

Anancy stories beyond the moralistic approach of the western philosophy of being

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes Anancy's cognitive and sociohistorical identity beyond the moralistic approach of the western philosophy of being. Instead, Anancy stories are studied as a decolonized expression of an afrodescendant Caribbeanness that struggles to survive in an imperial context. There is placed special emphasis on Anancy and his relationship with other animals of the forest present in the stories collected by a group of Costa Rican researchers. Walter Mignolo's concept of colonial and imperial differences, the notion of the trickster, Mikael Bakhtin's carnival, the psychological theories of the id and humor are used to support the analysis. Finally, it is concluded that Anancy stories are the result of resistance but more importantly, they reveal a nontraditional subversion that guarantees hope in a hopeless system. In this sense, Anancy does not accept fatalism as a cognitive structure of his identity; even though, he lives in a fatalistic society.

KEYWORDS: Anancy stories, decolonization, afro Caribbean identity, humor, cognitive identity.

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza la construcción cognitiva y socio-histórica identitaria en los cuentos de la araña Anancy más allá del enfoque moralista de la filosofía occidental del ser. Es decir, los cuentos de Anancy son estudiados como una expresión de un Caribe afrodescendiente que lucha por sobrevivir en un contexto imperial. Se da particular énfasis al personaje de Anancy y su relación con otros animales del bosque presentes en los cuentos recolectados por un grupo de investigadores costarricenses. El concepto de diferencia colonial e imperial de Walter Mignolo, la teoría del carnaval de Mikhail Bakhtin así como teorías psicológicas del yo y el humor son usadas como referentes teóricos de análisis. Finalmente, se concluye que los cuentos de Anancy son el resultado de la resistencia que sobre todo revela un acto de subversión no tradicional para garantizar la esperanza dentro de un sistema desesperanzador. Así, Anancy no acepta el fatalismo como estructura cognitiva de su identidad aun cuando vive en una sociedad fatalista.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: los cuentos de Anancy, descolonización, identidad afrocaribeña, humor, identidad cognitiva.

«Rethinking the colonial model should go together with efforts to undo it. And one way to undo it is to reveal the play of the colonial and imperial differences, to extract them from their historical naturality and to deploy them as the work of coloniality of power, to deploy coloniality as the other side of modernity» (Mignolo, 2002: 186).

THINKING AND RETHINKING ANANCY STORIES

In the context of modernity, Anancy stories become an important sociohistorical text to «reveal the play of the colonial and imperial differences» that Mignolo makes reference to. The nature of Anancy is one of the basic enquiries that come to the mind when one tries to understand these stories beyond the moralistic approach. But who is Anancy? It is a trickster represented in a Black human like spider who lies, steals, hurts, and laughs at others and everything. Anancy is selfish, untrusted, dishonest and mean. He is all the anti-values at once and the counter morality of a respectful individual in a

modern and postmodern society. That is Anancy under the imperial difference. However, any definition of the trickster, and then of Anancy, requires the deconstruction of the stated conventional meanings.

Anancy the trickster does not belong to the colonizing referential system imposed by imperialism despite the fact it operates outside-inside the empire. Beyond the Manichean dichotomy present in the occidental concept of the trickster, Anancy embodies the chaotic reorganization of the *double-moral* world he lives in. As Radin ponders, the trickster «possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being» (1972: xxiii). Because the living nature of the trickster is ambiguous –sometimes a subbeing and others a superbeing–, he obeys no institutionalized order. But this does not mean that Anancy is a bad entity. It is just that Anancy does what he has to do to survive in an oppressing system. In doing so, Anancy reveals the double institutionalized morality of his society. That is why he does not behave under the values of the western society. Instead, he plays with those values. This makes of Anancy more a revelation than the decadency of the human race.

Anancy stories call the attention not only on the character's formation –as the imperial difference emphasizes on– but on the perverse nature of the socio-political, economic and educational systems where that character has to live in –colonial difference–. For a trickster like Anancy, there is no sense to believe in Manichaeism as a structural guide for his social behavior because that system plays with such Manichean duality for its own good. From an occidental perspective, Anancy behaves amorally. But from the colonial model, in the sociohistorical context of slavery, Anancy is a symbolic redeemer that refuses to accept the role of the victim. Assuming its victimization –even though Anancy is the creation of a victimized– would justify the idea of the weak individual who needs to be domesticated by the one who embodies the oppressing system.

