oral tradition through complex layers of mediation (Okpewho, 1979).

Re-oralizing Kweku Anansi

Erich Auerbach (1946/2013) provides a foundational framework for understanding how narrative styles mix high and low registers⁶ to depict multifaceted reality, a dynamic that parallels the ironic, multi-layered orality of Anansi tales in Akan traditions. Anansi tales are more akin to fables and emphasize situations that are based in daily life pertaining to issues related to food, work, marriage, friendship etc. Auerbach contrasts the Homeric epic's uniform illumination where events are externalized, heroic, and fully explained with the Biblical style of backgrounded depth. In the Bible gaps invite interpretation and everyday life intersects with the divine. This Auerbach argues, democratizes representation by blending social strata, as seen in Dante's elevation of the vernacular or Woolf's⁷ fragmented consciousness⁸ (Auerbach, 2013).

In Rattray's Akan-Ashanti Folktales (1930) Anansi is stated in the story of 'How Kwaku Ananse (the spider) got Aso in marriage' to be the "soul-washer" of Nyame⁹. Soul washing is a spiritual ritual which holds prominence in royal ceremonies to remove spiritual impurities and replenish vital energies in Akan traditional society. Ananse also lived in the town where Nyame (Sky God) lived. In this story Anansi and Nyame have the same mother known as Yaa Nsia. In 'How it came about that the Sky-god's stories came to be known as "spider stories", Ananse returns his mother to Nyame as part of the items requested for the ownership of stories. Ananse stories are not quite epics, but they exist in a similar way in expressing the way of being of a society through how thinking occurs across various social strata. The notion of high and low registers in the mode of Ananse stories is very mixed or it may be seen as an irrelevant notion. In some stories language associated with kings are mixed or associated with animal characters. The formalities associated with the Anansi storytelling dynamic that may involve singing, clapping

⁶ High register (*sermo sublimis*) is reserved for grave, noble, tragic, or heroic subjects, including gods, kings, mythical characters, and epic events. The language is grand, dignified, and uniform, leaving no room for ambiguity. Examples include Homeric epics and classical tragedies, with everyday subjects omitted or treated superficially. The low register (*sermo humilis*) addresses comic, vulgar, or everyday topics, featuring ordinary people, slaves, peasants, and domestic life. This style appears in comedy, satire, and idyllic scenes, but never explores serious depths. Addressing common people or mundane reality with seriousness was considered impossible according to Auerbach (1946/2013).

⁷ Virginia Woolf is a 20th Century writer known for weaving deep psychological insight into narrative.

⁸ Auerbach praises Woolf's modernist technique as a radical departure from earlier realist styles. He describes her "multipersonal representation of consciousness," in which subjective impressions from multiple characters (received at various times) intertwine to capture a more complex, layered reality. This approach, he argues, prioritizes interior reflection over unified external action, resulting in a deliberate fragmentation of plot and objective events. This is particularly insightful for my interest in abstract painting and sculpture into figuration. In Woolf external occurrences become mere triggers for chains of associations that "cut loose from the present" and drift freely through memory, time, and psyche-hallmarks of what is often called stream-of-consciousness but which Auerbach frames as a deeper, more stratified penetration of human interiority.

⁹ Nyame means Sky-God or God the Builder or Creator.

and call and response events mimic those in ritualized events like funerals and festivals. Much of the spiritual language tied to the fairy world exist in Ananse stories. They exist in brief fragments as fables so certain events and phenomena might not be fully explained but might be expressed further elsewhere in another tale. This manner of representation is very prominent in comic books where ideas and characters are hinted at in one story and elaborated upon elsewhere. This is a feature I employ in my paintings. Be that as it may, the metaphoric significance of Anansi's kinship to God the Creator indicate the mixture of high and low registers as referred to by Auerbach(1946).

I am eager to explore what an aesthetic examination of this process of re-oralization reveals in different social settings within the narrative structure of Anansi tales. What are the prospects for making up Anansi stories in an art space where performative artists do recitations and re-enactments of the stories in Toronto today? How may contemporary stories and concepts be tied to new Anansi stories. In Anansi's trickster narratives, the spider-god's base deceptions (stealing, failing comically) reflect low registers, yet this is often mixed with high registers in his encounters with elements such as death or fairies or dwarves. Similarly, in visual art, El Anatsui's recycled-metal sculptures mimic this mixing where discarded bottle caps (low, everyday waste) are woven into regal tapestries (high, symbolic unity), that externalize oral histories of trade and resilience without losing their shimmer, which changes with light and viewer angle¹⁰.

¹⁰ Re-oralizing Anansi stories in the context of sculpture means, highlighting the notion of encounter to the divine or sublime. Classical western sculpture emphasised the divine by placing the human in relation to the divine form by not necessarily focusing on the interiority of human emotion. Thus, the ideal in its sublimity is the main emphasis of classical western sculpture (Hegel,1975).

