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From The Horse's Own Mouth: Gender Perception in Some Akan and Ewe Proverbs

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Abstract

Issues about women have engaged the attention of many scholars over the years, especially in recent times. These issues span much of marginalisation of women in national affairs, male dominance over women, sexual harassment and recently in Ghana domestic violence against women and children among others. Most of these have been analysed from various dimensions. The sociologists, the psychologists and the humanists have all touched on an aspect or other of womanhood however trite it may seem. This paper is a contribution to the discussion on women. It invites the reader to look at the issue of women in two ethnic communities in Ghana – Akan and Ewe from the literary point of view, specifically from the proverbs that these communities have themselves formulated and been using about women. One cannot deny the fact that creative writers, both males and females have portrayed women from a point of view that has close relations with societal determinants. The sexuality of the Ghanaian woman in general and those in the two communities studied has been expressed in their proverbs. The analysis of the proverbs has some relations with the findings of some researchers concerning the old perceptions about the woman as a weakling who depends on the male for sustenance and her total wellbeing.

Introduction

Language as a communicative means expresses people's ideas and thoughts and can be realised in different forms and through the different institutions of a people. Through language, persons of a community communicate and share their innermost thoughts and feelings in a particular way. Oyewumi (1997) agrees that language is pre-eminently a social institution and as such it constitutes and is constituted by culture. Indeed according to Asante (2002:1), *only those who possess that culture can fully understand such expressions*. Corroborating Oyewumi and Asante, Agyekum (1996:15), in discussing the importance of taboos as a system that expresses the world view of the Akan, asserts that *there is a closely-knit interrelationship between language and culture*.

One of the cultural elements from which one can realise the essence of language in expressing the world sense of a community is through its oral tradition. According to the Malian philosopher, Amadou Hampate Ba (cited in Oyewumi, *op.cit.* 38), *“oral tradition is a great school of life, all aspects of which are covered and affected by it. It may sound chaotic to those who do not penetrate its secret...”* One of such oral traditions is the proverb which leads to the *secret* of its users. Various paremiologists have looked at proverbs from different perspectives. Some have looked at their aesthetic importance; for

example, Asante (ibid: 2) argues that *proverbs serve as salt, seasoning the speeches of the Twi speaking people*. To this aesthetic aspect of proverbs, Achebe (1958:5) has also observed that, *proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten*.

Others also emphasise the importance of proverbs from the functional point of view. For example, as far back as the 16th century the English philosopher and statesman, Francis Bacon quoted by Appiah 2000:1 in discussing the importance of proverbs in the life of a nation, held that, "the genius, wit and spirit of a nation are discovered by their proverbs". Proverbs thus express attributes that a society cherishes or condemns. Issues on valour, power, wealth etc, are all embedded in the proverbs of a people.

Boadi (1998:21) remarks that, "proverbs provide a storehouse of native wisdom and philosophy and a code of behaviour..." Dzobo (1973:12) also in his preface to a collection of Ewe proverbs asserts that "the Ewe language and culture at their depth are made up of proverbs whose proper understanding leads to the soul of the Ewe." To understand the concept of a common man among the Akan, one source of data that Danquah (nd) used, was by reading into Akan literature embodied in 3,679 Akan proverbs. His findings were that, "never in the proverbs did I come across a single maxim that referred to a common man". Proverbs are therefore not just added extra; they are at the core of a people's knowledge and understanding of life. One will agree that, the experience of nations is caught and summarised in their proverbs and sayings. Indeed, we use proverb in all spheres of life to drive home a point, to recap a position, or to support a viewpoint.

It is important to note that proverbs can reach their audience through verbal and non-verbal means. Each of these channels, be it linguistic, artifact, clothing and so forth is significant to the proverb users in their construct about life in general. Thus, proverbs are taken as *truths* which a people may use to regulate their attitudes and behaviour as far as their relationship with one another is concerned. This paper seeks to study what proverbs express about gender roles in the Akan and Ewe communities of Ghana.

The Study Area

The study covers the Akan and Ewe of Ghana. Ethnographically, Akan refers to the group of people who live in most of the coastal and forest areas of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. According to Abakah (2003) these people share similar cultural traits which serve to differentiate them from other ethnic groups. However, Stewart (1971) classifies the languages spoken by all the Akan people dichotomously as Bia and Akan. About 44 percent of the Ghanaian population speaks Akan as their mother tongue, in the Brong Ahafo and Ashanti Regions as well as in parts at Western, Central and Eastern Regions. Orthographically, Akan has three main dialects – Akuapem, Asante and Fante which are mutually intelligible (Abakah ibid: 6-7; Dolphyne 1988: xi-xii). The Ewe of Ghana refers to the Anlo and Tongu in the South-eastern part

of Ghana, as well as the northwestern Eweland (Agbodeka 1997: i). The main traditional economic activities include farming, fishing and animal husbandry. The Ewe people refer to the Ewe language as Ewegbe, which is classifiable trichotomously as Anlo, Tongu and Eweme.

