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The Transgressional Webs of Anancy the Spider

This dissertation explores the Anancy stories of the Colombian archipelago of San Andrés, Old Providence and Santa Catalina and the Costa Rican Caribbean province of Limón. Largely drawing on Bakhtin's concept of carnival, this work demonstrates and analyses how the Anancy stories contest social order. In order to accomplish this, I do the following:

- Track the origin of Anancy stories and their passage through the Caribbean and the Americas.
- Analyse the content of the narratives in order to provide a reflection of the general social context.
- Demonstrate how trickster and carnival tropes provoke a transgression against the establishment and are thus reflected in both the Anancy stories and the figure of Anancy the Spider itself.

The Anancy tales originated among the Akan, a people from Western Africa's coastal areas of southern Ghana, Togo and the Ivory Coast. More specifically, it was the Asante, a Ghanaian-based ethnic group within the Akan, who brought the Anancy tales to the Americas. My aim has been to explore the link between the two regions. To do this, I conducted a historiographical review permitting me to trace the tales' journeys to Colombia and Costa Rica, and to pinpoint the similarities found in the two countries' tales. As I found, the slave trade and creation of British companies in the colonies – through which New World expansion took place – helped the spread of Anancy stories in the Americas. This is especially important since Anancy stories tend to frequently appear in British colonies.

The second step along the Anancy journey from Ghana to the Caribbean is the former British colony Jamaica, a point from which slaves were distributed to other places in the Caribbean such as Costa Rica. Important historical evidence about the Akan can be found in Jamaica, where 300 Africans, whose origin was the so-called Gold Coast, established a maroon settlement on the island. Moreover, by the eighteenth century the Akan had become Jamaica's most prominent ethnic group. Later their descendants, known as the Mina, came to settle in Costa Rica. Data offered by linguistic studies has revealed that the Akan is a dominant ethnic group in the Colombian archipelago, whose local English Creole is the same of that spoken in Jamaica and Limón.

Another important question I address regarding the continuity of the African Anancy stories in the Americas is whether the tales have changed or remained the same. Through compiling some 150 Anancy stories from four different locations in Africa, Jamaica, Colombia and Costa Rica, I analysed the structure of the Anancy tale to determine what similarities and differences existed. Comparing the content of Caribbean stories with African stories, I found many identical features. One such commonality is how the tales are referred to: they are standardly known as the 'Anancy stories' and their main protagonist is Anancy the Spider. Readers can recognise the narrative regardless of how the spider's name is translated or spelled: 'Anansi', 'Anancy', 'Nancy', 'Brother', 'Beda', 'Sister', 'Sist' or 'Hermano Araña'. Another frequently featuring occurrence is the character Ntikuma (also known as 'Tacuma', 'Tocuma', 'Tocumá' or 'Tucuma'), whose role varies between being Anancy's son and Anancy's friend. I also identify repeating characters such as Alligator, Cat, Dog, Rabbit, Brother Wheeler, Snake and Monkey, all of whose interactions with Anancy are based on conflicts, celebrations, fights and friendship. Repeating themes throughout the tales, despite their being of various origins, allow readers to recognise that they are encountering the same story.

The objective of chapter IV is to gather those Anancy stories that possess similar frameworks. To accomplish this, I applied an adapted version of Propp's morphological proposal to my work, which allows corroboration of the existence of very similar tales. Although the different stories may vary due to details added or omitted by the narrator, the tale remains the same.

This dissertation also reflects social order within the tales. The relationship between text (the tale) and context (the setting where the story's action takes place) is created by interweaving descriptions of surroundings and action. Together, they allow the reader to relate not only by providing allusions, but also by portraying characters whose environment depict, for example, similar exploitative conditions among the African descendants narrating the stories. An example of this dialogism is found in the allusion to the Akans' slave-trade journey to the Americas, which appears in the tale's recurring theme of water, and the different events related to it. Other allusions to environment are made through the frequent reference to the search for food and a depiction of weather similar to that where Anancy stories are found. Power relations prove to be another convergence among the tales and a hint to understanding how their characters become a recreation of real-life people who fight to become visible in adverse circumstances. Patriarchy is one prominent example of such power relations. In the case of Limón, one finds references to the railroad construction and the

banana plantations, which automatically index the arrival of the Africans to Costa Rica, and with them, the spread of their oral tradition, including the Anancy stories. The role of the environment also helps explain the importance of the narrator. He or she has the leading role across the African, Caribbean and American versions of the tale. As the voice in charge of describing the innovations and the passing of time, the narrator also allows the audience to locate themselves in a specific time and place.