ANANCY AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE WESTERN THINKING

Undoing Anancy in the socio-historical context of coloniality reveals other attributions that go far from the Christian morality, and then, from the western philosophy of being and its institutions of power. Anancy's ancestry comes from the Ashanti people of West Africa. His historic and cognitive consciousness is developed in the socio-political and economic context of slavery, desterritorialization, survivorship, migration and adaptation. In the West Africa, Duncan clarifies that Anancy is a second deity known as Anansi Kokoruru, «a kind of fallen angel» but with the qualities of «the great builder of the universe». On the other hand, in the Caribbean and in Costa Rica, Anancy «is the symbolic saga of the slave against his oppressor, and then, this represents a psychological vindication of the Black» (Duncan, 2010: 99) *my translation*. Such symbolic psychological vindication is constructed through the destruction of the western referents of power embodied on the notions of size, force and intelligence.

In those situations that imply confrontation, Anancy is able to defeat his enemies using intelligence rather than force. This is evident in the stories «Anansi and the Blackbirds» (Chang et alii, 2006), «Brother Anansi and the Alligator» (Chang et alii, 2006), «Lie hotter than sore» (Chang et alii, 2006), «Anancy, Dog and Alligator» (Chang et alii, 2006), «Breda Anancy and Breda Mule» (Chang et alii, 2006), «Tiger, Anancy's father old riding horse» (Chang et alii, 2006), «How Anancy catch Snake» (Britton, 2008), «The tar dummy» (Britton, 2008), and «Anancy and Bredda Lion» (Britton, 2008) among many other stories.

In «Anancy and Bredda Lion», the rights of the social hierarchies are reversed. The narrator states that «Bredda Lion has a new bad habit that he felt was his right and privilege, being the most feared in the village. He developed the biggest belch in the whole place. Every time he ate and went to sleep at night, he would belch really loud all night and woke up the rest of the village» (Britton, 2008: 64). To solve the problem, Brother Rabbit and Snake wear earmuff to make noise bearable during bedtime – a submissive solution–. Instead, Anancy acts against Lion. After trying earmuffs and having a sleepless night, Anancy gets furious and decides to talk to Lion. First, Anancy tries the civilized problem-solving way of the Western. He tells Lion that his bad habit of eructing makes sleeping impossible. But Lion does not care about Anancy’s complain. Lion thinks that he can do whatever he wants because he is the king. Then the spider tries the Anancy’s de-colonial way. He plans to set up Lion. Anancy tells Lion that when he belches, the eaten food is released so he will be hungry very fast. At first, Lion laughs at Anancy. But «Anancy started to work on his last bright idea. He secretly started to follow Bredda Lion for the whole day, watching what he was eating. He took a big bag with some containers in it. Every meal that Bredda Lion had, he collected some of the same thing in a container» (Britton, 2008: 66). At night, whenever Lion eructed, Anancy put some of the collected food around Lion. The foodsmell woke Lion up, and then, he remembered Anancy’s words. Lion believed he was going to lose his food and ate that much that he got a stomachache. That night, Lion could not sleep. Anancy proves the value of sagacity over physical power as he plays with Lion’s greediness. Anancy is clear that he does not have any chance to win in a frontal physical fight. However, using his knowledge, Anancy demonstrates that power resides on the mind rather than the body.

