

Sociocultural Implications of Nzema Proverbs Relating to Children and Adults

Mohammed Yakub

Department of Akan-Nzema Education

University of Education, Winneba

yakubm88@gmail.com

Abstract

Proverbs are witty and metaphorical statements in which many didactics and moral values are concealed. Many studies, especially in the African context, have examined the societal perceptions of gender via proverbs. However, little is known about how children and adults are stratified through proverbs. The significant role of Nzema traditional proverbs in redirecting the paths of members of the society and maintaining social equilibrium requires attention in the literature of paremiology. Adopting Sharifian's (2011) cultural linguistics framework, this study explores how children and adults are portrayed in Nzema proverbs. The analysis is based on 17 proverbs purposively selected from primary and secondary sources. The data demonstrates that children are not adamant and recalcitrant by default; rather, they have other acceptable behaviours which the society embraces. It is revealed that intelligence is not attributed to adults only; rather, children also display a certain level of intelligence, though they sometimes act as immature and inexperienced. The article also shows that the Nzema child is brought up to desist from intruding into adult discussions, especially when uninvited. The study concludes that the advisory content of this category of proverbs has helped to reshape the conduct of deviant individuals in order to promote peaceful societal coexistence.

Keywords: Proverbs; Communication; Children; Adults; Cultural Conceptual Metaphor.

Introduction

Nzema refers to the language, the speakers and a geographical location (Annan, 1980). The people of Nzema are found at the South-West part of the Western Region of Ghana, West Africa. The Nzemaland is bordered to the West by Ivory Coast (La Côte d'Ivoire), to the East by the people of Ahanta, to the North by Aowin (or Anyi) and Wassa, and to the South by the Gulf of Guinea (Kwesi, 1992). Nzema belongs to the Niger-Congo Kwa language

family. Politically, the people of Nzema cover three Districts (Constituencies) in Ghana, namely; **Dwɔmɔɔ** (Nzema West), **Elɛmgbɛɛ** (Nzema Central) and **Ɛvalɔɛ** (Nzema East) (see Annan, 1980; Kwaw, 2008). The Ghana Population and Housing Census conducted in 2021, puts the total number of Nzema at 342, 090. As an important aspect of their cultural and oral heritage, the Nzema live by a chunk of traditional proverbs which mirror their cultural beliefs, ideologies and social norms (Nyame & Tomekyin, 2018; Yakub, 2019; Yakub et al., 2021).

The present article looks at Nzema proverbs that shed light on the relationship between children and adults. It examines the folk perceptions and stratification of children and adults as conveyed in Nzema proverbs, highlighting their expected roles and responsibilities in line with what the society encourages and/or repudiates. The article also seeks to unravel the implications of this category of proverbs and how they can ensure social cohesion and solidarity, and to promote and maintain peaceful societal co-existence. As many aspects of the Nzema oral tradition stand the risk of extinction in the near future without any documentation and record since many social transmission processes have discontinued, this is a key motivation for the present study. Furthermore, previous works on African proverbs such as Oha (1998), Hussein (2005), Aku-Sika (2016), Barasa & Opande (2017), Lomotey & Chachu (2020) and Mariwah et al. (2022), among others have focused on various human problems and social issues through the prism of proverbs across languages and cultures. None of these studies, however, pays attention to the relationship between children and adults as conveyed in proverbs. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, only Dogbey & Sapaty (2019) examine how children and adults are portrayed in Ewe proverbs. There is the need therefore to enrich the literature with further studies which inform a people's worldview and philosophy; deepening our understanding on how children and adults are represented through proverbs. This is a gap in the literature the present study aims to address. The study is significant as it unravels the Nzema worldview; highlighting how their perceptions of children and adults are entrenched in proverbs. The cultural conceptual metaphor analytical tool, which forms part of the tenets of the cultural linguistics framework, is considered useful and employed in the data analysis. This framework is relevant to provide adequate description and explanation of the imagery and metaphoric correlations in the proverbs based on Nzema cultural beliefs.

The concept and function of proverbs

Proverbs and proverbial studies are increasingly gaining scholarly attention. The rich literature on proverbs, especially in the African context, has been written from broad interdisciplinary perspectives by folklorists, communicators, sociologists, educationists, philosophers, sociolinguists, and anthropologists (Mensah, 2013). Oral literature scholars such as Finnegan (1970), Yankah (1989), Okpewho (1992) and Agyekum (2005), among many others have worked extensively on African proverbs from socio-cultural and sociolinguistics perspectives. Other researchers, including Mensah (2010), Akanbi (2015) and Yuka (2016) have examined the grammatical (structural) properties of Efik, Yoruba and Lamnso proverbs respectively. Thus, many attempts have been made to define the proverb genre. Finnegan (1970) describes proverbs as a body of short statements built up over the years, which reflect the thought and insight of a people. Olatunji (1984) considers proverbs as horses of speech; they are used to discover the truth when it is missing in discourse. This suggests that a proverb can drive home a speaker's intended message. In the view of Mensah (2013), proverbs form part of oral performances which are forms of 'deeper' communication and means of constructing reality in every speech community. This position assumes that a people's lived experiences and cultural beliefs are reflected in their proverbs. In the words of Onwe (2018, 32), "a proverb is a relatively short but complete statement based on experience conveying traditional wisdom in figurative language to guide behaviour".

