

## Symbolic Representation And Socio-Cultural Significance Of Selected Akan Proverbs In Ghana

<sup>1</sup>Kquofi, Steve

Department of General Art Studies  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana  
Email: [skquofi@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:skquofi@yahoo.co.uk) / [kofikquofi@gmail.com](mailto:kofikquofi@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Amate, Peace

Department of General Art Studies  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana  
Email: [dmnd07@yahoo.com](mailto:dmnd07@yahoo.com)

<sup>3</sup>Tabi-Agyei, Emmanuel

Department of Integrated Rural and Industry  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana  
Email: [tabi\\_agyei@yahoo.com](mailto:tabi_agyei@yahoo.com)

E-mail of the corresponding author: [skquofi@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:skquofi@yahoo.co.uk) / [kofikquofi@gmail.com](mailto:kofikquofi@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Although Akan proverbs of the Twi-speaking people of Ghana are creatively crafted speeches with beautiful and rich values that make lengthy statements short; and spoken in a cultured way for communication of traditional values, the influx of foreign languages in Ghana has contributed to the rapid decline in the standards of this cherished Akan indigenous linguistics. These proverbs embody deep symbolic and socio-cultural values of the Akan people of the Ghanaian society. This paper showcases 20 visual symbols, created from the selected proverbs by the researchers, of selected Akan proverbs with the aim of making them regain their past glory and to promote visual literacy. In highlighting the significance of these selected proverbs, the study employed art-based technique of a qualitative research approach to represent them graphically. Based upon the findings of the socio-cultural values embedded in these proverbs, this paper recommends that more symbols should be created using the numerous proverbs and wise sayings that are in existence in our local languages to salvage the declining image of those proverbs as an important component of African art for communication.

**Keywords:** Adinkra, Akan proverbs, Asante-Twi, philosophical, socio-cultural, symbolic, Twi, visual literacy

### Introduction

Indigenous Akan proverbs of the *Twi*-speaking (*tw* is pronounced like the word "chew" said extremely fast – so that the word *Twi* sounds a bit like a compressed "chewy") people of Ghana have rich symbolic and socio-cultural values which could be harnessed to promote socio-cultural development and visual literacy of very useful traditional Ghanaian traditions. However, the introduction of foreign cultures and symbols into the Ghanaian tradition is gradually replacing and collapsing the conventional symbols that were once cherished in Ghanaian communities. Visual literacy of Akan proverbs, however, have the propensity to decode, interpret, create, challenge and evaluate actions that communicate with visual images in a creative and appropriate way to express meaningful messages (Yankah, 2012; Addo, 2001).

Over the years, Akan proverbs have been studied by ethnologists, anthropologists, folklorists, musicologists and linguists (Rattray 1927; Nketia 1971; Yankah 1986, Saah, 1986). Yankah (2012) made the most comprehensive study on Akan proverbs by vividly discussing the socio-cultural and philosophical significance of the proverbs in Akan society as well as highlighting how they are created and used in various contexts, including jurisprudence, church sermons and dance performance. Similarly, Domowitz (1992) made very interesting studies on the 'wearing of proverbs' as highlighted in various printed cloths considered as "one lively example of the oblique or veiled style of communication that characterizes the oral traditions of the Akan and other West African societies".

Proverbs in Africa are wise philosophical expressions, generally short and sometimes very funny yet make the language rich, picturesque, and express a hidden or obvious wisdom (Addo, 2001). Invariably, they express a relationship which is a general principle, or a characteristic of a certain category of static or dynamic systems (Paczolay, 1996). The nature of proverbs allows them to be interpreted again and again, across time and in different

situations to advice, educate and warn. In the home and in other community settings alike, proverbs are used to pass on rich cultural traditions, to transmit folklore, and to communicate expected codes of behaviour (Kaplan, 2002).

In Akan tradition, the use of proverbs in a conversation conveys special message to people. The proverbs are also used by speakers for a variety of purposes. Sometimes they are used as a way of saying something gently, in a veiled way (Obeng, 1996), and other times, they are used to carry more weight in a discussion. Notably, most Akan proverbs are used to simply make a conversation livelier. Also, like in many parts of the world, the use of these proverbs is a mark of being a good orator.

Wisdom, like knowledge, is conceived in traditional African societies as having a practical as well as a theoretical dimension, but theoretical wisdom must have direct relevance to practical problems of life, to dealing with concrete human problems. These intellectual activities of the traditional African sages, or thinkers, are of course theoretical, even though the basis of their wisdom is in human experience (Gyekye, 2003; Dzobo, 2009). The majority of proverbs found among the Akan people of Ghana express explicit wisdom.

Visual literacy for communication like tribal marks, emblems of clans and the *Adinkra* symbols in the Akan culture also transmit special sacred messages (Addo, 2001), aside playing significant roles as forms of identification. For instance, symbols such as the chameleon and a hand holding an egg signify that in life there are limits to human possibility. This symbol further admonishes politicians that power is fragile like an egg and needs to be handled with utmost care. The uses of such visual symbols provide benefits such as motivation, increased creativity, mental scaffolds, and aesthetic appreciation (Fang, 1996).