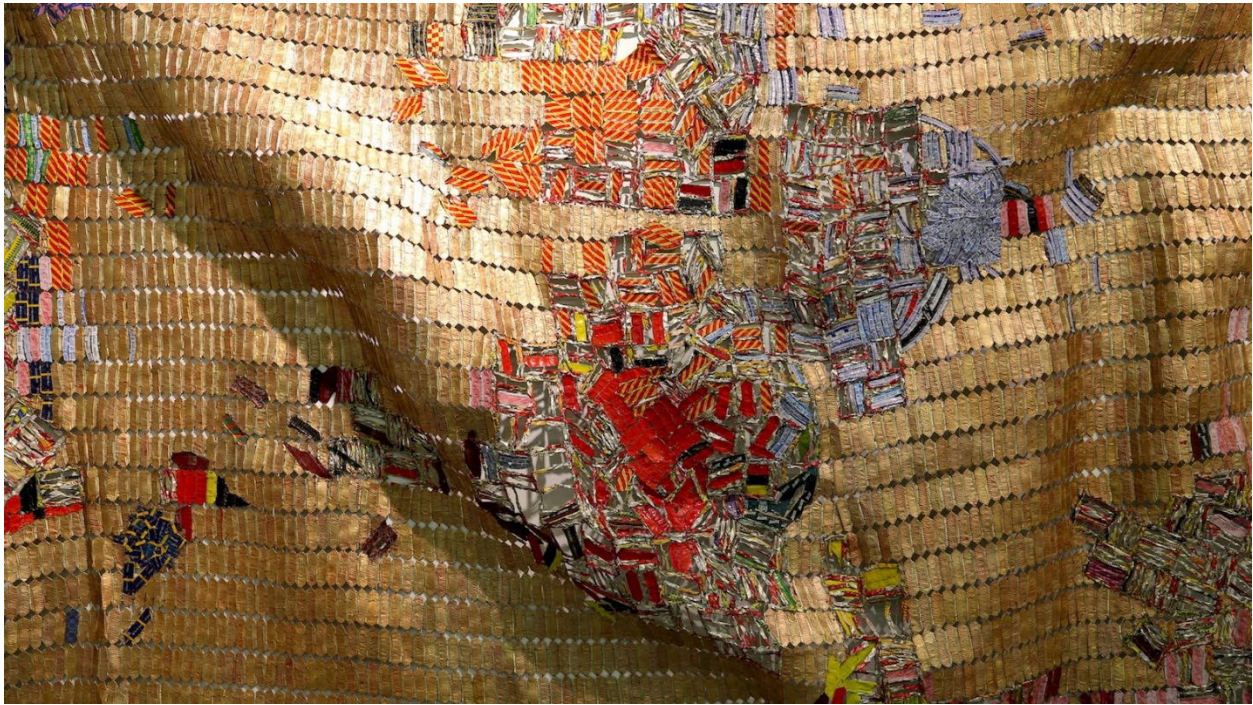


Figure 1 - El Anatsui, All Things Being Equal, 2017, Recycled materials

Ong (1967/1982) claims that primary orality is about adding rather than organizing, grouping rather than analyzing, and is competitive, situational, participatory, and balanced. Making lists through sculpture and painting is a way to capture orality. In primary orality, knowledge is not kept in silent texts but in the lively human world. People are not closed-off individuals but open and connected events. Anansi shows this oral mindset well. He is both greedy and generous, clever and foolish, a sacred messenger and a common thief, successful and embarrassed. In his stories, he is often shamed, beaten, starved, or tricked, but the community enjoys it because his contradictions keep moral and social truths alive. Pelton (1980) says, “To create the lines of force binding society together, Anansi breaks the connections assumed to exist between what is said, what is done, and what is meant.”

In Anansi stories, wisdom reflects the paradoxical state Kierkegaard describes in *Philosophical Crumbs* (1844) and *Repetition* (1843). In *Philosophical Crumbs* (1844), Kierkegaard defines paradox as where the infinite enters the finite, making faith a passionate leap beyond comprehension rather than rational understanding. According to Kierkegaard (1844), this manifestation of passion is what he terms as the ultimate offense to reason or the absolute paradox. Life is full of instances where passion overcomes reason. The exemplary definition of his encounter is when the eternal God enters time as a finite human being, an event offensive to reason for its absurdity (Kierkegaard 1844/1843). In *Repetition* (1843), the paradoxical state emerges in the tension between recollection or a backward repetition of the past and true repetition, which he defines as a forward renewal in existence. In Rattray’s Akan-Ashanti

Folktales (1930), Anansi drops the pot of wisdom in the story of how wisdom came into the world in an act of spite because his son had to tell him how to get the pot to the top of the tree and this refutes his conviction to gather all the wisdom in the world for himself. As demonstrated in this tale wisdom is effectively possessed but by the act of destroying the pot an eternal relation to the absurd is created. Kierkegaard (1844) argues that truth is received in the moment of faith as a gift contradicting reason, where the teacher becomes contemporaneous with the learner. Anansi smashing the pot brought wisdom into the community. It was a passionate act not necessarily born within faith yet his encounter with his son's remark created something meaningful. Anansi's wisdom is never accumulated precisely. Similar tales repeat failures, yet in that repetition (Kierkegaard's (1843) "repetition forward") something new emerges.



Figure 2 - Eugene Mireku, *Duck or Wabbit*, 2026, Acrylic, Gouache, Plasticine, Pastel, on Canvas

Ah! This was Anansi's utterance before crashing the pot of wisdom to the ground. According to Rousseau (1781), the interjection "Ah!" is a pure embodiment of contradiction that may simultaneously express opposing sensations such as pain and pleasure, terror and desire. This primal utterance captures the raw immediacy of human emotion before it is shaped by rational thought or linguistic convention. In painting and sculpture there are such encounters with primacy and immediacy of human emotion reflected in form and value. Forming an aesthetic language that draws upon these movements in human expression based on the Akan oral thought forms promises an adventure keen on exploring through collaboration. My inspiration for this is that most oral rites exist or function in communal settings. For Rousseau, the advent of writing fundamentally alters this dynamic by fixing meaning in a stable form, thereby killing the living contradiction inherent in the original cry. Writing transforms the spontaneous expression of

passion into a static concept, turning what was once a vibrant outburst of feeling into a propositional statement that limits the fluidity and emotional intensity of language (Rousseau, 1781). Nonetheless, poetry renders this contention futile. The painting is about the embodiment of contradictory feelings. It is titled “duck or rabbit (2025).”

The oral tradition exemplified by Anansi’s storytelling world represents Rousseau’s vision of paradise regained¹¹. Here, language retains its passionate and contradictory nature, refusing the closure and finality imposed by written text. Outside of poetry there are not many modes of writing which are contiguous to ideas of ambivalence in expression. In Anansi stories some tales have songs¹², and interactive call-and-response dynamics, creating a participatory atmosphere where meaning is continuously negotiated and renewed. The punchlines, often marked by a melodious “Eeeeeii” of recognition, or other forms of onomatopoeia that iterate the understanding that, the world is not governed by rational coherence but by emotional complexity and contradiction. This oral mode preserves the vitality of language as a living, breathing phenomenon, where contradictions are not always resolved but embraced. This allows stories to resonate deeply and humor to emerge naturally from unresolved tensions.

Umberto Eco's semiotics, particularly his assertion that "semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie" (Eco, 1976), illuminates the deceptive play at the heart of Anansi's orality. Eco argues that signs function through inference and interpretation, but their capacity for falsehood is inherent. According to Eco(1976) a sign is “everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else,” and this substitutive function means signs can refer to things that do not exist, are not present, or are intentionally misrepresented, allowing for lying, deception, or fiction. If a sign can mislead, it can also convey truth, but only contextually and relationally (Eco, 1984). In Anansi’s act of impassioned frustration wisdom came into the world. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco(1976) posits that lying presupposes a sign-function. Thus, deception relies on the gap between signifier and signified, where cultural codes allow for manipulation (Eco, 1976). This aligns with Pelton's (1980) portrayal of Anansi as the ultimate semiotic trickster. Anansi lies not maliciously but ironically, using ambiguity to subvert hierarchies, stealing wisdom from Nyame yet dispersing it chaotically, singing to father elephant and his family to amuse and distract him from his purpose, his tales delight in the sacred-profane collapse that exposes truth through failure often as a function in human emotion.

Umberto Eco’s semiotics illuminates why Anansi’s lies are never simple falsehoods. In *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) and dramatized in *The Name of the Rose*, Eco argues that every sign can lie, but lying is only possible within a communal code. Anansi’s deceptions in “The Mimicry of Holiness” where he multiplies fake Golden Stools and in “How Anansi Got his wife Aso” (in Rattray(1930) where he gives his host a false name meant to legitimize his cuckoldry are examples of Eco’s signs. The ploy inherent in the sign works because everyone already knows

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1755) vision of “paradise regained” is fundamentally a secular reimagining of humanity’s return to an original state of natural innocence and freedom, uncorrupted by the vices of civilization.

¹² Songs are found in Rattray’s(1930) Akan-Ashanti Folktales in the tales about why the elephant has a small buttock and in no one should say, this is the wife whom I love best.

the code of the descending stool¹³. The pleasure lies in watching the code short-circuit itself. The oral community does not condemn the lie, but it celebrates the semiotic play as comic relief.

