

Representation of Children and Parents in Proverbs among the Nzema of Ghana

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Abstract

Across languages and cultures, proverbs are perceived as sayings of the elderly, and as a guide to conduct. Drawing on qualitative data sourced through observations and semi-structured interviews, and gaining insights from secondary sources, this study explored how the Nzema people of Southern Ghana perceive children and parents through the lens of proverbs. A sample of twenty-one proverbs relating to children and parents were purposively extracted and examined. We observe that certain attributions of creatures like fowl, hawk, grasshopper, ant, and crab were used in the portrayal of children and parents. Such proverbs abound in metaphoric correlations as they accentuate the Nzema cultural conception of who a child or a parent is, as well as their expected sociocultural roles. Among other findings, the study suggests that the mother, in particular, shows maximum love and strives to maintain a crucial bond with her children even when the father is unconcern. However, the Nzema child, according to the selected proverbs, must honour his/her father most and accord him much respect. We conclude that the messages conveyed in the selected proverbs can foster positive child-parent relationship and enhance social harmony. Our analysis builds on Sharifian's notion of cultural conceptualisations.

Keywords: Nzema proverbs; Children; Parents; Communication; Cultural conceptualisations

Abstract in Nzema: Menli dɔɔnwo die to nu ke mrele le mgbanyima anloadweke, na yɛdua zo yɛtenrɛdenrɛ yɛ ebelabɔle. Nvedenvedenu ehye dua deenleanle nee adwelielile adenle zo kilehile ke Nzemama adwenle (nee ndelebɔbo) mɔɔ bele ye wɔ ngakula nee awovole nwo la si da ali wɔ be mrelebule nu la anu. Wɔ gyima ehye anu, mrele abulanwio nee ko mɔɔ fale ngakula ne awovole nwo la yɛe yekpale yeyele nuhua nvedenvede a. Nvedenvedenu ne maa ɔda ali ke Nzemama fa nyemoa mɔɔ le ke akɔle, kyenyema, abebe, ngyigyilira nee ehɔle la subane bie mɔ a kile be ndelebɔbo mɔɔ bele ye wɔ ngakula nee awovole nwo la a. Nvedenvedenu ne kile ke ninli titili a kile ehulole maa ɔ mra a, bɔbɔ saa

sele ne amkpo ngakula ne mɔ abozo a. Emomu, Semanli kakula biala ɔwɔ kɛ fa ɛbule dɔɔnwo maa ɔ ze kɛ mɔɔ ɔfɛta la. Gyima ɛhye guabele ne kile kɛ foledule mɔɔ yenyia yɛfi mrele mɔɔ fale ngakula nee awovole nwo la boa maa koyele nee anzondwole ba menli avinli nee bɛ ɛdenlanle nu. Mrele ne mɔ anu ngilehile ne gyinlanle menli ekpunli bie adwenle nee bɛ ndelebebo, ‘cultural conceptualisation’ ngyehyeleɛ ne azo, kɛ mɔɔ Sharifian to ye gua la.

Introduction

The present study investigates the representation of children and parents in selected Nzema proverbs from a cultural-conceptual perspective. “Nzema” is the language (Kwa, Niger-Congo) of the Nzema people, an ethnic group located in the south-western part of the Western Region of Ghana. The Nzemaland is bordered to the West by La Côte d’Ivoire, to the East by the Ahanta people, to the North by Aowin (or Anyi) and Wassa people, and to the South by the Gulf of Guinea (Kwesi, 1992). Politically, the people of Nzema cover three Districts (Electoral constituencies) in Ghana, namely; *Dwɔmɔlɔ* (Nzema-West), *Ɛlembɛle* (Nzema-Central) and *Ɛvaloe* (Nzema-East) (Kwaw, 2008). The Ghana population and housing census conducted in 2021, puts the total number of Nzema at 342, 090 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Most of the Nzema people are farmers who engage in subsistence agriculture and supplement their livelihood with fishing and trading (Yakub, 2022). Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion are practiced by the people of Nzema (Yakub, 2024).

Most speakers resort to proverbs in encouraging people to do what the society cherishes, and to entreat people to refrain from social vices and immoralities (Agyekum, 2024). The Nzema also take delight in using proverbs, not only for speech embellishment, but also to achieve conciseness in discourse situations (Yakub, 2023; 2025). For almost every context of social interaction, the Nzema have an appropriate proverb to be employed. They use proverbs mainly to advise, admonish, reprimand, praise, encourage, console, teach sociocultural values, and to amuse and entertain people. The issue of child–parent relationship and/or how children must be properly raised, therefore, does not escape from the didactic import of proverbs among the Nzema (Yakub, 2022; Yakub et al., 2021). Yakub’s (2022) study reveals the crucial role that Nzema proverbs play in child raising; corroborating Ukaegbu’s (2006) claim that proverbs are an effective tool of character moulding when a child is made to know the ethical standards of their society through proverbial renditions. Despite the evidence that proverbs can embody the formation of human character and child grooming (Onwe, 2018; Mensah et al., 2025), the extant

literature on proverbs apparently presents us with little understanding of how parents and children are portrayed.

