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## **SOCIAL ROLES OF RIDDLES, WITH REFERENCE TO KASENA SOCIETY**

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### **Abstract**

Riddles have significant social roles which may be latent or overt. They include roles that may be described as cultural, educative, intellectual, ideological, cosmological and political. While some studies dismiss riddles as a genre lacking the capacity to improve the mind, since they involve stereotyped questions and responses, it is argued in this paper that riddles do indeed exercise the intellect more actively than the mere recollection of responses. Riddles teach logic, they compel audiences to engage in the contemplation of a variety of paradoxes and enigmas, they teach about the social and cultural environment, about social norms, about history and biology and much more. They can also be said to play a role in the formation of the intuitions that people acquire about their languages and social structures. An examination of riddle texts collected from some Kasena communities enhances and appreciates these varied functions of riddles.

### **Introduction**

This paper attempts to discuss some of the latent and manifest roles of riddles and related aspects of verbal arts in African communities using the Kasena as a case study. Riddles appear not to have engaged the attention of many folklorists to the extent that other oral literary genres have. Nearer home, in Ghanaian societies, there seems to have been a conspiracy to ignore them. Yet they can be valuable in their own right<sup>1</sup>. Unlike the case of proverbs and folktales, some researchers seem skeptical about riddles as serious texts, especially as they are often perceived to be of interest primarily to children.

A definition of riddles proposed by Kallen and Eastman (1979: 418) maintains in the Swahili case that they are '... puzzles to be solved through riddle interaction and symbolic activity rather than through deliberation on analytical processes'. The view being articulated here, that riddles do not involve deliberation and analytical processes, is one that is widely shared and is reflected in the work of Blacking (1961) who maintained that Venda riddles do not develop powers of logic and reasoning or stimulate the imagination. Blacking arrived at this view from the fact that in Venda riddling '... it is knowledge of the riddle that is more important than the ability to work it out'. There are however scholars who appreciate the value of riddles in the education of communities. Writing on the processes through which Yoruba riddlers arrive at solutions to their riddles, Afolabi (1976) remarked as follows:

...to arrive at an acceptable solution to the Yoruba riddles one has to be imaginative and recognise that the proposer of the riddles employs (a) metaphorical language, (b) elements of surprise bordering on the unbelievable and (c) a single characteristic of an object as focal point.

It is hard to see how Yoruba riddles, as described above, can fail to be analytical and logical.

Commenting on the functions of riddles, Burns (1976) referred to several, including their reflection of cognition and categories of the environment as well as the concerns of people; the role of riddles in training and exercising the intellect; their distillation of the cultural norms and values of a given society and their role as a valve through which aggressive feelings and sexual drive might find a verbal outlet. Riddles are also seen as mediating ambiguity and stimulating cognitive re-examination. Finally, they are said to promote unity and group cohesion.

These sundry functions: cultural, educative, intellectual, ideological, cosmological and political, as summarised by Burns, are not exhaustive. The roles and functions of riddles would appear to be latent rather than manifest and this paper seeks to explore these further using material collected from a section of the Kasena.<sup>2</sup> It can be expected that societies would differ in the extent to which their riddles attain some, all or even additional objectives over and above those mentioned here.

### **The Kasena Dende**

The riddle as a folk literature genre has been defined variously since 400 AD when, according to Scott (1965:15), Cleodnius Pompeius Julianus attempted a definition. Scott (op. cit.) goes on to inform us that the different attempts at the definition of the genre to this date have not been adequate. To Scott, these definitions ‘.. are little more than descriptions of some of the major characteristics of the genre, and tell us nothing about how the riddle qua genre is formally distinct from other literary or folkloristic genres within cultures.’ Perhaps the problems of genre definition that bedevil the riddle are not unexpected as they inhere in most taxonomic classifications. These genres are polythetic in nature and a term such as riddle can best be seen as an ‘odd job’ word. The features that seem to be crucial in the definition of a genre in one culture may not be so critical for the definition of the same genre in a different culture. We cannot discount the possibility that what are perceptually distinct and different genres in one culture might blend and shade into each other in another tradition. This perhaps precipitates the characterisation of some riddles as ‘true riddles’, some as ‘proverb riddles’, others as conundrums, fixed formulae riddles, nonsense riddles etc. (Gowlett 1979). In fact, riddles in this respect are no different from other social institutions such as marriage and kinship, which share this characteristic of polythetism (Needham 1975) serving as odd job words, to some anthropologists (Beattie 1964; Reviere 1971). Problems of genre definition which relate to variation and evidence of shared or overlapping features and characteristics should not however deter us from proposing definitions, especially working definitions, so long as it is remembered that classifications are rarely as exclusive as they may at first seem. According to Georges and Dundes (1963), a way out is to adopt a definition based on a structural analysis of riddles.

Another approach is perhaps to ensure that genre definitions take into account native classifications and perceptions, an approach that does not seem to have found any favour with folklorists. Inadequate understanding and appreciation of institutions, philosophies and practices in a foreign culture, as Gowlett (1979) remarks can be an impediment to the study of their genres. He suggests that the classification of some Bantu riddles as 'nonsense riddles' can only be very tentative and contingent upon further research and insights.