Discourse on Gender

Many scholars including Oyewumi (1977), Dolphyne (1991), Opoku-Agyemang (1999) and Odotei (1999) have contributed to the discourse on gender. From the economic and sociological dimensions, Odotei (1999) looked at gender and traditional authority in the fishing industry of selected areas in Ghana. Forms of authority and power as exhibited in the whole enterprise of marine fishing were her concern. Her research shows that even though males form councils that may seem to be the highest authority in the fishing business/enterprise, women wield a lot of power in the economic field. On the whole, there are active complementary gender specific roles even though the roles played by women are rather on the quiet. She also noted that seniority in the enterprise is based on lineage in the kin group and not necessarily on anatomical differences.

Opoku-Agyemang (1999) noted that the folktale in a given culture is a "body of growing narratives that reflect the dynamism and testament of society". In her work, the institution and roles like marriage, parenthood, work, self-worth and authority are looked at through the lens of the folktale. She notes that the nature of the genre as responding to versions to suit a particular context provides the opportunity for new elements to respond to new demands in the society. For example, she cites the famous Ananse tale in which the stories of the sky-God became Ananse stories as they are written by a woman, (J. Osafoa Dankyi) and a man (S.Y. Manu) to make interesting revelations about the influence of gender and ideology on the final product. In this story, the sky-God will give his stories to anyone who can produce dwarfs, a cobra and honets. In Jane Osafoa Dankyi's version, Ananse who is a contestant, goes home, consults his wife and the two of them plan how best to procure those difficult and dangerous creatures of items. Ananse keeps informing his wife of his progress and she drops pieces of advice. Dankyi may be trying to project the idea of *two heads are better than one*. Man and woman must complement each other. In S. Y Manu's revision of the tale, no woman is mentioned in the tale until, Ananse is able to all on his own accomplish the feat and come home to boast to his family about his prowess. Is it an issue of misogyny? Opoku-Agyemang concludes that the folktale must be seen to be *nonsexual*. Gender role is not about the dominance of one category over the other; rather, it is complementary.

But to Oyewumi (1977), the Western world has been so genderised that there is a kind of essentialisation of social identity. In Oyewumi's book, *Invention of Women* (1977), she rejects the use of western theories to analyse African subjects or themes. Thus, "the promotion in African Studies of concepts and theories derived from the western mode of thought at best makes it difficult

to understand African realities... it hampers our ability to build knowledge about African societies.” One of such is the emphasis on the body as a basis for categorisation. For example, essentialisation has led to genderisation of professions leading to phrases like woman pilot, female teacher, woman president, as if the roles were different.

Oyewumi (ibid) also argues that most of the western theories use the body as the bedrock or basis on which social order is built. For example, the nose size, colour, the shape of the head, its size invites a gaze of differentiation. Race is built on what she refers to as *body-logic*. She therefore advocates a cultural logic and asks on what basis are western conceptual categories exportable or transferable to other cultures that have a different cultural logic? Differing cultures construct their social categories differently (p. 11). The use of European paradigms to assess the world sense of Africans to her is a disservice to Africa. Models therefore must be culture-specific. Since apprehension of reality involves more than perception, therefore, difference and hierarchy in society must not be biologically determined. The world must be conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together. To affirm her belief in *cultural logic instead of bio-logic*, Oyewumi (ibid) discussed relevant Yoruba institutions with the view of showing how these institutions explicate the primary principles of social organisation based on seniority defined by relative age. Thus, to her as it is in other African societies, gender is socially constructed in Yoruba; differences *between* anatomical male and female are to be located in social practices and not in biological facts. Physical bodies are therefore not social bodies. One remark worth considering from her work is that a thorough analysis of the language of a people for example, is thus essential to the construction of knowledge about the people and also the people's construct about life. The linguistic divergences and their implications for knowledge production are important. Since gender as an analytic category is now at the heart of contemporary discourse, language analysis can contribute to this discourse.

Oyewumi's view on language is vital to this study since it underscores the essence of proverbs in the life of a people. The proverb is an important communicative means that expounds the *world-sense* of the Akan and Ewe. It leads to the philosophy of these people. The proverb is language that permeates their thoughts and determines their relationship with others.