¹³ In the origin story of the Ashanti Empire there is a miracle by a famous priest known as Komfo Anokye who called forth a sacred stool descending from the heavens that is known as the Golden Stool (Sika Dwa Kofi). The stool, as a state artefact, is as priceless as Christ's crown of thorns that was acquired by the French king in 1200s. The event the stool descended at occurred around the 1700s to commemorate the Ashanti confederacy. It is omitted in some historical books with suspicion based on its mysterious nature although it is known by most Akans as part of history. Prior to this research it was a major subject in my painting practice because I found it pretentious in myself to wholeheartedly believe I am eating the flesh and blood of Christ when I participate in communion at church but every now and then argued with my Akan friends of the true origins of the Golden stool. I do not believe as much that it descended from heaven, I understand the blasphemy of this utterance in Ghana.



ATHENS.

"BUT OUR STORY TAKES PLACE BELOW THE FEET OF THE ALMIGHTY. YES. FAR AWAY FROM THE HOST OF THE GOLDEN KIN. LISTEN, WON'T YOU, TO MY SADDEST SONG."



"MELODIES OF A MORTAL SO MASTERFUL IN HER WEAVING SHE CALIGHT THE GREAT KWAKLI ANANSI'S EYE."

"ARACHNE. HER TALENTS SO PURE IT'S HARD TO SAY IF ANANSI BLESSED HER WITH POWERS AT ALL. LIKE YOU, SPIDER-MAN, SHE WAS A HERALD WHO WAS IGNORANT OF ANANSI'S INFLUENCE."

"HERS WAS A SONG ANANSI THOUGHT HE COULD JUST LISTEN TO FROM AFAR."

"SO CAPTIVATED BY HER WORKS WAS ANANSI THAT HE LET HIS GUARD SLIP. AN ERROR MORTAL EYES WOULD NEVER PERCEIVE..."

"...BUT LO, WE WERE NOT IN THE LAND OF MORTALS."

WHAT DELICATE WORK THESE FINGERS MAKE-- MY BROTHER WAS RIGHT TO BE ENVILOUS. THE QUALITY OF YOUR WORK REACHES FAR AND WIDE.

THANK YOU-- IT IS A TALENT OF MINE.

WORK SO FINE I DARE SAY IT RIVALS THE GODS. EVEN ATHENA HERSELF WOULD KNOW ENVY.

HA, THAT SHE WOULD.

IS THAT SO... MORTAL?



LET THE GREAT KWAKU ANANSI TELL YOU HOW HE LOST HIS SWEETEST OF CHAMPIONS, ARACHNE.

NEXT: MILES MEETS MYTH!





...IS THAT WE ALL HAVE OUR STORIES! THOUGH THIS DUO DUEL IS FIERCE, IT REMINDS ME...SINCE ARES PICKED THE CHALLENGERS, I GET TO PICK THE CHALLENGE. SUCH ARE THE LAWS OF THE AGON!

THOUGH CORRECT ME IF I'M WRONG...

Figures 3-7 - Cody Ziglar & Marco Renne, Depictions of Ananse 2025

Akan text: An experiment in Akan Proverbs

The following are symbols formed from Akan Proverbs. I use them in my painting to pull my meditations into Akan thought forms



Figure 8-15 - Eugene Mireku, Icons based on Akan proverbs, 2022-2026

The Use of Large Language Models in this Research

Prose makes weaving other ideas that affect the tuning of the story being told a bit complicated than how poetry or music would allow for various aspects of narration to cohere. In the creative space of comics, there is the picture that shows what is taking place, the words characters say to each other in speech bubbles, and captions that might give more context to the picture. This makes comics appear as a kind of precursor to film. I believe my current exploration of Ananse stories in the realm of painting and sculpture pays more attention to the comic form of storytelling. LLMs as a collaborative tool in my making process allow me to re-contextualize and recreate Ananse stories but it also allows me to analyse my making process within specific theoretical frameworks. Through-out this research, the dynamics of movements that occur within speech and oration in contrast to writing has been the main inspiration.

In the paragraphs that follow I use LLMs partly in generating analysis by converting my artist notes on a specific piece into poetry. The notes and analysis were initially written in prose. This is in **Me nim na emom**.

In **Spirit is a Bone** parts of the analysis to the story are generated using LLMs to gain further insight into the Ananse story as a marker for decolonizing my own thinking through my practice of making art.

In the Egg-time is a poem created using LLMs for the purpose of a comic painting idea. The poem feeds the picture and story being woven.

Ananse and Anokye: An experiment born in Orality

The following are some fables that play with the idea of an encounter between Anansi and Anokye's historical act of bringing the golden stool into the Asante Kingdom. In these examples the representation of the eucharist has been fused to the golden stool forming a hybrid in sacred thought. These stories were generated with Artificial Intelligence (xAI, 2025) to play with the orality of Anansi in order to inform a painting on the event commemorating the Ashanti Confederacy in the 1700s.

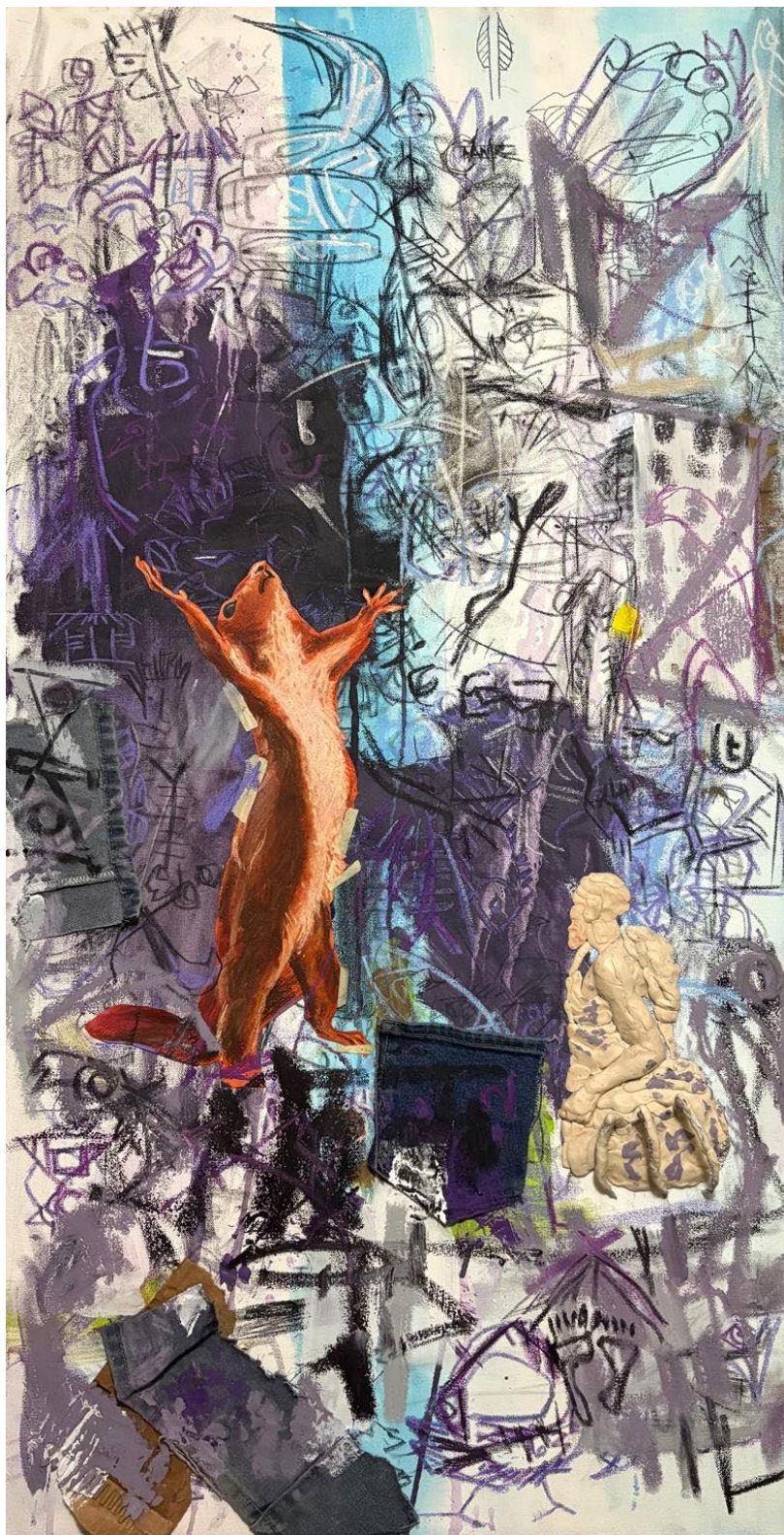
These stories (sketches) are made up based on investigations in forming allegory within Akan colonial era history and transcribing concepts in history into Anansi stories which will feed into the picture making process. The idea for this experiment came from Inkingi's (2024) *Narratives Reimagined*. In Inkingi's (2024) thesis he outlines the impact of retelling Anansi stories in making sense of the word. He also mentions how ethnic groups other than Akans such as the Waale, and the Dagaare tell Anansi stories (Inkingi, 2024; Marshal E. Z., 2007).

