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Trickster Ambivalence in Kwaw Ansah's *Praising the Lord Plus One*

Abstract

Kwaw Ansah's film *Praising the Lord Plus One* revolves around a crooked charismatic preacher. This paper examines him as one of the manifestations of the West African trickster. Though the figure of the trickster is bound to West African folktales, his familiar, contradictory and ultimately funny features transcend the oral tale to manifest in other media. The article examines Gabriel's self-transformation into a miracle-maker, his utilization of that identity, and his unmaking. It looks at how biblical exegesis and Christian rites, while apparently major aspects of the film, are reduced to marketing tools for sustaining the trickster ethos. The paper will also interrogate the trickster's presence in and impact on his society.

Author Notes

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Introduction

Trickster figures are “nearly omnipresent.”¹ From Coyote in Native American cosmogony through his “cousin” Hermes in Greek mythology² to Kweku Ananse, Leuk-le-Lièvre and others from West African societies, they thrive in diverse cultures. Despite their prevalence and true to their “tricky” nature, they are infamously difficult to pin down. This is in part due to their contradictory characteristics and their frequently cited ambiguity. The trickster is simultaneously “fooler and fool”³; he is the “creative idiot, therefore, the wise fool, the gray-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of sacred profanities [...] the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity.”⁴ In West Africa, the various manifestations of the trickster are an integral part of the literary landscape. Robert Pelton for instance classifies a number of them following geospatial and cultural boundaries, and chooses to analyze Ananse, Legba, Eshu and Ogo-Yurugu. Kweku Ananse, the most emblematic figurehead of Akan folktales, is most relevant to this article.

Ananse is at times an anthropomorphic animal (“*ananse*” means “spider”); at other times, he is a man. Either way, he is often a hoarder of communal resources who takes perverse pleasure from deception. This article analyzes a character as an extension of the trickster: Prophet Apostle Gabriel, the deceptive charismatic pastor in Kwaw Ansah's 2013 film *Praising the Lord Plus One*. After tracing the trickster's presence in literature and the niche he creates for himself in the social phenomenon that is charismatic Christianity, the article will examine Gabriel's self-transformation into a miracle-maker, his utilization of that identity, and his unmaking. It will look at how biblical exegesis and Christian rites, while apparently major aspects of the film, are reduced to marketing tools for sustaining the trickster ethos. The paper will also interrogate the trickster's presence in and impact on his society.

Kwaw Ansah, a celebrated Ghanaian filmmaker, has been releasing films since the 1980s. His works include *Love Brewed in an African Pot*, *Heritage Africa* and *Papa Lasisi Good Bicycle*. They have won him awards including two from the Pan-African Film Festival (FESPACO): the Oumarou Ganda Prize for the best first film and the Étalon d'or de Yennenga for the best film. He has also won a UNESCO film award and the jury's special Silver Peacock Award at the International Film Festival of India. *Praising the Lord Plus One* is one of his most recent films, premiering to a warm critical reception. It was screened in 2017 at the FESPACO and contended for feature film of the year. The protagonist is a fraudulent pastor who heads a charismatic church and who merrily defrauds his gullible congregation until his deceptions are exposed. In several ways, there are parallels with tricksters from traditional folktales and theatrical performances.

The Trickster in Literature

Scholars frequently scrutinize the trickster against the backdrop of mythology. In his study of the Native American trickster, Carl Jung notes that he can be found in “the mythology of all ages, sometimes in quite unmistakable form, sometimes in strangely modulated guise. He is obviously [...] an archetypal psychic structure of extreme antiquity.”⁵ Jung, who draws on Paul Radin's work, suggests that the trickster functions as a precursor to the figure of the Messiah. This observation suggests an attractive avenue for study here, given that Gabriel's milieu is the Christian church. It could offer insight into the trickster's evolution, his ties to divinity, and his place in a Westernized space such as the church. However, Vine Deloria Jr. has stated that a direct link between the trickster and the savior cannot be validated. Nor should the related notion—that the trickster represents the civilizing process—be assumed.⁶

It is still worth noting that the trickster can be found in diverse, everyday settings. While discussing the possibility of the trickster's continued existence in America today, Lewis Hyde mentions that the confidence man is a "likely candidate for the protagonist of a reborn trickster myth." This is true "especially as he appears in literature and film."⁷ His ability to acclimatize to different settings is true in modern African literature as well, whose scope goes beyond the traditional folktale and other performance genres even if it is often influenced by them. Pelton questions whether we already know what the trickster is, or if we apply the word to "more or less similar phenomena."⁸ This study takes a cue from Pelton's own choice: rather than imposing a pattern, it studies the "specific creative discovery disclosed" in this instance of the trickster. In any case, as Hyde confirms, "actual individuals are always more complicated than the archetype, and more complicated than its local version, too."⁹ Thomas Lynn adds that "authors who draw on the trickster figures of oral tradition [...] devise unique adaptations."¹⁰

