

Kasem Proverbs as Digital Paintings

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Abstract

This study highlights the role of Visual Art in the preservation of oral culture. Apart from oral transmission of culture, existing literature indicates the constant use of text as the ultimate method used to document, preserve and pass on Kasem proverbs over the years. The goal of the paper was to record and preserve selected Kasem proverbs and taboos by going through digital painting processes. Each painting is titled with their respective proverb theme and has objects peculiar to people from the North of Ghana, where Navrongo is located and this is to indicate the origin of the painted proverbs. Backed by the Nelson's semantic theory, which says that pictures are perceptually more distinct from one another than word, thus ensuring their chances of retrieval, the outcomes of this study provide readers and viewers of the artworks, the possibility of retention and recall of the proverbs by perceiving digital artworks of some Kasem proverbs.

Keywords: Navrongo, Kasem Proverbs, Digital Paintings

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1. Introduction

Indigenous African societies have passed on culture and societal traditions to generation through oral education. In the colonial times and before the introduction of formal education into Africa by missionaries and invaders in the nineteenth century, Africans educated younger ones to be skilled and useful to their societies. Mushi, 2009 (cited in Shizah, 2014) says that African indigenous education is a process among members and from one generation to another, the inherited knowledge, skills, cultural traditions, norms and values.

In the African traditional setting, upbringing of children is not the sole responsibility of parents only, but the entire society. Hence, societies have shared norms, values and belief systems and these were mostly passed on orally. This is because African societies, just like any other society, share the common ancestry which has led to most distinctive features. Omolewa (2007) considers African modes of education as holistic, in which storytelling, proverbs and myths play an important role.

Fundamentally, proverbs are geared towards teaching members of African societies, good behaviors and practices. Proverbs are wise sayings, mostly philosophical in nature and they add aesthetic value to speech among cultures. Proverbs were widely used by African ancestors to shape society, even before the introduction of constitutional laws into the continent. Sir Gordon Guggisberg in 1920 said one greatest mistake of education in Africa has been this: that it has taught the African to become European instead of remaining African. This is entirely wrong and the government recognizes it. In future, our education will aim at making an African remain an African in his own country (Global Black History, 2016). The emergence of social media makes foreign culture even more accessible to African societies. Though social media has a lot of advantages, it also compromises African traditional values and puts traditional moral values at risk of being lost and forgotten.

There is need therefore to salvage the diminishing culture of African indigenous societies. There is need to write reminiscence of African culture because history written by the generation that practiced it, is more reliable than history uncovered by historians who were not present to live whatever they record.

Navrongo is the capital of the Kasena-Nankana District in the Upper East Region of Ghana. People from Navrongo are called Kasena and they speak the Kasem language. They are predominantly farmers and mostly cultivate rice, millet, sheanuts and groundnuts. They are endowed with rich culture just as other African and Ghanaian ethnic groups. Like every other Ghanaian society, Kasena also have beliefs, values and traditions that are unique to their culture and these can be found in the expressions of their unique proverbs. Kasem proverbs reveal lots about the people of Navrongo, including their practices, values, principles and ways of life.

Unlike Akan proverbs which have been widely written on and are quite popular among Ghanaians, Kasena proverbs are not extensively known among Ghanaians. Christaller (1990) compiled and translated three thousand six hundred Asante and Fante proverbs. Another creative means by which Akan proverbs have been recorded and preserved is by means of Akan proverbs show, which is designed with episodes to make contestants battles for the most knowledgeable in Akan proverbs. This can be found on a YouTube channel called *Documented Africa Show*. Due to language barrier, values learnt through Kasena proverbs are the benefits of Kasena only. Oral tradition has high potential of being lost to time and westernization, especially in this day of technological advancement, where foreign culture is easily accessible via the internet and social media. Apart from oral

transmission of culture, existing literature indicates the constant use of text as the ultimate method that has been used to document, preserve and pass on Kasem proverbs over the years. Examples include Yitah (2006) who wrote a paper on, “Throwing Stones in Jest: Kasena Women’s “Proverbial” Revolt” and a compilation of 700 Kasem proverbs in a hand book titled Kasem Bitar-Dindi 700. Artworks with cultural contents have over the years helped in culture preservation, hence the need for preserving Kasem proverbs through documentation by other artistic innovative resources, such as artworks. Visual art works with cultural contents could provide innovative means of recording the oral tradition of proverbs in ways that render them both attractive and memorable. Visual art however remains an unexplored method in the preservation of oral traditions of proverbs from Navrongo.

