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## **Traditional Lore in Population Communication: The Case of the Akan in Ghana**

**by Kwesi Yankah\***

### **Abstract**

This paper argues for the use of African traditional collective knowledge and wisdom in the dissemination of government policy. The author points out that such traditional collective knowledge and wisdom (often referred to as lore) is conveyed through African traditional media whose channels include songs, riddles, appellations and proverbs. These channels of communication are still predominant in the African communities and could be put to good use in the dissemination of government policy on population issues.

In this context, the author examines the folk-lore of the Akan (an ethnic group in Ghana) in relation to family planning issues. The conclusions are that African folk-lore has the potential to serve as a powerful communication tool in the outreach programmes of family planning and related demographic issues.

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# Usage des Valeurs Traditionnelles: le Cas des Akans du Ghana

## Résumé

Cet article parle de l'usage des connaissances et sagesse traditionnelles collectives dans la dissémination de la politique du gouvernement.

L'auteur fait remarquer que de telles connaissances et sagesse sont transmises par voie des médias traditionnelles africains comme des chansons, devinettes, proverbes etc.

De tels modes de communication sont encore prédominants dans les communautés traditionnelles et pourraient être utilisés de manière optimale dans la dissémination de la politique du gouvernement, plus particulièrement concernant les problèmes démographiques. C'est dans cette optique que l'auteur de cet article se penche sur le folklore de planning familial du groupe ethnique des Akans du Ghana.

Les conclusions de l'auteur sont que le folklore africain a le potentiel de servir d'outil de communication puissant dans la campagne de planning familial et dans la solution de bien d'autres problèmes y relatif.

## Introduction

The power of the traditional mode of communication appears to have been slighted in current day communication policies; for our traditional media themselves convey the illusion of fossilised modes of communication that are impervious to change.

The relegation of the traditional media, however, does not accord with current realities since a majority of the African population does not have access to modern modes of communication. To these then, the folk media still take care of a good proportion of their communication needs.

This makes even more imperative the integration of traditional modes of communication within current day communication policies that appear to be dominated by the written and electronic channels of communication.

By the traditional modes of communication, we refer in part to face-to-face communication in which the addressor and addressee are linked by both time and space. This mode of communication relies ostensibly on the spoken word and other related channels. But besides its basic deployment of the oral medium, the traditional mode organizes its messages through certain laid-down speech economics or verbal art forms like proverbs, songs, stories, riddles, appellations and the like.

A pessimistic view about the deployment of such traditional modes in the present day context may be based on the premise that laid down practices have an intrinsic stability that fiercely resists the forces of change. After all, is tradition often not equated with truth in several African societies, and is the element of change not construed as an intrusion upon the sacred truth?<sup>1</sup>.

*Amannee yensee no*

*Tradition is not destroyed*

goes a popular saying in Akan. That is partly the reason why African societies revere custodians of tradition who restore culture and tradition on the correct path where there is a deviation.

This is not to suggest that our societies evince no dynamism in the use of the folk media. There is evidence of continued adaptation of the traditional media to cope with the forces of modernity as is seen in the effective use of the oral channels and traditional verbal art forms in the electronic media, where the face-to-face factor is compromised.

*Mere dane a dane wo ho bi*

*When time changes, change with it*

goes another Akan maxim.

Change and adaptation then are considered as intrinsically necessary for survival, whether this is in respect of channel, style or content of communication.

## **Importance of Traditional Lore**

Our proverbs, maxims, stories, appellations and the like are partly of artistic essence, but they are also very effective modes in which a society's values, ethics, experiences and history may be recorded. Thus anthropologists, for example, have attempted to determine a people's cultural traits and attitudes through analysis of their myths, proverbs, and stories.

This approach itself is fraught with problems and must be handled with care, for the proverbs, songs, idioms, tales, etc. that our cultures cherish are not necessarily the best media for the discovery of our ways of life. Proverbs, songs, etc. are artistic media — modes of communication by which we give free rein to our imagination. They are basically artistic in nature and cannot be the best prisms through which to look at ourselves. Our way of life is not just what the proverb or song says and nothing else. It reaches beyond the confines of these traditional modes. Thus the absence of overt references to population issues in proverbs is not necessarily an index to their insignificance in the culture. These art forms are constrained in their content and do not reflect the entire culture. Nevertheless, they may provide cues to cultural attitudes, particularly if the concepts they convey are not only recurrent but also cut across sub cultures.

