

The wisdom of our fathers: Akan proverbs and their contemporary educational value

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Abstract

Akans, who comprise the single largest ethnic group in Ghana, have a very rich culture some of which is expressed and transmitted orally through proverbs or wise sayings. Proverbs, as part of orality, popular culture and identity, permeate all aspects of the Akan social life. Akans have used proverbs in songs, dirges and speeches to convey and communicate important thoughts verbally since time immemorial. Proverbs are metaphors or figures of speech that form part of the wise sayings used in the transmission of wisdom and knowledge to the younger generation. There is virtually no Akan elder who speaks or makes statements without using proverbs and wise sayings because the Akans regard proverbs as a vehicle for communication and dissemination of wisdom, knowledge and values of society. Some of the Akan proverbs and wise sayings are depicted through symbols or works of art, while others are in metaphors and wise sayings. Proverbs, as popular culture, portray Akan beliefs and stories about the Universe or the Supreme Being and His relationship with people which is why they are worthy of preserving. Historically non-literate people, the Akans have preserved and transmitted their culture through orality and work of art. This paper outlines, discusses and analyses some of the important Akan proverbs and wise sayings as well as examines their contemporary educational value.

1. Introduction

The Akan comprise the single largest ethnic group in Ghana. A prominent Ghanaian history Professor, Adu Boahen (1975:1), affirms that the Akans, made up of 11 sub-groups, constitute over 45% of the entire population of Ghana. This sub group, which constitutes the larger single Akan ethnic group, includes the Bono, the Fante, the Asante, the Akyem, the Akwamu, the Ahanta, the Guan, the Kwahu, the Akuapim, the Sefwi, and the Nzema. The Akan migrated into their present area from the ancient empire of Ghana. According to oral tradition, the cradle of the Akan people is located in the area of the confluence of Pra and Ofin Rivers to the north of Twisa hills. That is, the area, of modern Adansi and Ammanse (Adu Boahen 1975). Although the majority of the group is found in Ghana, there are some Akan groups in the Ivory Coast. The Akan language is spoken in Ghana and some parts of the Eastern Ivory Coast and Western Togo.

They have a very rich culture, some of which is expressed and transmitted orally through proverbs or wise sayings. Proverbs are metaphors or figure of speech which form part of wise sayings used in the transmission of wisdom and knowledge to the younger generation. Virtually, there is no Akan elder who speaks or makes

statements without doing so through the use of proverbs and wise sayings. Proverbs, as part of folklore, are an important element of the Akan culture and identity. The Akan use them as metaphors or figure of speech in their daily lives. Thus being part of Akan orality, popular culture and identity proverbs permeate all aspects of the people's social life. Since time immemorial, the Akan have been using proverbs in speech and songs to convey and communicate important messages and thoughts to both the young and adults. Among the Akan people, proverbs form the vehicle for communication and dissemination of wisdom, knowledge and moral values. The importance of the proverb as a valuable part of folklore in exhibiting African culture, heritage and identity cannot be over emphasised. Folklore is a rhetorical act of instituting a people. Its power lies in recalling the reasons we develop common sense, namely to learn how to identify with constitutions or 'our' folk and with it, constitutions of those who are not 'we folk' (Gencarella 2009:2). In present-day Africa, and for that matter Ghana, folklore is seen as an important vehicle by means of which individuals could travel backwards through time to gain vital spiritual benefit. As Dundes (1969:16) affirms, one of the ways of getting back to nature, ideal human nature that is, and away from the forward marching destructive civilisation, was by regaining contact with folklore and this is the essence of a popular culture – the proverb.

In Ghana, the proverb as an aspect of folklore has remained an important part of the Akan culture, heritage and identity despite the colonial encroachment or incursion on African culture. The proverbs and wise sayings portray Akan beliefs and stories about every aspect of life, such as birth, childhood, adulthood, death, the origins of humans, the earth, the universe or *Onyame* (God), the Supreme Being and His relationship with people. As indigenous people who are traditionally a non-literate group, the Akan have preserved and transmitted their culture through orality and works of art for centuries. As Africa renews itself in this [21st] century it is prudent for its peoples to look at their cultural and indigenous practices to enable the continent to develop, protect and project its heritage and identity to the outside world. As the Akan put it, *Tete wo bi* [Our heritage has a lot to teach us]. This paper discusses some selected Akan proverbs and their educational value for today.