That said, there are certain features that are cited nearly across the board. Jung mentions "typical trickster motifs" such as a "fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks, his powers as a shape-shifter [and] his dual nature."¹¹ For Pascale de Souza, key trickster strategies are liminality, shapeshifting, and "signifyin(g)." These all suggest intricacy—as Lewis Hyde acknowledges, the trickster is not a "run-of-the-mill liar and thief."¹² While Jeanne Rosier Smith mentions that some of the trickster's attributes are "often condemned," she points out that in certain contexts, they have their place.¹³ Other things to be considered are the trickster's comic prowess and his audience's occasional identification with him.

Studies like de Souza's and Lynn's focus on modern literary characters, thus demonstrating that the trickster ethos has not faded from the collective imagination. Katrien Pype illustrates this when she argues that certain serial television shows in Kinshasa portray "trickster-like characters

as the main fiction-dwellers.”¹⁴ Moreover, some authors are unequivocal about their sources: the protagonist of Efua Sutherland’s play *The Marriage of Anansewa* is explicitly named Kweku Ananse. Whether he is the same Ananse now living in post-colonial Ghana or a new character, the spirit of Sutherland’s George Kweku Ananse is inextricably entwined with the Kweku Ananse of the folktale and traditional theatrical forms.

What then, does a modern-day Ananse look like? Answering that with *Praising the Lord Plus One* shows that he looks a lot like “the trickster Ananse of Akan folklore [who] lived for his appetite and survived by his wit.”¹⁵ The pastor’s motivation is his craving for material things, which he attains through trickery. His duality or shapeshifting plays out notably in the way that he assumes a new identity. Moreover, by employing a trickster, the film makes use of a well-known narrative structure that is not always restricted to fiction.

Ananse and the Charismatic Church

The trickster designation is used in real-life circumstances as well. In official realms, such as courts of law and churches, the term can be entirely denunciatory. This happens for example when the narrative involves someone cashing in on the unfounded spiritual authority of a fake pastor. Jesse Weaver Shipley quotes the head of a major hospital, who puts the public on their guard against “tricksters” hawking healing miracles. Yet, despite the condemnation from official fronts, there can be ambivalence with regard to certain churches’ take on material wealth. According to Shipley, the fear of being tricked has created a “specter of spiritual trickery” that haunts the Ghanaian public’s relations with Neo-Pentecostalism and charismatic pastors. He further observes that “charismatic preachers also rely on the trickster sensibility that permeates popular discourse.”¹⁶

From the early 1990s, the Ghanaian government ceded much of its control over mass media and other hitherto state-run enterprises. This led to a proliferation of public and private radio and television stations. Visibility on those platforms had to be financed, and coupled with this was the stations' need to stay afloat by catering to audience tastes. The correlation between this situation and the sharp rise of charismatic and Neo-Pentecostal churches in Ghana has been well documented. Neo-Pentecostalism, which among other things promises miraculous development and personal success, had already begun to gain traction in the 1980s among those who felt disappointed in the lack of state development.¹⁷ At the same time, “[c]harismatism as a dominant aspect of public life was spurred by the state’s failed attempts to regulate religious institutions. The state unintentionally [positioned] new churches as an alternative to state control.”¹⁸ Their growth is associated both with the rise of neoliberal capitalism and a previous state clampdown on nightlife that meant that people looked to churches for entertainment. They quickly took root in the landscape, as evidenced by the rising construction of church and mega-church buildings. They also exploded onto entertainment platforms via the themes treated by theatre, television and film. So popular did Neo-Pentecostalism become that even the older churches were obliged to import some of their practices such as miracle services, speaking in tongues, and emphasizing divine gifts.

Meyer remarks that many of these churches are run like business corporations. Profit for the organizations is coupled with discourse about “earthly rewards” for its members. It seems that the trickster, with his propensity for the material and the corporeal, takes advantage of the opening created by churches who are now moving “towards a greater accommodation with material prosperity.” Ansah’s Apostle Gabriel thus navigates a niche that lies between sanctioning earthly material success, and a “spiritual” high ground. This explains the title of Ansah’s film—praise is to be given to God; in addition, his earthly “partner” is to receive more substantial offerings. As

Simon Coleman remarks, “increasing numbers of charismatics and fundamentalists have managed to reconcile the exercise of faith with the valorization of contemporary forms of corporate capitalism.” Apostle Gabriel distorts this process of negotiation, since he is unapologetically in it for the material benefits. The filmmaker makes it obvious that Gabriel represents more than a vague fear of swindling; he *is* the “specter of spiritual trickery” brought to life.