The Taste of Forbidden Knowledge

One evening there was a massive gathering called by the Asantehene.¹⁴ After the oratory remarks Anokye¹⁵ proceeded to display in dance and incantation till the sky became heavy as if being

¹⁴ King of the unified Ashanti clans.

¹⁵ Anokye is the priest known to establish the Ashanti confederacy by his famous ritual of calling forth a golden stool that unified the kingdom.



directly affected by the rhythm and intensity of his outbursts. Immediately a stool appeared above his head through an incantation. The stool, covered in gold, had in its center a chalice and three pillars that looked like yams or bread. Anansi alone notices that when the stool first halts in the air, a single flake of gold dust no bigger than a fingernail drifts down and lands on the ground. Everyone else is too busy prostrating themselves in awe of what has appeared in mid-air. Quickly, he pops the flake into his mouth (because for Anansi all knowledge must be tasted, even if it kills you). The gold burns like pepper and honey mixed; visions of every future betrayal and every future glory of Asante flash before him as he falls seizing. He falls into a three-day trance, babbling prophecies in the marketplace. Some come true, some do not, but the net effect is that ordinary people begin debating openly whether the stool is truly untouchable or merely a clever priest-trick.

The chiefs brand him a blasphemer and chase him into the forest, yet the seed of doubt is planted. Centuries later, when colonial officers ask why the Asante will not reveal the stool that appeared in the sky,

Figure 16 – Eugene Mireku, When Ananse saw Anokye, 2026, Oil Sticks, Cardboard, Jeans, Pastel, Chalk, Plasticine, Paper on Canvas

old men still mutter, “because it is edible (a delicacy) and Anansi once swallowed a piece and spat questions.”

The Mimicry of Holiness

Anansi watches the stool descend and immediately understands its political function: it is the perfect fetish of untouchability, the ultimate sign that keeps rival kings in line. Instead of trying to steal it, he decides to multiply it. That same night he carves six stools of ordinary wood, gilds them with cheap gold leaf stolen from a Portuguese trader, and plants one in the compound of each jealous sub-chief, whispering that Nyame favoured them personally with a second descent. Within a month, every village swears its own stool came down from heaven; oaths fracture, alliances waver, and the Asantehene tears his kente in rage. Anansi, of course, sits quietly selling witnesses to whichever side pays more.

The Trick of the invisible Cord

Anansi, crouched among the kneeling chiefs, feels the old itch. No object that shines so brightly should be allowed to remain untouchable. While every eye is fixed on the stool hovering in the moonlight, he spins a thread of web so fine that it catches no glint. He loops it round one golden leg, meaning to yank the stool down the instant Anokye looks away and state it was claimed by “a fairy of the wind.” The moment he tightens the thread, the stool rises an extra cubit, as thought, the sky itself refuses the theft. Anansi is jerked off his feet and left dangling upside-down in mid-air, legs kicking, for the rest of the ceremony. The chiefs never notice. They think it is part of the miracle. Anansi learns publicly and humiliatingly that some knowledge-objects (suman¹⁶) are wired directly to heaven and will punish the presumptuous hand.

The Eucharist that bites back

Tempted beyond endurance by the glowing host-image, Anansi waits until the stool hovers at its lowest point (barely a handspan above the grass) darts in to lick the embossed wafer, reasoning that if Catholic priests can eat their god and live, so can he. The instant his tongue touches the gold, the stool blazes like the sun sounding KPOOOOaaaa. Anansi is flung twenty paces, smoking like a burnt palm-frond, his eight legs curled tight. He lies senseless for three days. When he wakes, half his body is gold, half remains black. He is now the living proof that the Christian Host and Asante Soul have fused in one creature. The missionaries claim him as a miracle of conversion. The palace priests claim him as proof that Nyame is stronger than the white man’s God.

¹⁶ Fetish

Akan Oral Thought Forms in Picture making

What follows is a web in the form of a list of paragraphs that attempt to tie the ideas of orality and textuality to themes in African Popular Culture in the eyes of an Akan from Ghana. This is an intimate exploration of how my process in picture-making ties into some of the arguments of this thesis.

Me nim na emom

I find Jean-Michel Basquiat's insistence on text in his abstract paintings a notable cry expressing a frustration in discursive thought in African languages... if you want to learn to write in an African language today you will probably use Latin text. I invoke Derrida here to inquire, if logocentrism would still have the same implications in post-modern society if phonetics in African languages were tied to indigenous forms of textuality? What would it mean if writing developed in African languages prior to its introduction and marriage to Latin alphabets? Does orality need writing to sustain its re-emergence into modern interfaces of storytelling? Regarding immediacy Walter Ong(1982) claims, "Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs. Word meanings come continuously out of the present, though past meanings of course have shaped the present meaning in many and varied ways, no longer recognized"(p. 46). Below is poem generated with Artificial Intelligence but edited to fit the ideas in the picture below. The work is not finished, and the poem is mean to inform the painting as much as the picture informs it. The painting is about, politics, YouTube algorithms, emptiness, meaning, blame and so on.



