



Research Paper

Akuapem Linguist staff and its proverbial interpretations in contemporary Ghana.

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Abstract

Proverbs are also presented in nonverbal forms through symbols. The use of regalia symbols such as the Akuapem linguist staff is quite popular in the courts of African traditional chiefs. Most Akuapem linguist staffs have connotations inscribed with a proverbial saying and a chain of literary connotations. The Akuapem life has undergone numerous changes and certain elements of the traditional culture seem to have been lost or greatly modified. This study adopts traditional literary theory as its lens. Through the qualitative research approach, this study employs an ethnographic research design to thematically analyze symbols sculpted by the linguist staff of the people of Akuapem traditional area and their relevance in this contemporary time. Contextual proverbial interpretation of the various art forms is the main focus of the study. The study looks at the classification of the staff, its purpose in contemporary Ghana, and its proverbial implications.

Keywords: *Akuapem, Linguist staff, proverbs, contemporary art.*

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I. Background to the Study

A people's philosophy, worldview, and cosmology, as well as its history, motifs, and traditions, can be learned through their proverbs. They are what Aderemi (1994) refers to as 'cultural markers' in the sense that they reveal to us, in a succinct but profound manner, a great deal about the past and the psychology of the peoples and communities from which they originate. Since proverbs are a fundamental component of every community, they cover a wide range of subjects, concepts, and aspects of daily life that affect a particular population. Proverbs are referred to as a grammar of values by Herskovits (1958). In the view of Speake and Simpson (1990), a proverb is a customary phrase that offers guidance or summarizes a lesson. Fayemi asserts that there are two points to keep in mind with this definition. First of all, a proverb is a brief statement with more significance than would be implied by its succinct form. A proverb is also a remnant of a long-standing tradition (2009:2). When Olatunji (1984:167) claims that a proverb is a legacy from elders who may have gone through a variety of experiences, it seems to support this point of view. The linguist staff is a stick with a carving on the finial that typically reflects a proverb that may be associated with things, events, or topics. For instance, the finial Anomaa nua onee nea one no da dua koro, which can be translated as 'Birds of the same species roost in the same tree,' symbolizes harmony and support between the state and the royal family (Ross, 1982). The linguist staff is the Okyeame's insignia of office but the meaning of the finial always relates to the chief and state. In effect, the linguist staff is a political art form. It may also be accurate to say that the linguist staff is highly important to the political activities of the Asantehene's palace since it may illustrate the stability of the ruling family and kingship, the king and state's political dominance, and the duties both the king and his subjects have (Adubofour, 2000).

Unquestionably, compared to other continents, Africa has the most diversified societies in the world. The prominence of proverbs is an odd aspect of African linguistic diversity. For instance, proverbs serve as the horse of conversation. This is because when the conversation lags, a proverb will revive it. A wise man who knows

proverbs reconciles difficulties" (Yoruba, Nigeria), and "Proverbs are the daughters of experience" (Sierra Leone) serve as examples of the relevance of these sayings (Finnegan, 1970). Proverbs are beautiful because they have a universal message that everyone can understand and connect to.

When those signs and symbols serve the purpose of communicating information, people frequently mistakenly believe that they are the same. That is untrue. While symbols communicate abstract and complicated ideas that cause one to create deep-level mental imagery, signs often provide plain, basic information (Adubofour, 2000). A symbol has a meaning, but not all things with meaning are symbols, as established by Sarpong (1974). Symbols frequently stand in for abstract concepts like patience, cowardice, knowledge, oneness, and others. Symbols can also convey concepts and values. For instance, the national flag conveys patriotism and nationalism, inspiring nations to respect it and, consequently, feel the values it represents.

Hill (2006) concurs with Dzobo that symbols are visual representations of hidden meanings. "All research on African art, whether it be of art objects as such or of objects or events in other domains that might be understood through the study of art, share the concern with meanings," claims Geary (1988). (pg. 103).