The objective of this work was to render fifteen (15) Kasem proverbs in pictorial forms through digital painting. The study is Art-based and so it is expected to lead to creative art activities. Wilson and Flicker (2014) say, as a study method, arts-based approaches consist of the merging of the conventions of ‘traditional’ qualitative methodologies with those of the arts to allow for deeper study insight, interpretation, meaning making, creative expression, alternative knowledge and ways of knowing. It is for these reasons that this study was conducted within the art-based study procedures.

The process of studio work was done by first finding appropriate elements that could best portray the culture of Kasena and define selected proverbs appropriately. The paintings consist of Navrongo architecture, clothing (smocks) and calabash (a storing and drinking container known to the Kasena) where necessary, for the purpose of identifying the culture the proverbs apply to. Digital paintings were done with the help of Adobe Photoshop

1.1 Concepts of Proverbs

Studies on proverbs have been carried out in various fields of discipline. Study into proverbs has been conducted in the fields of folklore, literature, anthropology, cognitive science, and psychology.

In some African communities, the wisdom of a person is measured in dialogues by how much proverbs he can state to prove his/her points. Proverbs contain advice, morals, and traditions of a certain group of people. As proverbs are deeply rooted in people's culture and thought pattern (Honeck, 1997), they can show the attitude of a particular society towards different social concepts (Dabaghi, 2010). They are often fixed and so attempts to change vocabularies within them are often unacceptable

Proverbs in different communities and cultures tell of the diversity of thoughts and viewpoints concerning different societal issues. Proverbs make dialogue and communication richer as they are sometimes used to buttress points made in conversations and arguments. According to Dabaghi (2010), the extensive use of proverbs in a given language pertains to their crucial role they play in the negotiation of meanings among the speakers of that language. With this in mind, any failure to understand the metaphoric meaning of proverbs may break down any level of communication.

The study of proverbs is termed as ‘paremiology’. With respect to the origins of the proverbs, Meider (2005) postulates that proverbs are invented by people either intentionally or unintentionally. One of Lord John Russell’s quote read,

Addo (2001) cited in (Amate, 2011) says that proverbs in Africa are wise philosophical expressions, generally short and sometimes very funny yet makes the language rich, picturesque, and expresses a hidden or obvious wisdom. Apart from the word ‘short used in Amate’s definition, all other components seem true with regards to proverbs but it doesn’t capture every component of proverbs. It is interesting however that he uses two opposite words to define proverb; expresses obvious or hidden knowledge. This shows that proverbs do not have specific parameters in terms of definition.

2. Proverbs in Artworks



**Figure 1: Nameless and Friendless. "The rich man's wealth is his strong city"
by Emily Osborn, Source: Tate (n.d.)**

During the 1850s Emily Mary Osborn established a reputation as a genre painter specializing in figurative subjects of 'unpretending character' (Tate, n.d.) In this painting, Emily used a proverb in the bible (Proverbs 10:15; "The rich man's wealth is his strong city.") to speak to a societal issue. She finds a link between the proverb and struggles of an artist female without a strong connection to perhaps people or associates in the community who can make her works sell.



**Figure 2: Pieter Bruegel Netherlandish tales/ dutch proverbs
Source: Shovova (2017)**

Shovova (2017) says over 450 years ago, Dutch master Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted this incredible Netherlandish Proverbs in oil. Also known as The Dutch Proverbs, it is a detailed masterpiece representing over 100 Dutch proverbs, which seems at first like a simple village scene with a lot of characters.

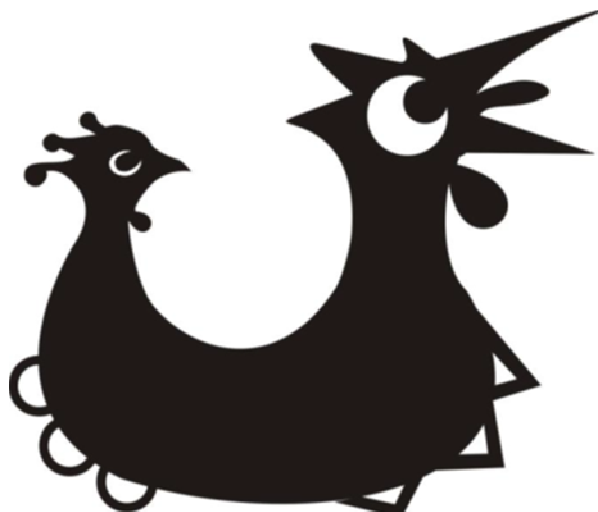


Figure 3: “Akokɔbedɛ Nim Adekyɛ Nanso Otie No Akokɔnini Ano”