2. Conceptual and Interpretive Framework of Folklore

This paper is grounded in folklore theory because practice is informed by theory. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990) defines the word *folk* as people in general. Folklore can therefore be described as the traditional beliefs and stories of people and about people. It is difficult to come out with a particular theory that suits all folklore stakeholders. The difficulty in producing a grand theory in folklore study stems from the fact that it is a discipline with many origin narratives deeply influenced by nationalistic imperatives. Gencarella (2009:3) affirms that to forge a path of robust convergence would promote folklore as critical praxis by addressing its socially and politically constitute nature. A rhetoric perspective provides a reminder that folklore is not something that the folk does; rather it is something

that in its doing constitutes a folk as both an immediate audience and political category. The various debates spawned by difficult approaches to provide a credible theory for folklore indicate that there is a divide between theory and practice (Roberts 2008).

It is argued here that folklore as a theory might be both evolutionary and devolutionary. Folklore is evolutionary because of its gradual response to the general changes taking place in society. The gradual changes may be regarded as a natural selection, which makes folklore suitable to its environment. On the other hand, folklore is devolutionary because the gradual changes in society provide it with the power to reinvent and assert its authority among groups of people – *the folk*. As something about people, folklore could be as old as humankind could. The origin of folklore is not clear and this has led to mere speculation. The theory of devolution attempts to provide the origin of folklore. The premise for the devolutionary theory is the notion that folklore ‘runs down’ by moving from ‘higher to lower’ strata of society. In supporting the devolutionary theory, of Bach (1960) points out that this theory holds that cultural items originating in the upper stratum of society filter down to the lower stratum. A logical consequence of this ‘aristocratic’ origin of folklore theory is that folklore consisted largely of reworked remnants, which had managed somehow to survive the presumed downward transmission of culture (Dundes 1969:6). In an apparent support for this theory, Thompson (1951) argues that folklore usually moved from ‘culturally higher’ to ‘culturally lower’ people. He supports his claim by pointing out that American Indians have borrowed European tales whereas Europeans have not borrowed from American Indians.

The use of the devolutionary theory to explain the origin of folklore raises some questions. In Thompson’s (1951) own words, ‘if the principle is really valid then we may ask whether tales must keep running down hill culturally until they are found only in the lower ranges’. Indeed if folklore really originated in the abovementioned manner, it could easily undergo textual deterioration with time because of exaggeration. The devolutionary theory is Eurocentric and does not seem to take into consideration the African context. That is, how folklore evolved in Africa. In the African context, folklore is considered as a pure, valuable, unadulterated original native culture where change can hardly affect its purity. Dundes (1969:11) affirms that if the forms of the past are valuable, then it logically follows that changes of any kind are potentially destructive in nature. The elementary forms of folklore such as African proverbs are most capable of resisting any possible corroding effect of digressive processes. The most possible erosion of folklore could relate to its mode of transmission. As an indigenous form of African orality, proverbs are not codified; they are mainly transmitted through word of mouth. This might, however, lead to distortion as the old generation passes away. It is for this reason that African scholars should begin to research folklore to entrench and preserve it as a valuable aspect of popular culture and identity.