While many studies in the African context have specifically investigated gendered ideologies and how men and women are represented through proverbs (Oha, 1998; Hussein, 2005; Asimeng-Boahene, 2013; Belfatmi, 2013; Aku-Sika, 2016; Barasa & Opande, 2017; Nyame & Tomekyin, 2018; Lomotey & Chachu, 2020; Mariwah et al., 2022), works on the portrayal of children and parents in proverbs are scarce in the extant literature. As far as we are aware, only the works of Dogbey & Sapaty (2019) and Yakub (2022) provide extensive discussion of children–adults proverbs in Ewe and Nzema respectively. These studies focused on proverbs that relate to children and adults in general. Among other findings, the studies confirmed many clichés, such as children are inexperienced and subordinate to adults. In both Ewe and Nzema cultures, as the studies revealed, children are trained not to intrude into adult discussions. Moreover, children are brought up to embrace industriousness, a virtue that promotes socio-economic growth. While previous studies inform us about the Ewe and Nzema cultural ideologies of children and adults, the relationship between children and parents, especially, and how they are represented through proverbs in Nzema, remains empirically unknown. Thus, this work fills a crucial gap by describing how children and parents are perceived and portrayed in Nzema proverbs. In the current study, we look at who a child and a parent are, and their expected social roles in the wisdom and ideologies of the Nzema people, through the lens of proverbs. Since many of the contemporary youth are exposed to urbanisation and Western education, most of the Nzema cultural values and ideologies stand the risk of being less appreciated. It is significant, therefore, to study how parents and children are constructed in Nzema proverbs to unravel their expected social roles and how these can promote peaceful co-existence and socio-economic development. The study extends the frontiers of cross-cultural studies on proverbs in the literature.

Proverbs and the construction of childhood and parenthood

Proverbs are essential elements of a society’s oral tradition, which teach lessons about culture, values and life generally (Mensah et al., 2025). They are pithy and witty expressions that communicate cultural ideologies. Proverbs are metaphorical statements whose didactics serve as social control (Finnegan, 1970; Mensah, 2013; Yakub, 2022). Proverbs “are very informative as they provide access to the traditions and the popular beliefs of a community”, as Oludare (2017, p. 71) posits. Oludare further maintains that, as an oral genre, proverbs feature in all aspects of life, and are hardly out of fashion. This implies that the proverb is an effective communicative resource which would continue to

permeate conversations held by people who are versed in its use. Agyekum (2019, p. 319) remarks that “proverbs are interpretations of traditional wisdom based on the experiences and sociocultural life of our elders”. Commenting on the role of proverbs in child grooming, Onwe (2018) aptly contends as follows:

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, p. 1).

The above observation points out that the message contained in proverbs also spells out the means of ensuring proper child upbringing. In this study, following Mensah et al. (2025), we consider children generally as human beings within the developmental periods of infancy and puberty, or under 18 years of age. However, it is important to note that, among the Nzema, once you are an offspring, your parents always recognise you as such. Therefore, childhood, to the Nzema, is not merely determined by age. One can think of a number of universal determinants of childhood and its construction. For example, even when one becomes an adult, complete their education or apprenticeship, get married, and begins to bear their own children, one’s parents still see him or her as their child, so you must be obedient and submissive to them. The Nzema also hold this cultural belief (Kwaw, 2008), which is fundamental in the context of the present study.

Parenthood is seen as a complex concept as it embodies a whole process of childbearing and nurturing. It includes bearing the responsibilities of child(ren)’s upbringing, and ensuring their success in life (Veludo & Viana, 2012). This social construction of parenthood is reflected in some African proverbs. For example, the Akan people of Ghana say: *Dee aboa no gyina no ehɔ na ne ba gyina* ‘wherever the animal is found, her offspring is found there as well.’ This proverb implies that, as a child, one must toe the line of one’s parents. It also implies that a child must not forsake their parents and vice-versa. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, a related proverb that communicates the protective nature of parents says: *Okuko chi umu anaghi arahu n’elu osisi* ‘A hen with chicks does not sleep on the tree’ (Ideh, 2023, p. 9). A Gikuyu (Kenyan) proverb also translates as follows: “*The baby who refuses its mother’s breast will never be fully grown*” (Dipio, 2019, p. 15). This proverb alludes to mothers’ key role in feeding their children, although fathers’ contribution is not to be underestimated. In the present study, we demonstrate in detail the social construction of children and parents in Nzema proverbs through the theoretical lens of cultural conceptualisation.

