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**The Dark-Light Reflection: Deconstructing Kwaku Ananse's Gourd
and Okonore Yaa's Hearthstone. (West African Folktales - How
Wisdom Became the Property of Human Race)**

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Abstract

This study examines symbolism in Akan folktales through a critical analysis of "How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race," focusing on the conceptual framework of The Dark-Light Reflection. It explores how two symbolic constructs: Kwaku Ananse's gourd and the culturally inferred hearthstone associated with Okonore Yaa, represent contrasting yet interconnected systems of knowledge, power, and social organization. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and supported by concepts such as othering, subalternity, and hybridity, the study interrogates how knowledge is produced, controlled, and distributed within the narrative.

The analysis argues that Ananse's gourd symbolizes the centralization, monopolization, and weaponization of knowledge, reflecting hierarchical and patriarchal systems that restrict access to wisdom in order to maintain authority. In contrast, Okonore Yaa's hearthstone is constructed symbolically as a site of communal, embodied, and sustaining knowledge, rooted in everyday practices such as caregiving, storytelling, and cultural transmission. Although not explicitly voiced in the narrative, Okonore Yaa represents the subaltern presence, whose knowledge systems are marginalized yet persist through lived experience and social continuity.

Through the "reflection" between these two symbols, the study demonstrates that the hearthstone does not merely oppose the gourd but corrects its excesses, revealing the limitations of authoritarian knowledge systems. The breaking of the gourd marks a shift from knowledge as power to knowledge as practice, affirming that wisdom is inherently collective, dynamic, and dependent on communal participation. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader discussions on African oral literature by highlighting how folktales function as critical sites for negotiating power, gender, and epistemology within cultural traditions.

Key Words: Anansesem, Symbolism, Dark-Light Reflection, Gourd, Hearthstone, Postcolonial Feminist Theory

INTRODUCTION - Where is Okonore Yaa's voice?

African folktales are rich oral narratives that reflect the diverse cultures, traditions, and moral philosophies of the society. They are stories passed down through generations, primarily through oral performance. They function as to entertain, educate, and transmit cultural values. Often, they feature animals with human characteristics. These tales convey moral lessons about life, community, and the relationship between human beings and nature. Oxford Languages Dictionary defines folklore as traditional beliefs, customs and stories of a community that are passed down orally from generation to generation. In this sense, folktales operate as cultural memory systems that collectively preserve identity and social ethics.

In the Akan cultural context, the Akan groups comprise - Fante, Asante, Akuapem, Akyem, Akwamu, Bono, Kwawu, Denkyira, Agona, Assin, Twifo, and Wasa. Folktales are widely known as Anansesem (Spider stories), named after the dominant trickster figure Kwaku Ananse. Although Ananse is the most prominent character, not all Akan folktales feature him rather, the term has become a general label for oral narratives within the oral tradition. These stories are often performed in communal settings, traditionally in the evenings around the fire, popularly referred to as “moonlight storytelling” or tales by moonlight. In such spaces, elders often women narrate stories to children as a form of informal education, preparing them for life in society through moral instruction.

As Paul Radin observes in his introduction to African folktales, Märchen (folk narratives) exist across cultures, but their function and structure vary significantly depending on social context. In the Akan tradition, folktales combine mythical and legendary elements to construct imaginative narratives featuring clever heroes, trickster figures, and moral conflicts. These stories are inherently didactic, aimed at teaching values such as honesty, greed, kindness, and communal responsibility. Through animal characters endowed with human traits, they reflect human behaviour and social relationships, while also embedding cultural beliefs within familiar storytelling frameworks.

Authorial Stance

This study argues that the opposition between Kwaku Ananse's gourd and Okonore Yaa's hearthstone symbolizes a deeper ideological struggle between dark, centralized knowledge systems characterized by control, secrecy, and patriarchal authority, and light, communal knowledge systems rooted in women's domestic space, nurturing practices, and collective cultural transmission, ultimately demonstrating that wisdom cannot be permanently contained but is sustained through everyday communal life.