One could say that some tales contain a consequential moral, although this is not their objective. Some studies claim that Anancy stories promote immoral values, which is a view I do not share since the issue of morality depends on the way the tales are read and interpreted. However, I agree with those whose reading of Anancy is based on this ambivalence and, from within it, observe a challenging of the establishment. In fact, I use the content of the tales to further explore topics of contestation. Thus, the morality of the tales is not an issue I deal with in this dissertation. My approach does not frame Anancy within a Manichean interpretation, though sometimes it may be necessary to review moral aspects to understand rupture and ambivalence. In the areas I analyse, I show how the tales portray a ludic moment to sublimate wishes and worries. One can find values related to solidarity and survival in harsh circumstances. Besides ethnic relations and legitimisation, another problem described in Anancy stories is that of cross-breeding. In addition, the topic of marronage is another link to trace the presence of the Akan in the Americas, since it is said that the first slave insurrection that took place in Jamaica was led by Akan people.

Transgression of the social order is an important element in Anancy stories. The concept of 'carnivalisation' does not reduce Anancy stories to a Manichean interpretation and thus allows audiences to understand the multi-dimensional nature of the trickster. The carnival allows the suppressed population to challenge power and its structures with scorn, criticism and abolition symbols. The essence of carnival, like that of Anancy the Spider itself, is improvisation. It is a moment for permission: a period preceding Lent's traditional fasting and abstinence, when people have the opportunity to satisfy instinctive needs such as hunger and sex drive and indulge in practices related to hedonism and anarchism. Carnival is connoted by external signs such as colour, masks, dance, parades and drums, all creating an orgiastic scene to release tensions and repression.

Anancy the Spider is an ambivalent character because it both creates and destroys; it is god and devil, hero and villain, master and slave. It sometimes appears as a nice character, though one who rarely assimilates to society's values since it preserves its own sense of irreverence and transgression. However, Anancy's acts are not seen as carrying any intended

felony because the spider's intentions are mere ways to survive in an oppressive and marginal context. That is why it is said that Anancy stories are examples of so-called carnivalisation. In this sense, the carnival may be seen as a popular party that casts aside the official rules of the system. It rejects the seriousness of the more rigid, and moral celebrations imposed by the parameters of a social order. Carnival is magnanimous because it promotes its own sense of carnivalisation. The agricultural environment portrayed in the tales is linked to the celebration of the harvest, in which everybody participates. At this party the world turns upside down. Anancy's friends, for example, eat pebbles as though they're beans. In this frame of reality, meanings of profanations and degradations get reinvented. The baseness traditionally associated to the low parts of the body and their use, for example, are not to be censored during carnivalisation: because reality is distorted, everything is possible. During carnivalisation, the satisfaction of needs, normally prohibited by the social order, is allowed. Thus, robbery and the ingestion of forbidden food are permitted: there is no penalisation against the performer of the deed as official rules and everyday norms do not apply here. A prime example of this is the inversion of hierarchies. During carnivalisation there is a change in power: the oppressed take control. And thus Anancy the Spider changes from slave to master through its own rules, which are not the official ones. They, like carnival, are free and vibrant. Sex permutation is another common feature found across the tales. In the various tales, Anancy can manifest as a man, a woman or a spider.

A crucial element to the Anancy stories is celebration, something that causes laughter and transcends morality and social norms. In this space morality can be scorned without punishment and laughter is used as another way to subvert hierarchies, eliminate social barriers and defeat fear, all to the rhythm of carnival.