Ansah’s film is therefore a meeting of the trickster from the traditional tale and “the Faith, Faith Formula, Prosperity, Health and Wealth or Word Movement,” which has been successful if sometimes controversial. If the debate arises from “a reclamation of the Christian’s right to have dominion over the earth,”¹⁹ this decidedly earthbound focus finds an important resonance in the trickster, who symbolizes and indeed, caricatures it. Ananse is often associated with “the gratification of physical or sexual appetite,” with a side of “phallic boasting” as Pelton puts it. Characterized by a sizable belly, the trickster clearly drags down the exercise of faith. He also calls into question the place of material wealth in the church setting; it can either be a reward for virtue or a temptation that leads one away from virtue. One scene perhaps best exemplifies this—a woman brings Gabriel an envelope of money to thank him for performing a miracle for her. After she leaves, the camera pans to Gabriel storing the envelope in his Bible for safekeeping. Scenes like this suggest that the charismatic church also has the potential to project ambivalence.

The Trickster in the Entertainment Landscape: Concert Party and Film

The backdrop of films like *Praising the Lord Plus One* is a mass of cheaper, melodramatic “video movies” that accord prominence to the relationship between daily life and the spiritual dimension. These movies peaked from the 1990s to “2003, by which time the industry had almost collapsed. After its recovery there was more diversity in terms of themes. This diversity yielded

both movies that criticize so-called fake pastors, and movies that focus on traditional culture. All the same, many movies made in the period between 2005 and 2010 (and later) still show a strong engagement with Pentecostal-Christian imagery.”²⁰

It is worth noting at this point that film in Ghana also shows some confluences with the theatre. Ansah is like other African filmmakers who are also at ease in popular theatre.²¹ One intersection between film and theatre in Ansah's oeuvre is the concert party. This is a popular theatrical form first created by itinerant theatre troupes in the 1920s; in time it came to be televised as well. Without overstating the importance of concert party theatre—which borrowed some elements of film to construct its *own* identity—it is important to note the connections between the genres. “Popular theatre,” Catherine Cole says, “has had a profound impact on other performing arts and cultural forms [...] the Ghanaian concert party has been the ‘single most important influence and avenue for contemporary Ghanaian performing artists’”²²

One significant motif across the board is the trickster figure. Kwabena Bame has referred to Ananse as “a likely prototype of or major contribution to” one of the stock characters in concert party.²³ Cole agrees that concert party actors played someone like “the famous Ananse character of Ghanaian storytelling.” She adds that “scholars have identified Ananse storytelling as an inspiration or precursor of the concert party.”²⁴ Like the traditional trickster who would sometimes mock institutions and authority,²⁵ popular entertainment satirizes social categories including “egotistical chiefs, the rich but miserly, the strange manners of Europeans (explorers, missionaries, or colonial administrators and their spouses), corrupt politicians, overly westernized African men and women, prostitutes, the rural village teacher, and so on.”²⁶ To this list we can add pastors with questionable motives and morals.²⁷ On the one hand the trickster mocks others. On the other hand, he is one of the figures satirized by these genres. Concert parties and films also show that the

pastor, when he claims to represent uncompromising spiritual values and when he pronounces judgment on others, can be both a cause for suspicion and a source of entertainment. The rest of the article discusses how Ansah, with a touch of humor, produces his own version of the trickster. In the process, the film suggests different degrees of ambivalence or slippage.

Appetite

Conventionally, the trickster tale begins with some scarcity, often a famine. Many opening lines will recount that once upon a time, all the animals were hungry because there was a drought that meant that sustenance was difficult to come by. In this scenario, the spider has also grown lean(er). Being gifted with mental acuity, he conceives of a ruse that will feed him while the others continue to starve. Because he lacks moderation, he amasses and gorges himself on much more than he needs to survive. Eventually, his scheme backfires on him and he is exposed.

Similarly, *Praising the Lord Plus One* begins with a dream sequence where the protagonist, whose name is at the time unknown to the audience, has a conversation with God's disembodied voice. His prayer is a preemptive plea for God to silence his conscience. He claims that life is hard for him, and that he will have to resort to dishonest means. God does not seem particularly sympathetic towards his plight but rather makes the case for patience. He tells the man that those who have succeeded have done so through determination and hard work, and that "one day" he will as well. The man is unimpressed. He answers that reality is different, "that the race for survival and to overcome one another for survival has become more intense."