This study will concern primarily the *dende* [dɪndɪ] and its features. Though *dende*, a Kasem word, can be translated by the term 'riddle' a caveat is necessary. Not all known manifestations of riddle reported in the literature will be classified by Kasena as *dende*, if presented to them.<sup>3</sup> Just as the noun *dendwe* (dream) derives from the verb, *dwe* (to dream) through the processes of stem reduplication, similarly, *dende* derives from the verb *de* [dɪ] (to drop). As we dream dreams, Kasena say they 'drop their riddles'; riddles are 'dropped' in the sense that they seem to be uttered out of context. No other genre is ever said to 'drop' or 'be dropped' when people engage in its performance. The riddle has two parts, the precedent (query, image) which is uttered or played by the proposer and the sequent (the answer, response, solution) which is supplied by the correspondent. The riddle precedent may be syntactically a question, command, exclamation, or statement. In this respect it is like any sentence except that it is de-contextualised and seems to come from out of the blue. It is the kind of sentence which if uttered outside the context of riddle performance could raise eyebrows. Take for example the riddle precedent, *n ni ne konto, a ba beene mo na?* (you fix your gaze on me like that, am I not coming towards you?) which is uttered in the night to a sedentary group. Who are you and who am I? Such a question would not otherwise fail to surprise the audience, but it does not because it is a riddle precedent. One of the features of riddles is their misdirection or indirection, which is only one strategy in the riddler's bag. De-contextualisation is one form of indirection.

### Context of Performance

Riddles, unlike proverbs (*memaye*) or witty sayings (*senseiri*), are a children's specialty in Kasena communities.<sup>4</sup> Until recently it was the practice for children to entertain themselves in the evenings with riddles, folktales and children's games. There is however no session devoted exclusively to telling riddles or riddling, and at the same sitting children engaged in riddling, telling folktales and playing other games. They may begin with riddles, then move over to sedentary games and perhaps end with story-telling. The time devoted to riddles is often short by comparison with the telling of folktales; folktales are usually regarded as more interesting and exciting.

This author is not aware that there is any prohibition on riddle performance, as is the case

with folktales which may not be told in the daylight hours. However, since folktales and riddles are associated it can be argued that any such restrictions on folktale performance would apply indirectly to riddling. The prohibition on daytime telling of folktales seems to preempt the likelihood of work time being wasted on folktales by idling youth. This is not necessarily an explanation that Kasena adults would themselves advance, unlike Venda people who adduced this explanation, as Blacking (1961:2) maintains. In any case if people were to be allowed to tell folktales any time of day, there could not be any guarantee that interest in them would not diminish, leaving youth and especially younger children with less varied sources of entertainment in the evenings before bed time.<sup>5</sup> This is likely to be so since there are only a few other activities of interest to youth such as *lenle* and *jɔŋɔ* (song and dance games). *Lenle* are performed by unmarried maidens and youth on moonlit nights outside the compounds, while the *jɔŋɔ* dance which is enjoyed by all is performed on special nights, particularly as part of the activities that may be associated with marriage celebrations. The traditional norms and the taboo on daylight performances notwithstanding, these days most Kasena children would have learnt folktales and riddles not necessarily at home but in school, where the taboo on day-time performance is set aside.

The Kasena riddle is stereotyped and more or less fixed in its precedent and sequent. Consequently, children do not feel they require the assistance of adults all the time to start riddling sessions or to sustain the performance. In this respect riddles differ from Kasena folktales. Younger children learn riddles from their older siblings with whom they play and tell stories in the evenings. This does not signify that adults never participate in riddling sessions; they would do so occasionally at the insistence of children. Kasena riddles are strictly not an adult form of entertainment. It may be that, as Noyes (1995) remarked, by the time an individual has reached adulthood s/he would have encountered most of the interesting riddles in the area. The consequent lack of adult interest means that, unlike folktales, riddle diffusion from ethnic group to ethnic group has been until recently minimal. Thus, in this case it is not so much the stable nature of a community which accounted for the lack of adult interest, as some scholars have argued. Even if Kasena adults moved about freely they would still be unlikely to account for significant diffusion of the riddle genre nor would mobility per se result in greater interest in the genre, as argued by Noyes, Goldstein (1963) and Velasco (1986).<sup>6</sup> If for no other reason, exogamy in the past compelled Kasena to move between their own local communities and others in the vicinity and occasionally outside their chiefdoms. Indeed inter-ethnic marriages are by no means new between Kasena and Nankana and Kasena and Balsa.

### **The Organisation of Riddle Telling Performance**

Two parties are required in a typical riddling session. It takes a minimum of two individuals

but usually a bigger group makes for an interesting session. Riddling therefore often involves several people exchanging riddles on a competitive or non-competitive basis. One group poses a riddle question and the other provides the sequent or answers. The groups take turns to pose the precedent and answer the riddle questions.