Figure 17 – Eugene Mireku, Me nim nae mom, 2026, Plasticine, Gouache, Gesso on Wooden Panel

Thus spake the Spirit in the sculptor's clay-wrought night,
Where black abyssal ground, like Chaos ere the Word,
Holds horned masks and fallen limbs in white and sable strife—
One points accused to the goat, the scapegoat bound,
Whose bloodless form the mimetic rage would sacrifice.
I know full well the truth—yet all the same I turn
To screens that narcotic weave their silken web of light,
The spider perched on water's edge, who scorns the leap
Of catfish from the pond, though branch o'erhangs the void.
Consumption's spiral gnaws, lists rise on YouTube's flood,
You tube's Flood?
News-apps in endless flux, amusement laced with dread.
I gorge on more than needful, purge when strength allows,
Yet voice of Akan birth lies strangled in the throat.
Estranged from oral breath—gestures, tones, the living now—
Where Ong once taught that meaning springs from present air,
Now Latin logocentrism chains the thought in chains,
And Basquiat's fierce text on abstract canvas cries
The same frustration, discursive nets on freedom's field.
In masks of clay the person chants the form,
Figuration wrestling abstraction's voided flight,
Where freedom's excess bounds the time, yet liberates
The repressed unconscious night—amusing, dire, divine.
Sleep's semblance teaches death, the Ungrund's groundless ground,
Where Böhme's dark abyss and Eckhart's God in man
Are born anew, in the proverb's sight
Oh, abi you naa rec how your phone then your hands no get difference,
E dey hold person e mind tight like nature wey dey call,

E mash up everything bout everything, dey feed de eye wey no dey sleep,
Nowhere cool for the line top. Where e dey commot from sef?
No dey save de cornered web wey fi full screen.
Ho see this clay—tangled shades, de spread horn, everywhere,
Silver dey flash, see claw, then broomed feet—
Man dey wrestle progress plus Akan planes of being,
Where person dey inside dream multiple.
The matter that: “Me nim, na emom...”
Na so the thing dey talk, we taya dey conf,
And freedom’s curative blade cut through de void once more.

In the Egg-Time

High on the burning wind from the world’s far sundered ocean, returning
Mr. Nancy reborn, dread singer of chains now loosened by memory,
Sixfold his arms, as the psalm of labour and cunning made visible.
Under him wheeled the dragon,
Once gift of a twin in the egg-time,
Warm from the palm of the past when
The ships first darkened the waters,
When from the Gold Coast torn souls
were borne in the holds of the empire,
Salt on their prayers and iron asleep in
The sleep of the ocean.
Now at the surf’s white edge,
Proclamation went forth before the thunder
Ananse no ara b) dundo (Ananse himself beats the dundo[drum]),
A summons of dust and of spirit,
Riding a spider immense, whose wings

Like a night-bat were fashioned,
Webbing the air with a rhythm that
Stitched the sundered beginnings.
So did the coast hear again what exile had carried in embers.
Trickster and Original, grief made song,
And return like a trick in whisper



Figure 18 – Eugene Mireku, Ananse on a flying Spider drumming, 2026, Plasticine on Wooden Panel.

In the Egg-Time is a comic strip idea that, shows Ananse arriving on the Gold coast astride a giant spider, drumming to herald his diasporic twin, Mr. Nancy. Ananse holds a dragon egg in the second image, symbolizing reunion and cultural hybridity. Mr. Nancy, inspired by Bob Marley, rides a dragon back to the ancestral homeland. This narrative draws on Ananse's role as storyteller and bridge between worlds, reflecting the interconnected identities of the African diaspora. The painting uses comic-strip conventions to translate oral storytelling into visual medium. Word bubbles within the work will invite viewer participation, transforming observation into collaborative meaning-making. In my thesis exhibition, viewers can complete dialogue in the bubbles. Similar paintings may combine fantastical elements and portraits of familiar individuals, creating dialogue between personal experience and cultural memory. This approach addresses the tension between oral homeostasis and fixed painting, screen-mediated consumption, and art's potential to reclaim a voice in digital flux. Digital flux (Baudrillard, 1981) is the proliferation of excesses in the form of endless lists on Youtube or news apps, frequent invasive ads, within screen culture and how things of gravity and relevance may be trivialized as a result of that. Anansi persists within this hyperreal¹⁷ world because there are versions of him that thrived in societies outside Africa prior to the present era of mass digitization. Nonetheless, I wonder if opening up Ananse stories into in the world of TikTok for instance could dilute the impact of telling Ananse stories?

¹⁷ Hyperreality is a key concept in postmodern theory, primarily developed by French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007). It describes a condition in technologically advanced societies where the distinction between reality and its simulations (representations, images, signs, or models) collapses. Simulations become more real than real—a state where signs and models generate a "real without origin or reality," detached from any authentic referent. Baudrillard famously defined it in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality, a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1).



Figure 19 - Eugene Mireku, *Ananse in the Egg-time*, 2026, Plasticine on Wooden Panel

Richard Hakluyt's (1584) *A Discourse Concerning Western Planting* outlines a mercantilist blueprint prioritizing state-sponsored plantations for securing trade monopolies and bullion accumulation, framing economic power as capturing finite global wealth through controlled navigation. This contrasts with Adam Smith's (1776) rejection of mercantilism, which favored free exchange and productive capital formation as wealth engines—arguing colonies should become trading partners rather than extractive appendages (Hakluyt, 1584; Smith, 1776). Sarah C. M. Paine's analysis shows how modern container fleets and global shipping networks have redefined economic dominance as participation in open maritime trade rather than mercantile exclusion (Paine, 2023). Within both mercantile and contemporary maritime systems, Africa's limited manufacturing and weak supply chain integration renders it peripheral—unable to generate export surpluses or compete in oceanic value chains. This marginalization, Paine suggests, stems from Rousseau's (1755) *amour-propre*—the competitive drive for recognition—which drove colonial expansion and continues to shape neoliberal pressures in the maritime order, leaving non-industrial regions in relative inferiority.

Spirit is a bone?

I think,

I think,

Listen,

I think I don't think in the language of my forefathers¹⁸. (I am not sure if I worship the same God of my forefathers) I don't like to separate myself from them but different times...

In a conversation with a very close friend who I grew up with in Ghana, we were discussing what language he would be speaking and like to teach his 6-month-old son as he grew up, and he mentioned Chinese and English. In response, I enquired about the language we were speaking, which was Twi and his response, translated, was, "what will he use it for?" "I said to him I was going to put what he said in my thesis paper. This question of the value of the modes of thought that occur within Akan thought, embedded within the Twi dialect is the source of a shame that is not mine alone. Sometimes when I learn about philosophical truths about how we experience the world or the way things are in the world, I am curious as to how such truths have affected civilizations especially in the affairs of trade and empire building. I have an inferiority complex tied to colonial shame that manifests as a bias for writing's impact for manifesting industry in society.