Our grasp of African oral literature is expanded by studying traditional African proverbs. African oral literature continues to garner attention in the field of research, and scholars from all over the world have made enormous efforts to investigate it. Finding out where the inhabitants of Akropong came from and when they did settle as a state has caught my attention because a number of Akwapim scholars are working on historical study about the origin and other unique traits about its people. There are various readership groups for which this study is meant. In order to contextually understand the various art forms of the research, it is important to first analyze thematically the symbols sculpted on the linguist staff of the people of the Akuapem traditional area and their relevance in the modern era.

II. Literature review

Overview of symbols

The use of symbols is as old as man. Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilizations had symbols which were used to signify several things. According to Colleen (2006: p.1) symbols are "something used to represent something else". They can represent ideas, concepts, beliefs, doctrines and feelings. They can have powerful meanings and evoke strong emotions." This has been likened to a national flag to a countryman and the crucifix to a Christian as they would also have powerful meanings and evoke strong emotions.

Agbo (2006) says symbolism is the representation of ideas by the use of signs, literacy and artistic invention to express ideas, emotions and abstractions in place of realism. A symbol generally stands for something visible, like an object, a mark, a sign or an abstract idea. Signs may be ambiguous in their use but they provide information about the environment, intentions and feelings of people and so elicit appropriate responses. Yankah (1989:102) illustrates that a certain chief who thought that a court decision had been badly made, turned up the next day in court wearing his cloth inside out and his sandals on the wrong feet. This action which was symbolic immediately told people that something was wrong and it was likely that the chief was ready that day to turn the court "upside down". Symbolism is mankind's oldest form of communication. In the stone-age, artists carved female figures with large abdomens and breasts as symbols for continuity of life and fertility. (Colleen, 2006). Today, realistic and abstract symbols are being used to convey several human thoughts and issues.

Symbols were found in the Ancient age. Ancient Egyptian art symbols in hieroglyphics were found in tombs and as part of other forms of decorations, including the ankh. In Ancient Greek art, the symbols of gods and goddesses to signify war and wisdom (Athena), love (Venus), thunder and sky (Zeus) for example, were used. In the medieval era art in Europe, symbols used in Christian art included the crucifix, snake and apple, etc. to represent the death of Jesus Christ and deceit of Adam and Eve respectively. In Eastern art, Buddha Sculptures are symbols of peace and spirituality. In India the dancing Shiva has symbolic importance for creation, destruction, grace and liberation. In Japanese art, the Zen garden arrangements of sand, rock and mounds of mass are symbols of water mountains and islands (Colleen 2006).

Signs and Symbols

Sarpong (1974), a symbol has a meaning but not all things that have a meaning are symbols. Symbols often represent abstract ideas like peace, patience, cowardice, wisdom, unity etc. Symbols may also express ideas, and values, for example, the flag of a nation expresses nationalism and patriotism causing nationals who see the flag, to respect it and by extension, feel what it stands for.

Signs, however, do not point beyond themselves to hidden meanings and information as symbols do. According to Dzobo (2009) "signs provide simple information, but symbols communicate complex knowledge, abstract truths and ideas about life and its meaning" (pg. 2). He further states that a symbol is a powerful instrument of thought is "a visible or audible sign or emblem of some thought, emotion or experience, interpreting what can be really grasped only by the mind and imagination which enters into the field of observation" (pg. 138).

Hill (2006) agrees with Dzobo that symbols are icons that represent meanings that are not immediately obvious. They stand for knowledge or great learning. Sometimes also, meanings given to symbols run true to the type of object, animal, person or plant. For example, a woman is a symbol of procreation, man for strength, egg for fragility, fire for destruction or heat or warmth. Gold weights also often serve dual purposes, both as a weight and in order to convey a message. For example, a gold weight featuring a symbol of a man carrying a keg of gun powder and at the same time smoking a pipe is interpreted as meaning that you can have an important duty to carry out at a specific time but that does not mean that you should not spare time to do other important things. Depending on the context, this same symbol may mean that one is acting dangerously and so should be careful. Again, the symbol of two crocodiles with a joint abdomen has a saying attached to it, that although they both eat into the same stomach they struggle to catch their food. This may be interpreted as, although people may aim at the same purpose, they have different ways of getting there (Sarpong, 1974).