The purpose of this study was to identify 20 selected Akan proverbs, which seemed to be dying off, represent them in a visual language and give their symbolic as well as socio-cultural interpretations for visual literacy. In a study by Dunn and Griggs (2000), people exhibit increased story recall when they are allowed to construct relevant pictures while listening to a story. There is an advantage for a visual/verbal communication when compared to only verbal communication. The researchers would like to indicate that there is a good deal of dialectal variation in *Twi*, the language spoken by all Akan people of Ghana. The dialect used in this paper is the *Asante-Twi*, the form of the language spoken in the Ashanti region of Ghana (once the Asante kingdom), which the researchers are adept in and widely understood by all Akan people of Ghana.

### Methodology

The study employed descriptive, arts-based and visual research method of qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research design is said to be the study of symbolic discourse that consists of the study of texts and conversations, interpretive principles that people use to make sense in their symbolic activities (Ting-Toomey, 1984). The qualitative research method was adopted to enable the researchers study the social and cultural phenomena since the study required ethnographic interpretation of the philosophical and socio-cultural values of Akan proverbs. This research method enabled the researchers to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviours, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture or lifestyles as attached to proverbs and symbols. Specifically, the studies were done in Kumasi, Obuasi, Konongo, Mampong, and Effiduase all in the Ashanti region of Ghana.

Also, the researchers adopted the concept and theory of the arts-based research approach in the illustration process as these proverbs were created from the interpretation, consideration and visualization of the words into symbols for easy identification and remembrance by all people. The authors chose to illustrate the proverbs themselves because they are all visual artists who could perfectly give an artist's impression of the proverbs based on their symbolic interpretations. Besides, since the proverbs had never been depicted symbolically as part of the iconography consisting *Adinkra* and *Agama* symbols of the Akan and Ewe respectively, the Ga traditional canon, linguist staffs, umbrella-top finials, traditional stools and kente motifs of the people of Ghana, the researchers had to do series of sketches based on the interpretations of the proverbs before finally settling on the ones presented in this paper.

The *Asante Twi* dialect was selected out of the four main dialects such *Asante Twi*, *Akuapem Twi*, *Fante Twi* and *Bono Twi*, of the Akan-speaking ethnic groups. Seventy-five individuals representative of the population aged between 25 years and above comprising 15 traditional chiefs, 15 weavers, 20 tertiary students, 15 local wood carvers and 10 educationists were interviewed. This selection was based on the fact that the Asante population is larger and their proverbs cut across the other three dialects. Interviews were spread across different days of the week and across different times of day to ensure all population sub-groups had an equal chance of being interviewed. Tape-recorders were used to interview the informants from the various communities, who gave and explained the proverbs to the

researchers. These informants are valuable repositories of wisdom of our fathers and their sacred sayings.

Additionally, direct observation of how the proverbs were used by local craftsmen enabled the researchers understand the philosophical and socio-cultural underpinnings of these symbols as well as how they are practically applied in real life situations. Furthermore, the researchers spent time to observe and study the philosophy behind the creation of the *Adinkra* symbols of the Akan, the *Agama* symbols of the Ewe and the canon symbols of the Ga traditional area as well as linguist staffs, umbrella-top finials, traditional stools and the *kente* motifs for the purpose of visual interpretation of these proverbs.

## Results

The study has found out that indigenous Akan proverbs are rich and weighty with wisdom, which anybody may quote in a similar situation, and as time goes on, they become popular expressions in the language of the people. These wise sayings are embedded with symbolic, socio-cultural and moral significance, which are employed in the social ethics of the people.

Upon critically examining the proverbs from some Akan communities in the Ashanti region of Ghana, the following 20 proverbs have been selected and represented visually based upon their symbolic and socio-cultural significance.

### 1. Twi: *Baanu soa a, emmia* (Figure 1)

**English:** If two people carry a load, it does not weigh them down.

**Literal meaning:** Many hands make light labour.

**Symbolic meaning:** Sharing of responsibilities makes tasks less tedious and faster to complete.

**Socio-cultural significance:** It is used when there are responsibilities to be shared.

The main ideas available in the proverb are a *load*, on top of two different *people*. The symbol is composed of two men carrying a common object. Their heads are joined together to show oneness in goal or thought. The idea is that when a load is shared among many people, it is lightly shared and easily done.

### 2. Twi: *Mmerantee mienu te nsuo ho a, eb]* (Figure 2)

**English:** If two young men sit beside the water pot (i.e. leaning against it firmly), it breaks.

**Literal meaning:** If two selfish and irresponsible young men sit by the water pot, the pot is endangered because if it inclines, neither of them takes the trouble to straighten it. It may eventually roll over, break and lose the water in it.

**Symbolic meaning:** If two people are responsible for a task or piece of work, it is never done well or it is neglected because each one assumes the other person would do it.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used when advising the youth about their duties. It counsels parents to give specific duties to each child so as to make each one of them responsible.