Cultural conceptualisation

The article adopts theoretical insights from cultural conceptualisation, a concept popularised by Sharifian (2017) in his cultural-linguistics framework. Cultural-linguistics is a sub-field of linguistics that explores the relationship between language, culture and conceptualisations. According to Sharifian (2011), cultural-linguistics concerns itself with the description of the features of language that focus on cultural perceptions. The approach deals with analytical tools such as ‘cultural schema’, ‘cultural category’ and ‘cultural-conceptual’ metaphor. Sharifian (2017) maintains that cultural conceptualisations help people to have a common understanding of their world. It sheds light on how members collectively view a phenomenon based on culturally constructed ideas, their environment, beliefs and values (Sharifian, 2017). We argue that the Nzema perception of children and parents reflected in proverbs is said to be an essential element of their cultural script. Such cultural perceptions are much grounded on animal metaphor and imagery, as Yakub (2019) indicated. Agyekum’s (2023) study adopted the cultural conceptualisation framework in examining aspects of Akan animal metaphor in proverbs and panegyrics. Yakub (2022) also employs this theoretical approach to effectively describe the Nzema perception of children and adults as reflected in their proverbial sayings. In essence, this study is inspired by the assumptions of the cultural conceptualisation framework, as it provides a useful descriptive apparatus to unravel the figurative elements (cultural metaphors) that feature in the selected proverbs.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach in the collection and analysis of the data. The primary data were sourced through observations and semi-structured interviews. The researchers attended some sociocultural events such as marriage contraction ceremonies, funeral and arbitration to gather some of the data, since these occasions normally featured speakers (and elders) who are competent proverb users. Through semi-structured interviews, we obtained additional data from twelve (12) participants who were culture-insiders and can render and interpret Nzema proverbs. Since we could not have easily identified people who had the reliable information to share with us, we employed the snowball sampling technique to recruit participants who were believed to have the requisite knowledge on the subject under investigation. Demographic characteristics of the participants revealed that there were six (6) farmers, four (4) traders and two (2) teachers. Eight (8) of them were married whereas four (4) were divorced. Six (6) had elementary education, four (4) had secondary education and two (2) received tertiary education. There were four (4) Muslims and four (4) Christians, whereas the remaining four (4) practiced African Traditional Religion. These participants comprised six (6) males and six (6) females, and their ages range between seventy (70) and eighty (80) years. We contacted equal number of participants (with regard to their gender) because, unlike some other

cultures, the Nzema perceive woman also as competent users and interpreters of proverbs. The basic inclusion criteria were that a participant must be an adult native speaker of Nzema who had lived in the Nzema community for not less than forty (40) years. A participant must also be a parent. During the interview sessions, we particularly gained a deeper understanding of the ethnopragmatic interpretations of the proverbs. In this way, participants (culture-insiders) were able to narrate their perspectives based on the Nzema cultural perceptions of parents and children. A portable smart phone was used to audio-record the interviews, which were later transcribed and translated.

We consulted secondary sources like Quarm & Kwesi's (1998) collection of Nzema proverbs, and selected some of the proverbs for the present study. Having gathered about 38 proverbs from primary and secondary sources, we purposively selected 21 proverbs concerning children and parents for the analysis. We found the chosen proverbs essential to communicate the desired behaviour and social roles of children and parents. Based on the transcripts, the proverbs were classified under relevant themes. The purpose was to allow for greater flexibility in the interpretation and analysis of data, as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2021) and Mensah et al. (2025). The analysis highlights the import of the proverbs in the Nzema cultural conception of children and parents. It also accentuates some of the perspectives and opinions of research participants.

Results

This section presents the data and analysis. The proverbs are presented in the Nzema language, followed by morpheme-by-morpheme interlineal glossing as well as English translation. The data are categorised and examined under various thematic tropes as follows:

Children are valuable assets to their parents

In the African cultural context, a marriage with many children is usually appreciated, whereas a childless marriage has many negative social consequences (Mensah et al., 2024). In all marriages, children serve as a source of happiness and satisfaction. As Agyekum (2024) and Dyer (2007) note, children secure rights of property and inheritance and ensure continuity through reincarnation and the maintenance of family lineage. To some extent, children can assist with labour, as participants of this study unanimously mentioned. As part of their traditional values and norms, the Nzema do not often send an adult except when the task to be performed requires some muscular strength or a message to be delivered is so 'sensitive' and demands cognitive maturity. For instance, a participant noted that "when a mother is so occupied, working in the kitchen, for instance, a child is expected to

run errands from the kitchen to any other place where the mother would have stopped working and visited. In this context, the child becomes very useful”. Proverbs (1) and (2) underscore the value and usefulness of child bearing.

1. **Fuale bε-n-zoa ye**
Menstruation 3PL-NEG-send 3SG

‘They do not send menstruation to perform any task.’

(Quarm & Kwesi, 1998, p. 98).

2. **ε-di abawuo a ε-n-nyia kakula ε-n-zoa ye**
2SG-eat stillbirth PART 2SG-NEG-get child 2SG-NEG-send 3SG

‘If you encounter persistent child-death, you do not get any child to send.’