Considering the wealth of wisdom within them, the deeper meanings of symbols in the Manhyia Palace do need to be unraveled so that the knowledge and great learning hidden in them will be made available for use by the society in general. In other African cultures, besides Egypt, several symbols that are used in daily occurrences in life. Symbolism here becomes an unspoken language that is dynamic and imaginative and used to communicate ideas in visual form. For instance, in traditional Ghanaian society, human dressing, apparel, architectural designs, stools people sit on, proverbs and even articles used in daily life are means whereby the people express themselves and also educate people, young and old. African art is highly expressive, communicating meanings to persons who have the ability to understand (Sarpong, 1974). Sometimes dancers use their body movements, steps, and hands to praise or even insult a person, symbolically. For example, among the Asante, raising the index and middle fingers to form a „V“ is used in congratulating a good dancer for a performance well done (Sarpong, 1974).

Oral Literary Symbols (Proverbs)

In speaking and thinking, Dzobo (2008) explains oral literary symbols as forms such as fables, myths, maxims and proverbs which are used in the traditional society to express beliefs, values and feelings. Proverbs are normally short and pithy sayings which are very popular devices used to state metaphorically certain general truths about life. For example, one Yoruba proverb states that "A proverb is a horse which can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas". Dzobo further clarifies that, proverb normally has primary and secondary meanings, sometimes referred to as denotative or manifest meaning and on the other hand connotative or latent meaning. For examples in the proverbs that state that, "The lion and the antelope live in the same forest yet the antelope has time to grow," the lion and the antelope firstly denote carnivorous and herbivorous quadrupeds, respectively; connotatively, however, the "lion" represents "forces of destruction" while the "antelope" represents man in his powerlessness. The main point of the proverb is that "there is a power in the universe that preserves the life of the weak and helpless in the face of all that threatens it" (Dzobo n.d, cited in Marfo, 2007).

Uses and Significance of Symbols

Symbols are multi-functional, they perform multiple functions in essence, according to Agbo (2006). These are admired for both their artistic and communication qualities, and are often non-verbal examples of proverbs, parables and maxims that represent a specific group of people's philosophical thought and way of life. He argues, however, that such icons are valued mainly only for their aesthetic qualities. This is because a lot of people don't understand their cultural significance. Symbols are used as a communication tool; typically, visual. Symbols act as communication shortcuts which convey one or more messages that both the sender and the recipient have learned beforehand. Symbols have been used since time immemorial to express concepts and convey meanings in depth (Amate, 2011). In Africa symbols are used symbolically in the form of visual images and ordinary objects to express information, feelings and values. Such images are found in art works such as appliqué, sculptures, leather and textile work that represent their life's history.

Basically, symbols are for identification. They are used to identify various entities and activities in life and are therefore synonymous with the things they represent within national, community or down to clan. Artists use marks, signs and objects to represent ideas, institutions, nation ethnic groups, and companies. In Christianity, religious symbolism is important especially in public worship. Examples are the candles, incense and the cross. In modern patriotism the flags, coat of arms and the like are examples of symbols. Corporate institutions also use logos for their identification. In everyday life colours for instance are used as symbols of various activities and situations. For example red is regarded as a symbol of danger. Symbols may be used as an identifier, a language of concepts, an iconic representation, to express intangible truths, carry particular meanings, express something unknown, or simply to represent something else. It could also be used to pass on stories from generation to generation, convey a deeper meaning than the words themselves and as a source of connection between members in a group (Lipinski, 2001 as cited in Amate, 2011). Additionally, stool for the Akan traditional council system is a symbol that identifies a chief or king whereas in the Northern part of Ghana the leopard or lion skin identifies

the chief. A typical example is the golden stool of the Asante, which is their symbol of the highest authority and kingship. At the mention of the golden stool, there is a reflection of the ruling king and his authority as also the leopard's skin or lion skin are also the highest of all the skins in the North.