Coming from someone who reveals his intentions so early, the audience takes the argument with a grain of salt. For all that he has assumed a familiar prayer posture—kneeling with hands clasped together, looking up at the ceiling with a morose expression—the sincerity of his penitence

is doubtful. He quickly reveals that his preoccupation is more than simply “surviving,” but living well. He illustrates one of Hyde’s remarks, which “throughout has been to show that the mythology of trickster figures is, by one reading, the story of intelligence arising from appetite.” The man’s “humble plea,” in his own words, is that God help him “assume the revered title of a pastor, a bishop or a prophet.” There is irony inherent in this situation—asking God to allow him to abuse the trappings of the Christian church. However, in this scene at least, his unapologetic nature also means that he is patently honest. The scene suggests that even in the face of the greatest moralizing, the nature of the trickster is immutable: “if trickster were free of all appetite,” Hyde comments, “he would no longer be trickster. In a sense, this is a matter of definition; the mythology we’re looking at is constantly gustatory [and] sexual.”²⁸

Speaking the Trickster into Being

During their conversation, God asks the man how his new title will help him survive. In response, he evokes the multitudes of the “meek” whose only hope is a heavenly reward. To help their passage, he plans to “bless, evoke [and] encourage their continued lack of want on earth.” God acknowledges that this is clever, but resorts to an archaic argument (and language) that bear little value in the eyes of the future pastor: “Thou shall not use my name in vain.” This reprimand instead grounds the man’s resolution because for him, the Bible is little more than a collection of words for convincing others. He retorts that God himself has commanded man not to survive by might but by wits as well. He decides to embrace his interpretation of survival.²⁹

By signaling his intention to “evoke” and to “bless,” Gabriel is already falling into terms that are well-known in charismatic settings. Many sermons tend to include elaborate performances where priests “command,” “bind,” “cast out,” “evoke” and “bless” everything from hearts and

minds, sickness and health, to future spouses and bank notes. “Charismatic Christianity is a religion of the Word,” states Coleman.³⁰ This Word embodies concrete power over one’s circumstances and speaking things into being through faith. The emphasis on words is of course another convergence with the trickster, a wordsmith who automatically tries to convert others to his cause through lies, half-truths and flattery. For this reason, even as he appropriates God’s own words, Gabriel punctuates his prayer with terms like “merciful God,” “omnipotent God,” “good God,” and so on, as though trying to win God over with compliments.

Stock phrases are only the beginning. After he wakes up from the dream dialogue, the man undergoes a transformation, confirming Hyde’s observation that the trickster “has the ability to copy others.”³¹ The charismatic narrative he is taking his cue from is prevalent enough that building a model is easy. The audience is treated to a succession of humorous sequences where he rehearses his sermons and tries on different priestly garb. He holds the practice sessions in front of his mirror, and only the audience and his own reflection are privy to the errors he makes while perfecting his persona. He learns to adopt a guttural tone of voice and a specific grimace when he wants to signify authority— “now kneel down and let’s pray!” His tone is higher-pitched and excitable, interspersed with exclamations and full-body gyrations when he quotes from one of his three different-sized Bibles: “but when I became a man- ah! I put away childish things-ah! Brothers and sisters-ah! Can I hear somebody say amen?!”

Not least, his talent with words is also manifested in his new title. The man chooses to be called Prophet Apostle Gabriel, signifying the many levels of spiritual authenticity and clout he would like to be associated with. As he has already mentioned to God, the title of pastor is a revered one. Likewise, he decides to baptize his church the “Miracle Temple of the Supreme Tabernacle

International.” By piling up titles and names, he signals the cacophony that follows him whenever he is in his “Apostle” mode.

Moreover, when he steps out into the world, he ingratiates himself to his victims by repeating lines like “I greet you in the name of the Lord” and “God bless you.” The film focuses on two households—the Quansah and the Commey families. Gabriel dazzles them with private details about their lives that obviously, only “the Lord” could have revealed to him (if one disregards spying and good old gossip). When he visits the Quansah household for instance, he adopts the smarmy, condescending tone of someone who knows his interlocutor’s deepest secrets. When Mrs. Efua Quansah says, “Good morning, Reverend,” he gently but firmly corrects her by emphasizing “*Prophet Apostle Gabriel.*” When she says she does not suppose they have met, he says “No, we’ve not. But spiritually, yes.”