On the other hand, Anancy is also able to downfall the intelligence and distrust of his akin: Snake. According to Guerrin et alii, «the snake is a symbol of energy and pure force (cf. libido); evil, corruption, sensuality; destruction; mystery; wisdom; the unconscious» (1996: 163). All these characteristics are attributed to Anancy too. However, unlike the spider, the snake has prestige, respect and the power of fearing others. Moreover, the snake is bigger and faster than the spider. In other words, the snake has social recognition in the western system of political and religious values. So how is Anancy capable of defeating Snake? In «How Anancy catch Snake» (Britton, 2008), Anancy makes a bet with the other animals of the forest. He promises to catch Snake. Even though he knew it was going to be a very difficult task because Snake trusts nobody, Anancy is self-confident of his capacity. The narrator tells that Anancy cuts a long bamboo stick and goes to visit Bredda Snake. But Snake being fully aware of Anancy’s tricking nature, orders him to stay away. Anancy answers «sure man, no man so fool fi try fi trick you, everyone know you have more brains than all of wi put together [...] I come because I want to prove to the world that you is the longest animal in the woods [...] Snake answered proudly: “longest. Sure me is the longest”» (Britton, 2008: 47). Anancy plays the role of the ignorant stating that the problem is that he does not know how to measure the size of Snake. Therefore, Snake proposes to do so with the bamboo stick Anancy holds. Snake stretches out over the bamboo and Anancy ties him up to the bamboo. «When Snake realize what was happening it was too late. So Anancy did catch Snake» (Britton, 2008: 49). In other words, what Anancy does is to deconstruct Snakes’ thinking and to identify his weakness: vanity. He studies the behaviors and ways of thinking of his opponents to conquer their cognitive identities and control their performance. Anancy does so through the play of their moral, philosophical and ideological beliefs. This is say that Anancy is aware of the colonial

and imperial differences, and he decides to take advantage of that knowledge to survive, to get pleasure, to vindicate his role and position in society, and finally, to make others see the possibility of subversion –to give hope to those who, like the spider, live in an oppressing and unequal world–.

Anancy also disrupts the counter discourse of subversion of the Western. Anancy and Snake share similar cognitive identities so one may think that defeating Snake is a discursive and ideological contradiction. Not really. They come from different cultural, historical and philosophical worlds. For western societies –and also for some oriental communities–, the snake is a free entity that obeys no moral authority. Its power is recognized even by God who justifies the snake's existence as an opportunity of freewill among humans. On the other hand, the spider is the symbol of enslavement and exile. While the snake has the power to oppress, the spider becomes the object of oppression. They share similar cognitive identities because they know how to play with morality but their social and historical statues are different. The snake has the same credit of a «positive» entity. It is just that such recognition is given in the negative dimension of the positive. On the contrary, the spider continues being absent in the official discourses. In the western terms, the spider is presented as the opposite of the expected morality, and then, as a slave of the wrong (the snake). In Anancy stories, the spider subverts both oppressing systems.

The western idea of power also comes along with size. Again, in Anancy stories, power derives from intelligence and astuteness. Physically, Anancy is inferior. It is a spider that shares a world with bigger animals. As Anglin states «the opponent of the trickster are generally chosen from those who supposedly are supreme [in size] in the forests: Tiger, Lion, Elephant [Monkey]. [But] their role in the story is that of animals that can be easily fooled» (Mosby, 2003: 35). In other words, despite the fact that Anancy is shorter than the animals of the forest, he is most powerful than them. In the story «Anancy and the riding horse», this little spider fools and makes fun of Tiger in order to get the attention of a female in dispute. To impress the female that Tiger is flirting, Anancy tells her that Tiger is his ridding horse. When Tiger realizes about such lie, he gets mad at Anancy. Tiger argues with Anancy but the spider denies the charges. Anancy accepts to «clarify» the apparent «misunderstanding» with the female. But he tells Tiger that his back is in terrible pain. Because Tiger wants to confirm his powerful nature, he decides to carry Anancy on his back. Anancy persuades Tiger to wear a rope and stirrup to make pain bearable. Tiger rides Anancy on his back without being aware that he was playing the role of a horse. When both see the female, Anancy hits Tiger with a branch making others believe that Tiger was actually Anancy's ridding horse.

Deconstructing the traditional referents of power is also present in the story «Brother Pigeon's birthday party». Anancy uses his intelligence to subordinate social hierarchies. He first invites Monkey to go to Pigeon's birthday party. Monkey was such a good dancer that all girls wanted to dance with him and none with Anancy. Even though Anancy tells this situation to Money, this last one pays no attention to the complaint. So Anancy decides to set Monkey up. He also invites Monkey's most scaring contender to Pigeon's party: Tiger. When Tiger sees Monkey, he commands Monkey to leave the place. Monkey runs away and Anancy gets revenge. As James states,

Whatever its composition, though, in this Creole folk ethos, Anansi is well accepted as the mascot of the small man's triumph. Although diasporic claims on him are universal, the West Indian cultural pantheon immortalizes him in tales fashioned out of the

particular West Indian landscape where he has become a synecdoche for Caribbean ingenuity, endurance, and commitment to self-preservation (2004: 4).