Source: Amate (2011)

Amate (2011) engaged in a study to identify forty Akan proverbs that are used in daily activities for communication and education in the Ghanaian traditional environment. The selected proverbs were made into symbols used to produce textile pieces (pictorial batik), wood carvings and clay work to demonstrate their use in the African handicraft. The image above is one of her resultant works, and it translates, “Although the hen knows when it is dawning, but it nevertheless, leaves the crowing to the cock”. A hen and a cockerel are depicted with separate heads with both bodies merged together. The hen watched the cockerel while the cockerel crows.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Nelson (1977) – Sensory semantic theory

This study is informed by the Nelson’s sensory semantic theory which says that pictures hold two encoding advantages over words and are perceptually more dissimilar from one another than words, thus increasing their chance for retrieval. Snodgrass and McCullough (1987) say that when very similar pictures are used, no picture superiority effect is present. Pictures are also believed to assess meaning more directly than words

3. Presentation of resultant digital paintings for the study

With the help of photoshop, the studiers produced paintings depicting Kasem proverbs. The studiers considered architecture, wall paintings and household objects that are peculiar to the people of Navrongo, in order to associate the paintings to their culture.

3.1 Presentation and description of artworks



Figure 4: Ba Nii Vieiro Yia mo ba Saɲe o Dwoa.(The face of a visitor/guest is perceived before his soup is cooked.)

Source: Studiers Construct

Figure 4 is a digital painting of a Kasem proverb titled “Ba nii vieiro yia mo ba saɲe o dwoa”. The proverb means that people look at the faces of their visitors before preparing their soup. The composition is made up of four people and a building at the background. There is a rhythmic movement of shapes in patches of squares and

rectangles in the background building indicating the identity of the proverb as that of Kasena. Two of the human figures in the painting are portrayed to be cooking with their backs against each other. Each has a human figure seated in front of her, which represents the caliber of persons they are cooking for. The woman on the left is portrayed to be cooking for a high-profile person. The status of this person is indicated by his looks. He wears fugu shirt, pants and hat which shows him off as a person of higher status. The woman on the right is however portrayed to be cooking for a person of lower status. His status is indicted portraying him in a pensive mood and posture and in a not so elaborate attire. The two women have different cook wares for cooking their visitors' foods. The one who cooks for the man of higher status cooks in a saucepan while the other cooks in a clay pot. The practices of keeping the best plates and putting in much effort in cooking for high profile visitors is a common practice in most Ghanaian homes. This proverb teaches young people to aim high and work hard towards becoming respectable people in society. It teaches the value of hard work.



Figure 5: Nɔn-Kwea ba Sae Sapunno wone (An Adult Does Not Dance in Flowering Beans Farm)

Source: Studiers Construct

The digital painting shows a male and a female figure, dancing in a flowering farm. The title of the work is, “Nɔn-kwea ba sae sapunno wone” and it means an adult does not dance in flowering beans farm. The figures are portrayed to be dancing in the traditional attire of the Kasena. Dancing in a flowering beans farm will obviously ruin the flowering plants since the spreading out of fugu shirts will cause the flowers to fall off. The proverb advises against adults having romantic and sexual affairs with children. Green represents youthfulness, and is hence used represent children in this painting.

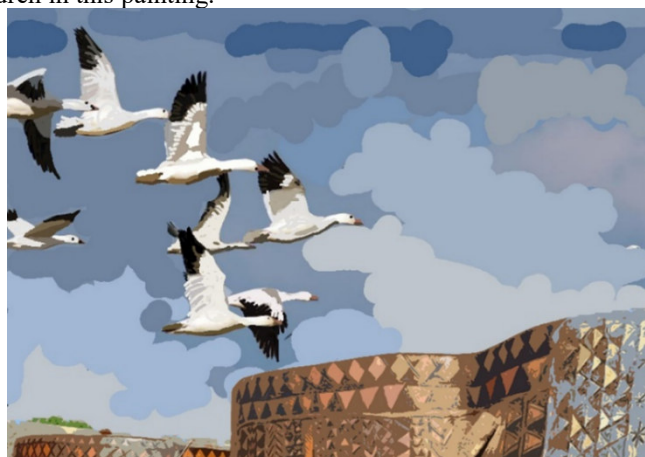


Figure 6: Zu ŋ a Bala Koro na Nye Daane to mo Jaane Daane (Birds of a Feather Flock Together)

Source: Studiers Construct

The image shows a digital painting of a blue sky, graced with eight flying seagulls. The seagulls are portrayed to be flying across the roof a typical Kasena building. A traditional architecture of the Kasena stands out in the blue sky. This is to identify the proverb as a Kasem proverb. The title of the painting is, “Zu ŋ a bala koro na nye daane to mo jaane daane”. It means birds of a further flock together. The work advises people to choose friends with good morals.