As mankind advances there is the tendency to neglect or look down upon some aspects of tradition or culture. The item of folklore, therefore, has to become fit in order to survive (Dundes 1961: 11). It is for this reason that proverbs, as important part of African orality and folklore which fits true African identity and educational value, should not be left untapped or to die away. The African proverb is a traditional selection that tends to lay bare the truth about African cultural identity by eliminating the misinformation from Western writers, preserving and refining not necessarily the more credible but the more artistic (Hartland 1896). The idea that traditional selection operated in such a way as to ensure aesthetically superior products was, of course, in keeping with the concept of evolutionary process. Although Tylor (1958) argues that the history of survival in cases of folklore and occult arts has been, for the most part, a history of dwindling and decay, he also acknowledges that folklore is the transformed survival or mutilated fragments of culture. His view clearly affirms the fact that as mankind evolved so folklore devolved. It is easy for folklore theorists from the West to think that folklore is dying out. The idea that folklore is dying out is in itself a kind of folklore and the idea that as natives become more educated and civilised they will abandon their culture and, for that matter, folklore is untenable. Freud (1958) concedes that our so-called civilisation itself is to blame for a greater part of our misery, and we should be much happier if we were to give it up and go back to primitive conditions.

With the renewed interest in African studies and African renaissance, and more African scholars and ethnic groups protecting their cultural identities, folklore cannot die out in many African communities. African scholars continue to write about their cultural identities of which folklore and, for that matter, proverbs are highly focused - this provides hope for the future unlike in the early days of colonialism when there were none or very few African scholars and writers. Dundes (1969:13) adds that as long as the oral tradition of the peasantry continues to exist as a uniform system... digressive and deteriorative processes play a secondary role in the dialectics of oral transmission. By reading and understanding the value of culture as an important aspect of identity, modern African scholars would continue to pursue the writing agenda to ensure that proverbs, as part of the African cultural identity, remain an important discourse. There has always been folklore and, in all likelihood, there will always be folklore. As long as humans interact and, in the course of so doing, employ traditional forms of communication, folklorists will continue to have golden opportunities to study folklore (Dundes 1969). In the ensuing paragraphs, some selected proverbs from the Akan of Ghana have been analysed, emphasising their educational values for today.

3. Selected Akan Proverbs: Their Educational Value for Today

Akan proverbs relate to everyday life experiences and activities of the people. While some warn people about the consequences of bad behaviour, others provide suggestions for better life. A few important Akan proverbs are reproduced and analysed here, pointing out their educational value for today.

3.1. A proverb that encourages hard work and detests laziness

The Akan often say *Se anoma anntu a obua da* [If a bird does not fly it starves]. Birds always fly out of their nests in search of food and can only avoid starvation by leaving their nests. A bird acts as a metaphor in this proverb. The Akan are predominantly peasant farmers who wake up very early and walk long distances to their farms. As a metaphor, a *bird* represents people or individuals in the Akan communities. Like birds, constantly flying in and out of their nests in search of food, the Akan should be enterprising and hard working in order to survive in the ever-changing socio-economic environment. This proverb cautions lazy people who do not make effort in life because they would literally starve, that is, be in want and poor. The word 'starving' refers to the inability to access basic things in life because of laziness.

The proverb teaches the importance of self-reliance and encourages people to learn from the bird, which does not rely on handouts but endeavours to search for its own food. It stresses the importance of mobility and in the modern socio-economic environment, the proverb seems to emphasise the concept of a global village or globalisation where one does not necessarily have to look for work in one's own community, district or country. Those who have skills but cannot find work in their communities should market their skills elsewhere. This proverb does not only mean physical starvation by referring to food. The clear message to people, especially the youth who think that parents will always provide for them, is that they would not remain children forever neither would parents live forever. Poverty is the lot of the lazy person [young or old] who does not make any effort to learn relevant skills, which can secure him/her an employment or a livelihood.

3.2. A proverb that warns people about the deception of physical appearance

An important Akan proverb that warns people, especially the youth, not to focus too much on the physical appearance of a person is *Enye nea ehyeren nyinaa ne sika* [thatnot everything that glitters is gold]. Gold is a valuable glittering object among the Akan. As the former name of the country, Gold Coast, indicates gold used to be very common before and during the era of colonialism. Even today most chiefs and clan heads keep and adorn gold ornaments -- head gear, bracelets and necklaces -- during festivals. Gold has been used in this proverb figuratively to refer to human character. The proverb teaches that physical appearance of a person can sometimes be deceptive. A beautiful woman or a handsome man might not necessarily be a good person, honest, reliable and a suitable spouse or business partner. S/he might be a prostitute, a bully, a [Biblical] Jezebel, lazy, anti-social, a drug lord, a murderer, a womaniser or carry some contagious disease such as HIV/AIDS.