With his talents for listening and speaking at the right time, he is like the Coyote who, as Hyde says, has no ways of his own but ends up with a repertoire of ways thanks to his proficiency as an imitator. Gabriel’s repertoire includes stock phrases, an assortment of grimaces, mannerisms, exclamations, etc., that he expects people will associate with the charismatic priest. But he does not stop there. His outfits are used to indicate not only his calling, but also the wealth he has accumulated through weekly collections and other monies given for services rendered. For example, in his church building and at the height of his glory, the camera keeps zooming in on his expensive white leather shoes.

The persona would not be complete without speaking in “tongues.” The impressive-sounding, indecipherable and entirely made-up noises are enough to increase his clout as someone speaking directly to and channeling God. They also underscore the trickster’s ability to imitate form without substance. But though it is funny, this spiritual speech is another instance where by

associating it with ridicule and suspicion, “genuineness” is called into question. Who, after all, can prove the difference between tongues inspired by the Holy Ghost and outright gibberish? Here too the trickster wedges himself into a space of ambiguity.

The emphasis on loudness and its accompanying excess evokes the influence of concert party theatre and accentuates the appropriateness of film for this plot. As storytelling media go, few others might fully capture the absurdity of scenes like the one where Prophet Apostle Gabriel and his sidekick, Prophet Joshua, sing a heartfelt and offkey rendition of “Go down, Moses,” or when Gabriel’s physical body is caught in the throes of spiritual ecstasy. Film is an ideal vehicle for bringing to life that aspect of Pentecostalism “imbedded in testimonies, ecstatic speech, and bodily movements.”³² Likewise, showing a trickster engaging with those qualities highlights his corporeality. There is certainly a carnivalesque atmosphere around Apostle Gabriel as he blurs the line between solemn religious mysticism and pure foolishness. This evokes some of Bakhtin’s well-known arguments about the material bodily principle and the ability of the carnival to transmute an entire society into an unofficial state where laughter reigns.

Is there more to the character of Gabriel than the trickster persona we watch him cobble together from various “Pentecostal” components? The audience does not even know his name. We have reason to be skeptical when he introduces himself because we suspect he is capitalizing on what the name Gabriel connotes in the Christian tradition. For Hyde, it is customary for the trickster to make us wonder: “It is our habit to imagine a true self behind the shifting images, but it is sometimes difficult to know if that self is really there.” When Gabriel complains to God, he insinuates that he is just one of a nameless mass of struggling people. The difference is that his talent for shapeshifting allows him to distinguish himself from others: “Wandering aimlessly, stupider than the animals, he is at once the bungling host and the agile parasite; he has no way of

his own but he is the Great Imitator who adopts the many ways of those around him.”³³ Before he adopts his form, there is no story and the character is of little interest.

Liminality

By affirming the trickster's status as a wanderer, Hyde points to another of his characteristics: his liminality. This plays out in different ways. For instance, he may live on the outskirts of the community, recalling Ananse the spider whose web is often on the threshold of homes he never quite leaves. The trickster is “the spirit of the doorway leading out, and of the crossroad at the edge of town.”³⁴ He may otherwise stand out for his peculiar brand of cunning and reasoning; Gabriel's definition of survival puts him at odds with the common good. Shipley, quoting Derrida, affirms that the pastor's fakery “appears as the margin, the horizon against which a moral center is clarified [...] The fake is not a negation of value but, rather, a critical comment on it.”³⁵ Pype, quoting Thomas Beidelman, has nonetheless questioned the validity of calling the trickster peripheral, since as she observes, the pastor has assumed a central position in places like Kinshasa and has even become “the new model of masculinity.”³⁶ In that sense, Gabriel is indeed central—he is the film's protagonist, is a source of authority for his followers, and in the full view of whoever cares to watch, manipulates one of his society's most prominent institutions. But he is also intentionally peripheral in the sense that by hoisting himself on a pedestal, he sets himself apart from others. In his case, the contrast between his vaunted spirituality and his real personality makes him amusing to the film audience.

While the trickster is undoubtedly at fault for the negative impact of his actions, the film points out that he takes advantage of pre-existing flaws in the social fabric. He has no trouble convincing Samuel Quansah that his loving but aging mother is a witch out to get him. To prevent

disaster, Samuel has to pray, fast, give alms, and make considerable donations to the church. This creates marital conflict because he refuses to listen to his wife, who is highly skeptical of Gabriel. The other couple, Frank and Rebecca Commey, are under unreasonable pressure from extended family members because they have been married for three “whole” years but have no child. Gabriel convinces the young man (here too the woman is deeply suspicious) that his enemies have “tied” his wife’s womb and that Gabriel alone has the authority to untie it. In a further parody of religious ritual, the young woman is required to go to the beach at dawn, roll about in the sand, and go alone to Prophet Gabriel’s house for “special prayers.” There, he sexually assaults her. It is after this that she falls pregnant.