Symbolism of The Gourd

Symbolism in “How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race” operates as a complex system of layered meaning that can be effectively understood through multiple theoretical lenses. Paul Ricoeur's concept of symbolism as a structure of double meaning is particularly useful in establishing the foundation of this analysis. Ricoeur argues that symbols “give rise to thought” by carrying meanings beyond their literal form. In the Ananse narrative, the gourd and the hearthstone function not merely as objects but as dense symbolic sites through which broader ideas about power, knowledge, and social organization are expressed. Ananse himself

embodies this duality, simultaneously representing intelligence and deception, thereby reinforcing the “dark–light reflection” as a tension embedded within the symbolic structure of the tale.

Building on this, Northrop Frye’s archetypal criticism situates Ananse within the broader mythic tradition of the trickster figure, a universal archetype that exists between order and chaos. The opposition between the gourd and the hearthstone aligns with Frye’s notion of recurring binary structures in literature: light versus darkness, control versus freedom, hierarchy versus community. In this framework, Ananse’s gourd represents a movement toward disorder through excessive control, while Okonore Yaa’s hearthstone reflects a restorative force that re-establishes balance through communal engagement and continuity.

From a linguistic and interpretive perspective, I. A. Richards’ theory of emotive and referential meaning explains how these symbols function within the oral tradition. The gourd, beyond its literal role as a container, evokes associations of secrecy, restriction, and authority, while the hearthstone suggests warmth, sustenance, and communal belonging. These meanings are not fixed but arise through cultural memory and emotional resonance, allowing the symbols to communicate complex ideas about knowledge and power without explicit articulation.

Similarly, C. S. Lewis’ distinction between symbolism and allegory reinforces the open-ended nature of meaning in the folktale. Rather than imposing a single interpretation, the symbols of the gourd and hearthstone offer multiple readings as representations of cultural memory and gendered spaces. This openness is crucial to the “Dark–Light Reflection,” as it allows the narrative to function as a participatory text, where meaning is continuously negotiated by its audience.

A psychological dimension is added through the work of Carl Jung, whose theory of the collective unconscious and archetypes further deepens the symbolic analysis. Ananse embodies the trickster archetype, associated with disruption, cunning, and the exposure of hidden truths. Within this framework, the gourd can be read as an extension of the shadow representation of control, selfishness, and the desire for dominance while the hearthstone aligns with nurturing and integrative forces often associated with the feminine archetype. The interaction between these symbols reflects an internal and societal tension between competing modes of knowledge and existence.

Altogether, these theoretical perspectives reveal that the “Dark–Light Reflection” is not simply a contrast but a dynamic interplay of symbolic systems.

The “Dark” – Ananse’s Gourd: Symbolism of Knowledge, Power and Control

In the Ananse folktale “How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race,” the gourd functions as the central symbol of “darkness”. It represents a system in which knowledge is hoarded, controlled and ultimately destabilized.

Monopolization of Knowledge

Ananse's decision to collect all wisdom into a single gourd symbolizes an attempt to centralize knowledge under one authority: "He set to work at once to gather again all that he had already given... and placed all in one great pot." This act constructs wisdom as something that can be reclaimed, owned, and controlled, transforming it from a communal resource into a private possession. In this sense, the gourd represents a monopolization of knowledge, where access is restricted and meaning is dictated by a single person. From a Postcolonial Feminist perspective, this reflects how dominant systems often patriarchal and hierarchical regulate knowledge to sustain power. The symbolic "darkness" of the gourd, therefore, lies in its withdrawal of wisdom from society, creating dependence, exclusion, and epistemic inequality.

Authoritarian Power and Unaccountable Control

Ananse's action is not democratic or consultative but rather punitive and unilateral: "He immediately resolved to punish them... the severest penalty... would be to hide all his wisdom." This positions Ananse as an authoritarian figure who weaponizes knowledge as a form of control. His punishment is not physical violence but intellectual deprivation, suggesting that the restriction of wisdom becomes a more subtle yet powerful means of domination - one that equates control over knowledge with control over life itself. From a critical perspective, this reflects how hierarchical systems, including patriarchal structures, operate through the centralization of authority, the arbitrariness of power, and the use of knowledge as leverage over others. Within this framework, the gourd becomes a potent symbol of authoritarian containment, representing a system in which wisdom is not shared or circulated but enclosed, regulated and used to enforce obedience.