Capturing Women in Proverbs

Borkor (2004), among other things, discusses certain peculiarities of African proverbs and notes that African proverbs have a socio-cultural pattern of patriarchy and Male Chauvinism and that “the attributes verging on power and accomplishments are reserved for men.” Another important element that he finds interesting is that African proverbs are *gendered* – giving little respect to women. Women are assigned negative traits in the following proverbs:

- A woman without a man is like a field without seed (and he asked inter alia why not a man?).
- A bad son gives a bad name to his mother (Ivory Coast)
- Mothers-in-law are hard of hearing (Democratic Republic of Congo).
- When a woman is hungry she says: roast something for the children that they may eat (Akan)
- If you marry a woman at a pub, you will divorce her at a pub. (Ewe)
- In trying to understand why men are not portrayed as such and also the source of these gender specific proverbs, Borkor (ibid) postulates that one could trace the origin of these female proverbs to male originators. He is also of the view that the male originators sought to belittle their female counterparts and this should not be surprising because in the traditional African society, the male has always been on top of thing. This mindset is exposed by the gendering that is evident in these proverbs. Though the focus of this paper is on women, it is interesting to note that there are also proverbs in the two speech communities that depict men in bad light as well. For example, there is in Akan, *Obarima nyɛ sumii na yede yen ti ato no so* - the man can never be a pillow for us to rest our heads on; in Ewe, *utsu fe tame menye azi woakle akpe eme o* – a man is not a nut that you can crack to see its contents. These two are all pointing to the fact that, one cannot predict how trustworthy or reliable a man can be.

Interestingly, Ibrahim Habeeb discusses how women have become the center of proverbs that mostly portray them as evil. He acknowledges that there are a few proverbs though, that portray them as angels. To him 'proverbial injustice prevails in most languages, [this confirms] that the proverbs and sayings were coined by men and male dominated societies and

experiences." Some proverbs that tell the bias against women, he gives as follows:

- The devil is dead when there is a woman.
 - An ass would climb a ladder if you find wisdom in women.
 - English
 - Women are the root of all evil.
 - A widow is an easily ridden-low wall - German
 - A woman is like a scorpion. She is not smiling when she shows her teeth.
 - Arabic
 - Women are deficient in mind and faith.
- 

He discovers from his data that there is a disproportionate share of bad sayings on women because 'civilisation has really been a man's civilisation, for

the major part... men coined most of these proverbs." He concludes with the question: "Can we make a conscious effort to correct the imbalance?"

Some form of assessment must be made about Borkor (ibid) and Habeeb's findings. Both have made very interesting analyses of proverbs as they affect the status of women. However, we are not sure whether these analyses have been pitched in context. This is because proverbs are better understood in context. Yankah (1989:153) puts it right that, *Ebe dee ennyina faako, etu-* "a proverb flies, it does not stay at one place." Another area of concern is the fact that the highlight has been on the negative proverbs about female and not the positive ones that they profess are also available. In fact neither Borkor nor Habeeb mentioned a single positive female proverb that could be the starting point of correcting the imbalance that Habeeb is worried about. It is possible that in the same cultures or languages there may be some proverbs that are both complementary and positive.

Finally, their conclusion that these proverbs about female have been formulated by males sounds plausible because an Akan proverb says, *obiara nso dae nkɔ nea yerekum no* which literally means *Nobody dreams to where they are killing him/her*.

In a work by Thiselton-Dyer (1906), *Folk-Lore of Women*, chapter one *Woman's Characteristics*, discusses the complexity of woman that makes her kind ... a miracle of Divine contradictions (Michelet quoted by Thiselton-Dyer) as expressed in the lore of a people especially proverbs and sayings. He finds out that these proverbs and sayings are both positive and negative. Some of the positive attributes of women discussed are that:

1. Universally it is acknowledged that the woman is indispensable to man's happiness and well-being as illustrated in the German saying *man without a woman is head without body...*
2. The woman is the most intelligent as demonstrated in the following proverbs.
 - a) A woman's intelligence is four times that of man, her assiduity six times... (Burmese)
 - b) Women are instructed by nature, the learning of men is taught by books or
 - c) Nature is woman's teacher, and she learns more sense than man, the pedant, gleans from books.
3. Woman is also said to be, *equal to emergency* as expressed in German saying as follows. *Though an elephant and a tiger come, [a woman] will leap over them.*

Some of the negative characteristics of women are captured under the following topics and expresses in corresponding proverbs or sayings.

1. Woman is tricky
Proverb: *They will kill their husbands and burn themselves (oriental)*
2. Woman is brainless (as expressed in these Russian and sayings)
 - *A woman's hair is long, but her sense is short*
 - *A dog is wiser than a woman, he does not bark at his master.*
3. Woman is also considered to be frail, proud, unfaithful and that correction is good for her.