Agyekum (2019, 319) shares a similar view as he asserts that "proverbs are interpretations of traditional wisdom based on the experiences and socio-cultural life of our elders". Onwe's (2018) and Agyekum's (2019) assertions encapsulate the fact that proverbs are traditional sayings attributed to the wisdom of past and present elders in the society, based on life trajectories and experiences. Yankah (2012) and Agyekum (2017) show that a speaker's communicative competence could be judged based on the use of proverbs in appropriate discourse situation. In line with this opinion, Bisilki & Nkamigbo (2017) observe that a person's ability to appropriately quote and/or interpret proverbs is tied to their level of maturity in their culture. The authors further state that, among the Bìkpakpaam of northern Ghana, for instance, "a person can earn popularity for being so noted for proverb use" (see Bisilki & Nkamigbo, 2017, 118).

The significant place that metaphor occupies in proverbial meaning and interpretation has also not gone unnoticed. Gibbs (1994, 309) reports that "proverbs appear as special cases of the general process of metaphorical understanding". As Bradbury (2002) argues, one

uses the model of metaphor and the uses analogies in every proverb performance such that proverb comprehension rests upon mapping the similarities between two widely divergent domains knowledge, one familiar and experiential, the other more remote and abstract (cited in Mensah, 2013, 89). Finnegan (2012) posits that a major feature of the proverb is its allusive, symbolic and metaphoric nature, which accounts for the multiplicity of its contextual interpretation. In this article, I argue that the imagery of animals, plants, human body-parts and other abstractions feature greatly in the selected proverbs. Hence, metaphoric corresponding plays a key role in arriving at the ethno-pragmatic readings and sociocultural underpinnings of children and adults related proverbs in Nzema. The crucial role that proverbs play in child raising has not gone unrecognised. In a study of Igbo proverbs, Ukaegbu (2006) contends that proverbs are very effective instrument of character moulding when a child is exposed early to the ethical standards of his or her environment through proverbs. Corroborating this position, Onwe (2018) states that:

Proverbs play a fundamental role in the formation of human character and in child upbringing. They transmit societal norms from one generation to another and serve as a tool for instructing, training, guiding, correcting, reprimanding and praising children during their journey from childhood to adulthood (Onwe, 2018, 1).

Onwe's postulation gives an insight that the moral content of proverbs also touches on the means of ensuring proper child grooming. In other words, how children are brought up to be patriotic, respectful and responsible adults is concealed in the didactics of proverbs. For instance, the Ewe people of Ghana use a proverb that says: *Tsitsiawo kple deviawo siaae sɔa ta wɔa nu*, which literally means 'The aged and the young both perform a task' (see Dogbey & Sapaty, 2019, 112). This proverb instils in the child the virtue of industriousness. It condemns indolence and emboldens people of younger age to be engaged in productive activities at all times, just as the grownups do. This, in turn, ensures self-reliance and promotes socio-economic development. The Nzema also use a proverb that places restriction on the extent to which children can get involved in matters related to adults, such as *Kakula te kɔndɔma a ɔte mɔɔ kɔ ɔ nloa nu la* 'A child must take a morsel of food that he can easily swallow' (Quarm & Kwesi, 1998, 102). This witty statement controls the activities of the child, in that a child must not be presumptuous, for instance, not to intrude into adult discussions uninvited. It also rebukes children who keep the company of adults who are noted for indulging in vices. Another adage among the Nzema says: *Kakula enzele kpanyinli mɔɔ ende kpɔke la* 'A child does not need to ridicule an incapacitated adult'. The moral in this statement reminds children not to make mockery of elderly people who may

be suffering from some ailments, since a child does not know what will happen to him or her at old age. A parallel of this is the Likpakpaln proverb provided by Bisilki & Nkamigbo (2017) such as: *Unaabu kalaa uyingbe* ‘A calf does not make mockery of a crooked horned cow’. The basic sense of this proverb is that since a calf is yet to develop horns, it cannot tell how its future horns will look like. There is the possibility of the calf growing to sprout crooked or ugly horns or not even develop any horns at all. In essence, it is dangerous for a child to make mockery of any adult (Bisilki & Nkamigbo, 2017, 123).

In a study of proverbs in selected languages from northern Pakistan, Degener (2022) shows that the representation and kind of relationships between husband and wife, man and woman, children and parents, grandparents and grandchildren, individual and family, son-in-law and daughter-in-law are well noticeable in proverbs. The study confirmed many clichés, as the author summarised the findings of the study as presented below:

women are subordinate, and untrustworthy, children are wished for, but hard to raise, mothers are good, and stepmothers evil, the honour of the family must be protected. However, there are remarkably few proverbs about the stupidity of women and their talkativity (Degener, 2022, 1).

Assessing Degener’s assertion carefully, one may observe that parents go through many difficulties in the process of child upbringing. The difficulty here may not be attributed to lack of finance on the part of the parents only, but could also be linked to children’s ‘recalcitrance and disobedience’ which may be hard for parents/adults to deal with. In the current study, I focus on Nzema proverbs related to children and adults in general. The article aims to bring to the fore the apparent disparities and imbalances in the way children and adult are represented within the Nzema culture.

Cultural linguistics

The paper is anchored on cultural conceptualisations and language framework, elucidated by Sharifian (2011; 2017). Cultural linguistics is a sub-field of linguistics which explores the relationship between language, culture and conceptualisations. The early notion of cultural linguistics may be attributed to the works of Langacker (1994) and Palmer (1996), who share the view that cognitive linguistics recognises and embraces cultural knowledge as a significant facet of grammar. Palmer (1996) argues that cognitive linguistics is directly applicable to the study of language and culture. He observes that language is a play of

verbal symbols based on mental pictures; as he rightly referred to this as ‘imagery’, which is culturally constructed.