I think this is clumsy talk. But hear my jazz. My thought is that the rootedness of my being as an Akan and African person is based within a non-empirical experience that is fractured based on my relation to representations of sense impressions I fail at articulating in the language, I was brought up speaking at home. I think writing adds a certain weight in substance to thought. I can write about my experiences in ways my ancestors could not and use tools they could not as well. Sometimes it seems I must do away with seeing the world in some of the ways they used to or thought of. I think this causes a handicap in the culture of Black Africans. I think there is an inherent discomfort about this partition with old ways of being due firstly, to the lack of historical understanding of the ways of being shaped within oral culture. Secondly, there is a gap in consciousness due to the lack of an advanced textuality based within African oral thinking. This gap could even by the definition of Jean Baudrillard be hyperreal because what most millennials know of Ananse stories is the modernised version, of Ananse stories¹⁹ which were told in English on Ghana Broadcasting Corporation by Maame Dokono. There were shows on radio where hosts and guests use proverbs and idioms based within oral thought but a lot of what is said can be inaccessible to the youth whose primary mode for reasoning is within a foreign

¹⁸ In Freud's last book, *Moses and Monotheism*, he attributes the origin of monotheism to Egyptian roots.

¹⁹ Within the telling of Ananse stories told in the local Akan dialects there are traditions such as the call and response dynamic that occurs before and after the telling or the tale. There are also things about the character of Ananse that get lost within translation. I have not come across Anansi tales in Jamaica and Suriname minimize Ananse's divinity. Although no one really thinks of Ananse as divine in Akan thought, he has some direct encounters with God the Creator (the closest idea God in Akan thought to the First Godhead in Christianity and Allah in Islam) and has functional control over the elements, in certain escapades but the most peculiar thing I learnt is him having the same mother as God the Creator. Social and psychological dynamics of relating to others are the predominant emphasis of Anansi stories in the diaspora.



Figure 20 - Eugene Mireku, *Spirit is a Bone*, 2026, Charcoal, Plasticine, Cardboard, Yarn, Pastel on Canvas

tongue. Cynicism shaped by this concern appears as Black Africans undermining the ability of their forefathers to reason logically due to the unfixed nature of logical patterns within orality.

Nonetheless, Ong (1982) in *Orality and Literacy* claims “Texts are false bottom. Or, I would say(write), text is fundamentally pretext, though this does not mean that text can be reduced to orality.”

There is a popular proverb in Twi... it translates to... ‘when we are drinking (alcohol) we are thinking’...

Implying drinking is a meditative act. (like how smoking and chewing something is)

There is another proverb in Twi... it translates... ‘wisdom is not in one individual’s head’...

Sometimes I don’t think thinking happens through the medium of African languages extensively enough. Can it even happen? Or does extensive thinking in African languages occur in a different way?

What does thinking have to do with eating anyway?

I think thinking has everything to do with the appetites, so passions and tastes and all that... Ananse reminds us...

Kwame Nkrumah’s *Consciencism* (1964) presents “philosophical consciencism” as a new African ideology that synthesises the egalitarian, communal outlook of traditional African society, the dialectical materialism of modern science, and the revolutionary logic of Marxism. It argues that colonialism created a “crisis of the African conscience” by imposing alien values, so the task of the African intellectual is to develop a materialist philosophy rooted in Africa’s own historical conditions rather than imported European systems (Nkrumah, 1964).

Nkrumah undermines abstract thinking in his philosophy although his reasoning for this is very abstract. The clash of Traditional African culture and Islamic tradition and Western European tradition brought by colonisation that he points out as creating inequality cannot be resolved

without abstract thinking. But there is a material need which he emphasizes and is echoed in Marx's critique of Hegel²⁰.

Nkrumah used to say forwards ever, backwards never.

What's so bad about going backwards Osagyefo?

Nkrumah(1964) rejects Hegelian and all idealism outright, insisting that matter is primary, self-moving, and the source of all derivatives, including consciousness. Nkrumah(1964) adds the "restitution of the African personality" by synthesising Marxist materialism with pre-colonial communal egalitarianism, producing a specifically African socialism that preserves humanist principles alien to classical Marxism's focus on industrial proletarian struggle.

A bone is dead, fixed, meaningless. A bone cannot explain thinking about truth, morality, or itself but by placing it next to spirit it pronounces itself. Man is very flawed but if God can become a man, then the complexities of being are infinitely more complex than can be embodied within thought and language.

²⁰ What is so bad about going backward?

Marx's core critique in his 1843 Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right and the 1873 Afterword to Capital is that Hegel mystifies reality by treating the Absolute Idea (or Spirit) as the active subject and the real world (state, civil society, family) as its mere predicate or external form. Hegel thereby "stands the dialectic on its head": ideas drive history, and the Prussian state appears as the logical realization of ethical reason. Marx reverses this—"turns it right side up again"—declaring that "the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind," so material conditions and social being determine consciousness, not vice versa. The state is not the embodiment of the Idea but an alienated product of class contradictions in civil society.



Figure 21- Eugene Mireku, Spirit is a Bone, 2026, Charcoal, Plasticine, Cardboard, Yarn, Pastel on Canvas

The following is my retelling of one of Anansi's origin stories for the purpose of this painting. This story can be found in Rattray's (1930) book.

In a time of great famine, when no rain fell and the gardens yielded no food, Anansi the spider was desperate to feed his many children—big ones, middle-sized ones, little ones, and even the babies. They begged him for something to eat, so he set out along the road in search of sustenance. As he wandered, Anansi heard distant singing that grew louder as he approached the river. Peering through the bushes, he saw a group of ghosts in the water.

They had removed their own heads and were using them like buckets to scoop out the river's water, chanting: "Oh, we need to catch the fishes, so we use our heads to scoop the river dry. We catch the fishes." Once the water was gone, they collected the flopping fish from the mud in baskets, then reattached their heads and left with their haul.

Forgetting his fear of ghosts, Anansi stepped out and begged them to teach him the trick. One ghost agreed but warned it required removing Anansi's head. The ghost popped it off with a click and handed it to him. Together, they scooped the water, sang the chant, and caught a basket full of fat silver fish. The ghost then reattached Anansi's head but cautioned, "Never sing that song again, or your head will fall off, and I won't be here to fix it." Anansi promised he wouldn't, grabbed his basket, and headed home, thrilled at the thought of his children's joy. But the catchy chant bubbled up inside him. He tried to stifle it by thinking of happy things, then sad things like the famine came to mind. Still, he sang "Oh, we need to catch the fishes, so we use our heads to scoop the river dry. We catch the fishes." Plop! His head fell to the road. He tried reattaching it, twisting, turning, but it kept falling. Tucking it under his arm with the eyes facing forward so he could see, he carried on with the fish under the other arm.

His children spotted him from the window and rushed out with their mother. They tried everything: stitching with needle and thread, nailing with hammer and nails, even gluing it on. Nothing worked and the head kept dropping. Finally, one of the baby spiders wanted to help. Being tiny, the baby could only reach as high as Anansi's bottom. It placed the head there—and it stuck fast! Anansi jumped, kicked, spun in circles, but the head wouldn't budge. Mortified, he scurried into the house, climbed to the ceiling corner, and spun a web to hide in, refusing to come down. Over time, a small new head grew on his neck, but it stayed tiny. The old, large head remained fused to his bottom forever after. And that's why spiders today have wee heads in front, big "heads" in the rear, and prefer to lurk up high out of sight, ashamed of their appearance.