One may wonder why the mention of menstruation in proverb (1), instead of a child. *Fuale* ‘menstruation’, is a prerequisite requirement for pregnancy and subsequent child birth to occur (in the case of humans). In traditional Nzema society, when a parent (or an adult) sends a child on an errand and the child perfectly accomplishes the task, proverb (1) is usually quoted to praise the child. A female participant (aged 79) noted that proverb (1) can be said to advise women who deliberately abort their babies to desist from such an act. Proverb (2) underscores the basic duty of the Nzema child as to be running some errands to assist their parents (or adults). Both proverbs show that children are an essential asset to parents, for they partly provide support system in terms of being sent to undertake certain activities especially when parents are seriously engaged in doing other equally important tasks. Studying family relationships in proverbs, Degener (2022, p. 13) provides a Pakistan proverb that underscores the usefulness of children, such as: “*In a house without offspring, the mice might dance*”. Proverb (3) below also projects children as possessing a certain level of physical strength with which they are able to assist their parents. The proverb says:

3. **Ngyigylira le ɔ nwo zo atwe**
Ant POSS 3SG self fit arrow

‘There is a befitting arrow that can pierce the ant (in spite of its size).’

(Quarm & Kwesi, 1998, p. 136).

In Nzema cultural metaphors, a child is likened to an ant in proverb (3) in the sense that ants are small insects that can be described as weak and vulnerable, just as little children. Furthermore, it may be very difficult for one to pierce the ant with an arrow because of its tininess. However, the proverb implies that an appropriate arrow exists to pierce the ant despite its tininess. This means that children, though not strong enough, possess some

muscular strength through which they can contribute their quota in providing support, especially to parents. It implies that, in their own capacity as children, they can be assigned to perform certain tasks which suit their strength. During an interview session, a male participant (aged 80) observed as follows: “Among the Nzema, when younger children accompany their parents to the farm, they are not allowed to sit idle. At least, they are assigned a portion to clear because it is believed that such an assignment is suitable for them as children”. This proverb teaches the importance of hard-work and seeks to condemn indolence and immobility.

Parents as confiners/protectors of children

In the Nzema society, child-bearing is regarded with much importance and is held in high esteem. If a man or woman does not bear a child when he/she is due, he/she is referred to as *mota* ‘impotent/barren’ (Kwaw, 2008; Yakub, 2020). For this reason, a married couple who do not bear a child few years after their marriage would quickly take steps for the woman to conceive. In this wise, parents have their children at heart and always endeavour to guide and protect them in the course of their upbringing. The Nzema proverb in (4) uses the imagery of chicken to imply that parents must confine and protect their wards.

4. **Ɛ-foa wɔ akɔle soɛ-soɛ a sianza kye ye**
 2SG-sack 2SG fowl away-RED PART hawk catch 3SG

‘If you persistently drive your chicken away, the hawk will snatch it.’

(Quarm & Kwes, 1998, p. 60).

This proverb is worthy of use in any ‘possessive situation’, such that if you leave your property unattended to, an outsider can take it. In the context of child-parent relationship, the proverb is also appropriate for advising parents who handle their children carelessly. In Nzema cultural conceptualisation, as a male participant (aged 78) contended, *akɔle* ‘fowl’ in proverb (4) can metaphorically represent a child whereas *sianza* ‘hawk’ can represent an enemy or entity that can cause harm to the child. Naturally, the hawk does not spare any chick which is unprotected. The import of the proverb suggests that one of the important roles of parents is to confine their children. It advises parents not to persistently reject or drive away their children from home as a result of misconduct. This is however not to claim that the Nzema do not reprimand recalcitrant children, but to caution that forcing a child out of the home can expose him/her to dangers and push them into the hands of destroyers (bad companies).

Parents are passionate and considerate

The Nzema proverbs in this category confirm the banal that parents are passionate. Participants suggested that, due to their unpleasant experiences before and during labour, mothers, especially, may be very considerate even when it becomes necessary to punish the child. The following examples (5-8) highlight the passion, love, commitment and the kind of bond that exists between parents and their wards.

5. **ɛ ra ne ɛ gyakɛ azo a ɛ-m-pɛ n-do ye ɓ**
2SG baby defecate 2SG leg.PL top PART 2SG-NEG-cut NEG-throw 3SG away
'When your child defecates on your lap, you do not cut your thigh off.'

Proverb (5) is worth cited in the context of advising a parent who tries to punish an erring child mercilessly. Children are inseparable from their parents' laps. Since they do not speak when they are infant, they usually defecate without informing whoever keeps them on their laps. Probing to understand the communicative import of proverb (5) during an interview, a female participant (aged 77) noted as follows:

According to our (Nzema) cultural belief, it is tantamount to rejecting one's child spiritually if a mother becomes angry and reprimands an infant who happens to defecate/urinate on her laps. The Nzema think that the child can comprehend and interpret the reprimand, and as a result, may even return to the ancestral world (die) if a mother does that. Therefore, the mother simply washes the faeces away. This ethno-perception is captured in the proverb to teach the essence of forgiveness and tolerance, especially on the part of parents.

Agyekum (2023, p. 116) reports that "the fowl is positively seen as caring and patient for its chickens. It is vigilant and protective on its chickens especially from the attack by the hawk and other predators". In the following proverbial expression (6), we see how parents are portrayed as passionate, caring and patient through the Nzema conceptualisation of the fowl. The proverb says:

6. **Akɔɓe gyakɛ ɛ-n-gu ɔ ra**
Fowl(hen) leg EMPH-NEG-kill 3SG baby
'The hen's feet do not kill its chick.'

