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Beyond Written Autobiography: Toward an Akan Theory of Oral Autobiographical Voice in the Folktales of Kweku Ananse and Kweku Tsin

West African Folktales - *How Wisdom Became the Property of Human Race*

African Folktales - *How Spider Obtained the Sky-God's Stories*

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Introduction

Autobiography as Traditionally Defined

Philippe Lejeune famously defines autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). Central to this definition is the identity of the author, narrator, and protagonist, a relationship Lejeune describes as the **autobiographical pact**, through which readers understand the narrative as referring to the author's lived experience. Consequently, autobiography has traditionally been associated with authenticity, personal memory, and factual self-representation. As Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf observes, autobiographies "had been considered as a sort of historiographical writing, as texts that are 'true' or at least 'truthful' reports of a person's life."

However, this traditional model privileges written, individual, and text-based forms of self-representation, leaving limited space for oral traditions in which identity is constructed through performance, repetition, and communal memory. Recent developments in autobiography and life-writing studies have challenged these boundaries by recognizing broader forms of self-representation beyond the conventional written autobiography. This expansion raises important questions about how cultures that preserve knowledge through oral performance construct and transmit forms of narrative identity.

Building on this theoretical shift, the present study argues that autobiographical selfhood need not be understood exclusively through individual written narration. Rather, it proposes that identity may also emerge through recurring narrative performances, collective recognition, and cultural memory. The study does not claim that Akan folktale figures produce autobiography in the conventional

Lejeunian sense; instead, it examines how recurring figures such as **Kweku Ananse and Kweku Tsin** acquire enduring identities through successive oral narratives.

Accordingly, this article advances the concept of **Oral Autobiographical Voice**, which refers to the cumulative construction and recognition of a narrative self through recurring oral performance, communal authorship, and cultural memory. Through this framework, Akan oral tradition becomes a site where autobiographical selfhood is not written by an individual author but performed, preserved, and transmitted across generations.

To establish the theoretical basis for this argument, it is necessary first to examine the movement from autobiography as an individual written genre toward broader conceptions of life writing and narrative identity.

Literature Review

From Autobiography to Life Writing: Expanding the Concept of Self- Representation

The traditional understanding of autobiography has been significantly shaped by Philippe Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact, one of the most influential theories in autobiography studies. For Lejeune, autobiography is distinguished by the relationship established between author and reader, whereby the author, narrator, and protagonist are understood to be the same person. This identity creates an expectation of authenticity because the narrative is presented as a representation of the author's own existence rather than as fictional invention (Lejeune 4).

Lejeune's model remains foundational because it explains the relationship between authorship, narration, and identity in autobiographical writing. However, its emphasis on individual authorship, written texts, and personal experience also reveals limitations when applied beyond literary traditions in which the self is represented through a single written narrative. Oral cultures often construct and transmit identity through collective performance, repetition, and communal recognition alongside forms of individual expression.

The movement from autobiography to life writing has expanded the study of self-representation beyond these traditional boundaries. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, argue that life writing encompasses diverse practices through which selves are narrated, remembered, and culturally constructed. Their approach challenges the assumption that identity is a stable entity simply recorded by an autobiographical subject. Instead, they emphasize that narratives of self are shaped by memory, cultural contexts, historical circumstances, social relationships, and structures of power.

This expanded understanding is significant because it presents self-representation as a process rather than merely a record of an already existing identity. Memory does not simply reproduce past experiences; it selects, organizes, and interprets them. Likewise, cultural environments influence how individuals and communities understand, preserve, and communicate identity. Life-writing studies therefore provide a theoretical framework for examining forms of self-representation that extend beyond conventional written autobiography.

Paul John Eakin further develops this understanding by arguing that the self is not simply a pre-existing reality later documented through narrative. In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Eakin demonstrates that selves are actively produced through storytelling. Narrative does not merely describe identity; it participates in the creation of identity by organizing experiences into meaningful patterns. Through remembering, interpreting, and narrating experience, individuals construct understandings of who they are.

Eakin's concept of "making selves" is particularly useful for reconsidering autobiography within oral traditions. If identity is produced through narrative practices, then autobiographical selfhood need not depend exclusively on written self-narration by an individual author. It may also emerge through repeated acts of storytelling, performance, recognition, and transmission within a community.