Symbols are used to express conceptual concepts, abstract facts and concrete ideas about life. Symbols are used in many ways in Ghana. Often, they're used to classify people's ethnic groups, tribes, communities, power, thoughts, and values. We have certain symbols which identify us as a country. An example is the flag on Ghana's coat of arms. It is capable of being used for realistic or abstract purposes. To represent something else, one may use the following as symbols; sign, sound, emblem, things, photo, image, and many more. Symbols also play important roles in the African conception of truth, a sound interpretation of African patterns of thinking and feeling that involves an awareness of the essence and purpose of symbolism in African culture as a tool for communication.

Symbol acts as a powerful medium of thinking and abstract idea that vehicles the creation of an entity, enabling us to conceive of an entity or to shape a view. It helps to provide explicit details about people's feelings about the environment and about sand purpose, and brings out the correct reactions as well as hides and protects some essential secrets. It gives information in a similar way, but if not properly used, they can transform to misinform the person and lead to a serious danger. Hence they must be used deliberately in certain respects not to misinform the public (Amate, 2011). The symbols have a decorative function but also represent objects that encapsulate evocative messages conveying traditional wisdom, life or environment aspects (Mawuna, 2013).

Linguist Staffs (Akyeampoma)

Linguist staffs are found in the courts of Kings and Chiefs in Ghana. They are also used by clans. Linguist staffs are used for political and judicial purposes. A Linguist, „Okyeame“ may carry a linguist staff when he is sent by the chief to deliver a message. Usually the symbol (s) of the linguist staff carries a meaning related to the message to be delivered. Such symbols may mean peace, justice, war or arbitration. For example, the finial which is an egg means that the owner/clan/chief is careful and patient and seeks peace as the egg is fragile and needs careful and patient handling. Again a linguist staff with an emblem (finial) of a keg of gunpowder means that the state is ready to fight if it becomes necessary; if the emblem is a tortoise and snail then it means the state has no war intentions against the other state. (Adubofour, 2000).

Description of the Linguist Staffs

Linguist staffs are often wood carvings. There is the sculptured finial and the shaft that are gold leafed after carving. Sometimes the shaft will feature motifs. The top, which is the finial, most often has a symbol that conveys a specific meaning. The most common is a square of reef knot known as nyansapo (wisdom knot), an aphorism „nyansapo wɔ sane no badwenba“ meaning „only the wise man can untie the wisdom knot“. Another is the multi linked chain which implies that family links are never broken.

It is a stick with a carved finial which most often represents a proverbial saying which may also have metaphorical associations that refers to objects, situations or subjects. For example a finial with a tree with several birds on its branches “Anomaa nua ne nea one no da dua koro” that may be interpreted to mean “Birds of the same species roost in the same tree” indicates unity and solidarity within the state and the royal family (Ross, 1982).

The Okyeame (Linguist)

Okyeame (singular) or Akyeame (plural) are linguist(s). The Adansi's had Akyeame (linguists) before Asantes adopted the practice (source). It was Awirade Basa, the second chief of Akrokyere and the first Akan chief in the Ashanti community, who instituted the position of Okyeame (Adubofour, 2000). Nana Kwaku Dua I appointed Amankwaa Kuma as his Okyeame (Adubofour, 2000).

Muller (1673) was the first to identify the position of the Okyeame correctly when he called him “first royal advisor”. Wilks (1975:471) saw the “Okyeame as a counselor, advisor, judicial advocate, military attaché, foreign minister, prime minister, and political troubleshooter”. He further explains that the “Okyeame's judicial role distinguishes him from other members of the Kings court”.

One could conjecture that the name “linguist” was given to the Okyeame by English language speakers who saw him as the mouthpiece of the chief to people and vice versa. He often repeated what the chief spoke to the people and what the people spoke to the King. In the process, he would add proverbs and metaphors to the statements, buttressing what Rattray (1927:277-8) wrote that “if a town becomes broken, it is the fault of the Okyeame, if a town stands (firm) it is due to the Okyeame (kuro ebo a, efiri Okyeame, kuro gyina a, efiri Okyeame)”.