Following Palmer (1996), Sharifian (2011) proposed and advanced the concept of cultural linguistics in a multidisciplinary perspective, replacing Palmer’s term ‘imagery’, with perhaps a more suitable alternative as ‘cultural conceptualizations’ (Sharifian, 2011; see also Peeters, 2016). Sharifian (2017) contends that cultural linguistics is responsible for exploring features of language that have cultural basis. It employs cultural conceptualisations as analytical tools such as ‘cultural schema’, ‘cultural category’ and ‘cultural-conceptual’ metaphor (cf. Sharifian, 2003; 2005; Peeters, 2016). “Conceptualisations act as the foundation for our emergent behaviour in our daily encounters” (Sharifian, 2005, 75). The author further postulates that our cultural experiences and worldview to a large extent provides a system of human conceptualizations and may even determine the way we conceive our body and environment. In the view of Sharifian (2003), cultural conceptualisations enable the members of a cultural group to think in one mind.

Taking insights from the review above, it could be noticed that cultural linguistics has its emphasis on conceptualisations that are culturally-constructed. The approach highlights the way members of a cultural group perceive a phenomenon in common, and how they conceive their environment based on traditional experiences, beliefs, values and customs. Therefore, the cultural conceptualisation framework provides a useful analytical perspective for exploring children and adults related proverbs among the Nzema, which abound in metaphorical abstractions. In the analysis of the proverbs, I show the metaphoric correlations between plants, animals, human body parts, among other imageries that help to construct the expected social roles and relationships between children and adults in Nzema cultural set up.

Methodology

The article employs a qualitative research approach in examining how children and adults are perceived and constructed through the lens of proverbs in the Nzema socio-cultural milieu. Qualitative research deals with a method of describing an event or a phenomenon without making use of numerical data (Patton, 2002). The choice of the qualitative approach is motivated by its flexibility in nature, providing the opportunity for a researcher to make adequate and comprehensive description of a particular phenomenon (Creswell,

2009). The data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. I relied chiefly on one published source, entitled '*Nzema mrele nee be ngilenu*', by Quarm & Kwesi (1998). This material was considered useful because it is a compilation of many traditional proverbs in Nzema, authored by native speakers who are noted for their rich knowledge in Nzema language and culture. The primary data involved a means of participant and nonparticipant observations. As an indigenous member of the Nzema society who had lived with the people for over thirty years, I had the opportunity to attend some traditional gatherings and ceremonies such as marriage, funeral and arbitration among the Nzema. During such occasions, I sought permission as a matter of ethics and hand-recorded in my data collection notebook, proverbs that were used in such events. I targeted such gatherings because they usually involved experienced traditional elders who are competent proverb users and used them profusely in communication. I based on my intuition as an indigenous speaker and member of the Nzema society to generate additional data.

Having assembled about 40 proverbs in all, I purposively selected proverbs concerning children and adults in which we shall be interested in this work. Through semi-structured interviews, I crosschecked the data and sought clarifications from six native Nzema scholars who are traditional leaders and are also competent in the use of proverbs. I interrogated the essence of the conceptual-metaphoric mappings of the proverbs and their ethno-pragmatic interpretations. The participants comprised three males and three females, aged between 65-80 years. I prevented biases in the selection of my participants (concerning their gender) since the Nzema society sees both men and woman as knowledgeable enough to cite and interpret proverbs. The period of data gathering was 18 months and 17 proverbs were purposively selected for analysis. I deemed the selected proverbs relevant to shed light on the expected social roles and behaviours of children and adults. The data were categorised based on connected themes, in terms of what they seek to convey about children and adults per the Nzema cultural worldview. The discussion focused on the symbolic functions of the proverbs and how the imagery of animals and plants serves as basis for folk conceptualisation and representation of children and adults. I present each proverb and provide a morpheme-by-morpheme interlineal glossing, followed by English translation. In the analysis, the ethno-pragmatic readings of the proverbs are highlighted in connection with the Nzema cultural conceptualisations.

Results and discussion

In this section, I present the data and take up the analysis under various subheadings. The data are categorised based on related themes that are deemed relevant to shed light on the way children and adults are represented in Nzema traditional society through proverbs. In the analysis that follows, I explore the relevant proverbs under the following tropes:

Children are inexperienced

Children may be perceived universally as inexperienced. This notion may hold true across cultures, where the Nzema people are no exception. The Nzema have a handful of aphorisms through which they conceptualise and perceive children as not wise enough to make informed decisions. Such proverbs tend to paint children as ignorant, less experienced and dependent on adults for wisdom among other things. The following are some examples:

1. Kakula ze nriandi na ɔ-n-ze fea
 Child know run CONJ 2SG-NEG-know hide
 ‘A child can run but, cannot hide’.

Sometimes, children try to deny facts and deceive adults even concerning matters which they are obviously guilty. Though children make such attempts, they often do not succeed because adults have intelligent means to persuade them to reveal the realities. The proverb is worth cited when a child tries to deny truth, but the truth is eventually discovered. In this proverb, the Nzema conceptualise children as having low thinking faculties and as less experienced, such that their intentions to trick adults often do not materialise. The proverb highlights the fact that children cannot hide anything from parents/adults, since they lack the cognitive abilities to finally accomplish their intentions, though they may take good initiatives. For example, a participant (female, aged 78) noted as follows “a child who decides not to go to school one morning may say they were sacked for school fees the previous day, forgetting that their parents might pay the fees in advance without their knowledge. In this case, the Nzema would describe the child as ‘being able to run, but unable to hide’”. The Ewe of Ghana use a proverb that conveys similar message; indicating that children cannot be perfect in their endeavours as compared to adults, such as *Devi fe koklo nyɔnyɔ la, fu mewɔna le eɣu o* ‘when a child de-feathers a fowl, a lot of feathers still remain’ (see Dogbey & Sapaty, 2019, 113). The Nzema proverb in (2) emphasises children’s ignorance and inexperience such as:

2. Kakula nwu senzεke nye a ɔ-se baka ɔ
 Child see lobster eye PART 3SG-say stick EMPH
 ‘If a child sees the eye of a lobster, he/she thinks it is just a stick’.

In seeking further clarifications on what this proverb seeks to communicate, a male participant (aged 69) said that “the eyes of the lobster are very thin, which can be erected as straight as sticks. Therefore, an inexperienced person (a child) would describe them as mere sticks at a glance”. The deeper sense ingrained in this proverb is that children make over generalisations. In this proverb, the Nzema conceptualise children as being unable to clearly distinguish between what is right and wrong. When they conceive of a thing, they apply the concept everywhere due to ignorance and less experience. This points to the fact that children could be easily deceived. The proverb in 3 also shows that a child’s intelligence and other capabilities are not comparable with that of an adult. The proverb says:

3. Kakula le epinli a ɔ nee kpanyinli εdeε ε-n-zε
 Child POSS sex organ PART 2SG CONJ adult own EMPH-NEG-equal
 ‘Even if a child has a sexual organ, it is not as big as that of an adult’.

The *epinli* ‘sexual organ’ as found in the proverb is actually symbolic. Here, ‘sexual organ’ is the only entity mentioned, however, it is used metonymically to represent all other things or features that adults possess in greater size or quantities than children. Agyekum (2018, 24-25) refers to metonymy as ‘part-for-whole relation’, where only a part/portion of an entity or a phenomenon is used to refer to the whole entity of phenomenon. In this proverb, the intelligence/wisdom, experiences and muscular strength of children among other things which are represented by only ‘sexual organ’, are said not to be comparable with those of adults. Below is another proverb that indicates children’s ignorance, inexperience and low thinking abilities. It reads as follows:

4. Kpanyinli de aze a ɔ nye nwu moa tela kakula mɔɔ de anwuma la
 Adult sit down PART 3SG eye see far than child COMP sit top PART
 ‘A seated adult can still see from afar than a child who climbs up high’.

This proverb underscores the Nzema perception that children are inexperienced. For what reason should a person who is seated on the ground view something from afar than one on top of a tree? The communicative content of this proverb implies that, adults are wiser and more experienced than children. In Nzema cultural conceptualisation, as I paraphrase what a male participant (aged 79) recounted, ‘a seated adult could be likened to one that is usually found in the home, perhaps without much exposure to modern happenings. The child that climbs up high could also be likened to one that had acquired western education and had travelled to many places. Comparing the two in terms of wisdom, the proverb still portrays adults as more knowledgeable’. Adults may foresee and foretell the outcome of certain current circumstances due partly to their previous experiences¹. A similar proverb among the Ikwo people of Nigeria reads as follows: *Iphe ogerenya nodu anodu phu be nwata nyihuru eli oshi t’aphudu* ‘what the elder sees sitting down, a youth cannot see even from a tree top’ (Onwe, 2018, 94). This proverb credits the elderly with the possession of more wisdom than children. It seeks to de-emphasise positioning or height in relation to wisdom acquisition; which also is akin to the Nzema adage: *Ɛ nee Ɛ ze tendenle se a te Ɛ ti pene ɔ* ‘if you have the same height as your father, you do not equate your wisdom to his’. By positioning the elder in a sitting position and the child (in a standing position) on a tree top, in their quest for wisdom, the proverb clearly places the elderly at an advantage position over the youth, irrespective of their heights (Onwe, 2018). The data in 5 also corroborates the Nzema notion that children’s skill and knowledge cannot be compared with those of adults.

5. Saa avile te m-gbanyima nyunlu a bie Ɛ-m-minli
 COND bead.PL tear PL-adult face PART SOME EMPH-NEG-lost
 ‘When the beads get torn in the presence of adults, none gets missing’

This proverb highlights the point that adults are meticulous in what they do, unlike children. Beads are often very tiny, and so some could easily escape when they get torn. However, the proverb in 5 communicates that in the presence of adults, each of such beads could be identified. Thinking beyond the bead metaphor, we conceptualise that adult, per their experiences, can investigate into matters and obtain accurate results. In an interview, a participant explained the import of this proverb also as portraying adults as having the prerequisite skill and wisdom to handle sensitive and delicate issues. Onwe (2018, 97)

¹ This is not to claim that adults are soothsayers; rather, the concern here is about the experience and cognitive maturity on the part of adults as compared with their children counterpart.

gives a rendition of a similar proverb from the Ikwo cultural perspective as follows: *Eke ogerenya taru aku be egbo iya agbaje iche* ‘where the elderly cracks palm kernels, the shells are different.’ This proverb relies on the image of cracking palm kernels to point out that the result that will be achieved when an adult performs an activity will be different from when a child does the same activity. In this case, “the size of the shells will show that the stone was not applied too forcefully in the cracking process; the abundance of kernel seeds will show evidence that the seeds were not crushed by the weight of the stone.” In all, less energy was skillfully exerted and waste was considerably minimised (Onwe, 2018, 97). As Onwe observes, the proverb is a metaphor for the benefits of skill and expertise that only come from age and experience possessed by the elderly, though not exclusively by them as younger people can, through being trained by the aged. The next Nzema example, in 6, specifically ranks adults far-higher than children with regard to solving problems perfectly. The proverb says:

6. Kila kakula di-di nwoma nloa
 Mouse child eat-RED animal.skin around
 ‘A little mouse feeds around a dried skin of an animal’.