On the other hand, Anancy ambiguous physiological nature is another counter-construction of the western philosophy of being. He is not human, not completely animal nor divine. The truth is that Anancy is not made like God but of uncertain nature instead. Such ambiguity is an advantage because Anancy cannot be placed in a pre-determined moral system. Even though, Anancy is conscious of God's power, he does not fear God. He treats God with no reverence. In the story «Anancy and the sky God», Anancy visits God, tells Him a story and obtains the reward of storytelling. There is one difference in approach among them. Anancy can trick God and other beings, steal their treasures, and finally, share them again with the rest of the world as it happens in «Anancy and the wisdom». In other words, as a spider-trickster, Anancy has the power to destabilize the social and divine orders inside the story and outside it.

ANANCY AND HIS PSYCHOLOGICAL VINDICATION: CARNIVAL AND HUMOR

In psychological terms, Anancy's nature and personality resemble Freud's concept of the id. According to Kwawisi Tekpetey,

One systematically finds him [Anancy] engaged in activities directed at gratifying his instincts for pleasure without regard for social conventions, legal ethics, or moral restraints. In short, he may be equated with the Freudian notion of the id, embodying instinctual, repressed, or antisocial desires. This characterization, however, should be seen as only partial. Kweku Ananse's literary function in the Akan oral educational system appears to be an attempt to expose the danger that he incarnates in society; in so doing, he serves to reveal the work of ideology in the society. Besides, the audience vicariously sympathizes with our hero, who renders within the fixed bounds of what is permitted an experience of what is inadmissible. Furthermore, Ananse narratives are cathartic, serving as tension-relieving aesthetic devices (2006: 74).

Even though the use of Anancy in Akan oral educational system may result problematic in terms of the imperial stigmatization Anancy may suffer, Tekpetey's analysis of Anancy's rebelliousness becomes a key to understand the psychological vindication of the afrodescendants in the Caribbean. The analogic relationship among Anancy, the trickster and the id constitutes the prevalence of catharsis over seriousness; especially, because through the humoristic mood and tone of the stories, Anancy interpellates readers as moral individuals. In other words, there is a substitution of authority for pleasure.

When Anancy defeats and tricks his enemies and other animals of the woods, he transgresses the traditional western hierarchies that organize reason and pleasure. It is more interesting the fact that the id –symbolized in Anancy– governs all human activities and necessities such as feeding, entertainment, resting, family relationships, social organization, ethics and philosophy. Even when Anancy assumes the role of the law, the mechanisms he uses to exercise justice and power are dislocated from the occidental notion of legality. For instance, in «The tar dummy», Anancy teaches a lesson but using unconventional ways. The narrator points out that the animals of the forest were thirsty because there was no water but they were reluctant to work for a solution. On the contrary, Anancy decided to dig a well in order to find water. He asked his friends for help; nevertheless, they thought that such idea was worthless, and refuse to support Anancy. But when Anancy finds water, everybody wants to drink it. Anancy,

then, states «[n]obody helped me dig the well; nobody is going to drink of my water» (Britton, 2008: 53). Despite of Anancy's constant warns, animals drunk the water in his absence. Therefore, Anancy makes a tar dummy and places it near his water fountain thinking that «[i]f someone comes to drink water, he will be stuck to the dummy. By this way I will catch the next thief that comes for my water» (Britton, 2008: 53). One night, Brother Tiger tried to steal Anancy's water. He thought that the tar dummy was actually a guard. He extended his hand in a friendly gesture to greet the tar dummy but got stuck. Desperately, Tiger used his force to get free. Instead, he got completely stuck to the tar dummy. Next morning, Tiger realized about Anancy's trap. He got really ashamed because he «knew that this would be enough reason for all the animals to laugh at him, so he got so distressed that he fainted» (Britton, 2008: 55). In this particular case, the narrator states that «Anancy was a good person, so he asked the other animals to release Tiger. The animals saw Anancy's good action and said: "Today, we have learned a lesson and from now on we will work together for our well – being"» (Britton, 2008: 55). Even though Anancy's nature is not transformed, he gains recognition and respect in the formal way.