Besides the cultural significance of their content, the traditional art forms are also persuasive devices utilised to effectively reinforce or change attitudes. Songs, proverbs or stories are often stylized and artistically cultivated to appeal to the senses and persuade. Their persuasive strength partly derives from the attribution of their authorship to tradition or ancestry. They are persuasive because their sentiments are based on the collective experience of an idealised set of people the society reveres.

## **Traditional Lore in Population Communication**

Is there any good reason then to ignore the traditional modes of persuasion in propagating official policies on the environment, family planning and the like? In a good number of such policies, one often ignores the importance of seeking traditional analogues of the messages conveyed in the official policy.

A recent investigation by one medical doctor at the Korle Bu Hospital in Accra, Ghana bears this out. He sought to understand the traditional modes of family planning by soliciting from certain ethnic groups relevant proverbs and sayings that reflect attitudes to fertility and birth control.

The outcome indicated a mixed attitude to small and large families, based on proverbs circulating within the localities<sup>2</sup>.

## Numerical Strength

In any case, issues of family life in Africa convey a recurrent sense of communality and numerical strength, sharpened by the concept of extended family. In a related respect, we recognize the triple fertility which the woman in Africa symbolises: being the agent of soil fertility (here referring to their leading role in agricultural productivity), womb fertility, as well as the inevitable medium of inheritance in matrilineal societies.

This concept of life, nurture, and continuity which the woman symbolises has its reflexes in the hunter's search for habitable abodes, where he is guided by the existence of streams and evergreen vegetation, for following him is not a nuclear family but a multitude that must live.

Indeed, the strength we derive in numbers may be partly due to the labour intensiveness of our techniques of production; but it also has a reflex in the general tolerance of polygamy in traditional Africa — the derivation of productive strength is sheer numbers.

*Abusua ye dom* goes an Akan maxim — the lineage is a multitude. And the Anona clan among the Akan reinforce this with a saying that is based on the clan mythology.

*Se wohu anomakro a ento no bo, na ebia na ofiri dodoo mu* (If you see a lone bird, do not throw a stone, for it may belong to a multitude).

But beyond this, from numbers may be derived strategic strength, invincibility, and sometimes esthetic appeal.

In Ampofo's (1989) solicitation of family planning proverbs, the following were collected in the Volta Region of Ghana: "There is the need for many people to hold the horn of the bullock", and "Cotton threads say they need to be in large company to be able to carry a stone". Numbers are not important to the Ewe ethnic group only.

The very symbol of the Asante state, the porcupine whose quills have a proverbial character of self renewal, is also significant. By its sheer numbers, was the Asante army not a force? Kill a thousand, and a thousand will replenish.

The proverb, *Akoko takra na ema akoko ye kese* (It's the hen's plumes that enhance its size), or *anomaa ahooden ne ne ntakra* (the bird derives strength from its plumes) points to the high premium we place on numbers as an important source of productive energy. And what of the proverb, *Abe dom ara nye ne mpopa* (The strength of the palm tree is its branches).

The Akan say *Yede nnipa na ekyekyere kuro* "We use multitudes to establish townships", and also *Nsamanfo mpo pe won dodoo*, "Even the dead love numbers".

## Fertility

But the strength derived from fertility is even more crucial, for here we are talking of a self-generating source of life, a self-sustaining energy source that is almost inexhaustible.

In funeral dirges sung particularly by women on the occasion of death, one of the singers' preoccupation is to make references to the deceased's home or domicile, where he was nurtured, for pride could be derived from its soil fertility. Thus a deceased hailing from Asumegya Gyankobaa would inspire a reference such as *Asumegya Gyankobaa, daamre kwadu reso borofero* (Asumegya Gyankobaa where the pawpaw fruit grows on the banana) referring here to the fertility of the soil<sup>3</sup>.

But fertility of productive organs is even more important here. The significance of this is well noted in libation prayers, where fertility is specifically requested for. For it is often the prayer of all that the newly married man and woman would be blessed with many children, often symbolically referred to as *abaduasa* (thirty offsprings). In actual life, however, it is the birth of the tenth child on which a premium is placed. The birth of a tenth child (*Badu*) in several cultures attracts special rituals in which the male responsible for the tenth child is offered a sheep and thanksgiving rites are performed.

Indeed a positive attitude to fertility is highly prevalent and marriages may be dissolved on that count. Fruitfulness of the womb thus receives special mention in dirges; and, significantly, the criteria for qualification as ancestor include proven fertility.