(Quarm & Kwesi, 1998, p. 2).

Example (6) also advises parents to deal passionately with children. Sometimes, the hen steps on its chick(s), in the course of 'scratching' the ground in search of food for the

chicks. This incident does not necessarily render the death of the chick, though some sort of pain may be inflicted. Although some parents may be cruel and heartless, the Nzema proverb here suggests that most parents have their children at heart and would not deliberately do anything to harm them. In this proverb, as a female participant (aged 80) observed, parents are likened to the hen to portray how they should render punishments that would not affect their children excessively. It suggests the kind of passion that is usually demonstrated even when it becomes necessary to rebuke the child. As in (5), proverb (6) is applicable in the context of entreating a parent to be considerate, and to minimise the sort of punishment intended to be given to a child who misconducts him/herself. The next examples in (7) and (8) especially point to mothers' sympathy and affection for their children.

7. **Ninli a ze mɔɔ ɔ m-ra ba-li a**

Mother FOC know COMP 3SG PL-child FUT-eat PART

'It is a mother who knows best what her children would eat.'

(Quarm & Kwesi, 1998, p. 74).

8. **ɛ nli mɔɔ kpɔ wɔ la a le awie ɔ nli mɔɔ kulo wɔ**

2SG mother COMP hate 2SG CDET PART COP someone 3SG mother COMP love 2SG

'Your own mother that hates you is better than someone's mother that loves you.'

A female participant (aged 78) pointed out that, the Nzema see mothers as having a strong emotional bond with their children, hence, proverbs (7) and (8) above are used to reinforce this belief. Most mothers strive to care for their children and provide their needs in every respect, should their fathers be incapacitated or deliberately abandon them. This may be corroborated by a Pakistan proverb that says: "*The deaf person's mother understands the deaf's language*" (Degener, 2022, p. 14). A mother cannot easily enjoy her meals while her children go hungry. Even when the father becomes angry and deprives the child from entering the house, the mother shows a high level of affection and treats the child with passion¹ (see also Nyame & Tomekyin, 2018). Even when nobody treats the child passionately and affectionately, for instance, by feeding them, their mother would do so. This can be inferred from the use of the focus particle...*a*, in proverb (7), which points out that no one else is capable of feeding and training the child better, except their own parents, particularly the mother. Among the most appropriate contexts of employing proverb (7) is

¹ This is not to suggest that mothers in Nzema culture rally behind children who try to go astray, but to show their extreme love for them.

when a very responsible mother passes away. This portrays the mother (woman) not only as performing the house chores, but also as industrious and a breadwinner who also strives to put food on the table for the family (see also Dipio, 2019, p. 17).

In (8), we observe that the Nzema conceptualise the mother as very caring and loving. As passionate and sympathetic as she is, a mother generally has the spirit of forgiveness (Nyame & Tomekyin, 2018). Mothers demonstrate love for their offspring, much more than any other person would do. Explaining the implications of this proverb further, a female participant (aged 77) said “the proverb seeks to inform people that an ‘outsider’ cannot comfort a person satisfactorily more than his or her own mother”.

Children are not to be pampered

While the data in (5-8) above suggest that parents are passionate and caring, the following two proverbs point out that children must not be pampered, because this may lead them into indiscipline; a situation that can adversely affect them, their parents and the society at large.

9. **Ɛ-fa Ɛ todɔ Ɛ-ka Ɛ ra nwɔhoa a ɔ-finde gua nu**
 2SG-take 2SG vagina 2SG-make 2SG child play PART 3SG-appear public place
 ‘If you allow your child to play with your vagina, he/she will reveal it publicly.’

10. **Kakula Ɛ-n-va ɔ ze andɔma Ɛ-n-li nwɔhoa**
 Child EMPH-NEG-take 3SG father testicles EMPH-NEG-make play
 ‘A child should not be allowed to play with his/her father’s testicles.’

Despite the profanity evidenced in proverbs (9) and (10), they offer crucial advice to parents not to over pamper their children. This aligns with the position of Akanbi (2015) and Coker (2016) who examined Yorùbá vulgar proverbs and maintained that speakers do not just employ vulgar proverbs because they want to sound profane. Rather, such proverbs are quoted to communicate important advisory messages to curb certain misbehaviours. In terms of part-for-whole conceptual metonymy, the genitalia that are mentioned in the proverbs stand for all valuables that the parents may possess. The proverbs imply that, if one allows their ward(s) to feel so much pampered because of one’s possession(s), and fails to discipline them, they would misbehave in public to disgrace one (as a parent).

Children must exhibit their parents' character

The Nzema think that a child must naturally acquire and exhibit some traits of the parents, especially the father. Participants noted that, out of uncertainty, and especially when DNA tests were uncommon to the Nzema people, a man could protest and deny responsibility, and may eventually divorce his wife on the grounds that his child(ren) do not resemble him or any of his extended family members. Proverb (11) underscores this culturally constructed perception among the Nzema.

11. **Ɛhɔle ɛ-n-wo anloma**

Crab EMPH-NEG-born bird

‘A crab does not bear a bird.’ (Quarm & Kwesi, 1998, p. 71).