Figure 7: Kasena Bia Zoore Natera de Jana mo (Kasena Wear Sandals With Blood)

Source: Studiers Construct

The title of this work is, “Kasena bia zoore natera de jana mo” and it means Kasena wear sandals with blood. It is a composition of two feet wearing sandals with blood in them. The work portrays Kasena to be hard working as it was not easy for a person to own a pair of sandals some time past in history. Sandals were often worn by royals, hunters and rich horsemen. Kasena had to work hard in order to be wealthy enough to own footwear. Blood represents hard work in the proverb and the composition. The proverb teaches the value of hard work and how it helps people achieve higher status in life.

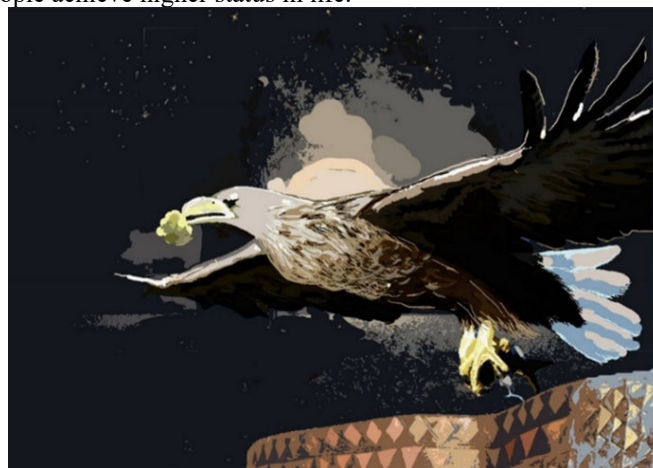


Figure 8: Tete Zu ŋ a Ba Jaane Ka Fae (A bird That flies at Night Does Not Fly in Vain)

Source: Studiers Construct

The proverb means that a bird that flies at night does not fly in vain/aimlessly. It is a painting of an eagle with a catch in its claws with an extra in its beak. The eagle is portrayed to be flying in the night. The painting represents the proverb by giving the bird two objects: one in its claws and the other in its beak. Birds hardly fly at night, so this teaches that; to achieve a different result, one must do things differently.



Figure 9: Ba ba Yage Bebala de Wiru Diga Dodoa ne (he-goats are not Left In The Same Room with a wolf)

Source: Studiers Constructs

The composition is titled “Ba ba yage bebala de wiru diga dodoa ne”. In English, it means, he-goats are not left in the same room with a wolf. For the purpose of identity, a Kasena building with traditional architectural painting has been placed at the background of the work. The composition has a wolf on the left side and goat on the right. The wolf has a roaring look, while the goat has a scared face. The proverb means that enemies would not be able to cope in the same environment.



Figure 10: Yuu Lɔŋɔ Tu na Zeŋe Nuga de Chana, ka Nyeene (An Unlucky Person Will Carry Shea Butter in Moonlight and Still Have It Melt)

Source: Studiers Construct

The title of this work is, “Yuu lɔŋɔ tu na zeŋe nuga de chana, ka nyeene”. It means that an unlucky person who carries shea butter in moonlight will have it melt. The painting is composed of two women standing side-by-side each other. The background depicts an evening scene. One appears to be happy, and the other sad. The one with the sad face represents an unlucky person, and she has melted shea in her calabash. The other woman with a smile, represents a lucky person, and she has solid shea butter in her calabash. The proverb teaches to be considerate and sensitive to the plight of others, since some people are not as lucky as others in various circumstances. Calabash is the commonest traditional container in Navrongo, and it is used to serve different purposes. It is used in this painting because people from Navrongo identify with it.