When an animal (a sheep for instance) is slaughtered and its skin is removed, the skin becomes dried and hardened, making it very difficult for a little mouse to bite. In Nzema cultural perception, as evidenced in the proverb in 6, *kila kakula* ‘little mouse’ can stand for a child, whereas *nwoma* ‘dried skin’ can represent any difficult task or, importantly, a problem that must be solved. As a male participant (aged, 74) highlighted, “it is the ‘adult mouse’ that can bite and chew such a dried skin perfectly. The little mouse can only feed around the skin, but cannot actually chew it thoroughly”. He further noted that “unlike ‘adult mouse’, little mouse has little teeth that are not very sharp and this is likened to a child’s wisdom and intelligence that cannot be equated to that of an adult”. Simply put, the Nzema use this proverb to imply that children lack adequate knowledge to deal perfectly with challenging issues. An Ewe proverb that conveys similar message reads as follows: *Vi kaa akple gâ mekaa nya gâ o* ‘a child who can mould big balls of food in their palm cannot mould a big case/problem for solutions’ (Dogbey & Sapaty, 2019, 113). This proverb underscores the point that a child is not ‘mentally strong’ to reason about how best to overcome certain constraints. It seeks to emphasise the glutton attribute of children, and portray them essentially as incognito.

Children and intelligence

The foregoing proverbs (in 1-6) conveyed children as inexperienced, intellectually weak and ignorant. Conversely, proverbs (7), (8) and (9) show that children can act wisely. These proverbs confirm commonplace belief that children can display some level of intelligence and experience. Take the examples as follows:

7. Bε-belebela kakula na bε-aha ye elue
3PL-convince child CONJ 3PL-eat 3SG food
'A child is convinced before his/her food could be tasted'.

The import of this proverb suggests that children are not so ignorant and intellectually weak as they may be perceived. For instance, during an interview, a participant (male, aged 72) narrated this scenario: "for someone to taste a child's food or take any item that the child considers very precious, one would have to speak in a 'wise' manner to convince the child for the two to reach amicable agreement. Such convincing words show that children also reason." This proverb gives an insight that the intelligence of children cannot be always underrated and taken for granted. When an adult struggles with a child in the course of taking any item from him or her, this proverb becomes useful to inform the adult to rather speak in a persuasive manner to seek the child's approval. Another proverb that underscores children's intelligence is seen in example 8 below:

8. Kakula mɔɔ sua εhane bole zo la ze leka mɔɔ ɔ-bɔ ye takola a
Child COMP set trap rock top PART know place COMP 3SG-fix 3SG stick PART
'A child who intends to set a trap at a rocky area knows where to fix the sticks.

In Nzema traditional setting, some family heads (fathers) hunt for animals by using guns or by setting traps to provide food for their families. Setting a trap can involve the use of sticks, which need to be fixed firmly into the ground. If the area to set the trap is rocky, the hunter finds it very difficult and sometimes ignores the exercise outright. In example 8, it is portrayed that the child notwithstanding the difficulties and challenges associated with setting a trap on a rock, endeavours to do so because he/she has the 'experience' and can manage to fix the sticks in an appropriate area. The child tries to prevent the rocks from being an obstacle to the progress of the exercise. From Nzema cultural conceptualisation, this proverb implies that children are not absolutely ignorant or inexperienced. In their own intellectual capacities, they are able to overcome challenges in life and act wisely sometimes.

Buttressing the fact that children can reason and act wisely, another proverb among the Nzema as demonstrated in example 9 reads as follows:

9. Kakula nwu ɔ sa anwo nrinzi a ɔ nee mgbanyinli di aleε
Child know 3SG hand self wash PART 3SG CONJ PL-adult eat food
'If a child is able to wash their hands clean, they dine with elders'.

Cross-culturally, intelligence and the ability to do things perfectly are usually attributed to adults/elders. In this vein, a child who may be invited to undertake any exercise with an adult, according to Nzema cultural beliefs, is regarded as one who is filled with wisdom. It is in the light of this traditional perception that the Nzema have instituted the above proverb (in 9) to portray that children can sometimes reason wisely. According to a 77-year-old female participant, the ethno-pragmatic implication of the proverb transcends the basic act of washing one's hands thoroughly and eating with the elderly. The didactic message inherent in the proverb is to encourage children to always do what is right, so that adults would appreciate and reward them. Hence, 'eating with adults' signifies many other benefits that could be gained when a child acts intelligently.