III. Methodology

For the study, the researcher used a qualitative methodology. Due diligence and in-depth analysis are needed to address the concerns with the Akuapem Linguist staff's proverbial interpretation. According to Wyse

(2011), exploratory research constitutes the majority of qualitative research. It is employed to comprehend the underlying causes, viewpoints, and motivations. Qualitative research is employed to elucidate thought and opinion trends and delve more into the issue. Ethnography is a qualitative methodology that allows the study of tiny cultures' beliefs, social interactions, and behaviors. It is derived from anthropology and was embraced by sociologists. It involves participation and observation over time, as well as the interpretation of the data gathered (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Reeves, Kuper and Hodges, 2011; 2008; Berry, 1991). A researcher analyzes an intact cultural group in a natural context for a long period of time using the ethnographic approach, mostly through gathering observational data (p. 14). The focus is on daily behaviors to establish values, attitudes, social structures, and other elements. Typically, ethnographic studies aim to comprehend how the Akuapem's culture has changed over time. The qualitative methodology used in this study, which explores the staff of Akuapem Linguist and its proverbial interpretations in modern Ghana, is consistent with ethnographic design.

PROVERBIAL ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF AKUAPEM LINGUIST STAFF



Figure : 1Ti koro nnko agyina: One head does not make a council.

The image on this staff represents the saying "One head cannot create a council" as three heads or three individuals seated together. It implies that three heads are preferable to one. The image suggests that decision-making processes must involve stakeholder dialogue and participation. One person's judgments and actions could result in costly mistakes for the Traditional Authority. Leaders are needed to consult with or organize groups that allow for taking into account various stakeholder viewpoints when making decisions, applying the symbol and its proverbial meaning to the current system of governance at both the national and traditional levels. This serves as the foundation for democracy, a type of government based on the idea that "two heads are better than one." It suggests that groups of individuals should collaborate when making decisions because they can approach a problem from a variety of viewpoints and views rather than from a single or biased viewpoint. The moral consequence is that even while making an individual decision, one should consider others before doing so. Consulting highlights any hidden risks that might be connected to a person's choice or course of action. When one consults with others, they gain exposure and experiences that they might not otherwise have. Therefore, collaborative decision-making makes sure that both actions and inactions represent collective advantages that are generally error-free.



Figure 2: Woforo dua pa a, na yepie wo: One who climbs a tree always gets a push

The image depicts a person climbing a tree with the help of another person pushing up from below. One who climbs a good tree always gets a good push, so the saying goes. The growth of their communities depends heavily on the traditional leaders in those communities. A chief needs the support of his subjects, nevertheless, in order to succeed in leading or growing his people. People's willingness to support anything will rely on how pertinent or significant the development decisions are, as well as the course that is being taken. Therefore, a chief who has the best interests of his people at heart will have their support.

This emblem and its adage have something to do with personal lives. Most of the time, limited resources are used to support family members' educational needs. Household or family members who make progress or take positive acts will receive assistance, whilst those who participate in irrelevant behavior won't. For instance, whereas dropouts who have no good goals or activities are left on their own, youngsters who strive to reach the top of the educational ladder receive support. As a result, positive social norms are promoted while negative ones are downplayed. One who is doing excellent things needs encouragement. Society will protest such behavior and battle for support for the good course if a person promoting a good course is not supported while the one taking a poor route is.

The sign and proverbial interpretation suggest that limited resources are directed away from bad behaviors and toward good. Therefore, those who require assistance must take appropriate measures. It helps a community, a traditional authority figure, or an individual shape conduct so that it complies with social norms and values. This motivates the people to do the good work for the leader and to maintain the push being provided.



Figure 3: Deɛ adeɛ wɔ no na odie na enye deɛ ɔkom de no: Food is for the owner and not the hungry one

A linguist staff of the Asantehene has a finial of two men seated with a table with food on it between them as a representation of this sign, which pertains to the kingship and continued rule of the ruling family. One sits and watches as the other person eats. This depicts a proverb “Deɛ adeɛ wɔ no na odie na enye deɛ ɔkom de no” translated to mean: "The food is not for the man who is hungry; it is for the one who owns it." The throne belongs to the legitimate owner or heir to the stool, not to someone who believes he is wealthy or popular,

according to the saying. This was ordered as a result of disagreements that occasionally occurred regarding the proper person to succeed to the throne.