Figure 11: Bom Two Daane pɛ De ɲwom Milim Daane (Goats That are Close to Each Other are the Ones that Can be Roped Together)

Source: Studiers Construct

The digital painting above is titled, “Bom two daane mo pɛ ɲwom milim daane”. It is a Kasem proverb which literally means goats that are close to each other are the ones that can be roped together. It is a painting of three goats that lay close to each other, roped together with one continuous rope. They lay in front of thatch houses which is historically the traditional architecture of the Kasena. The adage and the work teach that good times and bad times are shared with the closest people.



Figure 12: Titwei We Je-Selei mo Mu Muni (The Mouse Says That Two Hands Fetch the Flour)

Source: Studiers Construct

Figure 12, (“Titwei we je-selei mo mu muni”) is a Kasem proverb and in English, it means, “The mouse says that it is with two hands we fetch flour”. The composition is made up of two human hands joined together with an amount of flour fetched in them. A mouse stands in the flour in the human hands and also has flour fetched in its two hands. Beneath the hands is a calabash with flour in it. The container (calabash) indicates the origin of the adage. The two human hands and the two hands of the mouse are to emphasize the act of fetching flour with two hands. The proverb teaches that it is easier to get work done with the help of another, rather than to do it alone.



Figure 13: Ba Kwei Kukura ka Buli ne mo (A Dog is Taken in While it is Still a Puppy)
Source: Studiers Construct

Figure 13 is titled, “Ba kwei kukura ka buli ne mo”. It means that a dog is taken in while it is still a puppy. The painting has a black and white patterned building at the background which identifies the origin of the adage as Kasem. The work and adage mean that it is easy to train people to have good moral values while they are still young. This tells of the importance of correcting children and teaching them good practices before they grow into adults.



Figure 14: Kafoo Lulu ŋ u Mo Jiri Jiru (It is the Shadow of a Scared/Frightened Person That Turns to a Beast)

Source: Studiers construct

Figure 14 is a painting of the Kasem proverb “Kafoo lulu ŋ u mo jiri jiru”. In English, the proverb means that it is the shadow of a scared/frightened person that turns to a beast. This proverb is used to refer to situations where people’s evil deed/conscience hunt them. It likens a person who fears his own shadow to a person whose evil deeds tortures him in his own mind. The work is composed of a human figure with his shadow that extending from his feet and rising above him as a monster. The monstrous shadow appears to be hunting the human figure and the human figure appears to react with a fearful pose. The human figure is dressed in a traditional smock of the Kasena of Ghana.

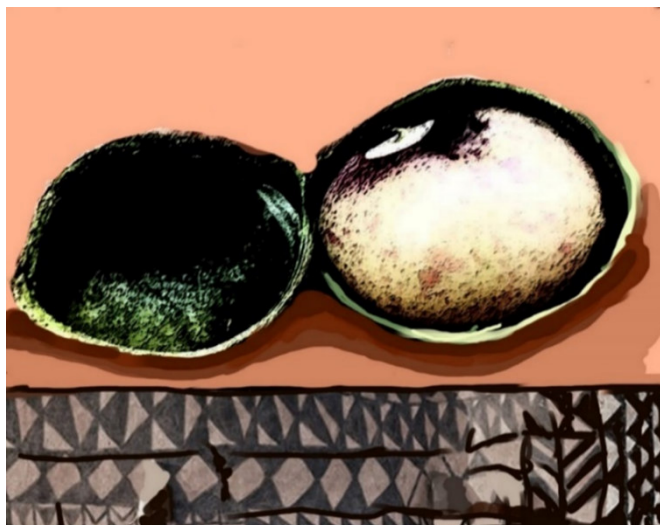


Figure 15: Sia Mo to de Pwoga Ne (Bambara Beans has Falling Right Into Its Shell)
Source: Studiers Construct

The title of the digital painting (figure 15) is, “Sia mo to de pwoga ne”. It means Bambara beans has falling right into its shell. This proverb is used when people get what they desire for. It signifies a situation where time and chance offer a person something they desire or need. It also symbolizes a perfect match or fit. The work is a composition of a split shell of a bambara bean, with the bean in one half of the shell. At the base of the painting is an indigenous Northern-Ghana style of wall painting for the purpose of identification of the culture to which this proverb belongs.