The main theme of this proverb is two young men and a broken pot. The idea of the proverb is illustrated by two young men who are sitting unconcerned about the water pot therefore leading to the final breakage of the pot. This symbol can also represent another proverb that is translated into English as 'a man with many wives dies from hunger'.



Figure 1: *Baanu soa a...*



Figure 2: *Mmerantee mienu te nsuo ho a...*

### 3. Twi: *Ab]sobaa na ema ogya pae* (Figure 3)

**English:** The continual hitting of the wedge with a mallet eventually causes the wood to split.

**Literal meaning:** By continual effort, every obstacle is eventually overcome.

**Symbolic meaning:** Persistence wears down resistance.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to encourage people to persist even when they are getting discouraged.

The design is illustrated in the profile format of a log, a peg and then the mallet to drive the peg through the log. As a result of the persistent hitting of the wedge, the log is split.

#### 4. **Twi:** *Nnua a eben na etwie* (Figure 4)

**English:** Trees that touch each other also rub against each other.

**Literal meaning:** People living or working together are bound to brush against each other.

**Symbolic meaning:** It is said that human beings are enjoyed from a distance and that, the closer you get to them, the more you take note of things you do not like about them.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used when settling a dispute between two parties who usually live or work together, such as married couples, neighbouring states, and close friends.

The researchers chose to represent the two pieces of sticks in abstract silhouette format that has crossed each other to portray solidity, strength, astuteness and stability.

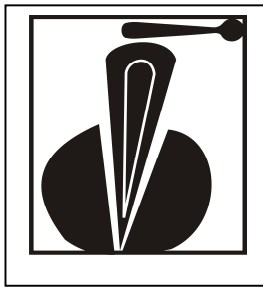


Figure 3: *Ab]sobaa...*

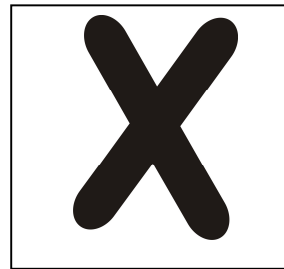


Figure 4: *Nnua a eben...*

#### 5. **Twi:** *Akok]nini boro nsa a, na ne werε afiri ]sansa* (Figure 5)

**English:** (a) When the cockerel gets intoxicated, it forgets the falcon.

*AND* (b) When chicks get intoxicated, they forget the hawk.

**Literal meaning:** The cockerels and chicks are preys for falcons and hawks, so they do not meet eye to eye, but when the cockerel or the chick gets drunk, it forgets about its enemies. The cockerel then goes strutting proudly around, and the chick walks around carelessly around, dazed in a false sense of freedom.

**Symbolic meaning:** If one gets power-drunk or temper-drunk, one tends to behave improperly to one's superiors and later suffers for it.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to counsel people to be sober when they are provoked to anger, or when they rise to a position of power and influence, be it physical or spiritual, they should keep in mind the Ghanaian saying: 'Until someone stronger than you arrives on the scene, you think no one can beat you.'

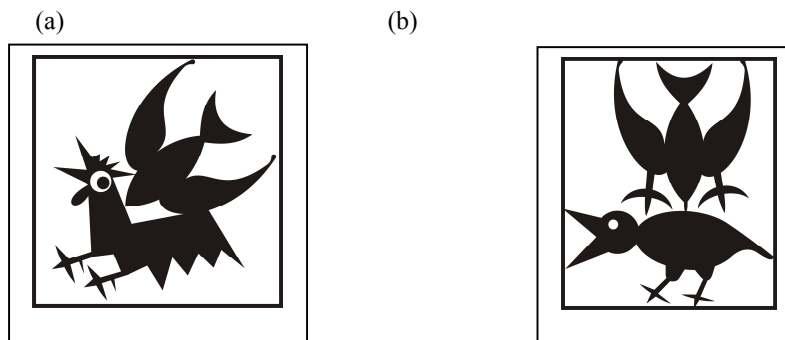


Figure 5: *Akok]nini boro nsa a...*

The researchers selected some major key words out of the proverb which aided them to come out with this composition. The keywords are *the drunken cockerel* and *the falcon*. The behaviour and reactions of people who get drunk were taken into consideration. For instance, some drunken persons are very talkative, their eyes bulge out and they are not able to walk with a straight gait. This is depicted in the widely open beak of the cockerel. The legs are not firm on the ground and the eyeball pops out. Moreover, its demeanour shows that it is not in a position to fight back to defend itself. Another fact to note is that the falcon is very aggressive and snatches away even the grown up hens and cocks.

6. **Twɪ:** *Ak]kono de betebetɛ na ɛwe abɛ* (Figure 6)

**English:** Though the grub is a soft creature, it can destroy the oil palm tree.

**Literal meaning:** The grub, soft and vulnerable as it is, can chew an entire oil palm tree down.

**Symbolic meaning:** However weak a person may be, he can overcome every obstacle and achieve great things by perseverance and industry.