Although *ɛhɔle* ‘crab’ and *anloma* ‘bird’ as deployed in the proverb can be said to be animals, they have several distinctive features in terms of habitation, physical appearance, mode of movement, and mode of reproduction. For example, the bird has wings to fly whereas the crab ‘crawls’ sideways. The crab can survive in water, and on the land (in a hole) whereas the bird lives in the sky (on trees). These and other unique attributes point out that the crab does not necessarily resemble the bird. It is as a result of this mismatch that the Nzema, through their traditional wisdom, have instituted the above proverb (see also Agyekum, 2023 in the case of Akan). Based on this proverb, a child who behaves in a particular way as either of his/her parents, is described as having taken after the parents (resembles the parents). For instance, a male participant (aged 77) informed us as follows:

If a parent is noted for any immorality, such as adultery, stealing, fighting, backbiting and others, this proverb could be used in the context when his/her child also indulges in any of such uncouth practices. On the other hand, if a parent was intelligent as a learner, for instance, and his/her ward equally became clever, this proverb could be cited to emphasise that the child’s intelligence was in order.

In this regard, the Nzema usually use another expression such as: *Yeva ɔ nli/ ɔ ze agyake* ‘the child has taken his/her mother/father’s leg’. This implies that the child behaves just as his/her mother/father. The proverb is a reminder to parents to train their children to be respectful and responsible adults, since the Nzema usually blame misconduct and waywardness of children on their parents.

Children and their regard for parents

Children in Nzema sociocultural setting, as part of their proper upbringing, are taught to honour and respect their parents and all categories of people including their own peers

(Kwaw, 2008; Yakub & Owu-Ewie, 2023). However, between the mother and the father, the Nzema child is expected to exhibit a higher level of regard and obedience to the father and accord him maximum respect as the proverb in (12) reveals.²

12. **Awie n-va ɔ sa bɛne ɛ-n-gile ɔ ze suazo adenle**
One NEG-use 3SG hand left EMPH-NEG-show 3SG father town road
'One does not use the left hand to show the way to his/her father's home town.'

In Nzema culture, like many other African cultures, the left hand is seen as inferior to the right hand³. Thus, anyone who uses the left hand to give or receive something from an elderly person is described as 'uncultured' and as one who lacks manners and proper parental training (see Yakub & Agyekum, 2022). In this proverb, the notion of the 'left hand' points out that one must not do anything to disparage his/her father. Among the Nzema, as in many African cultures, the father is considered as the 'family head' who controls all physical affairs within the nuclear family⁴. The father is believed to possess a strong 'fatherly spirit', such that his spirit covers that of his children and protects them better. A male participant (aged 80) contended that:

The Nzema trust that, when a child disrespects his/her father and faces the wrath of the father, the child could encounter serious spiritual challenges which may even lead to his/her death, much more than when the mother gets angry at the child. The significant message enshrined in the proverb, based on the Nzema tradition and conceptualisation, is that children must honour their parents.

An Igbo proverb that carries a similar message says: *Nwa fẹẹ nnà a, ò bulu isi nkā* 'if a child honours his father, he will grow to old age' (see Oweleke, 2021, p. 294). The proverbs in (13-16) rather shift the focus from the father to the mother. All these examples specifically incorporate *nli*, 'mother', which suggests that the mother is highly venerated. Study the examples below:

² This, however, is not to say that mothers in Nzema culture are inferior, or are devalued and marginalised.

³ This perception has been in existence because the left hand is often used to do things like cleaning the anus after attending nature's call among performing other activities that are considered to be unhygienic, as Yakub & Agyekum (2022) mention.

⁴ Consequently, if a man decides to marry a woman, for instance, and the woman's father disagrees to the decision, they cannot go ahead and marry. The woman's mother has no authority to grant the permission in this regard, as our participants emphasised.

13. **Ɛ nli la fovole zo bɔbɔ a wɔ deɛ ɔ**
 2SG mother sleep refuse dump top even PART 2SG own EMPH
 ‘Your mother is your mother even if she lives on the refuse dump.’
14. **Ɛ nli n-le ɛke a yɛɛ ɛ nee ɛ ze da a**
 2SG mother NEG-COP there PART then 2SG CONJ 2SG father sleep PART
 ‘You sleep beside your father only when your mother is not available.’
15. **Awie biala ɔ nli subue ye ye fe**
 One every 3SG mother soup COP 3SG sweet
 ‘Everyone (child) considers his/her mother’s soup (food) as most delicious.’
16. **Ɛ nli wu a ɛnee wɔ abusua ɛ-wie**
 2SG mother die PART then 2SG clan/family PERF-finish
 ‘When your mother passes on, you lack recognition as a family member.’