Children as subordinates to adults

In Nzema traditional society, children are brought up to cultivate the habit of honouring their parents and respecting natural hierarchy in general. Parents try to inculcate in their children the spirit of obedience and respect for authority. Thus, a child who disregards social norms and flouts authority is usually reprimanded. Among the Nzema, like in many other cultures, adults have authority over children; they control them in such a way that they (children) may get the opportunity to misbehave only when adults are not around. The following proverb, 10, emphasises children subordination to adults:

10. Kusu ε-n-le eke a ngila dwe'
Cat EMPH-NEG-available place PART PL-mouse misbehave
'When the cat is away, mice misbehave'.

In this wise saying, the Nzema conceptualise adults as *kusu* 'cat' and represent children as *ngila* 'mice'. The cat is noted for bouncing on the mouse to arrest it, and even to feed on its carcass. This indicates that the mouse is subordinate to the cat and has no cause to

misbehave in the presence of the cat. Similarly, it appears obvious that children usually misbehave and do what they wish, especially when there is no adult around to instruct and/or reprimand them. Where adults are readily available to monitor the affairs of children, they minimise or do not indulge in any act of misconduct. This proverb is usually employed in discursive context when a child misbehaves in the absence of his or her parents or any other adult. As a participant (female, 66) narrated, “this proverb is not limited to the relationship between adults and children only, but also communicates a general truth that people often take the law into their own hands. It teaches that several acts of misconduct take place when there is no authority in place, as for instance when there is no chief in a particular community”.

Children as adamant and recalcitrant

Some proverbs in Nzema project children in terms of highlighting their attitudes and conducts in the society either negatively or positively. The examples in 11 and 12 show that children have certain behavioural traits that are considered unpleasant; in which adults do not take delight. Such proverbs seek to depict children as stubborn creatures who do not heed advice. The examples are as follows:

11. Kakula mɔɔ anzo ye se la wu anzosesebe ewule
 Child COMP ear COP hard PART die stubborn death
 ‘A stubborn child dies from his/her stubbornness’.

12. Kakula ye mɔɔ be-n-ye a ɔ-nwu mɔɔ be-n-nwu ye
 Child do COMP 3PL-NEG-do PART 3SG-see COMP 3PL-NEG-see 3SG
 ‘If a child does what is not supposed to be done, he/she suffers for it’.

These proverbs provide insights into the assumed recalcitrance associated with children. The proverbs inform us that children sometimes do not follow instructions from adults/parents. The proverbs are imbued with the notion of ‘cause and effect’ relationship, which can be rightly employed in a communicative situation to remind an adamant child that their misconduct could lead to terrible repercussions. A critical examination of proverbs 11 and 12 reveals that the Nzema do not connive with children who prove recalcitrance. With regard to these proverbs, the Nzema child is checked and reprimanded accordingly when they violate an accepted social conduct. Make et al. (2014, 239) also show that the Wolaita people of southern Ethiopia have a related proverb that says: *Naata*

yeelliyoogee meetennashin dichchciyoogee metto ‘it is not difficult to give birth to a baby, but it is difficult to raise or discipline him/her’. This proverb deepens our understanding that children have the tendencies of becoming stubborn; such as flouting authorities, ignoring parents’ instructions and disregarding some social norms, though adults may also be charged for these culturally undesirable attitudes. It implies that parents cannot escape entirely from challenges in the course of ensuring proper child upbringing, and when the child eventually goes wayward, the parents have themselves to be blamed (Make et al., 2014, 239).

Children have good behaviour/manners

The examples in 11 and 12 examined above, although associate children with stubbornness, 13 and 14 tend to paint a different picture about children. In the discussions that follow, we show that children are not by default adamant and recalcitrant; rather, they possess certain implicit tendencies which manifest by means of displaying good conduct. The first counter proverb says:

13. Kakula kpale kenle bie ba-ho abolokyi
 Child good day some FUT-go abroad
 ‘A good child will travel abroad in future’.

14. Kakula kpale di dikyene dahuu
 Child good eat profit always
 ‘A good child is always rewarded.

These proverbs inform us that children can have good attitude and conduct. They point to the fact that children can act positively such as adhering to advice, performing their minor domestic roles like fetching of water, washing of plates, sweeping as well as doing many pleasant things which parents and the society at large would embrace. In traditional Nzema society, children who behave well are encouraged and motivated to keep it up. One of the numerous means of doing this is to assure them; using certain expressions that relate to long life, well wishes and prosperity such as ‘living abroad with a better job’. By this, the child endeavours to behave positively at all times. There is therefore no wonder the incorporation of ‘will travel abroad’ specifically in proverb 13. This means that the child would ‘go far’ in life, which implies that he or she would be successful and accomplished.

In 14, we see that an obedient child who runs errands and performs all duties assigned to them by an adult usually receive gifts for such positive behaviour.

Children do not compete with adults

In the Nzema cultural context, children are trained to refrain from being intruders and inquisitive. In other words, they are not expected to thrust into discussions that concern the elderly. The proverb in 15 below shows that children, particularly in Nzema culture, are discouraged and prevented from engaging in matters and activities that do not concern them. This proverb teaches children not to overstep their bounds as in:

15. Kakula bɔ ɛnlɔnkɔɛ na ɔ-m-bɔ ɛnwɔnra
Child break snail.shell CONJ 3SG-NEG-break tortoise.shell
'A child breaks the shell of a snail, but does not break the shell of a tortoise'.