The group that poses the precedent scores a compound or a cow when the opposing side fails to find the answer to the riddle. It should be remarked that the reference here is to a notional compound or cow and not to a cow or compound in the physical sense. The compensation however is rarely done in a systematic way. In this writer's experience no tally is made of scores to establish victors and losers at the conclusion of sessions. Where 'houses' are the trophy the award is made by the losing side which must in this case name a compound within the neighbourhood. It is clear that there is no gambling involved in the game. However, the loser usually exhibits a grudging attitude when it concedes; and this is clear from the tendency to give away smaller houses. These are mentioned by name and usually they are compounds that are in the clan-settlement or in a neighbouring one. The correspondents may haggle over the size of the compound the losing side is prepared to give out and the correct answer might be withheld until there is agreement on the prize.

#### **The Nature of the Riddle in Kasem**

The Kasena riddle, with a few exceptions, is a short utterance which may be in plain language or language that is poetic. Such a statement calls for a response which may be a single word response or an utterance like the riddle statement itself. The Kasem word *lore* (to know) or *lorem* (knowing) refers to the discovery or provision of response for the riddle. When the interlocutor cannot provide the accepted answer he or she says *a yeiri* 'I don't know' or *dé yeiri* 'We don't know'. The verbs *lore* and *yeiri* as well as their nominal derivatives suggest that the respondent is delving into a stock of knowledge which already exists.

The response may be a single word, a longer phrase, or a sentence that accords with the syntactic pattern of the riddle question. It may have an adjunct which explains the appropriateness of the response. The response is meant to be discovered taking into account the clues that have been provided but more often the interlocutor is expected to remember the standard or customarily approved answer or else to concede ignorance and wait to be told the answer. Some riddles may have several answers, such as the riddle which says *cha!* This is an onomatopoeic word that refers generally to whiteness as in the utterance,

*napwoŋo cha*

'pure white'

In Navrongo, the expected answer could be several things mentioned one after the other as the speaker repeats the word *cha*. For example, things that may qualify would include, 1) moon;

2) stars on a moonless and cloudless night; 3) teeth that fill the mouth; 4) white fowls in a hen coop; 5) cattle egrets that fill the valley. Certainly these are not the only examples of whiteness generally perceived in the culture. Though water fetched from the river bottoms is pale as a result of the presence of clay sediment and Kasena call this *na-pwoŋo*, 'white water' the respondent who suggests white water would be told the response is wrong. In riddle culture this will not be disputed. Similarly, although Kasena are mixed agriculturists who keep cattle, milk would not normally be accepted by riddlers as an appropriate response.

One must hasten to add that it would appear that performers and their audiences now appreciate that some riddles can and should have more than one statement or precedent and also more than one answer or sequent. This is clear from the responses obtained from a questionnaire circulated. For example to the riddle *amo chworō mo ke birakōga de ko bu dedo ye ko na jwoori to ko bia kōgō kōgō*, (my hen went round to the back of the compound followed by just one chick but on its return it had many chickens), was accepted as a legitimate riddle but it was suggested by some respondents that the same riddle could also be stated as *amo boŋo mo ke birakōga de bu dedoa ye ko jwoori de bia kōgō kōgō [zamzam]* (my goat went round to the back of the compound followed by just one kid but on its return it was found to have many kids). In the latter *boŋo* (goat) is substituted for *chworō* (hen). Similarly, though the response *sunuga* (groundnut) was generally known and acceptable it was suggested that *sia* (bambara beans) and *swoona* (beans) would also do. Millet (*mena*) was never suggested although it fits the image suggested.

Though the correspondent is usually expected to know and remember the correct answer to the riddle, nevertheless a certain relationship exists between the riddle query or precedent and the response or sequent in Kasem; this facilitates recall, even if it does not exclude other logical possibilities. That relationship derives from metaphor and metonymy, as various scholars since Aristotle have remarked (Georges and Dundes 1963:116). Harries (1971) comments: '...riddle is an exercise in the association of ideas based on close observation of natural life.' That association is not confined to nature but applies also to ideas about the supernatural and about what could not possibly be visible. It can be said that for most Kasena riddles there is a semantic fit between the riddle precedent and the sequent. Some of the figurative elements involved are straightforward enough for all to see. For example, in the precedent, *Amo kwobia mo wora ba tira gworam gworam* (There are these paternal cousins of mine whose foreheads are crooked) the descriptive element is the possession of crooked forehead. The statement, put differently, is asking, what do people know that has protruding forehead or a feature that resembles a human forehead that is crooked. Baobab seeds answer the query, although it may not be only these seeds that have the shape being referred to.