The proverb in 13 says that the person of a mother is indispensable, and so must not be dishonoured or rejected as a result of some deficiency. In a broader sense, even when one’s parents have shortcomings, one must ‘hide’ such negativities and rather project the positive side of their parents.⁵ In line with this observation, Dipio (2019) notes that “the person of the mother is regarded sacred. Out of love and respect, a child is expected not to capitalise on the mother’s shortcomings, as expressed in the Chewa (Malawi) proverb: “*Your mother is your mother; don’t look at your mother’s short legs*” (see Dipio, 2019, p. 18). In the proverb in 14, the Nzema cultural perception that mothers have all it takes to comfort their children is re-echoed. The mother carries an essential food, the breast milk, on which the child feeds. For instance, a Tonga (Zambian) proverb says: “*The breast of your mother is not to be forgotten*” (see Dipio, 2019, p. 15). When the child sleeps elsewhere other than beside the mother, he/she loses the breast milk. Thus, a child may sleep beside the father only when the mother cannot be reached. Furthermore, mothers work extra hard to make food ready on the table, though most fathers are responsible for providing the house-keeping money. Among the Nzema, the proverb in 14 puts mothers on a higher pedestal in the society; projecting them as those who can best ensure their children’s comfort.

The proverb in 15 encourages self-satisfaction and contentment. Participants pointed out that the Nzema do not appreciate people who undermine their own resources and appreciate other external resources. So, they inculcate in their children the virtue of contentment and

⁵ This, however, is not necessarily to claim that children must condone their parents’ criminalities.

self-confidence as celebrated in 15. Once your mother’s soup is deemed most delicious, you believe that no other food surpasses it. Metonymically, *nli alee* ‘mother’s food’ used in the proverb stands for all other things that the mother may possess. Generally, the proverb reflects the Nzema cultural perception that every child must appreciate and value their parents’ possessions and/or deeds. The matrilineal system of inheritance which the Nzema people practice has basis for the institution of the proverb in 16 above. The proverb puts the mother at the centre of the family; projecting her as the cause of the children’s recognition as members of a particular clan/family. Though any member of the family may attend to the children when their mother is no more, the Nzema believe that a person enjoys most and gains maximum recognition in the family when his or her mother is alive. From the Akan cultural context (family system), Agyekum (2024) presents a similar proverb: *Wo ni/na wu a, na w’abusua asa* ‘the death of your mother marks the end of your family’. This proverb stresses the role and essence of the mother. Agyekum explains that “the family is seen as a big unit with segments that relate very well, but there is none that can treat you fairly except your mother” (p. 146).

Children as a communal asset

From the Ibibio cultural perspective, Mensah et al. (2024, p. 8) report that “children have other social responsibilities to their families and the community as a whole”. In the same vein, participants noted that, among the Nzema, there is no restriction as to whose child can be sent on an errand or not. Once a child is born into the (Nzema) society, they are seen as a ‘communal asset’, and so everyone can invite whosoever’s ward and send him/her on a mission. Example (17) affirms this observation:

17. **Raε la raale kunlu a yεε ɔ-le ɔ ngome ye deε a**
 Child sleep woman stomach PART then 2SG-COP 2SG alone 2SG POSS PART
 ‘A woman claims ownership of a child only when it is in her womb.’

This witty statement points to the fact that there is an open access regarding when one wants other’s ward to offer them a helping hand (in any positive activity). When a woman conceives, she carries the baby in her womb and experiences all pregnancy-related sickness alone. Even the husband has no further contribution in carrying the baby until he or she is born. However, when the woman delivers, the child becomes a communal asset, where everyone has the prerogative to seek the child’s help in term by sending him/her to perform some tasks. This resonates with Mensah et al.’s (2024) observation that, in the Ibibio culture, for example, children are considered very useful because, somehow, they can make economic contribution to the family and community as a whole. As a male participant (aged

78) observed, “the Nzema believe in sharing and helping one another. Of course, some parents even allow their wards to render voluntary services to others who are childless”. The implication of the proverb in 17 is that even people who may not be blessed with children in the society would have the opportunity to engage others’ children to support them in one way or the other. The key thing here is that this practice creates social interdependency among the Nzemawhich promotes unity and harmony among the people for socio-economic advancement.

A child must be submissive and obedient

One of the clichés regarding children-parents relationship is that children are usually subordinated to their parents (Degener, 2022). As has been hinted earlier, every Nzema child is expected to be submissive and law-abiding. The following two proverbs especially point to submissiveness, an important virtue that the Nzema people strive to inculcate in their children.

18. **Wɔ epinli le kpole tɛla wɔ awovolɛ ɛdɛɛ a tɛ ɛ ti pɛne ɔ**
 2SG genitalia COP big than 2SG parent own PART NEG 2SG head equal EMPH
 ‘You are not equal to your parent(s) even when your sex organ grows bigger than theirs.’

19. **ɛ nee wɔ awovolɛ tendenle sɛ a tɛ ɛ ti pɛne ɔ**
 2SG CONJ 2SG parent height equal PART NEG 2SG head equal EMPH
 ‘You are not equal to your parent(s) even when you grow taller than them.’