Proverb: *Melons require the sun, and mangoes want the sun; women need a strong hand...*

A close look at these proverbs and sayings shows the dominance of the negative characteristics over the positive of women. These may go to support the suggestion made by Habeeb and Borkor that the proverbs have been formulated by men. Another important comment that is worth making is that, a chunk of the proverbs or sayings are of European origin and have only been given hypothetical explanations.

It is significant to note that Thiselton-Dyer has at least mentioned something positive about women as well. If there are negative ones, why not, that makes women real human beings. Are we sure men do not have these same characteristics?

Another work that is close to the above is the one by John Mbiti. In his work on *Women in African Traditional Religion* (1988), Mbiti explores the perceptions of women that are expressed in the following three areas of African lore – mythology, proverbs and prayers. Mbiti (1988) notes that, proverbs say so much about African women – positive and negative.

Like Thiselton-Dyer, Mbiti notes that women are extremely valuable in the sight of society; thus, a woman's worth is expressed in the example below. *It is better to be married to an old lady, than to remain unmarried* (East Africa). This notwithstanding woman is also regarded with a lot of prejudices. For example, woman cannot be trusted with secrets, she can ruin a man, and she is generally dangerous. So to *marry a woman is to put a snake in one's handbag* or *following a woman is like footprints in water*, it will soon vanish. Mbiti like Thiselton-Dyer has shown the dynamic nature of woman by pointing out both the negative and positive aspects of her.

Yisa (1997) has looked at proverbs that compare women to animals, food, plants, property and trouble. His work has revealed that proverbs de-personify or dehumanize women emphasizing *the intensity of their cumulative misogyny*. He argues therefore that proverbs should not be regarded as *wisdom* and *truth* since misogyny may not be wisdom and sexism, truth. A few of the proverbs he has used to show the dehumanisation of women are:

1. A woman is like a guitar; in order to warm up you have to strum/stroke her.

2. Women in state affairs are like monkeys in glass houses.
3. A woman, a dog, a walnut tree, the more you beat them the better they be.
4. The person who marries a beauty marries trouble, because she claims to be related to everybody.

Yisa also concludes like the others that, that which constitutes the female has suffered quite possibly the worst universal ideological abuse ever to be perpetrated on an abstract category.

From the exploration of extant literary works it is evident that proverbs about women have received a great deal of discussion. Additionally, all the analyses have emphasised the point that women have been mistreated. In the following section we briefly study the concept of the woman through the lenses of the Akan and Ewe communities in Ghana.

Women among the Akan and Ewe

Both the Akan and the Ewe believe that the woman is the essence of life. Thus, the Akan refer to the earth as *Asaase Yaa* – earth, a female Thursday-born, while the Ewe call it *mianɔ* – our mother, and even the Akan matriliney confirms this pride of place of the woman. In this context the implication is that, from the broad Ghanaian view, life emanates from and is supported by the earth. For our sustenance we need mother earth.

Among the Ewe of Ghana a woman is referred to as *Nyɔnu* which is a compound word derived from two root morphemes *nyo* and *nu* that is *the one that makes things good*. That is to say, woman is at the centre of goodness. This is encapsulated in the Ewe proverb: *Nyɔnu yenɔa megbe wonyona*, meaning, it is when a woman supports that there is success. Besides the above, the woman among the Ewe is also considered the creator or source of life. It is a woman that creates human beings among the Ewe and *not a man*. *Ɔman wɔ ɔbea yam* (*Nation is in the woman's stomach*) is an Akan adage which confirms this fact.

Proverb Interpretation

The study of African proverbs dates back to 19th century (Yankah 1989). Most of these scholars however have been interested in the collection and documentation of proverbs rather than their detail analysis. The best most could do was to translate these proverbs from the specific African languages into a European language. Scholars like Asare (1995), Dzobo (1997) and Appiah et al (2000) have gone a step forward to interpret or analyse these compilations using hypothetical situations. All of the scholars have acknowledged the fact that there is difficulty in explaining a proverb due to the number of different contexts within which a single proverb may be used. Appiah (ibid: 5) summarises the issue as follows: “it is impossible to explain all the uses [of a proverb], even if one is aware of them; it is the occasions that brings a proverb to mind ...”. Junod and Jacques (1936) also had this to say

about the meaning of proverbs ...*a proverb may have an apparent meaning which is quite obvious, ... it may at the same time have in actual use, a completely different intention* (cited in Yankah op cit: 36). All these underscore the need for context analysis of proverbs.

Thus, according to Yankah (1989:30-31) proverbs must have a linguistic or discourse context which implies that the actual words before and after the proverbs usage are important in the interpretive process of a particular proverb. This process may seem to give a kind of *free-for-all feature* to the proverb. Yankah again cautions that to minimise the possible abuse of context in proverb interpretation, one must consider the attitudes and utterances which must coincide with the intended meaning of the proverb and also a comment on the lore of the people is necessary.