The depth of the figurative expression differs from riddle to riddle, being more transparent in some and less so in others. In the riddle that states, 'Pass by, it does *pa* to you, pass by, it goes

*pa'* (*ke mpa ke mpa*) seems transparent to rural Kasena, though perhaps not to urbanites. The riddle is asking a question which can be re-phrased as 'What is it that does *pa* to you as you go by and *pa* again as you pass by it on your return?' The referent here is the leaf of the shrub growing by the footpath and which inevitably hits the passerby as he or she goes by. *Pa* is an onomatopoeic expression which simulates the sound of being hit by a flat surfaced object. By comparison, a riddle such as *yeiriba yeiriba yeiri daane* (stranger to them and stranger to them know not each other) appears more involved and more difficult to unravel. This could otherwise be classed as one of the nonsense or non-rational riddles defined by Gowlett (1979) for Bantu. However, it can also be compared to the proverb, *A-di-daane de A-di-daane mo di daane* (Mr. I-eat-with-others and Mr. I-dine-with-others share food). See Awedoba (2000: 164) for an interpretation and commentary on this proverb. An analysis that will reveal the literal or surface meaning of the riddle is necessary if we are to attempt to unravel this riddle's figurative content. Literally, it means 'know-them-not, know-them-not do not know each other'. The connection between the descriptive elements and the accepted response which is 'the bush farm and the granary do not know each other,' is far from being transparent. Know-them-not and know-them-not are similar in that they know not. Just as one is surprised to find kin whose existence one has been ignorant of, so is it apparently strange that despite the shared commonality between the know-them-nots they remain oblivious of their kinship. The farm and the granary are kin on the grounds that farm produce is stored in the granary yet they do not and cannot be expected to know this. They are spatially removed and distanced by the symbolic opposition between wilderness and settlement.

### **Why Do Kasena Tell Riddles?**

There is no straightforward answer to the question why Kasena tell riddles; to them the primary value of their riddles is the entertainment the genre affords. In any riddle session participants can be observed to laugh and display amusement when certain riddles are cited. This applies especially to the salacious riddles. If entertainment is a manifest function, riddles can also be said to have latent functions that an exegesis may not directly reveal. These functions are applicable for all and sundry, adults as much as children, perhaps even more for the adults who sit by and listen to children playing riddles.

### **Riddle and the Memory**

In addition to amusement, riddles help in memory training for children as they are expected and encouraged to remember the correct answers to the riddles. This is in spite of Harries' (1971) observation that the motive in riddles is not didactic. In the case of Kasena riddles emphasis is on the recall of associations. There is of course more to it. In fact it can be suggested with some



plausibility that the multiplicity of responses, in the case of certain riddles, derives from the allowance made for new responses that exploit new associations.

Recall which is a salient feature of riddling goes beyond mere recollection of correct or accepted answers and responses. For example, Kasena children are expected to recall, name and identify compounds in the neighbourhood during riddle sessions. As pointed out above, the failure to respond correctly to a riddle requires that the audience concede a named compound to the riddler which is an admission of ignorance of the riddle sequent and an inducement for disclosure of the right sequent. Learning and recalling compound names is further enhanced by a riddle that specifically requires the mention of as many names of compounds within the clan-settlement as possible. The precedent of this riddle goes as follows: *Wɔ sɔŋɔ?* (Whose compound?). Another form of the riddle requires that the correspondents name members of the lineage: *Wɔ vɔŋɔ?* (whose arm?). The correct responses require the listing of compound heads or the names of individuals in the community. This is an important contribution to a child's education. In learning compound names for example children are also learning about the ancestors of their villages and other senior members of the village whose names compounds usually bear. Indeed an old compound can have several names and the riddle thus provides one opportunity for learning these names; this, it can be argued sets the stage for further informal education on the village, the clan-settlement and the lineage. This is necessary education in a society in which it is almost taboo to call those of the senior generation by their personal names (Awedoba 1996).

### Didacticism

From the above it will be clear that learning for youth is overtly and covertly an adjunct to riddling among Kasena, as indeed it would be in many African cultures. Yet another aspect of riddle didacticism lies in the knowledge that can be acquired directly or indirectly through the riddle itself. Riddles, it will be realised, are based on critical observation of the environment in which the society finds itself. This includes the physical environment, human society, its organization and how that society operates, how animals and other living organisms behave, the relationship of divinity to man and the physical environment, etc. This kind of knowledge can be acquired from either the riddle precedent or the sequent. Take for example the riddle which remarks as follows: *Buga ni gaa kam na zuula, be mo tei ye ka zuula?* (The reed by the river bank sways in the wind, why?) to which the standard response is *Voro na voa, o bu toa we be* (the soothsayer communes with divinity, how come his child dies) or the riddle which remarks that "I see beautiful leaves yet I cannot use them to adorn myself" to which the reply is "No matter how beautiful your sister you cannot marry her". The child is in these riddles drawn to the differential qualities of grass growing by a water source and on dry ground and the fact that it is

not every beautiful leaf or flower that can be used as adornment. The responses to these riddles remind the child, whatever his or her sex, about the immutability of certain natural laws such as human powerlessness against death or the inability of the trees, grass or even the millet crop to withstand the storms. Similarly, people must conform to the cultural and social norms and human laws such as exogamy, incest and the prohibition against sexual intercourse with members of the opposite sex related to ego. The 'sister' in the riddle above is a metaphor; she represents all those women who have kinship ties to a man. One cannot marry such women, no matter their sexual appeal, simply because they are 'sisters', perhaps nothing more than just a distant classificatory sister. Even when this riddle seems to be aimed at the males, the lesson to all and sundry is unmistakable. A girl likewise cannot accommodate a boy sexually who stands in the category of brother.