Illusion of Total Knowledge

Ananse's belief that he can possess and contain all wisdom: "He thought he had all the world's wisdom in this pot", reveals a key symbolic contradiction: the illusion of absolute knowledge. The gourd becomes a symbol of this epistemic fallacy, reflecting the mistaken assumption that wisdom can be fully collected, fully controlled, and permanently secured within a single authority. Roy Bhaskar argues that things can exist and be real even if we don't know about them or don't talk about them. In the story, Okonore Yaa is not always given a strong narrative voice, detailed inner thoughts, or visible authority, as her actions and influence are often briefly mentioned or overshadowed by dominant figures such as Kwaku Ananse. However, drawing on the ideas of Roy Bhaskar, the absence of explicit representation does not necessarily imply the absence of agency. In this sense, Okonore Yaa's limited narrative presence should not be interpreted as a lack of power, but rather as a reflection of how patriarchal storytelling systems shape what is made visible within the folktale.

Disruption of Society Through Knowledge Suppression

Ananse's plan would have resulted in social collapse, since wisdom functions as the foundation of human survival and collective organization. By attempting to remove it from the community, he destabilizes the very structures that sustain society, including decision-making processes, collective survival strategies, and moral

and practical reasoning. In this sense, the gourd symbolizes not only containment but also the disruption of social equilibrium, as knowledge is extracted from the communal space that gives it meaning.

However, the narrative reaches a decisive turning point when the gourd breaks: “The wisdom contained in it escaped and spread throughout the world.” This moment marks a symbolic reversal of Ananse’s attempt at control, revealing that knowledge cannot be permanently enclosed without consequence. Instead of remaining concentrated, wisdom returns to circulation, reaffirming its dependence on shared existence rather than individual ownership. The circulation of wisdom restores balance to the social order, suggesting that collective life is only possible when knowledge is distributed, accessible, and continually renewed within the community.

Critical Interpretation: Power, Hierarchy and Knowledge Control

From a Postcolonial Feminist perspective, Ananse’s gourd symbolizes a hierarchical system of knowledge production in which authority is centralized within a single figure who seeks to regulate access to wisdom and control its distribution. This restriction produces imbalance and instability, since the removal of communal access undermines the very conditions through which wisdom gains relevance and effectiveness.

This reflects a broader critique of patriarchal and authoritarian systems of knowledge, where access to wisdom is controlled, authority is maintained through intellectual dominance, and alternative voices are initially marginalized or excluded. The role played by Kweku Tsin demonstrates that his insight is initially undervalued, yet it ultimately proves essential to the collapse of Kwaku Ananse’s illusion of total control. This is central to the meaning of the narrative, as it shows that Ananse’s project of wisdom cannot be achieved by a single authority figure, but is instead fundamentally collective and relational in nature.

The “Light” – Okonore Yaa’s Hearthstone: Symbolism of Communal, Embodied Knowledge

Although Okonore Yaa and the hearthstone are not explicitly named in “How Wisdom Became the Property of the Human Race,” they can be constructed symbolically from the cultural world of the tale, particularly its domestic, communal, and gendered spaces that remain largely invisible within Ananse’s narrative framework. Where Ananse’s gourd embodies the “dark” logic of containment, centralization, and control, the hearthstone represents the “light” logic of openness, circulation, and sustaining knowledge. In this symbolic opposition, the hearth emerges not merely as an alternative space but as a corrective structure that repositions wisdom as a shared, lived, and continuously reproduced practice within the community.