This theoretical movement from autobiography to life writing creates the foundation for examining Akan oral tradition as a site of autobiographical self-representation. In Akan folktales, recurring figures such as Kweku Ananse and Kweku Tsin do not possess autobiographies in the conventional Lejeunian sense. Rather, their identities are constructed across successive oral performances in which storytellers and audiences collectively preserve, interpret, and reshape their narrative selves.

Therefore, the concept of Oral Autobiographical Voice extends existing theories of autobiography by shifting attention from individual written self-narration to communal and performative constructions of identity. It does not reject Lejeune's model but expands the field of autobiography by

asking how selves may be narrated, remembered, and sustained within oral cultures. This theoretical expansion provides the basis for understanding Akan folktale figures as enduring narrative selves whose identities are produced through continuity, performance, communal authorship, and cultural memory.

Orality, Performance, and the Construction of Identity in Akan Tradition

The movement from written autobiography to Oral Autobiographical Voice requires an understanding of how oral cultures construct and preserve identity. Unlike written autobiography, which traditionally locates self-representation within an individual author's text, oral traditions sustain identity through performance, memory, repetition, and communal participation. Within such traditions, identity is not preserved as a fixed written record but emerges through the continuous narration and interpretation of cultural narratives.

Walter J. Ong: Orality, Memory, and Communal Knowledge

Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* provides an important foundation for understanding oral forms of identity construction. Ong argues that oral cultures preserve knowledge through memory, repetition, rhythm, formulaic expression, and performance. Oral communication is therefore not simply a method of transmitting information but a participatory process involving the interaction between performer and audience.

This understanding is significant for Akan folktales because figures such as Kweku Ananse do not derive their identities from a single authoritative text.

Rather, their identities develop through repeated performances in which communities preserve, reinterpret, and transmit their narratives across generations.

Ruth Finnegan: Oral Literature as Performance

Ruth Finnegan challenges the assumption that oral traditions are incomplete versions of written literature. In *Oral Literature in Africa*, she demonstrates that oral literature possesses its own artistic structures and modes of meaning-making, where significance emerges through the interaction between storyteller, audience, language, and performance.

Finnegan's emphasis on performance provides an important basis for understanding autobiographical identity in oral cultures. While written autobiography constructs the self through textual reflection, oral traditions construct narrative identity through repeated acts of storytelling. The self of a folktale figure is therefore not fixed but continually produced through performance and communal interpretation.

J. H. Kwabena Nketia: Akan Oral Tradition as Cultural Knowledge

J. H. Kwabena Nketia's studies of African oral traditions demonstrate that oral forms such as storytelling, proverbs, and songs function as systems of cultural knowledge. Within Akan society, oral narratives preserve collective memory, communicate social values, and transmit understandings of identity across generations.

This perspective is central to Oral Autobiographical Voice because Akan identity is not represented solely through individual self-narration. Rather,

selves and cultural figures are constructed through participation in shared narratives that preserve communal histories and meanings.

Kwesi Yankah: Storytelling, Rhetoric, and Narrative Authority

Kwesi Yankah's work on Akan verbal art and rhetoric further highlights the relationship between storytelling and social authority. Storytelling is not merely the act of recounting events; it involves questions of who speaks, whose interpretation is recognized, and how narratives gain cultural legitimacy.

This insight extends the concept of autobiography into the oral domain. The identity of a figure such as Kweku Ananse is sustained not by individual authorship but through the authority granted by generations of storytellers and audiences who continually reproduce and reshape his narrative presence.

Together, the perspectives of Ong, Finnegan, Nketia, and Yankah provide the cultural and theoretical foundation for understanding Akan folktales as sites of autobiographical self-representation. They demonstrate that in oral traditions, identity emerges through performance, communal memory, and narrative authority. These principles form the basis of the present study's concept of Oral Autobiographical Voice, in which selfhood is constructed not through a single written life narrative but through the continuing circulation of stories within a community.

Methodology and Corpus

Ananse and Kweku Tsin as Oral Autobiographical Voices: A Theoretical Analysis.

Methodology and Corpus

This study adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach based on the close reading of selected Akan folktales. Although these narratives originate within an oral tradition, the study examines published transcriptions as textual representations of performances that have circulated through communal storytelling. These versions are not treated as fixed literary texts but as access points for exploring the oral processes through which meaning, identity, and cultural memory are produced.

The study focuses on two Akan folktales associated with Ananse traditions: **“How Spider Obtained the Sky-God's Stories”** and **“How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race.”** These narratives are selected because they demonstrate how **Kweku Ananse and Kweku Tsin** acquire recognizable identities through speech, action, relationships, and interaction with other characters.