Through riddles, among other things, children are also being introduced to a variety of vocabulary items including the names of animals, trees, artifacts etc. We may include here the numerous onomatopoeic words which abound in African cultures and their meanings and uses. Riddles in fact have the potential to introduce new onomatopoeic words into the language. Kasena riddles exhibit a number of these new forms which are yet to enter main stream usage. The importance of onomatopoeia in languages like Kasem cannot be underestimated; they provide the means for the expression of shades and nuances of meaning that conventional words like the regular nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs alone are inadequate to convey. Adverbs in particular are not many in this language and one gets the impression that onomatopoeia performs some of the functions of adverbs in Kasem.

### Historical Education

Riddles, even in this pre-literate society, refer to some events of historical importance. One of these is the slave raids and predatory activities affecting the Kasena and their neighbours, the Nankana, Sisala, Bulsa, and Frafra. A number of Kasena riddles allude to the slave raids that devastated their communities towards the end of the 19th Century, just before the British occupied the area and stamped out slavery. For some account of the events that led to the raids in question and the activities and procedures of the Zamberma slavers, see Tamakloe (1931) and Holden (1965).

A riddle says, *amo kwo mo vei golo o bena bi ye o napere ta tige* (my father left for Mossi country a century ago yet his footprints remain visible). *Golo*, the term for Mossi country and also for the country of the slave raiders, is derived from *gwala*, a term that refers to the Mossi (also called *beilla* in Kasem) and other foreigners who raided for slaves. The riddle precedent calls attention to the part played by the Mossi in pre-colonial times when they raided neighbouring communities that were not organised to undertake collective self defence and their collaboration

with the Zamberma slave raiders<sup>7</sup>. Mossi raids may not have had the same devastating effect that the Zamberma raids had. However, accounts of the political economy of the Mossi kingdoms show that slave raiding was important as a source of labour and women and that campaigning in neighbouring communities for slaves had been going on long before the Zamberma entered the scene (see Skinner 1964; Zahan 1967). In the above riddle, a century stands for eternity and represents non-return in the case of the migrant. Additionally, it suggests that in spite of time lapse memories of relatives long taken into captivity do not lapse. In fact, in Kasem practice a long-lost relative's final funeral rites are not held until there is proof of death. The riddle is thus in many ways informative.

### Geographical Education

Children are through riddles being educated about the existence of other places and people such as the Balsa (or *bura*), '...whose hourglass drums we hear without ever seeing the mouths of the drums' according to the riddle precedent. Another riddle refers in its precedent to the Nankanes as the easterners (*birakɔga tiina*) who finish the basketry job the Westerners (the Balsa) began, a reminder of the existence of neighbouring people and communities and the exchanges and transactions that bring different people together in this part of the Upper East Region. Of the Kayoro chiefdom, a riddle precedent says that but for the trees we should be seeing their homesteads. This is a reminder to people in Navrongo, the biggest of the Kasena chiefdoms south of the international boundary, about the existence of a smaller Kasena chiefdom that many rarely get to visit.

What is true of geographical education is even more true for the anatomy of the human body, which Kasena riddles do not fail to teach. The members of the body feature in a number of riddles as well as the general functions of the body. The cooperation of the members of the body is captured in the riddle precedent which says "Two noticed a mango fruit, twenty climbed the tree to fetch it and thirty-two ate it," to which the reply is "It is the pair of eyes that observes a fruit and it is with the help of the ten fingers and the ten toes that a person is able to climb a tree to pluck its fruit; however, it is the thirty-two teeth that do the chewing and eating".<sup>8</sup> According to one riddle, the ear is like a clay bowl into which all and sundry drop coins yet it never fills. The eyes are like two black hens brooding side by side yet they do not see each other, *Chwo-zwonnu tilei mo vwe te twe daane ye te ba nae daane*. The hair, when shaved, drops noiselessly to the ground, says a riddle sequent in response to a riddle precedent which talks of plucked dry locust bean pods dropping noiselessly to the ground. A riddle compares the human foot to the wooden floor stamp used by women to beat and compact gravelly floors. Attention is also drawn to the fact that though legs enable locomotion, nevertheless it is possible to move from place to place by other means. A riddle cites the example of the snake. It lacks legs, yet it moves.

### Linguistic Skills

Riddles provide opportunities to play phonetic, morphological, grammatical and semantic games as they exhibit a variety of linguistic expressions and structures. Take the structural features of the riddle utterance *ke mpa ke mpa* whose reply is “shrub by the way side”. As a sentence it is open to several structural interpretations and some confusion cannot be ruled out given the occurrence of onomatopoeia here. One potential interpretation yields two onomatopoeic words (*kempa kempa*) strung together. Since these are not conventional onomatopoeic items no obvious meaning can be suggested. However, a more likely interpretation has a compound sentence construction which includes two component clauses each of which is a potential serial clause with the following shape: verb / second person singular subject pronoun/missing verb/adjunct//.