Behaving as a trickster and not as the honorable man, Anancy makes justice and mercy possible by using the principles of the id. In other words, to be fair and merciful –high values in the western discourse of morality–, Anancy carnivalizes justice through the application of ludic mechanisms as the tar dummy is. This represents the appropriation of ideological structures of institutionalized power. In his colonial difference, then, Anancy's cathartic condition is revealed through carnivalesque situations and humoristic tone and mood. The constant flow of images, settings, characters and conflict-resolutions generate a reversal twist presenting a world outside down.

The carnival and its connection with Anancy are indeed present through parties and feasts. In this regard, Pochet makes reference to the presence of farming celebrations in Anancy as «degradations because the inherent condition they have in regards to the Bakhtin's analysis of the banquet» (2012: 18) *my translation*. Such degradation is not negative. On the contrary, it represents the dilapidation of an oppressing system that strictly regulates pleasure for basic activities such as eating and laughing. In this sense, Elliot explains that the «[c]arnival keeps the official axe, ever-ready to descend on the unruly heads of the folk, in a state of uncertain hesitation, and in that moment of authority's hesitation is the triumph of carnival» (1999: 131). In the state of uncertainty, polyphony becomes possible because individuals can show their most inner instinctive desires without restriction as it happens in «Anancy, Tiger, and Friends work together», «Bother Anancy and the plantains» and «Anancy an de yam vine». In all these stories, the narration goes around situations that involve food and social reunion. Despite the existing social hierarchies among animals, they can share or steel food as equals: adults and children, fearful and domestic animals, mammals and arachnids, the family and the neighbors, the intelligent and the foolish individual, the big and the small, the healthy and the sick. They share with joy and pain, with hunger and gluttony, with selfishness and solidarity. As a result, polyphony is constructed at all levels.

On the other hand, the disruption of uniformed power in Anancy's carnival is constructed through humor. Bahktin explains that «[c]ertain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter» (1968: 66) because it destroys the formal referential of moral behavior placing individuals outside that system. Such official referential destruction is present in both the esthetic construction of Anancy and his way

of using humor to deal with everyday life situations. According to Freud, there is a strong connection among the unconscious, desires, jokes and dreams. As in the carnival, they use similar psychological techniques to be expressed in a process of emotional discharge. Humor and laughter are two mechanisms used to produce such relief.

The theory of incongruity explains the nature of laughter as the result of an irrational construction. In this respect, Morreall states that «we live in an orderly World, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. we laugh when we experience something that doesn't fit into these patterns» (1983: 17). Schopenhavers also ponders that «the cause of the laughter, in every case is simple, the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity» (Morreall, 1983: 17). Taking into consideration that incongruity derives from the dislocation of the logical reasoning created by the western philosophy of being, Anancy's celebration of the carnival and humoristic tone evidence a decolonialized cognitive identity. He not only transgresses the rational Saussurean structural relationship between the signifier and signified (which produces incongruity), but also uses such transgression to interpellate the emotional, moral and ideological worlds of his audience –including Anancy's friends, listeners and readers–.

On the other hand, Anancy is a spider making humor which de-centers the position of the human being in the planet. Hazlitt states that «[m]an is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be» (Willis, 2002). Bergson also points out that «the comic does not exist outside of what is strictly human» (1911: 3). Scruton tries to merge the two previous ideas by pondering that «[m]an is the only animal that laughs, but it seems that laughter belongs also to the immortals» (1982: 197). However, in Anancy stories, animals are the artifices and artifacts of humor. Consequently, Anancy's carnivalesque and humoristic work destroys the ethnocentric vision of the world because humor resides on animals rather than humans.