The analysis examines these figures as **Oral Autobiographical Voices** through four interconnected dimensions: **narrative continuity, communal authorship, performative selfhood, and cultural memory.** Rather than understanding Ananse and Kweku Tsin as autobiographical subjects in the conventional written sense, this study investigates how their narrative selves are constructed across successive performances and sustained through collective recognition within Akan cultural memory.

Kweku Ananse: Narrative Authority and the Acquisition of Oral Autobiographical Voice in *How Spider Obtained the Sky-God's Stories*

Among Akan folktales, *How Spider Obtained the Sky-God's Stories* occupies a unique position because it functions not only as an origin narrative explaining the emergence of Anansem but also as a narrative about the acquisition of storytelling authority itself. Read through the framework of Oral Autobiographical Voice, the tale demonstrates how Ananse constructs a recognizable narrative identity through performance, agency, communal recognition, and cultural memory. Rather than simply obtaining stories, Ananse acquires the authority to become their enduring narrative subject.

At the beginning of the tale, Ananse presents himself before Nyankopon with a remarkable declaration: he intends to purchase the Sky-God's stories. This request immediately establishes his ambition to move beyond ordinary social status. Nyankopon's response is equally significant. He reminds Ananse that powerful kingdoms have failed to obtain the stories, questioning how "a mere masterless man" could succeed where great rulers had failed. This dialogue introduces the central tension of the narrative: the contrast between Ananse's humble social position and his extraordinary narrative ambition.

From the perspective of self-fashioning, Ananse refuses the identity assigned to him by the Sky-God. Rather than accepting the limitations imposed by his status, he reconstructs himself through action. His identity is not predetermined but actively fashioned through ingenuity, confidence, and

perseverance. This process illustrates that oral autobiographical identity is performative rather than essential; Ananse becomes who he is through what he repeatedly does.

Ananse's success depends not upon physical strength but upon rhetorical intelligence and strategic performance. He captures Onini the python through verbal manipulation, persuading the snake to participate in its own capture. He deceives the hornets by exploiting their fear of rain, traps Osebo the leopard through calculated planning, and captures the fairy through the famous sticky doll. In every episode, language, performance, and practical intelligence become instruments through which Ananse constructs his identity. These performances contribute to a recognizable narrative self-sustained across Akan storytelling traditions.

The story also highlights the collaborative dimension of Akan oral identity. Although Ananse receives primary recognition, his success is inseparable from the advice and assistance of his wife, Aso. It is Aso who repeatedly proposes strategies for capturing the python, the hornets, and the leopard. This partnership suggests that Ananse's narrative identity is relational rather than purely individual. His achievements emerge through interaction with others, reflecting the communal character of Akan oral tradition. This observation also opens an important avenue for later discussion of gender and narrative authority, since Aso's contribution complicates the tendency to attribute narrative success exclusively to male agency.

A decisive moment occurs when Nyankopon assembles his chiefs and publicly acknowledges Ananse's achievement. Before the assembled community, the Sky-God declares that the stories

will no longer be known as the Sky-God's stories but as Ananse stories. This proclamation is crucial for the theory of Oral Autobiographical Voice because it transforms Ananse from a character within stories into the figure through whom the storytelling tradition itself is identified. His identity is no longer confined to a single narrative; it becomes permanently attached to an entire corpus of oral literature.

This public recognition illustrates the principle of communal authorship. The authority of Ananse does not arise because he writes an autobiography or claims ownership through authorship in the modern literary sense. Rather, his identity is validated by communal acknowledgment and sustained through repeated performance. Every subsequent retelling of Ananse's story reinforces this authority, ensuring that Ananse's narrative self continues to evolve while remaining recognizable within Akan cultural memory.

The conclusion of the tale further emphasizes this communal dimension. The storyteller ends with the traditional formula:

"This, my story, which I have related, if it be sweet, or if it be not sweet, take some elsewhere, and let some come back to me."

This closing formula reminds listeners that the story belongs to an ongoing oral tradition rather than to an individual author. It invites further circulation, reinterpretation, and performance, thereby illustrating how oral narratives remain dynamic across generations. The autobiographical voice of Ananse is therefore inseparable from the continuing life of the storytelling community.