Pass you pa pass you pa  
*ke m ø pa ke m ø pa*  
vb pn pa vb pn pa

Without knowing the correct and approved response or sequent any of these interpretations are equally valid. Word division is an issue here as in many riddles and the wrong segmentation makes it even more difficult, if not impossible, to figure out the clues, unless they were known beforehand. Ambivalence and ambiguity are features that riddles delight in and they serve as an indirection strategy aimed at misleading and distracting the audience from the right query. However from the accepted answers a person begins to reinterpret the riddle precedent in ways that make sense of the riddle. This is what most riddles make their listeners do and some of them can be expected to do this, covertly, if not overtly, as people ponder the enigmas enshrined in the language of the riddle and the way disparate ideas, sounds and structures are put together. In any language it is rather important for understanding to be able to come up with the correct immediate constituents of sentences. Riddling seems to equip language users, among other things, with analytical skills that in some respects are not too different from those language education seeks to provide to students and pupils in the schools and Universities.

Peculiar features of a language such as Kasem are also imparted indirectly through riddles. We can mention here, features like tone, the effect of vowel quality on meaning, the meanings and uses of conventional and unconventional onomatopoeia and how to construct them. For example, the riddle, *salallala de seellele jege daane ko kwaane* (Salallala and Seellele are fighting over it) whose response is “the water and the sand are struggling for passage” or “the sand and the mud are fighting over passage” presents the listener with the argument that two items named as *seellele* [sɪlɪlɪlɪ] and *salallala* [salallala] are competing for priority. That is to

say two items that are similar in some respect but different in the way that the vowel [ɪ] differs from the vowel [a]. Working backwards from the accepted sequent in which there is contrast between mud with its fine grain and sand with its coarse grain, it becomes clear that the high 'unadvanced' vowel [ɪ] stands for diminutive quality, the fine grain, while the low vowel [a] represents the augmentative quality, the coarse grain. A variant or similar riddle uses the onomatopoeia forms *yiga* (an idiosyncratic form) and *tiŋa* (a form related perhaps to *tiŋatiŋa* an onomatopoeic description for thick shade) to symbolise the struggle between mud and sand, as flood water drains down stream. Here the difference between fine grained and coarse grained is suggested by the difference between the semi-vowel /y/ which is also a palatal and /t/, an alveolar stop sound. Perhaps, it is through subtle devices like these that native speakers come by their intuitions for the language. With respect to a potential contrast between /y/ and /t/ and its wider implications for the allocation of signification to words little evidence exists as of now.<sup>9</sup>

To take the onomatopoeia which abounds in Kasem and which to some extent replaces adjectives and adverbs as qualifiers and modifiers, the meanings, distinctions and uses of this type of item are not straightforward and require exposure and learning on the part of young native speakers. Take the item used to describe the colour white. There is not one item but several and their uses are specialised. There are at least *cha*, *parepare*, *pwori*, *leo* [lɪʊ]. The riddle that takes *cha* as its descriptive element helps young learners to gain expertise in the application of this form. As mentioned above, on each mention of the form *cha*, participants are expected to mention white items such as the full moon (*chan-cheŋa*) that brightens the land on an October night, as a Kasena bard puts it, the cattle egrets that fill the valley at the commencement of the dry season, the white teeth that fill the mouth of the young adult, white fowls that fill a hencoop, the stars that sparkle on a cloudless night. In some versions of the riddle, *pwori* is substituted for *cha* but neither *parepare* nor *leo* would be so exchanged. The latter in fact has a negative rather than a positive connotation.

Riddles provide the younger speakers of a language with the necessary opportunities for improving pronunciation and the articulation of words and sound segments. This again includes conventional words and sounds as well as the not so conventional. For a language such as Kasem, which is essentially a language with a basic CV structure (i.e. consonant followed by vowel), with the bulk of the vocabulary items being no more than three syllables long, riddle descriptive elements such as *bumburibalugri* must be the kind of mouthful that affords an opportunity to learn to twist the tongue. Another example of a twister is the following:

*Kawuli-manyangwola mo kwei chebi-manyangwola ka vo ka jeini two-manyangwola  
baga ne ka di*

A deformed eagle took a deformed chick to the top of a deformed tree where it ate its meal

in which there is practice with pronouncing words with complex patterns like *kawuli-manyangwola* (deformed eagle). The answer to this riddle, strangely, is the statement that "cold thick porridge is never used to make offerings to divine beings". The logic of the riddle is simply that divine beings are not ordinary beings to be served with inferior products and left-over foods. It is a taboo to use left-over food (food that has 'aged' or 'deformed' like the deformed eagle).