In most of Anancy stories, tricks end up in humoristic and funny situations that reveal the perverse nature of society. Matte argues that «[h]umor is a particular personal and cultural process and a process that relates to all aspects of the personal and social world» (2001: 226). So considering something as funny requires a cognitive and affective notion of humor (sense of humor) associated to one's perception and assumption of the world. As it has been explained, in Anancy such perception is characterized by the disruption of the western values and ethics. In other words, in Anancy stories humor is constructed on «anti-values». At this point, Freud's analysis of the nature of humor is important. Freud claims that humor is

un medio de conseguir placer a pesar de los efectos dolorosos que a ello se opone y aparece en sustitución de los mismos. La condición que regula su génesis queda cumplida cuando se constituye una situación en la que, hallándonos dispuestos, siguiendo un hábito, a desarrollar afectos penosos actúen simultáneamente sobre nosotros motivos que nos impulsan a cohibir tales afectos, *in statu nascendi*. En estos casos, la persona sobre la que recae el daño, el dolor, etc., puede conseguir placer humorístico, mientras que los extraños ríen sintiendo placer cómico. No tenemos, pues, más remedio que admitir que el placer del humor surge a costa del desarrollo del afecto cohibido: esto es, del ahorro de un gasto de afecto. (1905: 1162).

Taking into consideration Freud's theory, one must say that in Anancy stories humor actually comes from the analogic relationship among disgrace, pain and pleasure.

From the imperial difference, such analogy is evidently perverse. But one needs to keep in mind that such perversion reflects a social situation rather than the nature of the individual. Also, in the case of Anancy, perversion is only symbolic because its repercussions are regulated by the comic effect. The deconstruction of the traditional characterizations attributed to the animals present in the stories develops that comic effect. Lion is not the king of the forest. Tiger is not fearful. Snake is not intelligent. Monkey is always scared. But a simple spider controls everyone. Even though Lion, Tiger, Snake and Monkey are bigger animals than the spider, Anancy constantly laughs at them.

Even though the situations Anancy laughs at may be thought as perverse, perversity is present more on the side of the reader than on the ontological nature of Anancy. After all, it is the reader or the listener who «finds» humor out of Anancy stories. Then these tales are configured as liberating mechanisms by which pleasure and humor obtained (from pain, frustration and disgrace) an answer to oppression. The result is the vindication of the self-esteem and morality of the Afro descendants in the Caribbean and in all those places where Anancy stories have been present.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In Anancy stories, the sociodiscursive dimension of humor presents conscious and unconscious motivations related to symbolic psychological subversion and social vindication. For the Afro Caribbean identity, Anancy stories also reflect a decolonized thinking that struggles within the double discourse of ethics, philosophy and intellectuality of the Western.

The carnivalesque settings and characters developed in Anancy stories destroy the solemnity of proper-official life (that one of the occidental ideology). The speaking voice of these tales knows that «[t]he serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations, and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation» (Bakhtin, 1968: 90). Instead of the serious treatment of problems, Anancy seduces listeners' and readers' sense of humor to disrupt uniformity of thought and to reveal the perversity of the imperial difference. This is possible because Anancy is not the typical western hero. Only, playing as the trickster, Anancy can evidence coloniality and modernity in relation to the imperial project and its mechanisms of subordination.

Consequently, Anancy stories deconstruct the colonial difference on the bases of the dialogic dimension of life. At the same time, such dialogism discloses the contradictory and chaotic construction of the western institutionalization of being as well as the hyperreality –in Baudrillard' sense– it creates through simulacra and simulation. As Mignolo states,

[i]f the politics of (epistemic) decolonization is related to a philosophy of being, there is still another space from which to pursue that reflection, and that is the space of the colonial difference [...] Rethinking literary history from the colonial difference implies decolonizing literary history, and in its turn it implies thinking in terms of otherwise than literature and history (2002, 186).

In this sense, Anancy stories are the result of resistance but more importantly, they reveal the «philosophy of being» of a decolonized cognitive identity in historical, psychological, and moral terms. These stories contradict the intellectual and ethical ideal thought. Therefore, Anancy's philosophical thinking and social behavior represent a nontraditional subversion that guarantees hope in a hopeless system. In other words,

Anancy does not accept fatalism as a cognitive structure of his identity; even though, he lives in a fatalistic society.

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