**Socio-cultural significance:** This proverb is used to motivate people who have daunting tasks confronting them and who appear to be unequal to the task.

The main images available in the saying are the grub and the palm tree. In order to make the symbol communicate to us, the grub has been depicted halfway chewing into the palm tree. This indicates that power does not always rely in size or stature.

7. **Twɪ:** *{k]t] nnwo anoma* ((Figure 7)

**English:** The crab does not reproduce a bird.

**Literal meaning:** The crab will beget a crab and a bird will do likewise and not the other way around.

**Symbolic meaning:** As a man is, so is his offspring.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to describe the behaviour of people when they follow the steps of their parents, ancestors, mentors, predecessors, etc.

The keywords here are the crab and bird. The researcher selected some parts of both animals to generate the symbol. The cheliped of the crab and the head of the bird were metamorphosed into each other to form the torso of the abstract symbolic creature. This is intentional, to depict the ubiquitous nature of persons born to a set of parents, that make parents fail to understand their child. The rounded projections on the crab side of the symbol represent the studs present on several species of crabs. This depicts the crabby nature of quick-tempered persons, often presented. The curved projections on the bird represent the feathers on birds. At first sight, they look like thorns, but are sweetly soft on touch. This too, visually represents the Ghanaian saying: 'my face represents the hawk, but I don't prey on chickens'.

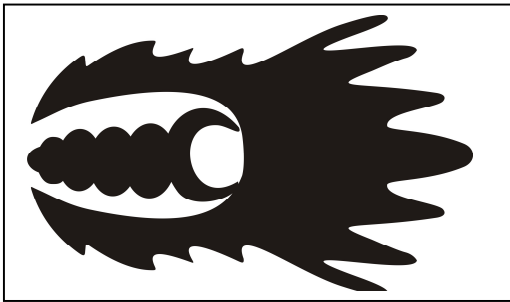


Figure 6: Ak]kono...

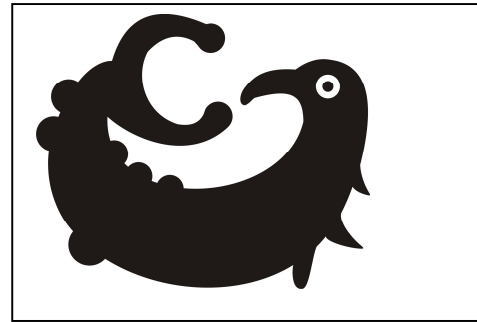


Figure 7: ]k]t] nnwo anoma...

**8. Twi:** *Akok]bedeε nim adekyeε nanso ]hwe onini ano* (Figure 8)

**English:** Although the hen knows when it is dawning, it nevertheless, leaves the crowing to the cock.

**Literal meaning:** The cock and the hen are always together at dawn, but it is the cock that crows. The hen can also crow by cackling loudly, but it is considered as a bad omen for a hen to cackle at dawn. It is the cock that crows all the time.

**Symbolic meaning:** In home and society, responsibilities are apportioned to various persons for the smooth running of life. For example, in the home, men take care of the masculine jobs like farming, fishing and others while women do the housekeeping. One should not interfere with the others' responsibilities. A person in a subordinate position should concentrate on his or her duties and let those in the higher ranks take care of their duties. Likewise, those in line positions must not criss-cross themselves so as to fulfil the *division of labour and specialization* policy of high productivity.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to counsel people who try to usurp the authority of others. It is also used to give advice on division of labour in the home and society.

The hen and the cockerel are the main figures used. Again, the heads of both are used and their bodies are merged together. The female part is decorated with half circles to give it a semblance of feminine while the cockerel has triangular shapes around it to indicate the traditional masculine rigidity associated with African husbands and workplace bosses. The male has a larger wattle and comb on top of its head. The female has its mouth shut, its beak and eye point in the direction of the cock to depict submissiveness and feminine willingness to follow the man. The cock on the other hand, has the mouth widely open to indicate that it is crowing. Its tongue juts out to depict that it is saying: 'it's daybreak, wake up, everybody!'. Its eyes point upwards to show that it recognizes the approach of the sun.

**9. Twi:** *Etire nni safoa na yeabue mu ahwe deε εw] mu* (Figure 9)

**English:** The human head cannot be entered into by means of lock and key and its contents examined by that means.

**Literal meaning:** The head as it is made up has got no physical opening through which one can see.

**Symbolic meaning:** Man is a mystical being and his thoughts cannot be easily deciphered. He may be smiling outwardly but within him can be full of evil. No one knows what the other is thinking unless he acts.

**Socio-cultural significance:** This proverb is used to advice people who relate to anybody and also consider anyone who looks friendly as a true friend.

An abstract female figure with a key penetrating into the brain is used here to represent the saying. The brain is painted black to represent the evil thoughts that people harbour within them but because there is no key to open up the head, the wicked thoughts cannot be seen even on their faces. A female figure is chosen for this concept because society considers women as more secretive, prevaricating and evasive than men.