The Trickster, the Devil and the Society

Reviews of the film appear to be predominantly positive and tend to focus on its impact on viewers. Critics therefore end up criticizing the social phenomenon that is the fake pastor. In his write-up, one reviewer invites “prophets” and “men of God” to see the film and learn how their wisdom will be rewarded. The shepherds’ “many sheep” likewise “might learn something about those people we esteem to be blessed with a sixth sense out of the reach of us mere mortals.”³⁷ The indictment is unequivocal. The BBC caption is still less subtle and reads as though the film were a documentary— “a take on how churches get rich.” The writer states that “[i]n places like Ghana and Nigeria, the church is also big business and the wealth raked in by many pastors makes it difficult to keep opportunists away from the pulpits.”³⁸ “Kwaw Ansah pillories false prophets and messiahs,” proclaims the caption of the *Daily Nation*, a Kenyan newspaper.³⁹ The *RFI Afrique* review agrees that Ansah’s inspiration is current events: “Kwaw Ansah has chosen a very current topic for his latest film, released in Ghanaian theatres in 2013. It is about the proliferation of

Christian churches headed by self-proclaimed pastors in Africa.”⁴⁰ Ansah himself does not hide the pedagogical bent that often sends him to real-life events for inspiration. Recently named as one of Ghana's most influential figures, he is of the school that believes that entertainment in Africa should be useful, either for ameliorating the image of the continent, or for educating its citizens. He has been recognized for this: One of his prizes was awarded by the Organization of African Unity for a film “that best addresses the cultural problems of Africa.” In addition to this, African literatures have typically been analyzed as referential because of the subject matters they tend to concentrate on. Pair this with what the film critics have confirmed—that there are indeed numerous incidents of liars taking advantage of churchgoers—and it is easy to see the trickster as wholly negative and the film as the simple denunciation of a common phenomenon.

To a point, the film encourages being viewed solely as the censure of real-life occurrences. This interpretation corresponds with its backdrop of Christianity. From a monotheistic point of view, Apostle Gabriel is undoubtedly “bad.” What is more, he gets his comeuppance in the end—he is literally on his knees and this time, he feels real apprehension since his life is in danger. After Frank Commey discovers that the baby Rebecca has borne is Prophet Gabriel's biological child, he reveals the news to the congregation in a dramatic confrontation. Gabriel makes a bumbling attempt to defend himself, claiming that his aggressor wants to spoil his name. At this statement, the young man snaps, “Spoil the bad name?” Realizing that the game is up, and that Frank is armed, Gabriel apologizes and offers a weak excuse based on Christian logic: he was tempted by the devil. Frank declares theatrically to the pastor: “*You* are the devil!”

Examining the film through the trickster lens nuances the film's satirical and didactic dispositions without necessarily reducing them. This is partly because the trickster blurs the lines between absolutes such as good and evil. As Radin states, “Trickster is at one and the same time

creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself ... He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social ... yet through his actions all values come into being.”⁴¹ Through his speech and mannerisms, Gabriel also displays the trickster’s important comic dimension. It has after all been observed that in mocking the trickster, men are really laughing at themselves.⁴² The trickster, then, embodies what is both good and bad about human society. He is ultimately amoral, signifying a mixture of human natures where, as Hyde puts it, good and evil “are hopelessly intertwined.” For his part, the devil has no nuances. Hyde confirms that while parallels have been drawn between the trickster and the devil, they are not at all the same thing. The trickster is after all the “embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.”⁴³ The devil, on the other hand, is simply evil and must be completely rejected.

Further showing that there can be more to *Praising the Lord Plus One* than a Manichaean viewpoint, Frank, whose name suggests his truthfulness and who could easily be read as Ansa’s spokesperson, delivers an emotional (if slightly longwinded) speech that closes the film. He frames his discourse like a sermon in which he ponders on human behavior. He invites his listeners—here the congregation and the film audience may coalesce—to consider the devil not as something conceived by God, but as a notion “created” by people like Gabriel. Frank affirms that he “wouldn’t blame Satan for any man’s rash actions.” One implication is that the trickster’s actions and their consequences belong to the wider community; they are all responsible for entertaining him. Secondly, the concept of Satan is like prophesying, reciting Bible verse or wearing ecclesiastical dress: just another instrument in the trickster’s repertoire. In this way the film suggests, as traditional folktales do, that there is no devil, only performance.