Viewed through the framework proposed in this study, *How Spider Obtained the Sky-God's Stories* is

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not simply an etiological account explaining the origin of Anansesem. It is a narrative about the construction of narrative authority itself. Through repeated acts of performance, strategic intelligence, communal recognition, and cultural transmission, Ananse acquires an enduring identity that transcends any single folktale. His autobiographical voice emerges as the cumulative product of oral performance and collective memory, confirming that in Akan tradition selfhood is narrated not through individual written confession but through communal storytelling.

Kweku Ananse and Kweku Tsin: Self-Fashioning, Narrative Agency, and Generational Identity in *How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race*

One of the most compelling illustrations of Oral Autobiographical Voice in Akan oral tradition is the folktale *How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race*. Rather than functioning merely as an etiological narrative explaining the origin of human wisdom, the tale also demonstrates how recurring oral characters acquire recognizable identities through narrative continuity, communal performance, and cultural memory. Read through the lens of Oral Autobiographical Voice, the story reveals that the identities of Kweku Ananse and his son Kweku Tsin are not fixed descriptions but cumulative narrative constructions shaped by repeated storytelling.

At the beginning of the tale, Ananse is introduced as the possessor of "all the wisdom in the world." This description immediately establishes a recognizable narrative identity. Across Akan folktales, Ananse repeatedly appears as a figure associated with

intelligence, ingenuity, and strategic thinking. The present tale does not create these characteristics; rather, it reinforces and develops an identity already familiar to audiences through previous performances. From the perspective of narrative continuity, Ananse's autobiographical voice emerges through the accumulation of such recurring representations across multiple folktales rather than from a single life narrative.

However, the story simultaneously complicates Ananse's identity. After deciding to punish humanity by reclaiming all wisdom and hiding it in a pot, he attempts to climb a tree with the pot hanging from his neck. Ironically, the burden of the wisdom he claims to possess prevents him from accomplishing his goal. This episode exposes a tension between Ananse's self-perception and his actual capability. Although he fashions himself as the sole custodian of wisdom, his actions reveal the limitations of that claim. His identity is therefore neither static nor idealized; it develops through contradiction, failure, and self-discovery. In Ricoeur's terms, Ananse's narrative identity is constituted through the unfolding events of the story rather than existing as a fixed essence prior to narration.

The folktale also demonstrates narrative agency, a central dimension of Oral Autobiographical Voice. Ananse drives the entire narrative through his decisions: he resolves to punish humanity, gathers the dispersed wisdom, seals it in a pot, chooses the tree, and finally throws the pot to the ground in frustration. The plot unfolds because of his choices. His agency is further expressed through dialogue, particularly when he responds to his son's intervention:

"I thought I had all the world's wisdom in this pot.
But I find you possess more than I do."

This admission is significant because it marks a transformation in Ananse's self-understanding. Rather than merely narrating events, the story depicts a character whose identity changes through experience. The autobiographical dimension therefore lies not in first-person narration but in the progressive revelation and reconfiguration of selfhood through action and speech.

The role of Kweku Tsin further enriches the theory of Oral Autobiographical Voice by introducing the dimension of generational identity. Although he occupies a secondary position within the narrative, Kweku Tsin demonstrates insight that surpasses his father's. Observing Ananse's repeated failures, he simply advises him to move the pot from his chest to his back. His practical wisdom exposes the incompleteness of Ananse's claim to universal knowledge.

From the perspective of oral autobiographical theory, Kweku Tsin is not merely an auxiliary character. He represents the transmission, renewal, and transformation of narrative identity across generations. His relationship with Ananse illustrates that identity in Akan oral tradition is relational rather than purely individual. Kweku Tsin's wisdom both emerges from and revises the narrative world established by his father. Consequently, autobiographical identity is shown to be cumulative and dialogic, developing through interaction between generations rather than through isolated acts of self-representation.

The story also exemplifies the principle of communal authorship. Unlike a written autobiography attributed to a single author, *How*

Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race has circulated through generations of oral performance before appearing in written collections. Its authority therefore resides not in individual authorship but in communal preservation. Every performance simultaneously preserves and reshapes the identities of Ananse and Kweku Tsin, ensuring their continued relevance within Akan cultural memory. Their autobiographical voices emerge through the collective participation of storytellers and audiences who repeatedly transmit, interpret, and reaffirm their identities.

Finally, the folktale illustrates the role of cultural memory in sustaining oral autobiographical identity. The breaking of the pot explains why wisdom becomes accessible to all humanity, transforming a personal conflict into a communal origin narrative. As the story continues to be performed, it preserves not only an explanation for the distribution of wisdom but also the enduring identities of Ananse as the clever yet fallible trickster and Kweku Tsin as the perceptive son whose insight surpasses inherited authority. Through repeated communal narration, these identities become part of Akan cultural consciousness.

