

Oral Traditions and the Physical Environment

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The interaction between a people's oral traditions and their physical environment may refer to the ways in which oral traditions, attitudes, and beliefs influence interaction with the physical environment, or the various ways in which the environment is reflected within the oral traditions and related practices. A people's unique ecology strongly influences their way of life and world view. It sharpens their distinctiveness as a people, and gives their oral traditions a quality that is uniquely theirs.

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In Africa and parts of the world where the population is predominantly illiterate and traditions are passed down from one generation to the other by word of mouth, guardians of the spoken word are considered very important. Specialized knowledge of history, genealogies, epics, farm boundaries, etc. becomes the exclusive preserve of certain individuals, who may bring their knowledge to bear in appointing people to key social and political positions, and in the solution of domestic and political conflicts. Remembrancers and griots abound in Africa; even so, it is to elders in general that knowledge of history and tradition is ascribed. Elders pass on knowledge through the transmission of fact either directly experienced or handed down by previous generations. But they may also transmit knowledge indirectly through verbal art forms such as tales, proverbs, and songs.

Proverbs constitute a very important aspect of the African verbal heritage. Since they contain bits and pieces of traditional wisdom, they are passed on to the youth to guide their conduct and as forms of moral instruction. The wisdom on proverbs is transmitted by elders during conversation and counselling, and lessons drawn from them are expected to guide moral behaviour.

Oral traditions passed on are not placed in a physical vacuum; they reflect, and are shaped by the people's unique ecology and way of life – their beliefs, superstitions, sources of livelihood as well as their geographical location. Hunters are one group of professionals to whom African oral traditions largely attribute a people's ecological niche. They are often regarded as the first settlers; for they discovered rivers and fertile soil in their search for

game. Having settled, they do not only familiarize themselves with the physical environment; they also attempt to utilize it for sustenance and personal protection. Thus the plant may not only be a source of food; it may also be of medicinal or curative value.

But interaction with the environment may also be on the basis of mythical experience. A people's primordial images condition their attitudes to certain items within their environment which they believe to have played a crucial role in the birth and continuity of their lineage or clan. Thus even though dogs, parrots, snakes, physically abundant in the environment, they may be totems of particular clans, held in mythical awe, and accorded the deference they deserve. