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**REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENEITY IN THE POSTCOLONIAL DETECTIVE
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ABSTRACT

Nii Ayikwei Parkes' *Tail of the Blue Bird* has gained critical attention as a significant literary achievement and an exemplary postcolonial detective novel. Less discussed, however, is how the novel constructs locational identity as a way of contesting Western ideals, epistemologies of knowing, and the globalization of the English language. The paper examines elements of indigeneity in *Tail of the Blue Bird* and how these assert the Ghanaian cultural identity. The paper demonstrates that language, naming, and traditional storytelling are three cogent ways indigeneity manifests in the novel. The paper argues that Parkes uses the aforementioned elements to capture the everyday rhythms of the linguistic landscape of place, resist the othering of Ghanaian languages and culture, and unapologetically project the unique epistemological system, belief systems, and values of the Akan culture. The paper contributes to ongoing scholarship on the reclamation of African identities in postcolonial literature and highlights *Tail of the Blue Bird* as a vital text for understanding identity formation and cultural resistance in African narratives.

KEYWORDS

Ghanaian, indigeneity, *Tail of the Blue Bird*, traditional storytelling

Introduction

Colonialism in Africa has left an indelible mark on the continent's cultural environment. For centuries, African identities were undermined and marginalized as the European colonizers imposed their own cultures, languages, and traditions on African culture. As Fanon (1961) opines, colonialism was predicated on the misguided notion of Western superiority, with African cultures portrayed as inferior, leading to the denigration and suppression of indigenous African practices, beliefs, and knowledge systems. In the wake of independence movements across the continent, a renewed quest for authentic African identities emerged. The notion of authentic African identities does not presuppose the existence of an unchanging or singular identity that is easily recoverable. As Achebe aptly put it, "the African identity is still in the making. There isn't a final identity that is African. But, at the same time, there is an identity coming into existence" (cited in Appiah 73). The postcolonial pursuit of African identity is at once a rejection of colonial impositions and a dynamic process of cultural reclamation and reinvention.

In the last few decades, the onslaught of globalization has accentuated the cultural crisis in Africa. African writers, in particular, have used their creative works as vehicles for exploring and asserting indigenous African identities. These writers often incorporate indigenous African languages, concepts, and epistemologies as means of reclaiming cultural space and asserting the African ways of being and knowing. This inclusion of indigenous genres of thought and cultural practices preserves traditional knowledge and provides a more authentic representation of African realities, which resists the homogenizing forces of colonialism and globalization. Notable African writers – both at home and in the diaspora – such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chinua Achebe, Ben Okiri, have in diverse ways incorporated indigenous African sociocultural and aesthetic forms and practices "retain Africaness despite changes" (Ojaide ix).

Nii Ayikwei Parkes, a Ghanaian writer based in the diaspora, continues this tradition in his debut novel, *Tail of the Blue Bird*. The novel is a whodunit that blends traditional African storytelling with contemporary detective fiction. Set in Sonokrom, a remote Ghanaian village where a mysterious death occurs, it follows Kayo Odamtten, a Western-trained-forensic pathologist based in Accra, who is literally forced to investigate the mysterious death that occurs. In executing his duties, he encounters the villagers' deep-seated beliefs in tradition, as they believe the mysterious death involves supernatural forces. Specifically, Kayo's encounter with the village elder, Yaw Poku, who shares a traditional story, brings him to a realm beyond that of scientific rationality. Through these interactions, the novel explores the tensions between modernity and tradition, while drawing in issues of identity and cultural preservation, which present a view of the Ghanaian society, especially the Akan ethnic group.

Since its publication, *Tail of the Blue Bird* has gained critical attention as a significant literary achievement and an exemplary African detective novel. Nyela identifies the novel's "literary embodiment of oral tradition" as "a sensitivity to sociolinguistic issues" (192) in Africa, particularly the negotiation between orality and literacy in contemporary narratives. Nyela highlights how the text's rhythms, repetitions, and proverbial structures echo oral storytelling forms, which foreground the cultural work of language within African societies (193-94). Similarly, Dawson highlights Parkes's privileging of Ghanaian languages over English as "the most curious attractions" of Parkes (68). Beyond the language, other aspects of *Tail of the Blue Bird* have attracted scholarly attention. Scott explores the relationship between geography,

epistemology, and genre in *Tail of the Blue Bird*. Scott argues that the protagonist and forensic pathologist, Kayo Odamtten, undergoes a perspectival shift from modern forensic science to indigenous ways of knowing (21-22). Bonsu et al. focus on how Parkes strategically employs the names of female characters, particularly Esi Mensisi and Yaa Somu, to foreground gendered violence and justice (2; 10-12). They demonstrate that names serve as semiotic markers that challenge patriarchal oppression and envision a more ethical postcolonial social order. In a recent study, Nkansah draws on eco-critical theory to argue that the depiction of the natural environment in *Tail of the Blue Bird* is geared toward fostering environmental stewardship. Nkansah contends that by foregrounding African conceptions of ecology, Parkes critiques “destructive notions of human exceptionalism that drive ecological decline” (1).

While the existing scholarship provides hints on the ways Parkes's novel stages locational identity and ways of knowing, it fails to provide a rigorous analysis of indigeneity as a crucial aspect of Parkes's detective novel. Both Dawson and Nyela comment on rather than provide in-depth analysis of Parkes' foregrounding of indigenous language and Ghanaian English. Similarly, Bonsu et al. ignore other naming practices that are fundamental to Parkes' aesthetics of indigeneity. The present paper fills this gap by examining the representation of indigeneity in *Tail of the Blue Bird*. Specifically, the paper focuses on how Parkes uses indigenous language, naming practices, and storytelling to articulate place, reclaim, and celebrate local identities in a world that often seeks to homogenize cultures under Western rationality and linguistic imperialism. By focusing on indigeneity, the paper shows that the African detective fiction does more than explore postcolonial crime and justice; it is a strategic subgenre for performing and articulating indigeneity. The paper develops its arguments in four sections. We begin by clarifying the conceptual framework of the paper. The second section examines the use of the Akan language as one of the crucial elements of indigeneity in *Tail of the Bird*. The third section focuses on the naming practices employed by Parkes as strategies of weaving Akan philosophies of knowing into understanding plot, temporality, and characterization. The fourth section examines Opanyin Poku's tale as a specific cultural form of knowledge production and dissemination, and a mechanism for decentering Eurocentric rationality.

Theoretical Framework: Indigeneity

As a necessary starting point, it is crucial to unpack the term indigeneity, which frames the paper. The concept of indigeneity has increasingly gained global currency; it has been strategically appropriated for various purposes: cultural, social, political, human rights, and academic. For example, as a resource for cultural politics, indigeneity is closely related to ethnicity, identity, hybridity, authenticity, autochthony, nation, and homeland. In the social sciences, indigeneity enables thinking about “the interconnectedness of identity, space, language, history and culture” (Uddin et al. 3). Despite this popularity, indigeneity is a highly contested concept. This is because not only is indigeneity “not a new invention, with a clearly defined meaning and scope” (Uddin et. al. 3), “it carries imperial fantasies of the ethnic” (Nicholls 11). It is important to note that indigeneity is closely associated with indigenous. The term “indigenous”, as Merlan has noted, “was used in some contexts to designate and differentiate “native” from the “others” (Merlan 303). However, in the last few decades, “indigeneity” also presuppose a sphere of commonality among those who form a world collectivity of “indigenous peoples” in contrast to their various others”

(Merlan 303). Scholars trace the genealogy of the notion of indigeneity to colonization and its differential allocation of categorization and recognition. Primarily, therefore, indigeneity describes a politicized and existential reality in settler colonial situations where indigenous activism has gained momentum in the last several years. As Devy aptly put it, indigeneity captures the sense of “struggles and survival” in the context of histories of domination (1). It is precisely from this context that indigeneity is predominantly associated with “indigenous people” “tribal,” “aboriginal,” “originary,” “autochthonous,” “native,” “first peoples,” and “first nations”—descended from the original inhabitants of territories subsequently invaded or circumscribed by colonial conquest and nation-state expansion” (Stam 7). At its core, indigeneity presents a unique and collective identity that contrasts with the often-imposed norms and values of colonial or dominant societies (Alfred and Corntassel 597-98). Similarly, Coulthard opines that indigeneity embraces the practices and philosophies that emerge from an enduring relationship with the land, cultures, and histories of indigenous peoples (13).

The values embedded in indigenous identities are handed down from generation to generation through language, folklore, oral traditions, and indigenous social structures, which often prioritize communal harmony and collective decision-making. Some scholars, such as Simpson (2014), believe that indigeneity encompasses cultural identity together with the ongoing struggle for recognition and rights in the face of historical and contemporary colonization. This is because Indigenous peoples worldwide have faced (and continue to face) marginalization, land dispossession, and attempts at cultural erasure. These challenges have led to indigeneity becoming linked with resistance, human rights, and resilience. Indigenous communities actively engage in efforts to reclaim and preserve their identities, languages, and traditions, often in the face of significant obstacles. To Battiste, this aspect of indigeneity involves political activism, legal battles for land rights, efforts to revitalize endangered languages, and the preservation and promotion of traditional knowledge systems (89). This understanding of indigeneity has been validated by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which was passed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007.

While postcolonial contexts are powerful sites for the articulations of indigeneity, Africa has surprisingly not generated significant scholarship except for the language debates or cultural crises. According to Nicholls, despite its “strategic usefulness” and “wide applicability in a wide variety of African contexts and communities” indigeneity “remains comparatively unarticulated” (10; see also Werner 2023). Early theorizations and articulations of indigeneity in Africa revolved around the language debate. Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madobuike’s “Towards Decolonization of African Literature” and Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Decolonizing the Mind* readily come to mind. These language debates emerged from concerns about the identity of African literature. Interestingly, the emergent decolonial perspectives on indigeneity articulated by scholars like Walter Mignolo are closely linked to postcolonial concerns on indigeneity. Decoloniality challenges the Eurocentric frameworks that have dominated cultural discourse and encourages ‘border thinking’ – a way of understanding the world from the perspectives of those traditionally excluded from dominant narratives (Mignolo 455). The decolonial perspective on indigeneity re-echoes Chinweizu et. al., and Ngugi’s contention that African languages and cultural practices are important in shaping African identities and resisting mental colonization. Ngugi posits that true decolonization requires more than just political independence; it is also a psychological and cultural liberation from Western paradigms (136). The onslaught of globalization in the last few decades has regenerated

scholarly discussions in Africa. In his book, significantly titled *Indigeneity, Globalization, and African Literature*, Ojaide argues that contemporary African literature is driven by “the tension between globalization and indigeneity” (ix). In other words, contemporary African literature invokes indigeneity as an oppositional and critical strategy for confronting globalization and other pathologies of colonialism.

Clearly, indigeneity encompasses cultural, social, political, legal, and human rights issues associated with formerly colonized and marginalized peoples and cultures. The present paper focuses on the literary dimensions or manifestations of indigeneity. In this paper, we use indigeneity in two senses. First, indigeneity broadly refers to the collective identity of a group of people who are native to a specific geographical region, characterized by their traditional systems or practices, such as naming, language, storytelling, as well as distinct social structures. Secondly, and drawing on the insights of Nicholls for our purposes, we use indigeneity to mean “a form of practice, a strategic performance” (20). Therefore, this paper examines Parkes’s use of oral storytelling traditions, indigenous language, and naming practices as strategic performances of indigeneity or markers of Ghanaian cultural identity. As strategic performance, indigeneity articulates locational identity, decenters colonial or Western paradigms, and recovers indigenous ways of knowing.

Reversing colonial linguistic hierarchies: Asserting indigeneity through language use

The most obvious strategic performance of indigeneity in *Tail of the Blue Bird* is the incorporation of the Twi, an indigenous language, as a mode of communication. Colonialism was not limited to corporeal and material subjugation. Colonialism also instituted linguistic imperialism, wherein African languages and knowledge were consciously and systematically displaced and devalued. Contemporary African literature has been at the forefront of reversing pernicious legacies through the intentional incorporation of indigenous practices and forms to assert cultural identity (Ojaide ix; 31). One of the strategies of reversing the linguistic imperialism of the colonial language in contemporary African literature is the incorporation of African languages as a mode of communication. For Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madobuikwe, this constitutes a powerful strategy “to map out a new foundation of an African modernity” (36). The co-existence of the colonial and African languages in African literary works affirms the call by Chinweizu et al. for the “deliberate and calculated process of syncretism: one which, above all, emphasizes valuable continuities with our pre-colonial culture, welcomes vitalizing contributions from other cultures, and exercises inventive genius in making a healthy and distinguished synthesis from them all” (36).

Parkes makes extensive and diverse use of Twi expressions, which Dako (2003) terms ‘Ghanaianisms’, as well as proverbs and transliteration, all of which ground the text in the Ghanaian linguistic landscape. The blending of indigenous languages in African texts like *Tail of the Blue Bird* is a deliberate attempt to project the culture of the indigenous people. The incorporation of local words and phrases, proverbs, as well as transliteration, highlights the relationship between tradition and modernity. Crucially, it challenges the dominance of English as the language of modernity, asserting the continued relevance and vitality of indigenous languages in contemporary Ghana. This suggests that tradition is not just a relic of the past; it is an integral part of modern Ghanaian society. Local expressions in Twi, such as *akpeteshi*, a local gin mostly found in rural areas, *otwe* (an antelope), *abenkwan*, a kind of soup made from palm fruits, *bidie* (charcoal), *wansima* (housefly), etc., are introduced throughout the narrative. While some of these

are explained, others are left to the readers' subjective explanation. At the same time, whereas the Twi words are not italicized or translated, some English words (words that are foreign to the villagers) are italicized. Typically, italics are often used to mark words as foreign or unfamiliar. Thus, by avoiding the italicization of the Twi words, Parkes resists the othering of Ghanaian languages and culture, challenging the notion that English is the superior language (Dawson, 2010). One other dominant local expression in the narrative is *sebi*, which means "excuse me" or "pardon me". This politeness expression is mostly used by Opanyin Poku, the village elder, to mitigate an otherwise offensive term or utterance. Apart from resisting othering, the local expressions also reflect the multilingual reality of many Ghanaians who seamlessly blend languages in everyday speech.

In addition to linguistic items and expressions, Parkes also makes use of proverbs to ground the novel in indigenous Ghanaian culture and, ultimately, assert indigenous African identity. Proverbs are short, commonly known sayings that express a truth, moral lesson, or piece of wisdom. The use of proverbs in *Tail of the Blue Bird* suggests that, despite modernization, traditional wisdom remains relevant and valuable. In Sonokrom, Parkes indicates:

Where Western thought has rooted itself in theorems and laws, the village of Sonokrom in Tail of the Blue Bird is rooted in proverbs. Proverbs maintain the villagers' conversation with the world because they have no obsession with an ultimate version of events; the proverb's meaning unravels according to individual experience. (2).

This reveals dichotomies between proverbs as repositories of traditional knowledge and scientific epistemology, which is objective and deals with empirical validation. Proverbs are fluid and flexible; meanings are, thus, dependent on who uses them and the contexts that inform the use of the proverbs. Beyond functioning as repositories of ecological knowledge (Nkansah 13), proverbs in *Tail of the Blue Bird* are deployed to criticize toxic masculinity. For instance, in his conversation with Kayo, Opanyin Poku says, "The brave man displays his courage and strength on the battlefield, not at home" (108). This saying is triggered by Kwaku Ananse's attitude towards his daughter, Mensisi, whom he subjects to repeated brutalities. In this context, the proverbs function as commentaries on cultural conceptions of a man. A man, among the Akans, Owusu and Bosiwah point out, '...was expected to show certain characteristics, an important one being bravery. A lack of bravery or any other masculine characteristic could earn a man the dishonourable categorisation of being genderless or gender neutral' (2). This proverb, therefore, offers a critique of Kwaku Ananse's violent behavior and also illuminates the motif of what it means to be a man. It reframes bravery and masculinity away from the domestic sphere toward socially recognized spaces of valor, such as warfare. Thus, the proverb critiques forms of toxic masculinity by asserting alternative ideals of manhood as ingrained in communal responsibility rather than domination. Furthermore, when attempts to stop Kwaku Ananse from beating his daughter fail, Opanyin Poku says, 'Ei! If I tell you that Kwaku Ananse told Oduro to leave his home, there you will understand why the wise ones said that *when one starts on the path to evil, good counsel sounds like a joke*' (131). Poku's proverb signals a communal virtue against individual arrogance. Interestingly, most of the proverbs in the novel are said by Poku, an elder in Sonokrom. This is significant as it highlights a specific form of cultural communicative ethos that reflects social status. As Dei maintains, in many African cultures, elders are mostly respected within their communities for their wisdom. Beyond his status as an elder, it can be seen that Opanyin Poku's use of proverbs emerges

mostly in contexts of conflicts or decision-making. He uses proverbs as a means of mediating social tension, correcting moral failings, and transmitting communal values. Through Opanyin Poku's use of proverbs, Parkes underscores proverbs as repositories of ancestral knowledge and cultural ethos passed down through generations.

Another aspect of the language that gives the novel an indigenous Ghanaian identity is the incorporation of transliteration. Transliteration is the process of representing words or phrases from one language, using the alphabet or writing system of another language, focusing on preserving the original pronunciation rather than translating the meaning (Zepedda 8). Parkes provides vivid metaphorical transliterations in the novel in order to "continually reinscribe the cultural identity of the Ghanaian experience he creates" (Tekpetey 132). Transliterations are evident in many passages in the novel and are mostly articulated by Opanyin Poku. For example, in his encounter with Kayo about the discovery of the sinister remains by the minister's girlfriend, Poku begins by saying, 'we were at our somewhere when she came' (*Yewɔ yen baabi na ɔbaee*) meaning 'she came when we were going about our duties' (6). Semantically, the use of 'ye' (we) and 'yen' (our) reflects the Akan communal way of living. Crucially, this expression frames the presence of the police in the community as an intrusion into their everyday activities. Another transliteration to note is "when I got to Kwaku Ananse's hut, the mouth had changed" (*Meduruu Kwaku Ananse apata no, na ano no asesa*), which literally means "the entrance of Kofi Attah's hut had changed when I got there" (58). Here, the reference to the 'mouth' of the hut does not literally describe its entrance. It signals that something unusual or ominous is about to be revealed inside, thus foreshadowing events in the narrative. Through these and other forms of transliteration, Parkes creates a narrative that mimics the multilingual reality of Ghana, where English and local languages often intermingle in everyday speech or utterance. Thus, Parkes immerses the reader in the linguistic landscape of Ghana, overall, contributing to the novel's distinctly Ghanaian identity. Furthermore, these transliterations preserve indigenous modes of expression, resist erasure by colonial English, signal cultural nuances that cannot be fully captured through translation, and act as narrative devices to foreshadow events, convey irony, or situate characters within specific sociocultural contexts.

Chapter titles as narrative markers of the Akan war myth

One of the most distinctive markers of indigenization in *Tail of the Blue Bird* is the incorporation of diverse Akan naming practices. We begin with the names of the chapters in the novel. Names index identities, serve as entry points, and pathways to the historical and cultural backgrounds of societies. As Sinclair argues, indigenous names encapsulate "distinct ontological, epistemological and ethical implications" (94). Bonsu et.al have examined the intersection between names and the quest for a postcolonial ethical ideal and regenerative principle of freedom and justice in *Tail of the Blue Bird*. However, they ignore the naming of chapters as integral to the performance of indigeneity. Parkes names each chapter by the days of the week in the Akan language. These are *Kwasida* (Sunday), *Dwowda* (Monday), *Benada* (Tuesday), *Wukuda* (Wednesday), *Yawda* (Thursday), *Fida* (Friday), and *Menada* (Saturday). The structure of the novel from *Kwasida* to *Menada* invokes the Akan system of days of the week, where Sunday is considered the first day of the week, and Saturday, the last day of the week. Therefore, the chapter names suggest that the plot revolves around a specific cultural conceptualization of temporality, totality, and

completeness. To ignore this is to miss a crucial insight that events in the novel unfold within the bounded space of a single week. In the process, the conventional European plot structure or organization of beginning (exposition), middle (climax), and End (resolution) is displaced by the Akan system of names of the day. Thus, Sunday, the first chapter of the week, chronicles the genesis of the entire novel: a minister's girlfriend discovers an unsightly human remains. *Menada*, which is the last day of the week in Akan culture, coincides with the last chapter of the novel. The chapter names do more than invoke Akan day name system; they foreground Akan cultural myth and ethos. Part of Parkes achievement is that he weaves an intricate tapestry of epistemological localism and locational identity by inscribing events in each chapter in the dominant mythological ideas and characteristics that govern a particular day of the week.

According to Sekyi-Baidoo, the "Akan day name system is based on the association of certain genii...to the respective days of the week" (180). This insight provides a lens for examining the significance of the names of the chapters and the events embedded in each of the chapters. This is because, as Sekyi-Baidoo avers, the reigning idea or characteristic of the genii "reflects the organisation of the spiritual life of the people and their relationship with worshipping beings, complemented by historical experiences of the forebears of the society and its culture" (180). Significantly, Sekyi-Baidoo argues that "the myth of the names of the day is based on the activities and vicissitudes of war...the early Akan grouped the major component activities and experience of war into **seven** and spread them over seven representative days" (180; emphasis included). Thus, each day is characterized by specific activities and experiences. Here, we reproduce Sekyi-Baidoo's (184) table.

i.	<i>Monday (Dwowda)</i>	<i>Pre-war calmness and tranquility</i>
ii.	<i>Tuesday (Benada)</i>	<i>Fear and wailing of an imminent war</i>
iii.	<i>Wednesday (Wukuda)</i>	<i>Death of our own, and killing of opponents</i>
iv.	<i>Thursday (Yawda)</i>	<i>Pain at the loss of one's own people</i>
v.	<i>Friday (Fida)</i>	<i>Recognition of good fortune for those alive</i>
vi.	<i>Saturday (Menada)</i>	<i>Restoration and renewal for vicissitudes ahead</i>
vii.	<i>Sunday (Kwasida)</i>	<i>Recognition of the end of war cycle and the planning of subsequent wars</i>

We draw on these mythological and cultural activities and experiences to analyze the chapter headings in Parkes' novel. By naming the first chapter Kwasida, Parkes repurposes the Akan notion of war and the beginning of a new cycle through the minister's girlfriend's discovery of the remains in Sonokrom, which kick-starts the plot of the novel. Also, by invoking the Akan notions of war, temporality, and cyclicity, Parkes strategically reframes Eurocentric forensic investigation as war. Characteristic of Dwowda's "pre-war calmness and tranquility," Parkes, in his second chapter, introduces light-hearted scenes and incidents by taking the reader to Kayo's workplace, his friends and family, and his being approached by the police. The predominant idea of "fear and wailing of an imminent war" that characterizes Benada is reflected in Kayo's forcible abduction, arrest, and manipulation by the police. Kayo's arrest on the trumped-up charge of treason hints at the traditional idea of "imminent war" which will be clarified in the subsequent chapter. Consequently, in the fourth chapter titled *Wukuda*, Kayo is presented before J.P. Donkor, the Greater Accra Police Regional Coordinating Chief, and recruited to investigate the "crime" at Sonokrom. Kayo also arrives in Sonokrom, meets Opanyin Kofi Poku, and they talk about death

in the village and other matters. The motif of “imminent war” is suggested by Kayo’s readiness to battle:

*Kayo woke up an hour before he heard the bolts on the door being released. He did some push-ups, sit-ups, and five minutes standing on his head, to get his mind and body sharp. **He was primed for battle** (36).*

Furthermore, the idea of killing and death associated with Wukuda is foregrounded by the remains at Kwaku Ananse’s hut, which is replete with “flies” and “maggots” and a “foul smell”. This atmosphere captures the ‘visual-olfactory’ image of death characteristic of the gross panoply of stench and flies over a dead body on a battleground. Kayo’s own secondary death, the “perspective modulation” (Scott, 2024) from scientific knowledge to indigenous knowledge when he burns the remains, also heightens the motif of death that is traditionally associated with Wednesday.

Yawoada or Thursday is characterized by pain and mourning at the loss of one’s people (Sekyi-Baidoo 184). Consequently, in the novel’s fifth chapter titled Yawoada, the reader is confronted with Kwaku Ananse’s pain and mourning of his beautiful wife who dies two years after their marriage. The gravity of Kwaku Ananse’s pain is accentuated by Opanyin Poku’s account:

Hmm. After Kwaku Ananse’s wife died he cried paa, hard paa. Indeed, many say he never stopped crying. For many moons he slept and rose and never looked at the sky...His farm grew wild, with sapow, elephant grass, mmofra forowa and nettles growing beneath the cocoa trees, covering the earth in the same way his beard covered his face. Oh, and palm wine (you know I don’t play with my palm wine), palm wine; he drank palm wine like a river drinks rain. So, as I have said, he went and came like this until his beard and moustache swallowed his mouth. That is when people remembered that he hadn’t spoken since his wife died (76)

There is also a secondary type of pain of loss made evident in Yawoada. This is embodied by Yaa Somu’s anger and pain as a result of Kwaku Ananse’s subjection of his daughter to unspeakable physical abuse. It is important to note that the loss that engulfs Yaa Somu is not the death of a person; rather, it is the death of a socially and ethically acceptable form of masculinity. Thus, Yaa Somu, with fiery eyes, tells Kwaku Ananse: “You are not a man. It is not a man who raises his hand against a woman who has sixty years” (80). The pain is so grave that when it reaches its breaking point, it begets a curse – a curse which forms the crux of the mystery that Kayo is tasked to solve.

Despite the pain of loss, Friday (Fida), brings “recognition of good fortune for those alive” (Sekyi-Baidoo 184). Thus, notwithstanding Kwaku Ananse’s brutish and beastly attitude, there is the recognition of the possibility of good fortune as he is advised to “mend his ways” (Parkes 97). Also, despite Kwaku Ananse thwarting her efforts to go to school, Mensisi focuses on selling tomatoes, becomes quite successful, and even marries James in the process. Another good fortune for Mensisi is that, although Kwaku Ananse had still made her lose three pregnancies, and also lost her husband, her children, whom she had lost during pregnancy, mysteriously returned to support and protect her. These events map onto the Akan conception of Friday as a day of good fortune. At the same time, Fida also points to the narratological state of the text. In Fida, the author begins to resolve earlier tensions and sufferings.

For the Akans, Menada (Saturday) is the period for “restoration and renewal for vicissitudes ahead” (Sekyi-Baidoo 184). Consequently, it is on Saturday that Kayo obtains closure to his investigation, and also, where another vicissitude, which is his last ‘encounter’ with Inspector Donkor and its rippling effects are hinted at. Further, it is in this same chapter, Fida, that the process of how Sonokrom is purged of Kwaku Ananse’s madness, resulting in “sweet justice” is summarized. Through the creative strategy of chapter names, Parkes projects the uniqueness of the Akan culture, and ultimately the Ghanaian culture, specifically in terms of the etiological metaphor of war embedded in the day names.

Names as ethical frameworks and indices of social responsibility

The previous section examined a form of naming practice that relates to names of the day of the week as chapter names in *Tail of the Blue Bird*. This section focuses on the names of characters as another important performance of indigeneity by highlighting the socio-cultural and ethno-pragmatic values of the names. Parkes predominantly makes use of names that reflect the Akan naming categories: the day, family, title, and circumstances of birth. We begin first with day names, also known as soul names, which specify “the first automatic name every Akan child gets based on the day s/he was born, even before s/he is officially named” (Agyekum 213). The Akan day name, according to Sekyi-Baidoo, is “based on the association of a certain genii [that is] *a kind of spiritual cum psychological essence which characterises a day, and which becomes the property of people born on that day*” (180; italics in original). Hence, people born on particular days are expected to exhibit the spiritual identities and characteristics or attributes associated with the days (Agyekum 2006; Konadu 2012; Sekyi-Baidoo 181). This is particularly so because the day that one is born in Akan cosmology serves as a nexus between the day one took leave of God from the spiritual realm and the day the person communed with the physical world, which is the realm of humans (Sekyi-Baidoo 180). Additionally, the day that one is born serves as a ‘spiritual identity’ where the spirit of the individual can be accessed and also connected to other elements of the spiritual realm (Sekyi-Baidoo 180-181). In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, we find such spiritual identities in names like Yaa and Kwadwo. Yaa indicates someone born on Thursday. Traditionally, Yaa indexes valiance and bravery (Agyekum 214) and is associated with fearsome qualities, love, and care (Sekyi-Baidoo 2019). In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, Yaa Somu is framed along these qualities. First, her love and care materialize in how she counsels Kwaku Ananse to quickly nurse his grief and pain. She tells him:

Kwaku, stop questioning the ancestors and look around you. See grasscutters, aburuburu, wansima; my son, all these creatures die, but the rest carry on. Listen, don't walk around thinking that the Onyame owes you something. You have a beautiful daughter, she has not even seen your face. Stop mourning the dead and take care of the living (74).

Finally, as Bonsu et al. (2024) have observed, Yaa’s caring nature is revealed in how she “would always save some of her produce for those who didn’t have much” (Parkes 95). Her valiance and bravery reflect the characteristics of her soul day archetype as she is the first to oppose Kwaku Ananse’s beastly attitude by telling him she would kill him with her own hands. She also curses him on the condition that if he ever beats Mensisi, Mensisi’s pregnancy mark be the beginning of his woes. Yaa’s qualities also echo a historical archetype, Yaa Asantewaa the Queen Mother of Ejisu who led the Ashanti in the war against the British in 1900. Both women exude courage and bravery (Bonsu et al. 11).

Also, Kayo, the detective figure, whose name is a malapropism of the day name Kwadwo, exudes qualities constitutive of Monday. The ‘dwo’ morpheme in Kwadwo, according to Sekyi-Baidoo, translates to peace, calm, and tranquility, all of which are qualities that Kwadwo exhibits in the novel. Consequently, unlike the other officers like Sergeant Mintah, who stormed Sonokrom in quite a chaotic and impolite manner, Kwadwo’s investigative procedures speak of calm and respect for otherness. The way he honors customs and the beliefs of the people of Sonokrom also registers his admission of the existence of other epistemologies. This endears him to Poku and Oduro, the elders of the village. Furthermore, Kwadwo’s calm and composure even in the face of death is symptomatic of the qualities of a Monday born. Therefore, Yaa Somu and Kwadwo Kayo Odamtten affirm that among the Akan, “day names have an inextricable relationship with their associated days” (Sekyi-Baidoo 176).

Another category of names found in the *Tail of the Blue Bird* articulates socio-cultural ethical values. Examples in the novel include Somu, Mensisi, and Oduro. Somu literally translates to ‘upholding’ or ‘nurturing’ (Bonsu et al. 9). The name, which is diactinic in nature (see Alvarez-Altman, 1981), emphasizes standing up for “what is right in society and desisting from bellicose acts that infringe on the human rights of the people” (Bonsu et al. 9). Somu’s nurturing virtues are given credence in how she steps up and takes care of Mensisi in the absence of Kwaku Ananse. This nurturing trait, as Rich (2004), cited in Amissah-Arthur (2021), argues, is borne from a natural predisposition from motherhood. As such, we argue that such nurturing places Somu in a logical position to protect what she nurtures. On a higher level, Somu not only nurtures Mensisi, but Parkes positions and elevates Somu as one who nurtures and brings the community together, protecting the community by effecting judgment on those who try to disintegrate the community that is being nurtured. This gesture reverberates with ‘maternalism’, a concept under postcolonial motherhood, where “women who identify as mothers seek to address issues specifically related to the lives of women and the society as large” (Semley 6). In this way, Parkes suggests that postcolonial mothers, like Somu, carry both maternal and political responsibilities: sustaining life, safeguarding identity, and confronting social injustices that threaten the collective. Through this naming technique, Parkes projects that the postcolonial African state should be prepared to uproot all forms of “inequalities, cruelty, belligerent mannerisms, and social injustices” (Bonsu et al. 12). As Sinclair argues, native names “affirm and create ecological relations, [and] educate their users on Native relational ontologies” (100). Somu’s name, thus, restores the ontological network of justice and relationality, by standing up and fighting for what is right, and preventing communal disintegration.

As has already been established, family names when given by fathers confer spiritual identities on people. Thus, people whose family names were not given by their fathers, are people with no spiritual bearing in Akan cosmology and philosophy. As Sekyi-Baidoo (2019) argues, it is deemed despicable if a child is given a name by one’s mother or mother’s family, instead of one’s father’s family. This is because a woman does not transmit this spiritual essence to offspring. It is for this reason that Rattray (1927) asserts that a woman lacks a spirit. This state of affairs is played out in *Tail of the Blue Bird*, especially in relation to Mensisi. The fact that the name Mensisi is not given by her father reflects absentee fatherhood. The name Mensisi was conferred by Yaa Somu because Kwaku Ananse had abandoned his daughter shortly after her birth. For the Akans, this suggests a severing of spiritual ties between Mensisi and her father. This disconnect manifests in Kwaku Ananse’s consistent violent nature toward his daughter. Also, at its core, the name,

Mensisi, which literally means “do not cheat” and contains tropes like fraud, manipulation, and misuse of power, is strategically employed by the novelist to challenge unethical actions and vouch for an equitable society (Bonsu et al. 2024). The name ironically teases Kwaku Ananse’s ineptitude in taking care of his daughter, as he constantly subjects her to verbal and physical violence.

Other names in the novel describe the profession of the character. Such is Oduro, the medicine man, whose name is derived from the root word ‘duro’, meaning medicine in Akan. As the healer, he is charged with the responsibility of ensuring that indigenous epistemological practices are adhered to and honored. It is not surprising because his name stems from the Bosommuru family name, whose temperament is honor (Sekyi-Baidoo, 2019). Again, as the medicine man, Oduro is the one with deep-rooted knowledge about the web of relationships between creatures, lands, plants, forces, and humans and how they all relate in the esoteric sphere. Opanyin Poku intimates:

Oduro is the one who knows about these things. If we wanted to see the tail of this matter that was brought by a woman in a short short skirt with thin legs, Oduro was our best guide. That is why I was glad when this Kwadwo asked Oduro for advice (51).

Everyone in Sonokrom listens to him because his name confers on him the ability to commune with all ecological networks. He is believed by all because he knows “some of the paths are sacred” (83); because “when he speaks, he has spoken” (53). He also knows that “it is not everything we can understand” (57). Therefore, he is in a privileged position to explain how the ancestors punished Kwaku Ananse.

Another family name that is loaded with Akan sociocultural beliefs is Opoku, which stems from the Akan family group *Bosompo* or *Bosomnketea*. The ‘o’ is deleted at the juncture between word final and word initial positions. Hence, Opanyin Opoku becomes Opanyin Poku. Every family group begins with the morpheme, *Bosom*, which is derived from deities that the ancestors of the Akan worshipped in the olden days (Agyekum, 2006). *Opoku* translates to *ɔpɛ oku* which means “He who loves to kill” or “One with the penchant for killing” (Sekyi-Baidoo 64; 320) and the temperament typically associated with the family group is pride and arrogance (ibid). Given this traditional context, it is not surprising that in *Tail of the Blue Bird*, Opanyin Poku is represented as a hunter (killer of animals) with rich knowledge and experience about flora and fauna. His sense of pride and arrogance is conveyed early in the opening chapter when he boasts of his hunting prowess, especially how he can maneuver and outsmart *ndanko* (rabbits) by setting many traps. He adds:

I, Yaw Poku who has roamed the forests from Atewa to Kade, seen every duiker, hog, cobra and leopard that turns this our earth, I was surprised (2).

The final name worth considering is J.P. Donkor, the Police Regional Coordinating Chief. Donkor falls under Akan circumstantial names. It is essential to note that Donkor is the anglicized form of the Akan name **Donkɔ**. As we shall see, Parkes chooses the name Donkor as a technique of characterization. Among the Akans, **Donkɔ** has two meanings, both of which are pejorative. On the one hand, Donkor falls under “child-mortality and death-repellent names” (Sekyi-Baidoo 223). Thus, Donkor is usually conferred on a child who is believed to be trapped in the tragic cycle of “one who is born, dies”. Donkor is a denigration that will prevent a child from leaving the realm of mortals. From another hermeneutic stance, one which we side with in this paper, the name

Donko (Donkor) means “a slave”. It is precisely this sense that Parkes capitalizes on to represent the character of Inspector J.P. Donkor. Inspector Donkor is presented as enslaved by power and material things. Inspector Donkor corrupts and falsifies reports to lay claim to his inherent desires for power. Towards the end of the novel, he almost kills Kayo because the latter refused to join him in a corrupt desire for power. So enslaved is Inspector Donkor to power that even though he appoints Kayo to investigate the mystery in Sonokrom, he tells Kayo that “I am not interested in the truth. I am interested in results. I need you to make this a big case with international implications.” (71). Inspector Donkor’s character, therefore, expresses Akan understanding of **Donko** as “disgust and ugliness and the idea of dishonour” (Sekyi-Baidoo 313). By deploying the diverse naming practices, Parkes is able to encode a whole range of cultural beliefs and epistemologies for purposes of characterization and to assert Ghanaian identity.

Traditional storytelling as indigenous epistemology

Perhaps one of the most significant sites of originality and elements of indigeneity in *Tail of the Blue Bird* is the folktale. Parkes uses Poku’s tale as a story-within-the-story technique in *Tail of the Blue Bird* to mirror the oral storytelling tradition of Ghana. What is more, Parkes deploys the tale to reinforce the importance of indigenous epistemologies as a tool for bringing communities together and as a repository of traditional knowledge. In the process, Parkes creates a hybrid narrative style that borrows from Akan forms or genres of thought and European conventions of the detective novel. *Tail of the Blue Bird* is a “happy synthesis” (Obiechina 197) between oral tradition and elements of the novel. Despite the emergence of new literacy systems and their subsequent superimposition on oral traditional culture, oral culture is still “absorbed, assimilated, extended, and even reorganized within a new cultural experience” (Obiechina 197). As Obiechina argues:

It is impossible to ignore orality in a form that prides itself on a life-like portrayal of reality when exploring the life and experience of people...who have continued to sustain traditional solidarities and to espouse values, beliefs, and attitudes conditioned and nourished by the oral tradition (199).