In this didactic proverb, we are told that children are supposed to engage in issues that befit their levels and capacities as children. In Nzema cultural conceptualisation, breaking the shell of a snail represents activities that require less muscular efforts and breaking the shell of a tortoise is conceived as undertaking a herculean task. The proverb is also useful to advise a child who tries to perform a very difficult task beyond their reach and capacity, and which may eventually pose health challenges to them. The Nzema also use this witty statement when a child is being reminded to stop keeping the company of people who may be older than them, especially when such adults are noted for indulging in social vices. In other words, children are entreated to 'move' with their peers. Furthermore, the proverb in 15 is significant to rebuke children who attempt to intrude into adult conversations. Under no circumstance should the Nzema child make uninvited contribution when adults are talking. In this case, they are advised to discuss matters that pertain to them as children. This is important to prevent the child from inviting any trouble for the family by means of gossip. Dogbey & Sapaty (2019) provide an example of Ewe proverbs that also restricts the child in terms of what discussions they can engage themselves in, such as *womekpɔa nu gbɔ na vi o ke boŋ afɔ gbɔ ye wokpɔna nɛ* 'we do not see the lips of a child, but the legs.' The proverb implies that a child must not intrude into adult conversations; rather, he or she must be active in running errands to support adults/parents (Dogbey & Sapaty, 2019, 113). Another proverb with an analogous message is presented in example 16 below:

16. Kakula tu besea na ɔ-n-du bentenle
 Child uproot small palm tree CONJ 3SG-NEG-uproot big palm tree
 ‘A child uproots a young palm tree, but does not uproot a mature palm tree’.

The young palm tree is noted for possessing a few and immature roots which could easily be made to fall. On the other hand, a mature palm tree has many roots firmly fixed into the soil, making it very tedious to be brought down. Conceptually, *tu besea* ‘to uproot young palm tree’ is to engage in minor activities that require less muscular strength, whereas *tu bentenle* ‘to uproot mature palm tree’ represents activities that demand more strength. In this metaphoric correlation, children are seen as ‘weaker creatures’ and are expected to engage in minor works as such. They must desist from indulging in complex issues and tasks which are meant for adults to tackle. This proverb also admonishes children who are pry and try to get involved when adults are conversing.

A child does not need to test the intelligence of an adult

A study conducted by Kwaw (2008) reveals how the Nzema cherish children who regard the elderly as custodians of cultural knowledge, and must therefore accord them maximum respect. The Nzema do not appreciate children who try to play tricks on the intelligence of adults. Under no circumstance should a child hide to do anything independently and test an adult’s knowledge about it. The proverb in 17 sheds light on this cultural perception among the Nzema.

17. Kakula ε-n-du-du anloma nwo n-dεke n-gɔ-ngile kpanyinli
 Child EMPH-NEG-remove-RED bird body PL-feather NEG-go-show adult
 ‘A child does not pluck the feathers of a bird completely and ask an adult to name it.’

When one de-feathers a fowl completely, hardly would somebody be able to identify its kind. In a deeper sense, this proverb implies that a person (child) should not do anything in isolation and later invite an adult to prove their knowledge about it. If the adult’s assumptions are not proven right in such a ‘test’, what would people take them for? In order not to put any adult in such situation to undermine their intelligence and reputation, therefore, the Nzema resort to this proverb to warn their children. Crucially, the proverb advises a child to first inform an adult about their intentions to accomplish a task. In this

way, the adult would be in a better position to give them assistance, be it in the form of advice or finance among other things.

Conclusion

Set within the cultural conceptualisation framework, the article discussed the sociocultural stratification of children and adults as conveyed in selected Nzema proverbs. The study revealed that plant and animal imagery in Nzema proverbs plays a key role in conceptualising and understanding the relationship between children and adults, which reflects the Nzema cultural tradition, cosmology and philosophy. The findings further confirmed many clichés, for instance, children are not adamant and recalcitrant by default, rather, they have other acceptable behavioural traits which members of the society would always embrace. In terms of cognitive ability, the study showed that intelligence is not attributed to adults only. Children also display a remarkable level of intelligence, though they sometimes act as immature and inexperienced. It is also evident that the Nzema child is trained to refrain from intruding into adult discussions, especially when uninvited. Children must be submissive and live in the society as a subordinate to adults. Even among their own peers, the Nzema child must demonstrate respect and humility. By implication, the article has shown that Nzema proverbs abound in didactics that can prompt both children and adults to recognise their expected roles. This fosters child-adult relationship and promotes ethical standards, which in turn ensures a harmonised and peaceful sociocultural milieu. Importantly, this study underscores the fact that the understanding and appropriate interpretation of proverbs is culture-internally motivated. The study has implications for future exploration of the sociocultural representation of children and parents in Nzema proverbs. Such studies may explicate how the expected social responsibilities of children and parents are expressed through proverbs to redirect the paths of members of the Nzema society.

References

- Agyekum, K. (2019). The ethno-pragmatics of Akan advice. *Pragmatics*, 29(3), 309-331.
- Agyekum, K. (2018). *Akan body parts expressions: Cognitive semantics and pragmatic approach*. Accra: Adwinsa Publications Ltd.