Another analytical or interpretive process of a proverb that has been used by Penfield (1983) in her study of proverb among the Igbo involves:

1. Interpretation of observed overt behaviour in which proverbs were used.
2. Recall of past interactional settings in which proverbs were utilised.
3. Interpretations of recalled past or hypothetical interactional settings in which proverbs were used.
4. Provision of information regarding various aspects of the way of life of the people
5. Participant observation

One must acknowledge the limitations of the above model which includes forgetfulness that affects the reconstruction of the past vividly.

However, from the discussion so far, it is obvious that the ideal model for interpreting a proverb is from its context. This paper uses both the hypothetical and recall of past interactional settings as well as some real life situations for the analysis of some collected female proverbs from both the Akan and Ewe speech communities. However, the detailed analysis focuses on proverbs used in context. A summary of the situation will be given without mentioning the real participants.

Ewe

1. Nyɔnu mekpɔa tɔ wosine o.
(Don't go and fish in a river when a woman tells you to do so).
2. Nyɔnu kpɔ ga medoa agblɔvu o.
(A wealthy woman cannot institute a war-drum).
3. Nyɔnu medɔɔ ɔutsu dudu o.
(A woman does not urinate man's urinating).
4. Nyɔnu fle tu ɔutsu ye dane.
(A woman buys a *gun*, a man fires it).
5. Nyɔnu gblede mebī a o.

- (Palm fruits on the farm of a woman do not ripe)
6. Nyɔnu medoa adudɔ vuvua dɔ o.
(A woman does not urinate and shake her genital organ).
 7. Nyɔnu mɛfiɛ fi o, hotɛli wowɔna.
(A woman does not steal, she prostitutes).
 8. Nyɔnu metsɔɔ tu de abɔ o, etɛɛ nye akpledatsi.
(A woman does not carry a gun on her shoulders, hers is the *laddle-that cooks-akple*).
 9. Nyɔnu goka wɔnye.
(A woman is a gourd plant).
 10. Nyɔnu manyomanyo, nyo wu ɖutsu manyomanyo.
(A useless woman is better than a useless man).
 11. Nyɔnu dzetugbe medea atsu deka o.
(A beautiful woman does not marry one husband).
 12. Nyɔnu dze wosiaa, mesia du o.
(A woman dries salt, not gun-powder).
 13. Nyɔnu medua fia le ɖutsuwo de o.
(A woman does not rule where there are men).
 14. Nyɔnu abolo kpaku wɔnye, de wo fone hafi wovuna.
(A woman is like *abolokpaku* container you need to beat it for it to open).
 15. Nyɔnu koklo wɔnye, ne du vodudɔ nu.
(A woman is a fowl, she wipes her mouth after eating).
 16. Nyɔnu mevɔna na nyagadzi o.
(A woman does not fear the red loin cloth).
 17. Nyɔnu sudui bɔbɔe wɔnye na `utsu.
(A woman is a soft pillow to a man).
 18. Nyɔnu xle akpe, mebua alafa o.
(A woman who counts thousands, respects not the hundred).
 19. Nyɔnu yenɔa megbe wɔnyona.
(It is when a woman is at the back, that things work out well).

Akan

20. Akokɔ nansoa nkum ne ba.
(The claws of the hen do not kill its chicks).
21. Abofra dwonsɔ gu ne na so a, ontwa ntwene.
(If a baby urinates on the laps of the mother she does not amputate either of the legs and casts it away).
22. ɔbea te sɛ borɔde, n'ase mpa mma.
(A woman is like a plantain plant, which sprouts all the time).
23. ɔbea ye oguan a, ɔbarima na yetɔn no.
(Even if a woman becomes useless it is a man who is sold).
24. ɔbea te sɛ ohurii, ɔnom mogya, na ɔmma mogya.

(The woman is like the tsetsefly, she drinks blood but she doesn't give blood).

25. $\text{\textcircled{O}bea nya ne ho a, \text{\textcircled{O}dan \text{\textcircled{O}barima.}$
(When the woman becomes wealthy, she still depends on the man).
26. $\text{\textcircled{O}bea nyansafo na \text{\textcircled{O}se "mehw\text{\textcircled{e}} de\text{\textcircled{e}} abusua b\text{\textcircled{e}}ka".}$
(It is the wise woman who says "I look forward to what my matriclan will say).
27. $\text{\textcircled{O}bea animuonyam ne aware.}$
(A woman's glory is in marriage)
28. $\text{Mmea nyae su a, na y\text{\textcircled{e}}n ne akunafo.}$
(Widows are excluded when women are to abstain from weeping).
29. $\text{\textcircled{O}bea ne barima hyia a, \text{\textcircled{O}bea de \text{\textcircled{O}bea na \text{\textcircled{O}barima nso de \text{\textcircled{O}barima.}$
(When a woman and a man meet, the woman is called a woman and the man a man).
30. $\text{\textcircled{O}barima hwe \text{\textcircled{O}barima, na \text{\textcircled{O}bea hwe \text{\textcircled{O}bea.}$
(A man trains a man, and a woman trains a woman).
31. $\text{\textcircled{O}barima b\text{\textcircled{e}}ko a, \text{\textcircled{e}}w\text{\textcircled{a}} ne tirim; \text{\textcircled{O}bea b\text{\textcircled{e}}ko a \text{\textcircled{e}}w\text{\textcircled{a}} n'ano.}$
(If a man is going to fight, it is in his head; if a woman is going to fight it is on her lips.)