Although the proverb in 18 sounds vulgar at face value, it deeply teaches children not to challenge their parents, as the same theme the proverb in 19 resonates. A child’s sexual organ that is said to be bigger than what their parents may possess, as well as their height that is said to be taller than their parents’, metonymically stand for wealth, education, or popularity that the child may earn much more than their parents. However, even if this happens, the child is expected to be submissive to their parents. Children are entreated to heed advice and follow instructions. This point is further entrenched in the proverb in 20 below:

20. **Akɔsea mɔɔ doa-le ɔ nli la li-le abɛbɛ ɛzɔle**
 Chick COMP follow-PST 3SG mother PART eat-PST grasshopper thigh
 ‘The chick that followed its mother ate the thigh of a grasshopper.’
 (Quarm & Kwesi, 1998, p. 2).

This proverb fits any subordinate-superior relationship or situation. However, it best describes child-parent relationship according to the Nzema cultural conceptualisations; implying that the obedient child is always rewarded. The message of this proverb is that children are sometimes law-abiding, and do what is expected. A chick following its mother, as used in 20, metaphorically represents a child taking advice and obeying instructions from his or her parents, and by extension, every subordinate obeying instruction given by their superior. A grasshopper is somewhat a tiny insect on which fowls can feed. In this proverb, however, as a male participant (aged 76) recounted, the thigh of the grasshopper is likened to something ‘huge and precious’, which the law-abiding child is likely to gain. Here, ‘eating the thigh of a grasshopper’ implies receiving a great reward for good conduct. This could be in the form of material gifts, cash prize, or comments of well wishes and prosperity (see also Yakub, 2022).

Children and parents must be responsible

The Nzema believe that both parents and children must have responsibilities to accomplish. This must be done in reciprocity to ensure each other’s wellbeing. They see child bearing and raising as an investment in the future, such that the child must grow to also care for the parents until they pass on. Take the proverb below:

21. **Ɛ-neá ɛ ra maa ɔ gye fifi a ɔ-neá wɔ maa ɛ gye tudu**
 2SG-look 2SG child CAUS 3SG teeth grow PART 3SG-look 2SG CAUS 2SG teeth uproot
 ‘You must look after your child to grow their teeth, so they would look after you when your teeth are removing.’

This proverb acknowledges full responsibility on the part of parents in fending for their children. It entreats the child to also reciprocate the efforts that their parents had made in looking after them. This notion is also captured in the Ibibio proverbial expression that says: *Áyín ákédò àkòd ádúbóók* ‘a child was meant to grow and cater for the parents’ (Mensah et al., 2024, p. 8). When the parents are aged, the child, who may then be an adult in an occupation, would be expected to fend for his/her parents. In Nzema cultural conceptualisation, ‘growing of teeth’, as featured in this proverb, is a metonymy that represents all positive developments and experiences in the growth of the child. This encompasses the child’s health care, food, security, skill and training, and education which are provided or sponsored by the parents. On the other hand, ‘removal of teeth’ represents the deteriorating state of the parents at old age. At that stage, their body (physical strength) and mind (thinking ability) begin to diminish. Even their income reduces as they retire from active works and services. Among the Nzema, this stage is when their offspring are

most expected to care for them. Highlighting the moral lesson conveyed in proverb (21), a male participant (aged 78) provided a proverbial expression such as: *Kpanyinli butua wie a ɔko kakula edee nu* ‘when the buttocks of the aged depreciate, they enter into that of the child’. A Pakistan proverb also reads: “*When the beard of the young he-goat comes out, the value of the old he-goat will be broken*” (see Degener, 2022, p. 14). These expressions imply that as one grows from childhood to adulthood, they become more beautiful/handsome and gain more physical strength to be able to work hard, much more than the aged. Hence, the Nzema believe that one must take good care of their parents at old age. The child is seen as the asset of the parents, and one of the ways parents can benefit from their toil and investments in a child is for him/her to support the parents when they have become old (see also Mensah et al., 2024).

Conclusion

In this study, we examined the conceptualisation of children and parents in selected Nzema proverbs. The study found that in the Nzema culture, like many others, children are valuables, and therefore, child bearing is held in high esteem. This study has revealed that the mother, in particular, shows maximum love and strives to maintain a crucial bond between she and her children, even when the father does not show much concern. However, we saw that children in Nzema society are expected to rather honour and respect their fathers most. The study has also uncovered the Nzema notion that children must exhibit the traits of their parents. If a child behaves well or misbehaves, they are described as having ‘copied’ their parents. We found out that, in Nzema cultural context, parents are responsible for their children’s actions and inaction. When a child indulges in vices, such as stealing, smoking, fighting, and prostitution, their parents are blamed for not inculcating in them good manners in the course of raising such children. The Nzema consider child-raising as an investment for future benefits. We argue that the proverbs treated in this study largely foster positive child-parent relationship, which helps to maintain social equilibrium and ensure peaceful coexistence. While this study is essential to deepen our understanding of the social roles of children and parents, we suggest that one of its limitations is the lack of analysis on how proverbs are used as a pedagogical tool in educating children. Future research may therefore focus on ethno-pragmatic interpretations and pedagogical implications of children-related proverbs in Nzema, as well as to explore how riddles and folktales may serve as a tool for inculcating cultural ethics and mores into the Nzema child.

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