- Agyekum, K. (2017). The ethno-semantics and proverbs of *ohia* 'poverty' in Akan. *Legon Journal of the Humanities*, 28(2), 23-48.
- Agyekum, K. (2005). An Akan oral artist: The use of proverbs in the lyrics of Kwabena Konadu. *Research Review*, 21(1), 1-17.
- Akanbi, T. A. (2015). The syntax of Yoruba proverbs. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science (G)*, Volume XV Issue VIII. Retrieved from <https://www.academia.edu> (29th November, 2021).
- Aku-Sika, C. M. (2016). *Gendered power relations as expressed in selected Ewe proverbs*. M.Phil Thesis, University of Ghana. ugspace.ug.edu.gh
- Annan, C. J. (1980). *The phonology of Nzema*. School of Ghana Languages, Unpublished Note.
- Barasa, M. N. & Opande, I. N. (2017). The use of animal metaphors in the representation of women in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs of Kenya. *The journal of Pan African Studies*, 10(2), 82-108. <https://41.89.196.16:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/312>
- Bisilki, A. K. & Nkamigbo, L. C. (2017). A Sociolinguistic and literary analysis of the proverb in *Likpakpaln* 'Konkomba'. *Journal of Linguistics, Language and Culture*, 4(1), 103-135. www.nigerianjournalonline.com
- Bradbury, N. (2002). Transforming experience to tradition: Two theories of proverbs use and Chaucer's practice. *Oral Tradition*, 17, 261-289. journal.oraltradition.org
- Creswell, J. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Degener, A. (2022). Family relationships in proverbs from northern Pakistan. *Proverbium*, 39, 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.29162/pv.39.1.56>
- Dogbey, E. & Sapaty, G. (2019). Portrayal of children and adults in Ewe proverbs. *Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 9(2), 107-117. <https://www.academia.edu>
- Finnegan, R. (2012). *Oral Literature in Africa*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers. www.openbookpublishers.com
- Finnegan, R. (1970). *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Ghana Statistical Service. (2021). *The 2021 population and housing census*. Retrieved from: Census2021.statsghana.gov.gh (8th August, 2022).
- Gibbs, R. (1994). *The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language and understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hussein, J. (2005). The social and ethno-cultural construction of masculinity and femininity in African proverbs. *African Study Monograph*, 26(2), 59-87.

- Kwaw, F. (2008). *Maandee ye enlomboe*. Anyinase: Atwe Royal Consult Publishers.
- Kwesi, A. P. (1992). *Nzema anee ne anwo mgbanyidweke*. Accra: Bureau of Ghana Languages.
- Quarm, P. & Kwesi, G. (1998). *Nzema mrele nee be ngilenu*. Accra: Bureau of Ghana Languages.
- Langacker, R. (1994). Culture, cognition and grammar. In Martin Pütz (eds.), *Language contact and language conflict*, 71, 25-53. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Lomotey, B. A. & Chachu, S. (2020). Gender ideologies and power relations in proverbs: A cross-cultural study. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 168, 69-80.
- Mariwah, S., Ofori, E. A., Adjakloe, Y. A., Adu-gyamfi, A. B., Asare, E., & Bonsu, C. (2022). Gender (in)equality in Ghana: A critical discourse analysis of Akan proverbs on masculinity. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. Retrieved from journals.sagepub.com>doi>abs (23rd September, 2022).
- Mate, M., Kebede, A. & Alemayehu, F. (2014). The social implications of Wolaita proverbs. Functional analysis. *International Journal of Languages and Literatures*, 2(1), 225-246.
- Mensah, E. O. (2013). Proverbs in Nigerian pidgin. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 69(1), 87-115.
- Mensah, E. O. (2010). A morpho-syntactic analysis of Efik proverbs. *An interdisciplinary Journal*, 5(2), 250-280.
- Nyame, J., & Tomekyin, C. (2018). Social construction of masculinity and femininity as portrayed in Nzema proverbs. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advance Studies*, 5(7), 227-234.
- Oha, O. (1998). The semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs. *African Study Monograph*, 19(2), 87-102.
- Okpewho, I. (1992). *African oral literature*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Olatunji, O. (1984). *Features of Yorùbá oral poetry*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Onwe, A. (2018). Proverbs and worldviews: An analysis of Ikwo proverbs and their worldview. PhD. Dissertation, Anglia Ruskin University.
- Palmer, G. (1996). *Toward a theory of cultural linguistics*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

- Peeters, B. (2016). Applied ethnolinguistics is cultural linguistics, but is it cultural linguistics? *International Journal of Language and Culture*, 3(2), 137-160.
- Sharifian, F. (2017). *Cultural linguistics: Cultural conceptualisations and language*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins
- Sharifian, F. (2011). *Cultural conceptualisations and language: Theoretical framework and applications*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins
- Sharifian, F. (2005). Cultural conceptualisations in English words. A study of Aboriginal children in Perth. *Language and Education*, 19(1), 74-88.
- Sharifian, F. (2003). On cultural conceptualisations. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 3(3), 187-207.
- Ukaegbu, N. F. (2006). Igbo aesthetics: The case of proverbs as a key to Igbo worldview and culture. *Journal of Igbo Studies*, 1, 164-167.
- Yakub, M., Ollenu, Y. A. & Delalorm, C. (2021). The pragmatic functions of some morphological structures in Nzema proverbs. *Journal of Universal Language*, 22(2), 145-180.
- Yakub, M. (2019). *A Morpho-pragmatic and structural analysis of Nzema proverbs*. M.Phil. thesis, University of Education, Winneba.
- Yankah, K. (2012). *The proverb in the context of Akan rhetoric*. New York: Diasporic Africa Press.
- Yankah, K. (1989). *The proverb in the context of Akan rhetoric –A theory of proverb Praxis*. Peter Lang
- Yuka, C. (2016). *The structure of Lamnso proverbs*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net> (15th February, 2022).