While proverbs numbered 20 to 23 in Twi and 9, 12 & 19 in Ewe talk positively about women, 24-27 in Twi and 13, 15 & 18 in Ewe talk negatively about women.

Again, most of the proverbs seem to show anatomical differences, for example proverbs numbered 29 & 30 in Twi and 3 & 6 in Ewe: complementarity of roles for example number 1 in Ewe and 30 in Twi but they can be used in contexts that exhibit power relation and categorisation, as the following analysis will indicate.

Some of the Ewe proverbs in context (Translations)

Situation A:

Dispute settlement between settler farmers and their landowners:
During the proceedings the following ensued:

Male Settler: You are becoming too discriminatory. We are tired. We are also kings where we come from

Female Host: But you are not kings here; you are only settlers and we have every right over you. You better stop the "pomposity".

Male Settler: Look here! What right do you have to talk to me this way? Is it your beauty, wealth or what? You have no authority over me; you are only a woman.

Female Host: I laugh at you. I'm a woman but I can look after you, your children and your whole family. If you insult me, I will insult you.

Male Settler: Be careful! You are only a woman. *Nyɔnu kpɔ ga medoa agblɔvu o* – Even if a woman has money, she cannot institute a war drum (agblɔvu)...

A little after the encounter, the researcher asked the male settler whether he was angry because of the insults or because they came from a woman. He said to me: *Mebe nyɔnu ko wɔnye... mekpɔ mɔ o*, meaning, I say she is only a woman... she has no right.

In this context, this proverb clearly shows some sort of categorisation that is based on *body-logic* or *bio-logic*. The woman is beautiful, has money and, therefore, may wield some power but that does not permit her to be rude to an anatomical male. *Agblɔvu* among the Ewe symbolises power and valour. Its institution demands rituals that used to include human blood. The *Agblɔvu*, therefore, was instituted by males who *physically* went to war and brought back Prisoners of War or human heads. For this feat their names are extolled on the drum. In addition to its institution, traditionally, a woman would not ordinarily be allowed to handle the war drum *agblɔvu*. In short, it is a man that brings honour that is derived from his physical strength, to both his family and the community as a whole and thus, should not be spoken to with disrespect. It does not matter the strength or valour of the man in the episode. His biological status is enough to merit respect from a woman.

The *agblɔvu* metaphorically suggests the power that the male has acquired through the use of his physical or spiritual strength.

Is it possible that the woman can use her financial resource to purchase the drum, especially in this era when we are fighting other wars?

Situation B:

Marriage arbitration: The following was the advice that an uncle gave the niece. “You see, a woman is a woman. You cannot marry yourself. You complain you do this and that and your husband does virtually nothing. You see, you cannot marry yourself; that is why our elders say *Nyɔnu fle tu tse, ɖutsue dane* (that is, if a woman buys a gun, it is a man that fires it). No matter what you do, it is a man that must marry you”.

Again this smacks of some kind of absolute power to a male. The woman may have all it takes to make her recognizable in the society but her worth and dignity is derived from a man. *Gun* among the Ewe connotes power and maturity. The woman in this proverb must ride on the back of the man for recognition. She can have the wherewithal to buy the gun and that is where her power ends; its real functions whether for protection or economic purposes depend on how the man uses it. A woman is thus powerless so it may seem,

unless a man supports her. Essentially it is a man that buys a *gun* but if (contrary to expectation) a woman should acquire one, it must be the man who will use it.

As has been suggested earlier on, these proverbs, by the nature of the genre can assume some other interpretations. For example, is it possible to see them as complementary? At least the woman has the economic power that is very important as far as the purchasing is concerned; the man, having the know-how uses the gun to good purpose.

Situation C:

A quarrel between two women: Insults which bordered on infidelity and bastardization were traded.

Female A – If you are a woman go on and I will tell you where you come from.

Female B – Go on, tell me and I shall also tell you and everybody where those children of yours come from: hotelitɔ” (a whore).