Add to this the learning of new words, including not only the everyday words but also dialectal forms, archaic expressions and words restricted to registers or occupational varieties. The word *noyo* (animal fat) which occurs in the riddle,

*Amo kwo mo go o nabea gaao ne ye ka noyo jaane ko yi saŋɔ*

My father killed his bull in the wilderness but its fat got home is unlikely to be found in everyday language. It is possibly the augmentative form for the more current term *nuga* (oil or fat). The sequent for this riddle is bushfire: the flakes of burnt grass float to the settlement. Mastery of archaic words, unusual or dialectal variants, may not necessarily enhance language competence but Kasena value in a native speaker the ability to exhibit such knowledge and competence and we see this in the way Kasena musicians craft their songs. Riddles certainly provide the facility for a child to learn to express many complex ideas and sense relations. Thus, in diverse ways riddles contribute to a child's linguistic education.

### **Riddles and Creative Thought**

Above all creative thinking is the corner stone of riddling in societies like the Kasena. This is a contradiction of the views of some researchers discussed earlier who take the position that riddling emphasises recall at the expense of creative thinking. The Kasena riddler, it is true, seeks the customarily correct answer and not just any answer. However, it would appear that riddle culture is not as dogmatic as it may seem and that the appropriateness of responses is negotiable. Interlocutors can argue persuasively on the merits of an answer that may not have been customarily associated with a particular riddle precedent; it is possible that such an answer might be accepted as an alternative and perhaps eventually make its entry into the riddling tradition. It is in this way that some riddles over time have come to have a couple or more of accepted or expected responses. Take the riddle, *Tintim ye woro wae* (There is semblance of shade yet no shade for shelter). The most standard response is "clouds", but it appears that to this has been added "bambara bean" which produces a bunch of luxuriant green leaves that are of no value as shade to humans and livestock and sometimes without much seed growing under the leaves, which calls to mind the maxim that appearances can be deceptive.

There is, as Kallen and Eastman (1979) have observed, a cognitive aspect to the riddle. At the cognitive level riddles can themselves be said to provide opportunities for critical observation and assessment of beliefs, norms and notions as well as behaviours, even if they end up

confirming the status quo rather subverting it. This is achieved through the application of the figures of speech including use of metaphor and metonymy. Kasena riddles can be said to ask questions of the 'why' and the 'how is it' kind. Why does one moon in the sky light up the world, as Kasena know it? How is it that a snake lacking legs moves, why is it that guinea fowls are not allowed to hatch their eggs? And so on. Take the riddle which remarks that the soothsayer's child is not spared death, cited above. The riddle informs us that in Kasena culture the soothsayer is like the giant grass by the water source which is privileged with adequate supply of moisture and nutrients. Through this riddle for example it is wondered why the soothsayer who is so strategically placed as the medium of communication between gods and humans and through whom the unseen and unknown is discovered and the lives and prospects of individuals and communities are saved from the wrath of powerful spiritual forces, should suffer the fate which his profession sets out to avert. This and many other riddling paradoxes are homework to the young inexperienced person listening to riddles. They will engage the active or not so active attention of the young child. In the case of the soothsayer's paradox the resolved conclusion remains that the divinities and ancestors are not the only players where the destiny of mortal humans is concerned and that there is also the concept of *We toone* (God's death, or death preordained by God). These may be explanations not provided in the course of the riddling session which, without doubt, is not a conventional classroom. However, the questions provoked by activities like riddling continue to nag and engage the constant attention of some people.

Explanation or justification for correct riddle responses is often expected and should be undertaken either by the riddler or the correspondent. This is not always done, I admit, and it can be skipped where the justification is too obvious to warrant statement or commentary. For example, when 'white fowls', 'mouthful of teeth' etc are given as the correct answers to the riddle query *cha!* performers and audience do not take the trouble to explain how it is that these responses are correct, nor is it expected that native Kasena audiences would request for a justification. The idiophone or onomatopoeic word that serves as the descriptive element of the riddle happens to be common and most speakers know it describes white colours. New speakers of the language who may not be fully conversant with this particular onomatopoeia will nevertheless gather from the white objects that are suggested and accepted as valid responses what the denotation of the onomatopoeia in question is. Where however there is need for explanation or justification this will normally be provided spontaneously or on request. For example, the answer to the riddle,

*amo kwo mo go o nabia o le seo ka wone o maa cha ka*

my father killed his bull and found a knife in it to butcher it

is *mene* 'sorghum'. This is not likely to be immediately obvious to all and an explanation is understandably called for. This is almost a necessity for urban-dwelling children who are not

familiar with some traditional practices such as the eating of unprocessed sorghum grain and the use of a part of the sorghum stalk to beat out the fresh grain for consumption in the raw state. It can be said therefore that the riddle affords an opportunity to teach.

We can conclude that creative thinking, far from being absent, is indeed an important aspect of the Kasena riddle. People who engage in riddling do not only memorise stereotypical answers. The significant point to note is that creative thinking often, though not always, comes later. It manifests itself in the form of individual and group contemplation of associations made in the riddle. This may be and often is verbalised as the group now attempts to appreciate the aptness of the associations after the correct response has been provided to the audience.