Though Frank declares that Gabriel does not “deserve to live,” he lets him go without harming him physically. More importantly, he vows to care for the trickster’s biological child as his own. The trickster not only survives but will likely thrive. Ricketts intimates a similar continuity when he states that the trickster is a culture hero who risks himself “for those who are to come.”⁴⁴ In this case, the couple will raise his child. The trickster, it appears, must live on. Indeed, his reputation may be in tatters at the moment; but that has never stopped Ananse, who is routinely named and shamed at the end of one story only to bounce back in the next episode.

What does his community obtain from his continued existence and comfortable occupancy of the landscape? The trickster does give people what they want in his own way, whether assurance of a spiritual safety net or even a child. Also, besides drawing attention to societal tensions and flaws, he invites the viewer to connect with him. One aspect of this relationship is tied to the trickster’s entertainment value. The church, as previously mentioned, established itself as an option for entertainment. Gabriel’s gaudy showman persona could explain the presence of so many enthusiastic churchgoers, who perhaps frequent him as something of an amusing pastime. This function becomes more concrete in his relation to filmgoers. When the film premiered in Accra for instance, the audience responded well to Gabriel’s shenanigans. At certain moments, some people would laugh even before he said or did anything.

In one memorable scene, Samuel Quansah visits Gabriel, who tells him, “I fast day and night with prayers for your family.” The audience laughs because just like “Ananse [he] is notorious for his obsession with food.”⁴⁵ Gabriel then makes Samuel kneel for prayers that are marked by the usual hullabaloo. This scene is more ridiculous than usual because when Samuel knocked, he interrupted Gabriel’s substantial lunch. Gabriel scrambled to hide the food and rushed to change from his underclothes into his soutane, then cleared his throat to make way for a more

“pastoral” voice inviting his visitor in. The audience knows that the hand he is now laying on Samuel was recently deep in a hot dish.

Gabriel would like to create the impression that he is sustained by spiritual food. In this, he evokes other charlatans in literature, such as Wole Soyinka’s Brother Jeroboam from *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero’s Metamorphosis*. Jero’s congregation are of the firm and obviously false belief that their pastor is a sworn ascetic who sleeps on the beach if and when he sleeps at all. Prophet Gabriel for his part refuses to be caught doing something as prosaic as eating.⁴⁶ To reinforce the image of a rarefied spiritual lifestyle, he informs his credulous visitor that he was just praying. His public discourse is humorous because of the foil provided by his private actions. Additionally, it is implied that the viewer would surely never be taken in by such an obvious scam. Even if the audience question their own assumptions and ties to charismatic churches, the trickster makes them do so by laughing at *other* gullible people.

Thomas Lynn goes further when he says that the trickster is motivated by a quest for liberation. Though he destroys, he has the power of restoration. Because he is free from most societal restrictions and codes, people who tell and listen to his stories live vicariously through him, even if for a short period. By freely crossing the lines between good and bad he underscores his position as an “outlaw and survivor” while also calling into question established institutions. Gabriel’s transformation scenes and his subsequent actions underscore ambivalence on several levels. He enhances suspicion of spiritual leaders but also makes it difficult to reject them outright. The emphasis on performance and transformation grants a sort of validation to the faker, because he is behaving as a preacher is expected to according to the common narrative. Inversely, his fakery calls the validity of authentic religious leaders into question. He invites viewers to question the extent to which religious practice is attention-grabbing performance.

Conclusion

Praising the Lord Plus One suggests possible ways of evaluating trickster characters. On the one hand, there is an unequivocal viewpoint, as suggested by the film's ecclesiastical context. The trickster might be viewed in absolute terms, even as an embodiment of the original liar from the garden of Eden. This invites an unqualified—and valid—condemnation. That being said, the film is also about the potential of religious institutions to be used to exploit others; the waters sometimes become muddied with regard to who is judging whom and on what basis. Compounding this is Christianity's outlook on capitalism, at least as presented in the film. For some, accumulated wealth can be a sign of God's favor. For others, it can alienate from God's presence. The church's attitude to affluence is thus shown to also be ambiguous, like the trickster himself. In fact, the traditional trickster's ability to manipulate institutions for his own benefit, his cleverness and his survival skills mean that sometimes, he is seen as a hero as well as a source of entertainment. The viewpoint inspired by the trickster ethos underlines his state as a being of paradox and his aptitude for raising questions without providing easy answers.

The point of view vacillates between these possible readings. The film is a means of protecting people from fakery. It discloses the trickster's intentions from the very start and exposes him again before his following. At the same time, it invites some level of identification with the trickster. The audience sees things from his point of view and recognizes him as a comic character. What is more, he is let off relatively easily, as though to underscore the fact that if he continues to flourish, it is at least partly because his own community humors him.

¹ Pelton, Robert D. *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 3.