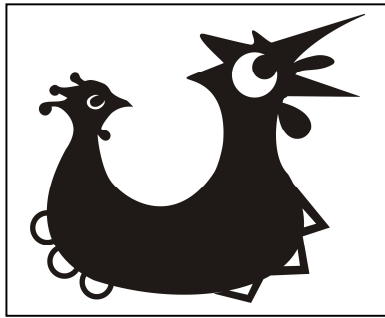


Figure 8: *Akok]bedeε nim adekyeε...*

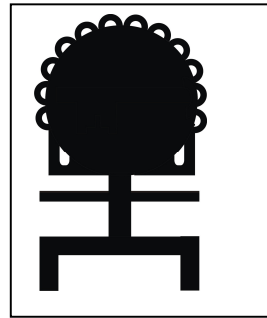


Figure 9: *Etre nni safoa...*

**10. Twi:** *Sε ]sono betutu nnua nyinaa a, [nny] ab[* (Figure 10)

**English:** Even if the elephant can uproot all trees, it cannot uproot the palm tree.

**Literal meaning:** The elephant is the biggest and strongest animal in the forest and it can uproot any tree in its way when it gets angry. Even though it can uproot any tree, it cannot pull down the oil palm tree because of the toughness of its stem and the high tenacity of its rooting system.

**Symbolic meaning:** It is almost impossible for the wind or elephant to pull down the mature oil palm tree. The palm tree is used as a symbol for great warriors or a nation that is advancing towards a war target. The proverb is used to warn such an assailant that, they may have defeated previous enemies, but they cannot defeat this one because no one ever has.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to warn goal-blinded persons to look before they leap. It is also used to encourage persons or institutions or societies that are faced with challenges posed by other persons, institutions or societies.

The palm tree and the elephant are the keywords in the proverb. The palm tree stands taller than the elephant, to show the power of the palm tree over the elephant. Again, the elephant has its trunk on the ground, which also signifies submissiveness to the palm tree. The palm tree has five branches, which also means a perfect number for the power of God or the gods among men on earth. It is believed that the ancestors of the Ghanaian, Ivorian, Burkinabe, Beninian and Nigerian peoples are descendants of the Ethiopian Jews. As they travelled westwards to their present locations, they brought with them certain ancient Jewish values. Five, the Jews say, represent three plus two, which is the integration of Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit with Man and Woman of Humanity. In African traditional thought and belief, it is 'Okorsa' (Trinity carrying the African married couple on his back).

**11. Twi:** *Obi nni ]sono akyi mmoro hasuo* (Figure 11)

**English:** No one follows the elephant (in the bush) and gets wet by the morning dew.

**Literal meaning:** When you follow the elephant, it shakes off, ahead of you, the wetness of the morning dew from the plants as it walks through them, due to its large size.

**Symbolic meaning:** The elephant symbolizes a powerful or prominent person in society who gets you out of trouble if you associate with him.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used in reference to a benevolent person of prominence.

The design portrays the antelope, one of the smaller animals in the bush, and the elephant. The antelope is comfortably hiding under the security of the elephant both against the dew and predators. The legs of both animals are depicted in motion to indicate their movement in the forest.



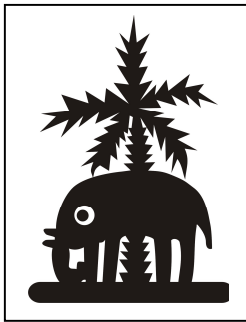


Figure 10: *Jsono*

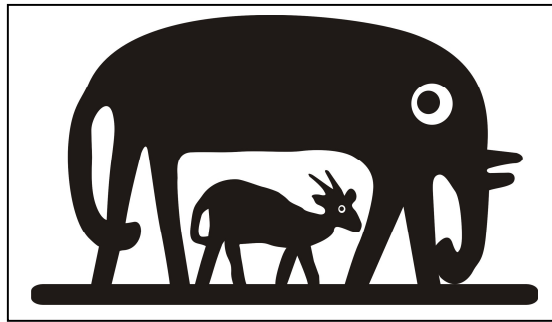


Figure 11. *Obi nni Jsono akyi....*

**12. Twi:** *Seante[ , [ne Jnwam atik] p]* (Figure 12)

**English:** Because the great hornbill (*ɔnwam*) did not listen to advice, he developed a lump on his head.

**Literal meaning:** The (the Great Hornbill) is a large bird of the forest that flies high in the sky and hardly lands on the ground. This bird is said, in the folk tales, to have borrowed money from a puff adder and refused to pay back, defying all the advice given him by the other birds, because he thought the puff adder, a land-bound snake, had no way to reach him. The adder, on his part, patiently waited until the harmattan, when water got scarce. He went into hiding near a pond where *Jnwam* would land for water. When *Jnwam* landed, adder pounced on him. *ɔnwam* managed to escape again. However, in the process, he fell to the ground and developed a lump on his head. This lump has become a distinctive mark for *Jnwam*, the Great Hornbill.

**Symbolic meaning:** If one refuses to take advice about bad habits, it will one day land him in trouble and misfortune.