Since the riddle is an exercise in the association of ideas derived from observations of nature, culture and society we can also say that it affords an opportunity for the learning of Kasena ways of life and the people's outlook on life and nature. This is illustrated by the riddle cited immediately above. Rational Kasena do not expect to find cutting tools inside slaughtered livestock, but the child is reminded that it is customary to eat fresh grains of sorghum and to do so these should be extracted. Whipping or beating the ears of guineacorn is one simple way of achieving this objective. The stalk (*fera*) of the same plant suggests itself for use. Interestingly, the word for 'whipping' happens to be *fere*. The Kasena boy sees the associations evoked by this riddle.

### Conclusion

This study is not suggesting that riddling is the archetypal form of education for the Kasena child and young adult. In the absence of formal schools much education remained rather informal and unorganised and riddles and other oral literature genres played an important role. The concept of education for the Kasena is suggested by the terms *bera* (literally, showings or demonstrations) and *zamsem* (learning). In a face to face kind of society children learnt by example, precepts given by their elders, particularly older same sex kin. They listened to conversations, to folktales which would usually conclude with a moral, to proverbs, songs, riddles and experiences of others. Verbal instructions were not excluded; however, there were various subtle ways in which learning took place and the discussion of some of the linguistic education suggested above is pertinent in equipping users with their insights and intuitions.

If the unwillingness to accept that riddles have a role in the education of communities and in development of analytical thinking lies in the fact that the answer to the riddle is already known to the audience, then researchers should not forget that the riddle provides a rare opportunity for introspective questioning about things, events, images, relations, behaviours and norms usually taken for granted. We could draw an analogy here between the riddle whose answer is known beforehand and the mathematics problem whose answer is found at the back of the textbook. The



fact that problems and answers are in the same mathematics textbook challenges the student to try to discover how the given answer is arrived at. The availability of answers to problems enhances inquiry and need not stifle it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> School children exhibit considerable interest in them to the extent that Ghana Television and some Ghanaian dailies have found it worthwhile to allocate space and time to riddles.

<sup>2</sup> A questionnaire containing 55 riddles was distributed in Navrongo and Paga. Respondents were required to indicate whether or not they were familiar with riddles and to suggest variant forms, if any existed or were known to them. At the conclusion of each questionnaire, people were invited to list additional riddles not included.

<sup>3</sup> Like most nouns in the Kasem language the word for riddle belongs in a gender. There are five of such genders (see Awedoba 1979). This noun can be classified in one of two genders, i.e. as a Gender III (marked by collocation of *kam* and *sem* determiners) or as Gender two (marked by collocation of *dem* and *yam* determiners). As a Gender two noun its shapes are *dende* (singular) and *dendwa* (plural) but when it is classified as Gender III its shapes are *dendea* (singular) and *dende* (plural). No meaning differences are associated with this.

<sup>4</sup> The proverb is described as *memaye* or more fully *faya tu memaye* (the words of the sage of old) while the folktale usually begins with the phrase, *faya faya to* (long long ago). The riddle on the other hand has no such preface or entitling phrase that suggests its origin.

<sup>5</sup> Evening entertainment was essential, as pointed out above, in view of the lateness of the dinner. Traditionally women, who were the cooks, were usually preoccupied in the day time which meant that cooking began late. Sleepy children were difficult to awake and persuade to eat their meals.

<sup>6</sup> See Noyes (1995) where the views of these authors are referred to. Velasco wrote in Spanish.

<sup>7</sup> The Moshie people are more commonly referred to as *beillu* (*beilim*) and *beilla*. There is no evidence, to this writer's knowledge that they actively teamed up with the Zamberma (or Zambarima) raiders to devastate the Upper East and West regions in pre-colonial times. However, they supplied horses to the Zamberma. It would seem from anthropological comments that the Moshi princes raided neighbouring acephalous peoples for captives, who would serve as slaves.

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, one of the new riddles, as the mention of mango, a non-indigenous tree, would suggest.

<sup>9</sup> One is however reminded of a finding by Bonvini (1987) on the basis of which he establishes a DIRE zone of the oral cavity, from lips to alveolus, the ANIMAUX zone, palate and the velum area as the region of PARLER. DIRE or Saying words suggested by Bonvini include those that begin with /b/ (spellings based on the New Spelling Convention for Kasem in Ghana) like *bwei* (to ask), *bwoni* (to call), *bage* (to shout at); those initiated by /t/ as for example, *tei* (to praise), *twe* (to insult), *tole* (to narrate), *tone* (to refute) and *toole* (to announce) and those that begin with /l/ such as *laare* (cry out), *lare* (to converse), *lwoori* (to beg), *leeini* (to sing) etc. The problem with the words used to illustrate is that DIRE and PARLER samples overlap to the extent that *ta* (to say) and *we* (to say) appear synonymous just as *laare* (to cry out) and *keeiri* to cry or *kwoori* (to plead with or ingratiate) and *lwoori* (to beg).