The sign denotes the political dominance of the Kingdom when referring to the Ashanti Traditional Authority. Some groups of people are entitled to such privileges or food, but the royal family is the only one who owns the land in the country. As a result, while anybody can admire and revere the throne, regardless of how near they are to it, a person who is not a royal cannot sit on it. In a denotative sense, it describes food and hunger and does not accurately convey the connotative meaning of a proverb. It clarifies aristocracy and those who are the true heirs to the throne.

The metaphorical interpretation of the sign and its moral lessons are that supremacy and power in our way of life should govern us as individuals so that we are aware of our place in power struggles and may avoid confrontation. Knowing what you have or can have helps you avoid feeling envious or jealous of others because everyone experiences success and failure in life. Those who profit might have an advantage over a shared resource, while others might not have access to it. In conclusion, the symbol deters unauthorized individuals from asserting ownership over resources, hence averting disagreements and conflicts.



Figure : 4 Anomaa ne nua ne deɛ ɔne no da dua koro so : A bird's neighbour is the one it perches with.

The image conveys the need for a positive working connection between a superior and/or a subordinate. A good leader has a strong bond with his followers and, as a result, possesses the spirit of sacrifice, which is one of their characteristics. This staff is carried by a linguist to symbolize the necessity for everyone in the community to work diligently to support the town's chief and elders. Again, there is a proverb to the effect that "nobody knows what tomorrow holds," therefore if someone or a neighbor needs aid, everyone must be prepared to lend a hand. While some people may have the chance or resources today, others might not. To preserve harmonious cohabitation in society, it is prudent for the wealthy to assist the less fortunate. Once more, the emblem conveys the idea that lending a helping hand should be valued. The individual being helped must not be viewed as an enemy, but rather as a decent neighbor or friend.



Figure: Suro Nipa: Be careful of a human beings because that's how they are

Someone is forewarned against their neighbor using this sign. This illustrates how a chief may have relied on a neighboring town or chief and ultimately been let down. You don't have to rely on anyone for everything. One must have faith in their own abilities. The symbol's moral message is that, despite compliments and good deeds done for others, there may be those closest to you who do not appreciate what you do. Even your closest friends and family members won't always love and value you.

An elderly man agreed with a linguist who spoke at length on this symbol and added advice to the youth to be wary of friends and not put so much trust in them, concluding with another proof “*Ayɔnkogorɔ nti na ɔkɔtɔ anya tire*”. This literally means the crab lost its' head because of friendship.



Figure : Nkabom ma Ahocden: Unity is strength

This representation of togetherness. It is true that freedom exists where there is oneness. Every society needs unity to succeed. Regression is caused by a lack of oneness, hence a chief using this staff looks for nothing else in his society but harmony. In conclusion, the leader needs his people to be united. The cooperation of every member of the Ashanti Kingdom has been a major factor in its success. People are anticipated to band together in supporting a similar cause in order to attain ultimate achievement. Without a shared objective, success is impossible.



Figure : Wonsii wo hene na wokofa ahenkye hye a, obiara resom wo: If you are not a chief and you adorn yourself with even a crown, nobody will revere you as one.⁷

This staff informs us that pride and power are incompatible. Only the deserving possess power. The correct individual must be powerful. The head man makes sure that the right thing is done. Do not push your way through when it is not your turn to get something; instead, wait for the appropriate moment. In the Akan culture, becoming a chief is not decided by the people. There is nothing like affluence, and the elegant should be allowed to enjoy it.

IV. Conclusion

Due to the fact that most people do not take part in chieftaincy or traditional events in their various communities, the study came to the conclusion that the linguist staff is not given enough credit. Due to the widespread belief that it is ungodly, especially among Christians, few people are interested in learning about it or using it as a source of information. People must respect the staff such that it receives a standing ovation whenever and wherever it is seen, including during festivals, funerals, and numerous traditional events. Festivals are even more esteemed in our community, therefore I will suggest that chiefs who do not observe any festivals at all arrange for their people to do so. The next generation will be able to learn a lot from them because of this.

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