Knowledge as Practice (Embodied Wisdom)

Unlike the “wisdom” stored in Ananse’s gourd, the hearthstone symbolizes embodied knowledge rooted in everyday practices that sustain life, such as cooking, caregiving, storytelling, and nurturing. This form of knowledge is not detachable from lived experience. It cannot be sealed, stored, or possessed like an object. Instead, it is performed, repeated, embodied and continuously reproduced through daily communal interaction. In many Akan cultural contexts, the hearth functions as a central domestic space where food is

prepared, stories are shared, and children are socialized into cultural values, making it a site of both material and intellectual formation.

From this perspective, Okonore Yaa's hearthstone represents a form of wisdom that is practical rather than abstract, experiential rather than theoretical, and continuous rather than static. This understanding directly challenges Ananse's assumption that wisdom can be collected, contained, and permanently secured within a single entity. Instead, it reveals knowledge as something inherently relational and dynamic.

Communal Transmission

When the gourd breaks and "the wisdom contained in it escapes and spreads throughout the world," the narrative enacts a decisive symbolic reversal that restores the logic of the hearthstone. The circulation of wisdom signifies the failure of containment and the reactivation of knowledge. Wisdom is no longer confined to a single authority or object; wisdom returns to the social space where it originally derives meaning.

The hearthstone functions as a metaphor for collective learning, oral transmission and knowledge on transmission across generations. All of which depend on participation rather than possession. Unlike the gourd, which isolates and centralizes knowledge, the hearth operates as a gathering point where people come together, and through this togetherness, knowledge is continuously produced, reshaped and desecrated. Knowledge, therefore, is not treated as a fixed object but as a relational process, thus something sustained through interaction, dialogue, and shared experience. This reinforces the idea that wisdom gains its meaning not through containment, but through its ongoing life within the community.

Sustenance and Survival

The hearthstone is fundamentally tied to food, caregiving, and survival, making it a symbol of knowledge as sustenance rather than abstraction. It transforms raw materials into nourishment, just as communal knowledge transforms lived experience into practical wisdom that supports everyday life. In this sense, the hearthstone reframes knowledge as something that is essential for daily survival, linked to continuity, and grounded in the material realities of the community, rather than detached intellectual possession.

Within this symbolic contrast, Ananse's gourd represents knowledge as power to be controlled and restricted, whereas the hearthstone represents knowledge as nourishment to be shared and sustained. The shift from containment to circulation marks a deeper epistemological reorientation, meaning wisdom is meaningful not when it is hoarded, but when it actively contributes to human flourishing. The "light" of the hearthstone, therefore, lies in the recognition that knowledge must serve life, not dominate it, and that its true value emerges through its capacity to sustain and connect the community.

Female-Centered Space (Women as Custodians of Culture)

The hearth is traditionally a female-centered space, and Okonore Yaa is constructed symbolically. She embodies this domain as a site of cultural continuity and relational knowledge. While Ananse operates in isolation, attempting to control and centralize wisdom, the hearth functions through inclusion, care, and continuity, positioning knowledge as something that emerges through shared participation rather than individual possession.

Within this symbolic framework, women become custodians of cultural memory and practice, sustaining knowledge through lived, everyday activities. This includes preserving traditions through storytelling, transmitting communal values through domestic life, and maintaining the social fabric through forms of care work that are often undervalued in hierarchical systems of knowledge. Unlike Ananse's model of authority, which depends on exclusion and intellectual dominance, the hearth represents a form of epistemic practice rooted in relationality and collective responsibility.

In this way, the hearthstone directly challenges the patriarchal logic embodied by Ananse's gourd, where authority is centralized and knowledge is restricted.

The “Reflection”

At the center of your argument, the “reflection” between Ananse's gourd and Okonore Yaa's hearthstone is not a simple opposition but a mirroring that exposes and corrects imbalance. The gourd does not merely stand against the hearthstone. It reveals what happens when knowledge is pushed to an extreme, when it is removed from life, concentrated in one figure, and turned into an instrument of control.

The gourd hides, sealing wisdom away from human reach, while the hearthstone reveals, bringing knowledge into the open through everyday practices like cooking and storytelling. What Ananse attempts to conceal, the hearth makes visible and accessible. At the same time, the gourd centralizes knowledge within a single authority, reinforcing hierarchy and dependence, whereas the hearthstone distributes it across the community, allowing multiple participants to contribute to and reshape understanding. Knowledge, in this reflective structure, shifts from being a possession to being a shared process.