**Socio-cultural significance:** This proverb is used to advise young people who do not respect or take heed to any advice given them.

**13. Twi:** *Sɛ woanntia ]w] ti, ]nka wo, ana s[ , ]w] ]ka anibrere[ so* (Figure 13)

**English:** The snake stings when it is trampled upon.

**Literal meaning:** The snake even though dangerous and feared by man, it does not sting without being provoked. It stings man only when man threatens its life. If you do not step on it or cross its path, it won't harm you.

**Symbolic meaning:** There are people in the society who do not make trouble unless they are forced to do so by someone else's action. These people may be powerful and dangerous, but they are quiet and always stay away from trouble. If you get in their way, however, it is then that you will get their true colours.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to warn trouble makers in society.

The main symbol here is the snake. It has been confined into the circle to show how harmless the snake can be if not provoked. The snake is portrayed to be very wild or angered so it has pulled out its long tongue and teeth ready to strike. The emphasis is on the head because of its readiness to take action.

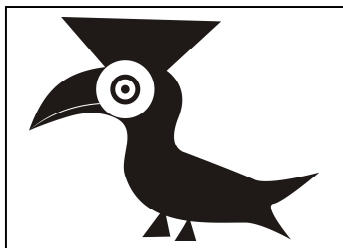


Figure 12: *Seanteε....*



Figure 13: *Sɛ woanntia ]w] ti....*

**14. Twi:** *Ani baako nnhwe ]krawa nnhwe asibe* (Figure 14)

**English:** A hunter cannot be turning his head this way and that way at the grey-haired monkey and the white striped monkey and gauge at both at the same time.



**Literal meaning:** The grey-haired and the striped monkeys are very alert and apprehensive and move very fast in their habitat. Because of their swiftness, it is unwise for one to attempt to focus one's eyes on both of them at the same time.

**Symbolic meaning:** One person cannot concentrate on two issues well at the same time.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to advise people who attempt unsuccessfully to deal with more than one important issue at a time.

The symbol comprises an *eye* on top of two *monkeys*. The idea is that a person is trying to focus on both monkeys at the same time which is impossible because of their swiftness.

**15. Twi:** *Animu nnye ahina, na w]apunu mu* (Figure 15)

**English:** The human face is not a water pot which can be perfumed by smoking it.

**Literal meaning:** In the traditional society, the water pot or water cooler is used to store drinking water. It is smoked occasionally with the fibre of oil palm fruit. The human face is not a pot, and its looks cannot be altered by applying the wrong influences.

**Symbolic meaning:** God gave every human being his or her own sense of honour and therefore no one should despise another despite his or her situation social, spiritual or economic.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to rebuke people who try to disrespect their fellows publicly and also to entreat people to show respect to everybody no matter their situation.

The central idea in the proverb is the human face, water pot and smoke coming out of a fire. The researchers chose to represent these ideas by creating two human faces under an inverted water pot and the smoke billowing over the faces. The human face is portrayed as being angry to show how unpleasant it is to have one's face being smoked with fire or smoke just as in a real life situation, where others who have no respect for others treat them anyhow they feel and thus get people angry.

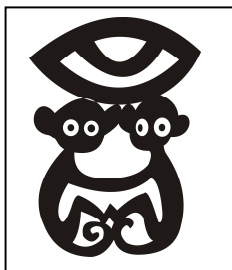


Figure 14: *Ani baako ...*

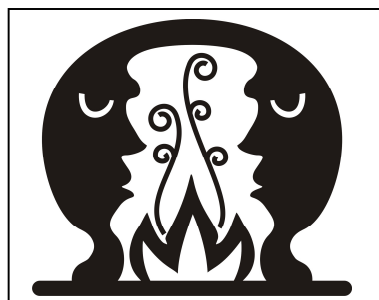


Figure 15: *Animu nnye ahina...*

**16. Twi:** *Aniwa nnnim awercho]* (Figure 16)

**English:** The eyes do not know times of sorrow.

**Literal meaning:** Human eyes go to sleep even in times of sorrow.

**Symbolic meaning:** No one can cheat nature; water always takes its own level.

**Socio-cultural significance:** (a). When a person falls asleep in the midst of pressing duties or emergencies. (b). When a person dozes in public, especially during a funeral.

The symbol is an eye with a tear dropping from it. The eye is again sunken in its ball to show grief.

**17. Twi:** *Funtum-kok]nini repe dabere nti na ]k]faa ]seb] adamfo]* (Figure 17)

**English:** It is the pursuit of accommodation that caused the sandworm to befriend the Leopard.

**Literal meaning:** The sandworm lives in sandy or dusty ground while the leopard also prefers to lie in the plain, dry sand. The leopard scratches the ground, to create a dry and sandy bed for itself. The sandworm then makes its home in the dust around the leopard's sleeping spot.

**Symbolic meaning:** No one befriends great people in society for nothing. They do so with ulterior motives.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to insinuate about the actions and attitudes of people who are always found around prominent people.