The novelist engages in such “traditional solidarities” by drawing on the story-within-the-story or what Obiechina calls “narrative proverbs” to organically and creatively transform the “narrative matrices” of the plot (199). In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, the novelist delegates the burden of the story-within-the-story to Opanyin Poku. Like Benjamin’s storyteller, Opanyin Poku relates the story to Kayo and Garba from his experience, and this experience in the form of a story can be handed down from generation to generation (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004). Opanyin Poku is handed such an exclusive role because, as Dei et al. assert, in indigenous societies, the elderly in the society are considered the repositories and transmitters of cultural knowledge and values (128). In Sonokrom, the oldest person is Opanyin Poku, and in the Akan setting, old age is an embodiment of wisdom.

Parkes’ inclusion of the story-within-the-story is not just for aestheticism nor a ‘procedural issue’ (Scott 27); rather as Scott argues, “by attributing evidential value to the hunter’s narrative, by drawing on the conceptual resources of oral culture’ (27), the novelist significantly elevates indigenous epistemology as Kayo is led to “a higher plane of evidential meaning” beyond that of scientific knowledge. In doing so, Parkes deconstructs the traditional detective novel form, which

usually privileges empirical logic, scientific deduction, and linear problem-solving. He demonstrates that truth can also be accessed through oral traditions and communal memory, thus repositioning indigenous knowledge systems as equally valid modes of detection and interpretation. Further, consistent with Smith's (1999) assertion that folklore and oral traditions are some of the various cultural markers through which indigeneity is expressed, Parkes utilizes the narrative proverb technique to plumb the depths of the Akan culture in terms of its beliefs, values, and practices. And so, we find characters like 'Ananse' (spider), who occupies a central position in many Akan folktales, and is touted as mischievous, cunning, and sly, also playing a pivotal role in Poku's story. The ubiquity of Ananse in Akan culture is highlighted by Oduro as he tells Garba: "My friend, half of our stories in this land are about Kwaku Ananse" (80). Poku's tale is triggered by the desire of Kayo and his assistant Garba to come to grips with the mystery in Sonokrom. This is important because Kayo's empirical rationality has failed to deliver the truth he wants. Rather than provide empirical facts about Kofi Atta, who is thought to be the criminal, Poku plunges into Sonokrom's repertoire of folktales.

Opanyin Poku's tale is about Ananse and his violence against his daughter, Esi Mensisi. While sly and mischievous, Ananse is also physically violent. But it does not end there: it is revealed through the story-within-the-story that Ananse is eventually punished by the ancestors for his mistreatment of his daughter. He is reduced to a pile of ghastly, pungent matter, one that resembles "the colour of a woman's troubles" (Parkes 126). Through the narrative proverb, Parkes presents the indigenous ethical praxis and moral codes of the Akan, especially on how justice is ensured. Such stories, just like Mother's story-within-story in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, sensitize "young people to the values and social attitudes that prepare them to participate constructively in the life of the community" (Obiechina 211). It is to Kayo's credit that he realizes that Poku's supposedly fictional story actually encodes real events in Sonokrom and provides the key to the mystery at Sonokrom. The tale thus decentres forensic science as the only valid way of knowing.

Further, the sense of community that comes with storytelling sessions is emphasized in the novel. In the Ghanaian society, storytelling sessions mostly bring the community together, in the sense that they all sit at a common place to listen to stories from the elderly. In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, this is seen during the storytelling session between Opanyin Poku, Kayo, and Garba. The setting and atmosphere during this session are made known:

The men nodded. The flame in the centre of the hut, behind Kayo and Garba, was reflected in the hunter's eyes, and on the wall behind Oduro and the hunter, the shadows of the men merged like so many rivers. (83)

This description fits the typical Ghanaian storytelling session when members sit around the fire at night to listen to stories. This atmosphere fosters some sense of belongingness among the individuals.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine how *Tail of the Blue Bird* strategically performs indigeneity as a means of resisting Eurocentric cultural frameworks. The analysis focused on key elements such as language, naming practices, and storytelling, which serve as markers of Ghanaian identity in the

text. Parkes employs linguistic strategies, including what Dako (2003) describes as ‘Ghanaianisms,’ as well as proverbs and transliterations, to ground the novel in the Ghanaian cultural and linguistic landscape. Naming practices, whether of characters, places, or even chapter titles, further reinforce this identity by encoding spiritual and social meanings. Additionally, storytelling emerges as a vital means of preserving indigenous knowledge and fostering communal bonds. Through the analysis of these elements, the paper shows that *Tail of the Blue Bird* is a wake towards indigeneity, as it is conceived as a response to Eurocentric ideals and culture. The findings, thus, align with Mignolo’s (2009) argument that indigeneity functions as a challenge to Eurocentric worldviews that have historically shaped cultural discourse. *Tail of the Blue Bird* resists the dominance of Eurocentric ways of knowing and expressive forms by centering local modes of knowledge production and genres of thought. Therefore, *Tail of the Blue Bird* does more than explore postcolonial crime and justice; it is also a strategic performance of indigeneity.

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