This mirroring also exposes a deeper ideological tension: the gourd controls, using knowledge as a means of punishment and domination, but the hearthstone nurtures, aligning knowledge with care, sustenance, and survival. Where Ananse isolates himself, literally climbing away from society to secure exclusive access, the hearthstone connects, gathering people into a communal space where knowledge is continuously produced and reproduced. Isolation, therefore, becomes a sign of epistemic failure, while connection becomes the condition for meaningful knowledge.

Seen through this reflective lens, the failure of the gourd is inevitable. Its logic is internally flawed because it seeks to fix and contain what is inherently fluid and relational. The hearthstone does not simply reverse this logic rather it restores balance by reintegrating knowledge into lived experience. It corrects the gourd's

excesses - its hoarding, its abstraction, its authoritarianism, by re-grounding wisdom in the communal, the practical, and the sustaining.

Thus, the “Dark–Light Reflection” ultimately demonstrates that knowledge cannot survive in isolation or ownership. It must circulate, adapt, and be shared. The hearthstone, therefore, is not just an alternative symbol; it is the necessary counterforce that exposes the limits of patriarchal, hierarchical knowledge systems and redefines wisdom as something fundamentally collective and life-affirming.

Theoretical Analysis

Within the Dark–Light Reflection, the absence of Okonore Yaa’s explicit voice is itself politically significant. She does not speak within the narrative because the structure of authority is already monopolized by Ananse, whose claim to possess “all the world’s wisdom” defines what counts as legitimate knowledge. From a Postcolonial Feminist perspective, this silence reflects the condition of the subaltern, where women’s epistemic contributions are not absent but systematically unrecognized within dominant space. Okonore Yaa’s “voice,” therefore, does not disappear rather it is displaced into practice.

At the level of othering, her voice is rendered invisible. Okonore Yaa’s knowledge is not voiced in the traditional sense but performed through care, sustenance, and everyday cultural transmission. Her silence is therefore not absence but epistemic marginalization, where what is most foundational to survival is excluded from obvious recognition.

However, the breakdown of the gourd disrupts this silence. When wisdom escapes and disperses into the world, it reactivates the submerged knowledge. This moment reveals that Okonore Yaa’s knowledge was never absent, it was structurally suppressed but socially active. From a subaltern perspective, this suggests that marginalized voices do not vanish; they persist in forms that dominant systems fail to formally acknowledge.

The concept of hybridity further complicates this dynamic. The interaction between Ananse’s centralized system and the communal epistemology of the hearthstone shows that knowledge is never purely singular or controlled. Even within Ananse’s attempt at total domination, alternative forms of knowing already exist within the community, embodied in everyday practices traditionally associated with women. The intervention of Kweku Tsin, therefore, is not an isolated act of intelligence but evidence of a pre-existing communal epistemology that Ananse’s system cannot fully suppress.

The hearthstone becomes her epistemic articulation, challenging the patriarchal assumption that knowledge must be spoken, owned, or centralized to be valid. Instead, the narrative affirms that true wisdom is relational, embodied, and continuously reproduced within communal life, even when it is not formally acknowledged.

Thus, the “Dark–Light Reflection” is not only a contrast between two symbols but a critique of epistemic power itself: it exposes how dominant systems silence alternative voices, and how those voices persist, dispersed, embodied, and essential to the survival of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The attempt to monopolize wisdom through Ananse's gourd ultimately fails, revealing that knowledge cannot be contained, owned, or abstracted from lived experience. Instead, its dispersal underscores that wisdom survives and thrives within communal spaces such as Okonore Yaa's hearthstone, where it is continuously practiced, shared, and sustained. In this reflective dynamic, the hearthstone does not merely oppose the gourd but corrects its excesses - transforming knowledge from an instrument of control into a collective, life-sustaining process. The narrative therefore affirms that true wisdom is not preserved through isolation, but through circulation, participation, and communal engagement.

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