In the late fifteenth century, Portuguese explorers under Prince Henry the Navigator and King John II established maritime routes along West Africa's coast to access gold, ivory, and spices while bypassing Muslim-controlled trans-Saharan networks, marking the modest beginnings of European involvement in the Atlantic slave trade that initially relied on intra-African exchanges rather than large-scale shipments to the Americas (Disney, 2009; Lovejoy, 2012). Vessels purchased captives—typically 100–120 per voyage, arriving roughly every thirty days—from coastal markets in the Kingdom of Benin, the Congo region, the Niger Delta, and collection

points such as Portuguese-colonized São Tomé. These individuals were supplied through African intermediaries via warfare, raids, or judicial processes, then were resold on the Gold Coast at fortified posts like Elmina (founded 1482) (Lovejoy, 2012).

The economic focus was on the Akan peoples' control over the prosperous goldfields in the hinterlands, where the employment of imported slave labor was vital for mining operations, transportation, and the growth of inland trade, as noted by Rebecca Shumway (2011). The Akani trading network, composed of Akan merchants who transported gold to the coast, resulted in a notable supply gap. This gap arose because local Akan communities rarely exported their own people in large numbers, which allowed Portuguese traders to trade captives for gold, yielding significant profits. Additionally, they exchanged captives for goods such as beads, cowries, textiles, and eventually firearms, which further encouraged enslavement and political transformations. This trade pattern, partially redirected to Portuguese Atlantic islands for sugar and wheat production instead of the Americas, preserved Portugal's coastal monopoly until the Dutch began to challenge it in the early seventeenth century. Although the annual export numbers were only 600–1,000 captives, this laid the groundwork for the trade's subsequent rapid expansion (Shumway, 2011; Klein, 2010).

In the tale, Anansi's head falls off as a direct consequence of his solitary, passionate act—singing the forbidden chant despite the ghost's warning. This stems from an internal drive, the “catchy chant bubbling up inside him”, overriding a promised moral restraint. It is a moment of pure subjectivity. Anansi prioritizes his immediate gratification over the external rule, leading to self-fragmentation. Hegel claims subjective will, can devolve into caprice or evil when detached from social context, Much like Anansi's song, which Hegel might see as a willful assertion that ignores the “universal”²¹ (the ghost's prohibition as a stand-in for objective right). In both, individual autonomy sparks a crisis where the head's fall symbolizes a moral wrong, highlighting how unchecked personal desires disrupt self-integrity and set the stage for relational dependency (Hegel, 1807/1977). Some interactions can lead to absurd, irreversible distortions, turning moral lessons into bodily²² curses and social retreat. This highlights morality is not entirely innate or individual but forged in the dialectic of relations with others, often with humorous or tragic irony.

Here Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms delineates Hegelian subjectivity(1977) by locating the chant not as mere caprice but as a primary linguistic expression (Ausdruck) that binds

²¹When painting in abstraction it appears as a pure act of expressing my autonomy. In the context of African paintings what I understand by abstraction is that it draws upon a conscious effort to unconsciously emphasize the person living among others. Malangatana Ngwenya from Mozambique has said people said he was always playing when he was painting. The act of painting is not easily recognized as an occupation independent of the input of foreigners. I think much of the support for the visual arts in most African countries is done by foreigners or African artist who have gained acclaim abroad. However, there are whole villages in parts of places like Nigeria where sculptors and artisans lived on making art for royalty. Functionality is deeply tied to art in the context of Africa.

²² I think of the body here as a medium of expression and speech. I also think the inferiority complex I associate with the power of writing is a kind of deformity in my consciousness.

sensory multiplicity into mythic signification²³. Mythic signification according to Cassirer(1955) is a pre-logical category that defines words as having inherent force and agency. The repeated refrain, “Oh, we need to catch the fishes, so we use our heads to scoop the river dry”, functions as a tool for bringing a kind of coherence into a perilous world for Anansi (Cassirer, 1923; Langer, 1942). In my practice bouncing between abstraction and figuration mimics this need to find meaningful dimensions in the picture making process. Sometimes there is no conviction in what I am saying on canvas so I have to find my thoughts clearly withing the process of making the picture Hegel’s(1977) Spirit moves through contradiction toward ethical actuality based on his emphasis on negation. Cassirer(1955) drawing on Leibnizian monads and Schelling’s theogonic crisis, sees language as the formative tool that imposes congruence on experience yet always risks the “bad infinity”²⁴ of unchecked enumeration. In jazz music there is this idea of resolving discords. I think when I paint in abstraction and I make forms that do no sync harmonically and often times sculpture applied in such encounters with discord creates some sort of coherence in my painting language from my point of view. Umberto Eco’s (2009) *Infinity of Lists* illuminates the tale’s poetic catalog in the enumeration of Anansi’s children (big ones, middle-sized ones, little ones, and even the babies) and the family’s exhaustive repair attempts (stitching with needle and thread, nailing with hammer and nails, even gluing it on) echoes the open-ended lists.²⁵ Eco, emphasizes the ineffable excess of existence while exposing its comic failure to close. Lists offer a visually coherent means of highlighting absurdities by placing tragic symbols with comic one. Lists preserve oral traditions, given the tendency of orality to be based on mnemonic retention and traditional practices based on repetition (Eco, 2009; Ong, 1967/1982 Yankah, 1989). In the image Nkrumah is depicted as a harpist like Orpheus with women in the background ready to stone him. Marxist philosopher Slavoj Zizek looks on as Nkrumah sings before dying.

²³ Ananse sings in the tale where he steals father elephant’s buttocks meat to cause father elephant and his family to deviate from their goal of getting back the piece of flesh. In Homer’s Hymn to Hermes, the Greek trickster god also uses music to get meat from Apollo.

²⁴ As a kind of movement in abstract thought this “bad infinity” is tied to Kierkegaard’s notion of Absolute Paradox discussed briefly in the concluding parts of the introduction. Bad infinity according to Hegel(1977) negates without establishing anything positive. Bad infinity to me is like Julius Eastman’s style of jazz music where resolving discords are overlooked for extending the discord, although there is almost a sense that some resolution might occur, yet never quite does. In *The Concept of Irony* (1841), Kierkegaard describes it as the essence of irony’s subjective freedom. Here the ironist hovers detached above the world, negating all finite content to clear space for authentic inwardness or faith, yet risks endless dissolution if the “higher” remains unrealized (Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 261–271)

²⁵ Caroline Langill and Steve Daniels in *Permeability: New Symbiotics for New Media* expand on the role of systems in media art. I am very interested in the implications and prospects of this new terrain in collaboration and in African Popular media culture.