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- ² Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes this World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010, 32.
- ³ Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa*, 15.
- ⁴ Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World*, 7.
- ⁵ Jung, C. G. *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Translated by R. F. C Hull. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, 260.
- ⁶ For the detailed critique, see chapter two of Deloria, Vine. *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria Jr. Reader*, Indiana: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999 (“The Trickster and the Messiah”).
- ⁷ Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World*, 11.
- ⁸ Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa*, 14.
- ⁹ Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World*, 13-14.
- ¹⁰ Lynn, Thomas. “Postcolonial Encounters Re-Envisioned: Kojo Laing’s *Woman of the Aeroplanes* as Trickster Narrative.” *Matatu* 45, no. 1 (2014): 153-166.
- ¹¹ Jung, *Works*, 255.
- ¹² Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 7.
- ¹³ Smith, Jeanne Rosier. *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 113. Here, she is speaking of adaptive behaviors adopted by slaves.
- ¹⁴ Pype, Katrien. “Of Fools and False Pastors: Tricksters in Kinshasa’s Television Fiction.” *Visual Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2010): 115-135, 117.
- ¹⁵ Cole, Catherine. *Ghana’s Concert Party Theatre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, 79.
- ¹⁶ Shipley, Jesse Weaver. “Comedians, Pastors, and the Miraculous Agency of Charisma in Ghana.” *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (2009): 523-552 (523, 539).
- ¹⁷ Meyer, Birgit. *Sensational Movies: video, vision and Christianity in Ghana*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015, 8.
- ¹⁸ Shipley, “Comedians,” 527.
- ¹⁹ Coleman, Simon. *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 23, 26, 27.
- ²⁰ Meyer, *Sensational Movies*, xii, 11.
- ²¹ Olaniyan, Tejumola. “Festivals, rituals, and drama in Africa,” in *The Cambridge History of Caribbean and African Literature*, edited by Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, 35-48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 40.
- ²² Cole, *Concert Party*, 2.
- ²³ Bame, Kwabena N. *Come to Laugh*. New York: L. Barber Press, 1985, 22.
- ²⁴ Cole, *Concert Party*, 109.

²⁵ Lynn, "Trickster Narrative," 162.

²⁶ Olaniyan, *Festivals*, 40.

²⁷ Bame describes a popular concert party scene: a British-trained pastor pretends that his stay abroad has wiped his memory of all understanding of his mother tongue. He preaches in English in order to impress the local congregation with "the modern authority conferred by English," as Shipley calls it. The church is obliged to use an interpreter. The latter consistently botches the job to the exasperation of the pastor, who bursts out at one point that "that" is not what he said. When the pastor betrays himself, the audience laughs (39).

²⁸ Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World*, 76, 63.

²⁹ It is entirely possible that "God," who does not speak aloud after this dialogue, is either a figment of his imagination or his own conscience that he puts to sleep.

³⁰ Coleman, *Globalisation*, 117.

³¹ Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World*, 42.

³² Coleman, *Globalisation*, 24.

³³ Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World*, 53, 77.

³⁴ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 6.

³⁵ Shipley, "Comedians," 524.

³⁶ Pype, "Of Fools," 119.

³⁷ Françoise Kaboré, lefaso.net. "Praising the Lord Plus One de Kwaw Paintsil Ansah." Accessed July 15, 2018. http://lefaso.net/spip.php?page=web-tv-video&id_article=75977&rubrique18 My translation.

³⁸ BBC. "A Ghanaian filmmaker's take on how churches get rich." Accessed July 15, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-24087312/a-ghanaian-filmmaker-s-take-on-how-churches-get-rich>

³⁹ "Kwaw Ansah pillories false prophets and messiahs." Accessed July 15, 2018. <https://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/art-culture/Kwaw-Ansah-pillories-false-prophets-and-messiahs/-/1954194/2034574/-/acnmb/-/index.html>

⁴⁰ RFI Afrique. "Fespaco: projection de «Praising the Lord Plus One» du Ghanéen Kwaw Ansah." Accessed July 15, 2018. <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170227-burkina-faso-fespaco-praising-the-lord-one-kwa-ansah-ghana>. My translation.

⁴¹ qtd. in Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 10.

⁴² Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa*, 10.

⁴³ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 7.

⁴⁴ qtd. in Deloria Jr., *Spirit and Reason*. Ricketts is speaking of the mythical trickster who prepares the world for mankind.

⁴⁵ Cole, *Concert Party*, 113.

⁴⁶ There is also a popular tale, in which Ananse makes the startling vow to fast for a month during his mother-in-law's funeral rites. He plays the inconsolable mourner during the day but at night, sneaks into the kitchens to gorge himself on food.

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