Female Passerby – Look here! Stop the disgrace. *Miava gba afe* – You'll break up the home. *Nyɔnu mesia du o lo, edze wosiaa*, a woman does not dry the gunpowder, she dries salt.

Explanation

Indeed the insults from the two women could inflame serious trouble and create cracks in the fabric of the society because issues of fidelity and geneology are delicate among the Ewe and other communities in Ghana. Metaphorically, a woman whom we have referred to as the essence of life should not be interested in creating trouble. Salt seasons, it preserves; it is medicinal, it brings taste to blandness. In contrast, gun powder connotes destruction. Here it is being suggested that it is men who are interested in the wanton destruction of life not women. For a mother does not hit the stomach of her child – *Vɛnɔ mefoa vi fe dɔme o*. Gun powder and salt are quite similar in texture but they function differently. The piece of advice discernible from this proverb is that like the salt, the woman, upon whom a society is built, must preserve life, home and family.

Situation D: At a funeral

It was a chat among a group of people concerning the rash behaviour of some women which has led to some kind of trouble in the family. To support the idea that women are impatient one of the members used this proverb. *Nyɔnu gblede meɓta o* that is the palm fruit on a woman's farm does not ripe.

The cultivation of palm trees takes time. It needs a lot of care and patience. A woman, in this situation it is believed, does not or cannot wait for that long period. She will be in a hurry to harvest the fruits. There are reasons for

this; one of these is that she needs the palm fruits for the home. In her desire to serve the family she may be rash. In short a woman can be erratic. Closely related to the above is the proverb *Nyɔnu mekpɔ tɔ wosiee o* – if woman tells you there is fish in some part of river, do not take her seriously. She might have seen a mirage or a log. She is not critical and may cry wolf where there may be none. The following proverbs were hypothetically tested.

1. *Nyɔnu metsɔɔ tu de abɔ o, etɔe nye akpledatsi.* A woman does not carry a gun, hers is the ladle. To arrive at the possible interpretations of the above proverb various members of the Ewe community including my students offered their views. What seems to cut across is the idea of complementarity. The woman must use the ladle to prepare food to feed and sustain life, the man with the gun can also use it to protect life. On the other hand, the *akpledatsi* is as dangerous as the gun to life another proverb hypothetically tested is:
2. *Nyɔnu abolokpakue, de wofonɛ hafi wovuna.* A woman is a gourd receptacle that carries *abolo*, you need to hit it for it to open.

One can interpret this in the way Thilselton-Dyer looks at the proverb – *A woman is like a guitar, in order to warm up you have to strum/stroke her.* This sounds negatively harsh. However, another interpretation that was offered which looks more positive is the one that derives purely from the metaphoric thrust. The receptacle that is made from the gourd is delicate, it keeps the *abolo* warm. The owner of the gourd-receptacle needs it for survival and so cannot hit it hard otherwise it will be shattered. One needs to take absolute care of it; handle it gingerly. Generally the lid of the receptacle may prove difficult to open as it fits snugly; but, it does not call for its break. Life in general needs the woman so she must be protected. She may prove a little *stubborn* to deal with but that only calls for gentle handling almost caressing so as to derive the best out of her.

Some of the Akan proverbs in context (Translations)

Situation E: Researcher eavesdrops and joins two women who were returning from a funeral and were expressing their views on what they saw.

Two women AB and CA left a funeral premises where they had gone to express their condolences to the bereaved family and were chatting on their way back home. AB was trying to draw the attention of her colleague CA to an observation she made at the funeral grounds. According to her she saw that, with the exception of the widow who she did not see weeping and showing any sense of sadness or loss, the faces of most of the deceased's relatives looked sad and some even had swollen eyes indicating that they must have been weeping all along.

The addressee CA was not surprised at all about what the speaker AB was saying. Rather, she started to tell AB about a 'Will' she heard the deceased had left, bequeathing greater part of his property to the wife. She continued that the said Will requests that the wife should not shed any tear for him after his death, because all the services she needed to render for him, she did when he was alive and was with her. CA expressed her surprise at such a Will and the fact that the widow would want to go by the letter of the said Will, and so will not show any sense of loss to a loving husband.

The researcher who was then following the interactions and was eavesdropping begged her intrusion and called their attention to the Akan concept of the Will testament especially when it is one made by a deceased. Quickly AB stopped the researcher from continuing any further explanation and said, '*Madam, mate nea woreka no, nanso mpanin se: mmea nnyae su a na yenne akunafɔ*' (*Madam I have heard what you are saying but according to the wisdom of our forefathers, widows are excluded when women are to abstain from weeping or when women are to stop weeping we do not mean widows are included*). To her, the behaviour the widow put up was shocking and unacceptable and CA was trying to refer the researcher and AB to prerogative traditional role of the Akan woman. Here, when it comes to funeral and dirging the culture frowns on men who behave like women by expressing their sorrow via weeping publicly hence, the Akan say *ɔbarima nsu'* - (*Man does not cry*). Rather, a funeral ground is one of the few public domains that is solely for women to perform to show the depth of their affection for deceased relatives. A woman who does not weep or wail openly to show her feelings about the death of a relative is considered a bad woman.