Figure 16: Serekwe Gwe ye Kalwoɔɔ Nia (The Porcupine Walks in Majesty While The Hawk Watches)
Source: Studiers construct

“Serekwe gwe ye kalwoɔɔ nia” is a painting of a Kasem proverb and it means that the porcupine walks in majesty while the hawk watches. This is often used by people who are backed by stronger forces like people in authority, God, god’s or oracles. It is to say that enemies look on but cannot harm a person backed by a stronger force or authority. The painting portrays a hawk standing on a pedestal and looking down at a porcupine. Porcupines are known for their defensive mechanism of shooting out their thorns when they feel threatened. The hawk is also a bird that likes to snatch away its prey. A hawk will avoid a porcupine in order not to get quilled by it. The painting has the porcupine right beneath the bird to indicate its fearlessness. A Navrongo wall painting is at the background of the painting for the purpose of identification of the origin of the proverb.



Figure 17: Zware Weeru se n pa Nɔɔɔ Bura (Sweep and You Will Avoid The Scorpion)

Source: Studiers construct

The painting is titled, “Zware weeru se n pa nɔɔɔ bura” and it means sweep and you will avoid the scorpion. The English equivalence of this proverb is prevention is better than cure. The proverb is used to advise people to prepare ahead of events or misfortunes. The composition has a Navrongo household setting at the background for identification. It shows a woman sweeping and a scorpion symbol in a white crossed circle, showing scorpions are forbidden from the territory.

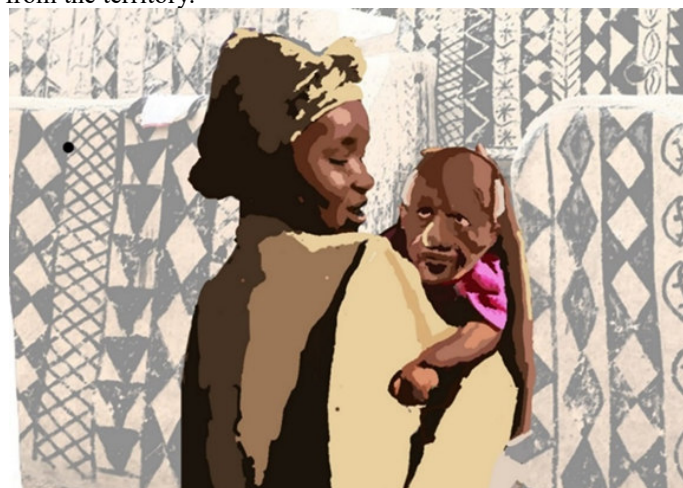


Figure 18: Ba ba Zoore Nɔɔɔɔ Sɔɔɔ ba Kwei Chichuru (You Don't Enter a Person's House and Carry Along a Dwarf)

Source: Studiers Construct

The title for Figure 18 is “Ba ba zoore nɔɔɔɔ sɔɔɔ ba kwei chichuru”. It means you don't enter a person's house and carry along a dwarf. This proverb is cited to advise people to mind their own business and not to involve themselves in other people's family issues. In this painting, a woman is portrayed to be holding a baby with an elderly man's face to depict a dwarf. The background is made in patterns of the traditional wall painting style of the Kasena to indicate the origin of the proverb.

4. Conclusions

Proverbs, apart from being important communication tool, are resourceful means of examining historical and socio-cultural traditions of groups of people. Kasem proverbs like African proverbs, tell of the accepted behaviours and ways of life of the Kasem ethnic group. Members are able to fit in and co-exist with each other by learning values taught in proverbs. It is important therefore to document proverbs in order to not only be knowledgeable in the values and practices of the Kasena, but also to preserve them for generations and for further studies. It is important to note that, documentation of proverbs, though important on its own merit, will be meaningless without efforts to reveal their meanings. For instance, documenting Kasem proverbs, though important, without meaning they may not be relatable. Examining connotative and denotative meanings of selected Kasem proverbs teach of the values and accepted conduct of Kasena. These values include unity, respect for the elderly and the dead/ancestors, hard work etc. Visual art provides diverse and unique ways of documenting culture, since visually perceiving art affords individuals a more likely chance to remember content.

It is for this reason various means of documenting proverbs need to be identified for holistic preservation of these important visual cultural elements. Generally, art affords creative means of recording and preserving culture and cultural knowledge, however, without a form of representation of cultural symbolism and features that relate to a people and their cultural practice, there would not be much in the artworks that indigenes can relate to. On the strength of the above, the study recommends that diverse methods should be explored in documenting Ghanaian oral tradition, and proverbs should be documented with Visual Art methods and displayed in homes and galleries so that people can access such knowledge. Also, other Visual Art methods should be explored in preserving Kasem proverbs and other oral culture.

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