Thus a deceased woman with many children may receive complimentary comments in a dirge, such as *Eno nkruma kese a ne yam abaduasa* (Mother the *okro* that is full of seeds. Or *Eno* the *okro* full of seeds that rears others' children as well<sup>4</sup>). Also in the following line from a hunter's song (*abofodwom*), a hunter's virility receives mention, *Twenedurase Anokwa Tomfoo a ne mma refuafua no* (Anokwa the smith of Twenedurase whose children are clinging to him)<sup>5</sup>.

In dirges, an exceptionally prolific mother may receive highly romanticized praise in which the very condition of labour prior to delivery attracts comments such as *Eno the Woman who was given condolences on female talking drums*, while she laboured<sup>6</sup>. Here, we have talking drums indulging in a rare exercise of heralding the process of birth.

But closely related to fertility is the issue of parental care and hospitality. For children delivered have to be nurtured. Thus a caring mother may attract such an appellation as *Osenkese a mpanin ne mmofra redi ho ahurisie* (The big pot around which old and young rejoice); or *Ekoona abura kese a nkwa nsuo wo mu*. (The big well that contains plenty of water); or *Me na nufu kese a mmofra num ano, Me na koroposie a mmofra hyia ho*. (Mother *Aba* the great breast that children suck, the great wooden bowl around which children gather).

Thus responsible child bearing here is seen to go hand in hand with adequate provision of food. But mutual co-operation between mother and child is such that the child suffers a denial of access to proper nourishment, if he allows truancy to intrude on his domestic habits. It is said, *akoko a oben oni na owe abebeko sre*. (It is the chicken closer to its mother that eats the thigh of the grasshopper). Self discipline is the basis of adequate nourishment.

If fertility is 'poeticised' in highly positive terms, the opposite condition of sterility or barrenness is almost a bane, as earlier hinted. This, as was said, could lead to

divorce. According to a Kikuyu proverb from Kenya, *A woman whose sons have died is richer than the barren woman?* The implication is the lingering hope still existing for the bereaved woman.

In the case of the barren, there is no such hope. But the Kikuyu also express the suitable age for child birth in their proverbs. They say, *The woman that gets old before bearing child will have nobody to draw water for her*<sup>8</sup>. Even so, such a condition may be better than barrenness.

Infertility sometimes propels the affected women into realms of self reflection. *Awoo nye kente na yeato afura* (*Childbirth is not a kente cloth that may be bought and worn*), said one such a woman in a proverbial mode; and said another who sees an evil hand in her hapless condition, *I am the padlock clamped in place. I wasn't blessed with a good womb to bear children. How then can I have grandchildren. It's only my offspring that can beget a grandchild. The witches have clamped a padlock on my womb*<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, the condition of childlessness is sometimes taken as having been inflicted by an adversary. But its consequences of social disapproval are harsh enough. In certain cases, the society's reaction may find expression in songs of sarcasm and ridicule, as can be found in the following song,

*We shall drag her on gravels.  
Gyankuku Abena, the barren, is childless  
What do we do of it?  
We shall pelt you with stones*<sup>10</sup>.

Even so, in some of such songs of ridicule are embedded words of hope and consolation. For the same song resolves itself in the words,

*Akyenkwa Amma Pokuwa that drinks from the Biremu  
If you are childless  
You will not be maltreated  
I have a child  
Yet I carry my own water pot  
The childless  
You will not be maltreated*<sup>11</sup>.

Or the following

*Man will die and rot away  
Yes, but nothing is beyond God  
Issueless One, don't grieve, eat  
For man will die and rot away.*

## Small Families

The emphasis we place on numbers in our folk media, however, does not seem to be absolute. Despite the traditional yearning for fertility and high birth rate, traditional lore drops hints of the caution African societies exercise against excesses for the socio-economic dislocation resulting from excessive numbers is not unknown in traditional Africa.

Proverbs and songs thus place considerable emphasis on quality and affordability. The Akan proverb, *Wonsuom, wonsuom wodze nyimpa* (When we call for helping hands, we mean humans) underscores the need for numbers but this is complemented by a cognate that places emphasis on quality, *Wonsuom, wonsuom wodze nyimpa, wondze nyimpan* (When we call for helping hands, we mean worthy humans, not worthless ones). Worthy of note here is the play on words, the juxtaposition of *nyimpa* (worthy human) with *nyimpan* (worthless human).

In Ampofo's (1989) research on proverbs on family planning in which he solicited relevant proverbs from informants, the following proverb was found in circulation in Tsito in the Volta Region, "The cat says the prosperity of one's family does not depend on its large size, but the strength of each member".

In the Essakyir area, one important proverb elicited in the context of family planning was, "A small amount of water when boiled is enough for bath", implying that small numbers may derive strength from quality — water when boiled is enhanced in quality and is used economically. Similarly a small number of children if well-bred are a great asset.