Viewed through the framework proposed in this study, *How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race* demonstrates that autobiographical identity need not depend upon a written, first-person account of an individual's life. Instead, the repeated performance of recognizable characters, their evolving actions, their remembered speech, and their enduring relationships collectively produce what this article terms Oral Autobiographical Voice. The identities of Ananse and Kweku Tsin are therefore not biographies in the conventional sense but narrative selves continually constructed,

negotiated, and transmitted through Akan oral tradition.

Ananse and Kweku Tsin as Oral Autobiographical Voices: A Theoretical Synthesis

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Akan folktale figures challenge the assumption that autobiographical identity must emerge through written self-narration by an individual author. While Lejeune's autobiographical pact remains useful for understanding conventional autobiography, the narratives examined here reveal an alternative model in which identity is produced through collective narration, performance, and cultural remembrance.

Kweku Ananse and Kweku Tsin therefore represent a different form of autobiographical selfhood. Their identities do not originate from personal acts of writing but from the accumulation of stories, actions, relationships, and interpretations preserved within Akan oral tradition. Their selves exist through continuity: each performance recalls previous representations while creating new meanings.

This study's concept of Oral Autobiographical Voice emerges from this process. It refers to the construction of recognizable narrative selves through four interconnected elements: narrative continuity, communal authorship, performative selfhood, and cultural memory. Unlike written autobiography, which centers on an individual's retrospective account of life, Oral Autobiographical Voice locates selfhood within the ongoing interaction between storyteller, audience, character, and tradition.

Through Ananse and Kweku Tsin, Akan oral tradition demonstrates that the self is not only something one writes about but something a community narrates, performs, preserves, and transforms across generations.

Conclusion

This study has challenged the assumption that autobiography must be limited to written self-narration, individual authorship, and the identity of author, narrator, and protagonist. While these principles remain central to conventional theories of autobiography, they do not fully account for oral cultures in which identity is produced through performance, repetition, and communal memory. By bringing autobiography and life-writing studies into dialogue with theories of orality and narrative identity, this study has argued for a broader understanding of autobiographical self-representation.

Through an examination of "How Spider Obtained the Sky-God's Stories" and "How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race," the study has demonstrated that Kweku Ananse and Kweku Tsin function as Oral Autobiographical Voices within Akan oral tradition. They do not possess autobiography in the conventional Lejeunian sense; rather, their identities emerge through accumulated narratives, repeated performances, and collective recognition. Their selves are therefore not produced through individual acts of writing but through the continuing processes of oral narration and cultural transmission.

The study has identified four interconnected dimensions through which Oral Autobiographical

Voice operates. Narrative continuity shows that identity develops across successive stories rather than within a single account of life. Ananse's identity as an intelligent, ambitious, and complex figure is shaped through the accumulation of multiple narratives, while Kweku Tsin extends and transforms this narrative inheritance through his own wisdom and agency. Communal authorship demonstrates that oral autobiographical identity is produced collectively rather than through individual ownership of a text. Ananse becomes associated with storytelling because generations of Akan storytellers and audiences preserve and reshape his identity. Performative selfhood reveals that identity emerges through speech, action, and interaction. Ananse's intelligence and Kweku Tsin's insight are not merely described; they are revealed through their performances within the narratives. Finally, cultural memory explains how these identities endure across generations through repeated circulation and reinterpretation within Akan society.

The concept of Oral Autobiographical Voice therefore expands autobiography from the writing of an individual life to the broader construction of a recognizable self through narrative practices. It suggests that selfhood may be produced not only through personal reflection and written confession but also through communal storytelling, performance, and collective remembrance. In this sense, Akan oral tradition offers an alternative model of autobiography in which the self is relational, performative, and culturally sustained.

Ultimately, the cases of Kweku Ananse and Kweku Tsin demonstrate that oral traditions possess complex systems of self-representation that can contribute significantly to autobiography and life-writing studies. By proposing an Akan theory of Oral

Autobiographical Voice, this study contributes to the expansion and decolonization of autobiographical theory, showing that narratives of the self exist beyond the boundaries of written autobiography. It also opens possibilities for examining other African oral traditions and cultural figures whose identities are created and preserved through collective storytelling.

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