There are also many conmen and women in beautiful suits who pretend to be honest and good, going around or using technology to swindle innocent people of

their money and properties. They may come in various forms and put on facades as business people, entrepreneurs, pastors, healers, magicians and fortunetellers. In view of the appearances and what they pretend to be many people fall victims to their gimmicks.

The proverb advises people to look beyond the physical appearance of those who come their way with various proposals- work, business, friendship or marriage. To the youth in particular, this is a valuable lesson. Due to the influence of formal education and the so-called Western civilisation, most young men and women do not take time to study prospective spouses. They literally jump into relationships without considering any possible negative consequences because of attractions such as money, luxury and physical beauty. Until most recently, a typical Akan youth would solicit his/her parents' assistance to learn and know more about the background of anyone who proposes to him/her. That practice helped save many people from untold hardships and troubles. Modern men and women do no consultation or investigation. They usually get involved with all kinds of people, perhaps due to infatuation, and by the time they get to know the real character of their spouse it might be too late. This might account for too many broken marriages among the youth of today. The proverb warns people that in venturing into any partnership - friends, business or marriage - they should 'look before they leap'.

3.3. A proverb that stresses unity, support, love and co-operation [*ubuntu*]

One Akan proverb which emphasises unity, love, co-operation, in other words *ubuntu* is *Hu ma ni so ma me enti na atwe abien nam*, literally meaning the need for someone to 'blow the dust' out of my eyes motivates antelopes to move in pairs. Antelopes are forest animals sought for by Akan hunters and trap makers. These animals usually move in pairs, support each other and have strong bonds between them. The proverb uses a figure of speech or metaphor to transmit its message to people. The expression 'blow the dust from my eyes' [*hu mani so ma me*] goes beyond removing dust from a friend or a neighbour's eyes. It refers to the importance of support, co-operation, unity, commitment and love, which is very important in all human endeavours and relationships -- be they social, economic or political. The Tswana expression affirms, *kopano ke matla*, or the Akan put it, *nka bom ye* [unity is strength]. Based on this principle of unity, love or *ubuntu*, the Akan teach children to see each person as an important community ally without showing hatred for others who might be from a different cultural background. Ethnicity, xenophobia, discrimination on the grounds of origin, language, dress, accent or physical appearance of any individual is discouraged right from infancy because it does not foster unity. With this kind of training in social skills when children grow up, they might not attack others physically because they look different or come from another tribe or country. Akan communities, full of people from all parts of the world, live in peace with locals because of their emphasis on *ubuntu* in the upbringing of children. The proverb teaches people the importance of 'love thy neighbor as thyself' because one may never know from where help might come in

times of need. For example, in all Akan communities when thieves break into one's house neighbours may voluntarily arrest the culprits or report the matter to the police - this love and co-operation among community members can reduce crimes such as house breaking. The core message of the above proverb is unity in diversity and unity of purpose. It, however, warns that in choice of friends one should be careful and selective because of 'fair weather friends'.

3.4. A proverb that consoles the bereaved and reminds people of the end of life

Death is highly feared by every human being but it is the unavoidable and ultimate end of life, hence the Akan say *Owuo atwede obaako mmfro* [the ladder of death is not climbed by only one person] and *owuo begya hwan?* [who will death spare?]. This proverb uses a ladder as a metaphor to describe, educate and console mourners whenever death occurs in an Akan community. In real life, a ladder is used in climbing in order to reach high places. Its reference as a figure of speech is to warn people to be mindful of the ultimate end of human life on this earth. Death does not spare anyone! It is the lot of all humans -- the monarch, subject, rich, poor, strong, weak, powerful, vulnerable, old, young, men and women alike. No one can escape death and since it acts unannounced people should prepare for it and lead a better life in order to leave behind a good name. The proverb teaches that no matter who you are one day you will die and leave this mundane life. Everyone will die at some stage. The proverb seems to educate people that when you console the bereaved and assist in mourning for the dead, you are actually mourning your own death. No one sees his/her own funeral and so in the same way as you mourned others you are mourned for. To those who deceive themselves that death is too far away from them or do not attend funerals of community members this proverb is, indeed, food for thought!