Excessive birth is derogatorily likened to that of a pig, as in the saying, "Pig birth is a curse". Pig birth here refers to multiple births typical of pigs.

The small family proverb that was cited the most was, "many births and rags are bed fellows", which was often supplemented with the narrative: Ama Awusi who had 30 children was killed by a single snail when all the children wanted their share of the snail she had brought, she was compelled to swallow it, and she died. Competition for limited resources might then lead to a domestic tragedy.

The Kikuyu of Kenya convey the grief expected in several childbirths in the proverb, "Many births, many burials". An Akan woman proverbially attributed her lack of business capital to multiple births, *Awo dodoo nti na mannya dwetire*. Excessive childbirth eroded her capital base, due to persistent demands on her savings for the upkeep of the children.

Even polygamy, which appears to be an offshoot of the passion for a strong production base, is occasionally deterred in proverbial language. *Aware dodoo ye hia* (Polygamy spells poverty), *Mmaa dodoo kunu yare a okom na oku no* (The man of several wives dies of hunger, when he falls ill) and *Wo yerenom enum a wo tekrema enum*. (If you have five wives, so do you have five tongues).

The passion for high births, then appears to be constrained by other factors such as affordability. In recent times, the economic realities appear to have dawned on us, and there is a perceivable dynamic in the content of some of the traditional sayings one hears.

Recently there was a country music programme on television, in which an *nnwonkoro* group from Nkoranza in the Brong Abofo region performed a remarkable tune that portrayed the economic realities of high births in the modern world. The song described excessive childbirth and recounted its socio-economic consequences — inability to provide children's needs, pay school fees, inadequate nutrition, etc. And it was even more remarkable when, in the middle of the song, the theme was dramatised in a scene where a pregnant mother carried a three-months old baby on her back, with five others of overlapping ages following and needling her with various demands.

If it is not the current drive towards family planning that motivated the song drama, it must be this inner dynamic at work which draws attention to the need for discretion in the choice between purely traditional sentiments and grim contemporary realities.

## Concluding Remarks

In communicating and implementing current day policies and programmes, we need not lose sight of traditional modes of communication and information which, after all, are the most regular channels through which information reaches a majority of our people. Proverbs, dirges and various traditional modes of discourse should not be viewed as a set of static channels that are fixed in number or doomed to uniquely convey pre-existing values. Traditional modes of communication may change themes or style or may adapt themselves to novel situations, as the need arises.

What one would like to avoid rather is the possible element of coercion being adopted or deployed in the adaptation of traditional modes of discourse. Culture is not static, but it is not so pliable and accommodating as to uncritically admit borrowed values. The adaptation of traditional modes of communication in the service of the dynamics of population policies, for example, should be exercised with care and should proceed gradually from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Current day information technologies that reduce face-to-face communication in the transmission of knowledge ought to facilitate the gradual process of information dissemination through the electronic media (radio and television). Our folk songs, proverbs, tales, and other modes of discourse would then naturally pick up the acceptable aspects of the foreign values and adopt them for local use.

When Koo Nimo, the popular Ghanaian folk guitarist, was called upon a few years ago to compose a folk song to help arrest the process of deforestation, the song that emerged appealed to existing traditional concerns for foresight and planning for the future. These were not novel concepts, but pre-existing ones that were adopted to meet contemporary challenges. *Asem biara nni ho a emmaa da* (there is nothing in this world without precedence).

Implementation of modern population policies should not completely ignore traditional channels of communication and information flow. For even as we entertain ourselves in song, dance and drama, there is always a philosophical moral, a deep

seated lesson of social relevance which we take home and brood upon. That is why experienced users of the proverb would say, *I use the proverb to tie a knot around my argument (mede bo asem pow)*, such that when a piece of information is missing, its proverbial identity is bound to enhance its attention value.

## Notes and References

1. This is reminiscent of Lord's impression of Serbo Croatian epic singers. See, Albert Lord, (1960) *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 29.
2. Ampofo, D.A. (1989). 'Proverbs and Knowledge on Reproduction as an Approach to Develop Family Planning Education Content for Rural Ghana.' Workshop on Agricultural Approach to Family Planning. Unpublished.
3. Nketia, J.H. (1955). *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*. Exeter and Sons, p. 41.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
7. G. Barra (1987). *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, p. 61.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
9. Yanka, Kwesi (1989). *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric*. New York: Peter Lang, p. 199.
10. Aning, B.A. (1975). *Nnwonkoro* Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, p. 84.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Ampofo, *op.cit.*