Figure 22 - Eugene Mireku, *The Ball and The Cross*, 2024, Plasticine, Acrylic, Gouache, Paper Clay, Sand, Pastel on Canvas

True repetition, as Kierkegaard(1843/1844) insists, is “the new category... reality and the seriousness of existence,” transcending both aesthetic reality and ethical cunning. Applied here, Anansi’s solitary breach repeats forward in the family’s flawed intervention of placing Anansi’s head in a different place than it was originally. This indicates a transformation of personal fragmentation into a communal test. In Kierkegaard’s (1843/1844) *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs* this is precisely the “test”²⁶ Job

embodies which is neither aesthetic nor ethical but transcendent. In my practice I find, I am frequently questioning the role the visual arts has for making anything of substance in how Africans think of Africa. The significance of Job in Africa’s plight is that Job is not a stoic enduring trial but one who, in loss, clings to God with inward passion, turning ordeal into blessing through obedience and trust. In African contexts, this Kierkegaardian repetition actualizes pre-colonial communitarianism (Ikuenobe, 2006; Kierkegaard, 1843) not as nostalgic idealism such as in Rousseau’s(1755) undermining of civilization and industrialization, but as new ethical actuality amid conceptual vacuums tied to orality and literacy. There is a need to interact with the lack of established concepts, definitions, or conceptual frameworks based within oral thought forms more extensively in order to facilitate further understanding. There is a need also for further interpretation on ideas within oral thought forms. For instance, where was the Chinese trickster god Sun Wukong in the imagination of Chinese myth before Wu Cheng'en transcribed the character into an epic in the 16th century? The modern African citizen, detached by media spectacles and global-consumer identities may yet repeat relational personhood (“I am because we are”) through symbolic media that reconstitute orality, with or without Anansi (Kierkegaard, 2009; Wiredu, 1980; Gyekye, 1987).

The story shifts to collective intervention when Anansi’s family rushes to help. Their efforts stitching, nailing, gluing fail until the baby spider, in a naive act, sticks the head to his buttocks. This interaction is collaborative yet flawed just as the dynamics in post-colonial Africa. The family’s good intentions produce an inverted outcome, fusing the head permanently in the wrong place. It underscores how individual mishaps ripple into social domains, with others’ actions reshaping the self in unpredictable ways. Hegel would frame this as a dialectical transition from

²⁶ Kierkegaard (2009) frames the test as a category that exists outside ethics, dogma and aesthetics. I think is a pre-ontological, in likeness to how Zizek(2025) claims Heidegger thought the imagination is tied to the “infinite power of abstraction”

subjective morality to ethical life, where individual freedom is realized (or sublated) through social bonds. Here I believe Hegel outlines why collaboration is a critical aspect of the art practice in Africa.

Morality is transformed here through interdependence. In the story, the family's involvement elevates Anansi's personal failing into a communal moral lesson (explaining spiders' anatomy and shame), but it also imposes a collective burden where his children witness and participate in the fix. Hegel argues that such dynamics embed morality in society. Ethical norms aren't abstract but lived through relations, where individual actions gain moral weight via recognition by others. Ernst Cassirer (1923) posits that humans are "symbolic animals," who comprehend the world not merely through direct perception but via mediated forms such as language, myth, art, religion, and science. These forms represent structural and constructive activities of human consciousness, which transform experience into intelligible, cultural, and objective realities. Cassirer's symbolic forms suggest that the new bodily syntax (wee head in front, large "head" in rear) constitutes a monadic totality, harmonizing multiplicity much as Akan proverbs fix specific situations into cultural congruence (Cassirer, 1923; Wiredu, 1980; Gyekye, 1987).

Anansi's withdrawal illustrates that without complete integration, the self remains fragmented, reducing morality to mere avoidance rather than active participation in society. The inversion of buttocks and head could represent Hegel's concept of "actuality" gone astray. According to Hegel (1821) the rational must manifest through social processes, yet here it is humorously reversed, with the "head" (reason/will) becoming subordinate to the "base" (bodily/instinctual). In my practice of mixing painting with sculpture the motions of what is aesthetically ideal mimics this movement in symbolic progress by depicting forms that can be clearly contextualized within society. Yet there may be inversions either for lack of harmony or the lack of a clear execution of certain aesthetic principles Wiredu and Gyekye anchor personhood in Akan thought by emphasizing relational dynamics and how community duty creates the material conditions for well-being, with moral life being a harmonious contribution rather than abstract rights. Thus, the tale's stasis becomes the task of repetition, actualizing ethical substance in new media forms that preserve orality amid hyperreality (Wiredu, 1980; Gyekye, 1987; Kierkegaard, 2009). As Anansi has demonstrated, true morality thrives in progressive social structures that foster freedom based on one's interactions with others, yet the tale concludes in stasis, suggesting that flawed dynamics can solidify moral shortcomings into intergenerational ethics (spiders forever ashamed). Shame to pout literally in the context of the painting has to do with the way Africa is and recognizes itself after colonization.

Conclusion

I have paralyzing anxieties about eating from the practice of making art. I am deeply concerned about making something that can sustain me, but I also want to tell tales about what concerns me.

However, very often I consider the point of what I am saying (I recognize a stance) then I make up a thought about it (visually). Paintings tell me more than I thought about certain thoughts. It is a meditation. It is also

prayer. Paintings are tools for leading me further into specific domains in my psyche. They are a fetish for shifting my

moods and perceptions of what I understand of the world. They are intertwined with my reading habits and things tied to words I hear and speak. My mind tells me my mind cannot tell sometimes when I am telling it nonsense. When I put nonsense on the canvas, I can tell, most of the time. There are moods and perceptions I would like to repress and contend with less so painting can be very painful sometimes. I worry about what my nieces and nephews will say about what I make. Sometimes I think it does not really matter what I think but also, I think people connect to things. I don't know how much personal concerns matter in the stories I tell. I think my point of view is all there is really. I know speaking from what concerns me frees the burden of it from my consciousness. I want to grow in what I do/make/say from what I do/make/say. But I want to learn to speak and think for myself too. For instance, the emotion that served as the main basis to follow through with the reasoning of this work is shame. Now that I write on this, I feel less shameful about the work, but I also get how reflecting on my interiority can mean more than the thing I am reflecting on. Ong (1982) talks of writing being a means of raising consciousness. I think painting does the same thing.

I think portraiture captures the interiority of human experience effectively on the visual scale. But the interiority of expression is interwoven with various other scales. Some of these scales are within speech or discursive forms, and patterns of sentience that have to do with significant sequences in life. But the thought of presence being a word and the word being the second Godhead in Christianity is tremendously illuminating to me. I wonder the adventures Ananse has had and continues to with this second Godhead. Ananse is mythic expression to me. Christ is the word in speech and thought and textuality. I think the language that organized phonetics in African languages within textuality emerges from a monotheistic concept of God or it might have something to do with it. I am not entirely sure of the implications if this development of the



Figure 23 - Eugene Mireku, The Great Masturbator, 2024, Plasticine, Gouache, Acrylic, Paper Clay, Pastel on Wooden Panel

possibility for abstraction in thought was based within textuality originating in Akan symbols, for instance. Warhol said a painter only paints one picture, really. I think every painter says one thing. I am interested in writing in Akan these days. But Akan text can never be in Akan text. How can you tell me this story?... as the meme goes. In terms of how music may hit a person in the words on Bob Marley Langer claims in reference to music in *Feeling and Form*:

“The basic concept is the articulate but non-discursive form having import without conventional reference and therefore presenting itself not as a symbol in the ordinary sense, but as a “significant form,” in which the factor of significance is not logically discriminated, but is felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function.”

(p.32)

Food is an important motif for my contemplation of significant form in the manner Langer describes. I think books and ideas and content on screens also have much to do with diets and eating habits.



Figure 24 - Eugene Mireku, The Great Masturbator, 2024, Plasticine, Gouache, Acrylic, Paper Clay, Pastel on Wooden Panel

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