The main objects in the symbol are the *leopard* and the *sandworm*. The abstract head of the leopard rests on the crater made by the sandworm, oblivious of the intentions of the sandworm. The crater made by sandworm traps several small creatures such as ticks, fleas, buds, lice and ants on which the sandworm feeds. Otherwise, these pests would bite the leopard and feed on its skin and blood. The relationship between the sandworm and leopard, therefore, is a symbiotic one. The heart-like shape of the sandworm's home depicts the bond of friendship that has developed between the insect and the beast. The bumpy surface of the sandworm's home depicts the irregular nature of the sand in which the leopard rests. This, too, is a warning to the sandworm that if a leopard sees its prey, it may, without intent step on the crater, crush it and bury it. Hanging around big people poses many hidden threats.

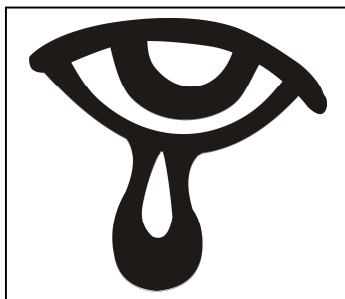


Figure 16: *Aniwa...*



Figure 17: *Funtum-kok]nini repε daberε nti...*

**18. Twi:** *Ani bere a, enns] gya* (Figure 18)

**English:** If the eye gets reddened, it does not catch fire.

**Literal meaning:** The full saying is: *Ani bere a, enns] gya, na yede nsuo adum no*. When eyes go red, they do not start a fire that may be quenched with water.

**Symbolic meaning:** When a person gets angry or finds himself in some unpleasant situation, naturally the eyes turn reddish. Anger, irritation, frustration and other similar emotive passions may result from stressful situations that cause the eyes to appear to be blood-shot. Yet, no matter the extent to which the eyes go red, the redness of the eye cannot start a literal fire. The proverb takes advantage of a pun resulting from the expression for the eyes going red that sounds the same as if the eyes are like fire. This kind of fire, though it cannot burn wood, can burn up the person in whom the fire is. The philosophy of this proverb is captured in the saying: 'Anger hurts its possessor more than its target'. Angry persons are, therefore, advised to look for another kind of water-patience rather than literal water, to quench the redness in the eyes.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to advise people who tend to accuse people of their problems and to tell them to calm down no matter the situation in which they are.

The symbol is composed of a flame of fire blazing out of an eye.

**19. Twi:** *Nkwan pa na etwe adwa* (Figure 19)

**English:** Good soups draw seats together.

**Literal meaning:** Many people go where there are good meals.

**Symbolic meaning:** When people have what others want, they attract other people to themselves. For example, a woman with courteous behaviours easily draws men to herself. It can also be said that a business centre that renders quality services always attracts customers.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to praise honourable people in society and also to advise people to take whatever they do seriously and work with all their strength so as to catch the eye of people who matter.

The traditional stools and the cooking pot are the central points in the discussion. There are two different stools to indicate different groups of people who are drawn to the soup.



Figure 18: *Ani bere nns] gya*



Figure 19: *Nkwan pa...*

**20. Twi:** *Toa na epe na ahoma san ne k]n mu* (Figure 20)

**English:** It is the wish of the gourd that a rope hangs around its neck.

**Literal meaning:** The gourd has a round and slender neck that makes it easy for a cord to be tied around on it for easy handling. It was traditionally used by farmers and warriors as storage bottle for water and gun powder, food, sorcery, etc. because of its hollowness and lightness in weight. To conveniently carry the gourd, a rope or cord is tied around the neck and then hung around the waist.

**Symbolic meaning:** The gourd was always readily prepared and stuffed with ingredients ready for action in times of needs. It was therefore considered as the lifeline of the bearer. Improper or insufficient storage of one's gourd might land him in trouble. Every warrior, therefore, made sure that his gourd was always ready. As explained above, a rope around the neck of the gourd made it convenient and handy. A rope around one's neck, nevertheless, restricts movement and interferes with one's personal freedom. The saying therefore always goes for situations in which one's availability for service imposes unpleasant restrictions.

**Socio-cultural significance:** The proverb is used to tease people who present themselves for work and then complain of being overloaded.



Figure 20: *Toa na epe...*

The gourd and a rope are the central icons. The rope is loose around the neck of the gourd when the owner does not need it. As soon as the owner grabs the rope, it squeezes itself easily around the neck of the gourd.

### Discussion

The results have indicated that in Ghanaian society, as in other parts of the world, it is not uncommon to hear the older generation complain about the decline or degeneration of proverbial language among the youth. It may be a universal tendency which can be seen as one of the numerous problems which confront the relationship between the young and the old. The elders' view of proverbial language is established by what they consider the norm, and what they consider the norm is what they themselves do (Addo, 2001; Yankah, 2012). Perhaps, their attitude represents a ploy to subjugate or dominate the younger people and assert their authority, or perhaps it represents an

unreflecting stance. But in any case, what they fail to realize is that language is not static and that people's linguistic behaviours change from situation to situation, from time to time.