Situation F:

Conversation between two elderly friends, TA and AK. TA complains about his wife's queer behavior.

TA visited AK one evening to tell him what his (TA) wife had done to him the previous day. According to TA he did not provide his wife with housekeeping-money because he did not have any money on him that day. But luckily, one of his farm labourers had brought them a piece of venison from the village. So he knew that at least the wife was going to prepare a delicious soup with the venison. However, when he started eating the food, he realized that his wife had used only pepper, water and the venison to prepare the soup. When he called the wife and asked why that type of soup, she told him that what he provided her with was what she used to prepare the soup.

AK who was so surprised about what the friend's wife did, could only remark that, '*m'akora ka kyereɛ me da bi se: ɔbea te sɛ ohurie ɔnom mogya na ɔmma mogya*' (*my father told me one day, that a woman is like a tsetsefly she sucks blood but she does not give blood*). Here, the woman is being likened to a parasite – the tsetsefly which is one of the most deadly flies. It is known that the tsetsefly is a carrier of the sleeping sickness disease, it will suck the blood of an

infected person and transmit it to any other being its sucks afterwards. The woman here, it is held, is always feeding on men till they get them exhausted. Thus women are always on the receiving end and hardly the other way round.

Situation G

An observational remark by MP about four small girls between two-and half and three-and half years and a boy also of about two years. Researcher overheard MP behind her house where the children were playing.

MP was passing behind the researcher's house and saw four little girls and a boy playing in the house. He slowed down to watch them. Then he saw that the youngest girl among them who plays the "house help role" was trying to carry the boy at her back. Unfortunately, she could not execute the skills well so the boy fell down and started crying. All the other girls stopped whatever they were doing and came around to reprimand the 'house help' whilst the 'mother' took the boy and coaxed him to stop crying. She sat him on her lap and started feeding him on the chin with some of the 'sand food' they had prepared. The other two girls who played "siblings" started singing lullaby to their 'brother'. Very soon the boy dozed off and they put him to bed. The old man who was so impressed about the children's drama, remarked '*Mpanyin kae a wɔmma sɛ ɔbea mma.*' (*Our forefathers were right to say that, really the female is not a loss*).

MP appreciates the fact that maternal role of the female begins right from the infancy. The attention and nurturing skills put her in the centre of human caring, child upbringing and home building. The presence of the female is an assurance of hope and survival.

Situation H

A chat between two elderly women MA and NA who were returning home after visiting a young lady returnee.

The researcher accompanied her aunt, MA to welcome a young lady of three children who after staying away from the village for so many years made a maiden home-coming visit. When we got to the lady's house my aunt introduced herself to her. The lady was so happy to see my aunt because according to her, her father who brought her up used to mention my aunt's name to her. She called her three kids to come and greet their 'grandma'. After spending some time, we left the house and on our way home we met an elderly woman friend of my aunt NA who wanted to know where we were returning from. Then my aunt told her where we went and how happy she was to see the lady we visited and the fact that now that she had started having children there was the hope that her family once again was going to sprout.

Then suddenly NA cut my aunt short and said '*na mpanyin ka sɛ; ɔbea te sɛ borɔde, n'ase mpa mma' no na wote ase sɛn?*' – but how do you understand the elders when they say, 'the the woman is like the plantain plant which sprouts all the time. Here, NA uses the imagery of the plantain plant and its ready

sprouting ability to draw attention to what a woman is like. The idea of sprouting shows the capabilities of a woman even in worst situations; she can never be pushed down. She will also sprout just like it is difficult to totally destroy the plantain plant. The impression is that once there is a woman, the likelihood of producing children to build a home is highly probable. Also the presence of the women signifies the perpetuation of a family.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed some proverbs of the Akan and Ewe people of Ghana in an attempt to arrive at what these proverbs communicate about the status of females. From the analysis, it is evident that women in most cases are categorized on the basis of what Oyewumi refers to as *body-logic* or *bio-logic*. Even though the importance of the woman as the essence of life is embedded in her role as a peace maker she is not recognized by what she can accomplish but the emphasis is on her physical beauty. Most of the proverbs that have been contextually analysed project women as less powerful and they must depend on males for recognition and support. Only a few of the proverbs that have been collected show positive aspects of women and the need for complementarity.

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