3.5. A proverb that warns against discrimination

Traditionally the Akan have the moral obligation to teach their children the importance of treating every human being with dignity and fairness and without discrimination. This is based on the belief that any unfair treatment for anyone could lead to a curse on the doer. The Akan proverb *Se wosom brode a sum kwadu bi* literally means when you provide the plantain with supporting sticks do the same to the banana. Akan farmers take much care about plantain; their staple food and neglect banana even where the two stand side by side. Farmers go to the extent of making sure that the plantain does not fall down because of storms or winds. They see the banana as less important since it does not form part of their staple food. Many see it as just an additional crop that might be eaten only in times when there is no choice. The above proverb uses the two food crops (plantain and banana) as metaphors to educate people to be fair to all fellow human beings because one cannot predict the future. Children, family members, neighbours and community members, visitors and indeed any person must be respected and treated fairly, no

matter their origin or background, because like farmers no one can predict the future, *obi nnim dwanku a ade bekye so* meaning that o one knows the kind of foodstuff or individual who can save people from famine, disaster or from death.

3.6. A proverb that stresses the importance of communal life

Proverbs also stress the importance of communal and mutual assistance. A very good example is *se wo bribi ne okwakuo a w'ade nka dua so* meaning that if the monkey is your relative nothing of yours will ever be left on the tree top. The monkey lives in the bush and climbs even the tallest of trees. In this proverb, *monkey* and *tree* are used as metaphors to refer to the power, expertise, wisdom, knowledge, wealth, and difficulties or problems in life consecutively. In the Akan tradition, every child belongs to the entire community, which is why they say 'it takes a whole village to bring up a child'. The message here is that people (families, neighbours and community members) should come together to bring up, support, protect and work towards the welfare and betterment of all children because a well brought up individual (well educated, mannered, skilled or knowledgeable) could be an asset to an entire community. Whenever there is a problem such a person could be called upon to assist in finding a solution. Like a monkey, that expert or powerful individual could always be handy in solving community and even national problems hence the need for communal assistance to all people, especially children.

3.7. A proverb that warns about hypocrisy

The attitude and behaviour of people also features in some of the Akan proverbs. An example is *se anoma hye a ebuo mu a ne so nko* [i.e. when a bird is in a cage its cry is different from when it is out of the cage]. The *bird*, *cage* and *cry* are used metaphorically in this proverb to draw the attention of individuals to the hypocrisy of humans. The message here is that we must be aware of the ungratefulness of some people. When they are in trouble or need help from others they may pretend to be submissive, humble, vulnerable and co-operative but after the 'tempest', that is, when they are out of danger or no longer need assistance they behave differently and show their true colours. The proverb teaches that people are generally ungrateful and, as we offer assistance or show magnanimity, we should bear it in mind that not every person can reciprocate or acknowledge the good done to them. This is not to discourage people from assisting others but, rather, a warning to those who do good to minimise their expectations.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to demonstrate the importance of proverbs as part of popular culture and means of educating people through wise sayings and metaphors. The paper analysed few important Akan proverbs pointing out their respective educational value for modern people, especially the youth of today. There is much education in African popular culture and as the Akan say, *tete wo bi kyere*, meaning,

tradition - norms and practices - have a lot to teach the present generation. Thus relevant African proverbs, as part of popular culture, can be integrated into the school curriculum to teach the youth social skills and emotional intelligence to make them good community members. The paper concludes that in this era of renaissance Africans must emancipate themselves from mental slavery by learning more about what identifies them as true Africans and putting them into practice because people without identity belong to a lost generation.

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