A closer look at the proverbs have revealed that they are relevant to the present-day society as they are mostly employed in summing up situations (Figs. 1, 3, 4, 7, 11, 14, 16), passing judgments (Figs. 4, 11, 14, 16), reprimanding (Figs. 12, 15, 18), recommending course of actions (Figs. 1, 6, 17), serving as past precedents for present actions (Figs. 7, 16, 17), praising (Figs. 6, 19), cautioning (Figs. 2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18), speaking the unspeakable (Figs. 5, 7, 8, 9, 16), persuading hearers (Figs. 1, 3, 6, 14, 20) asserting someone's status (Figs. 7, 8) (Seitel 1977 as cited in Obeng, 1996), and teaching morals (Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20) as corroborated by Addo (2001).

Significantly evident in this present study is the ability of Akan indigenous people teaching morals through proverbs. Almost all the proverbs studied showcase several moral lessons which guide and guard the behaviours of the people they are directed at. It can therefore be inferred here that even though the proverbs crafted by people are used to sum up situations, pass judgements, reprimand, recommend course of actions, praise, caution, speak the unspeakable, persuade hearers as well as to assert people's status, the common denominator underlying them is to ensure the moral uprightness of the people.

### Conclusions

A central tenant in this study was to explore the symbolic and socio-cultural significance of selected Akan proverbs, and visually represent them for easy visual literacy in communication as well as the transmission of special messages of the cultural values of the people (Addo, 2001). The presentation of the proverbs in graphic form and their interpretation in both *Asante Twi* and English should put a universal premium on the symbols. Though, thoroughly *Twi* in background and form, the proverbs as well as their symbolic representations can be used universally throughout the English speaking areas of the globe because their significance cannot be over-emphasised.

The use of visual symbolism in the daily lives of the Akan people of Ghana, in fabric designing, wood carvings, paintings, clay work and metal work is a very old practice that can be traced to antiquity. These symbols were generated from proverbs and other wise sayings. The history of the lives of the people were also incorporated into these symbols for documentation and memorisation to hide secrets and facts that are open only to members of the community or society and also to transfer history and culture to the younger generation. The Akan people, therefore, placed much value in these symbols and so used them in all their activities.

In order to preserve these traditions in our contemporary era, there is the need to frequently create and introduce new and innovative images from proverbs, wise sayings and the life stories of our people into the socio-cultural systems of the people to help discover, create, and promote the many aspects of visual literacy and learning with this modern society.

### References

- Addo, A.E.P. (2001). African philosophical thought and wise sayings .retrieved on 24<sup>th</sup> February, 2010. <http://www.authorsden.com>.
- Dunn, R., & Griggs, S.A. (2000). *Practical Approaches to Using Learning Styles in Higher Education*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey.
- Domowitz, S (1992). Wearing Proverbs: Anyi Names for Printed Factory Cloth. *African Arts*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Special Issue: West African Textiles. pp. 82-87+104
- Dzobo, N.K. (2009). African symbols and proverbs; as source of knowledge and truth. *Journal of Cultural heritage and contemporary change series ii. Africa, volume 1*, chapter iv.  
Retrieved March, 21, 2010 from symbols.net. [www.symbols.net/africa](http://www.symbols.net/africa).
- Fang, Z. (1996). Illustrations, text, and the child reader. What are pictures in children's storybooks for? *Read. Horizons*, 37, 130-172
- Gyekye, K., (2003). *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Sankofa Publishing Co., Accra, Ghana.
- Kaplan, M., (2002). Employing proverbs to explore intergenerational relations across cultures, in M. Kaplan, N.

Henkin and A. Kusano (eds.): *Linking lifetimes: A global view of intergenerational exchange*: Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Nketia, J. H. K. (1971). The Linguistic Aspect of Style in African Languages. In *Linguistics in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, 733-57. *Current Trends in Linguistics* 7. The Hague: Mouton.

Obeng, S. G. (1996). The proverb as a mitigating and politeness strategy in Akan discourse. *Anthropological Linguistics* 38(3), 521-549.

Paczolay, G. (1997). *European Proverbs in 55 Languages*. Veszpre'm, Hungary.

Rattray, R. S. (1927). *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Schnurer, J. (1995). Proverbs as the way to understanding African cultures. In Shephard, R. (1993). *Elementary media education: The perfect curriculum*. *English Quarterly*, 25, 35.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1984). Qualitative research: An overview. In W.B. Gudykunst, & Y.Y. Kim (Eds.), *Methods for intercultural communication research* (pp. 169-184). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Yankah, K. (2012). *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Diasporic Africa Press).

Yankah, K. (1986). Proverb Speaking as a Creative Process: The Akan of Ghana. *Proverbium* 3:195-230.

Saah, K. K. (1986). Language Use and Attitudes in Ghana *Anthropological Linguistics*, Vol. 28, No. 3. pp. 367-377.

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

## CALL FOR PAPERS

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. There's no deadline for submission. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/Journals/>

The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a **fast** manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

### IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

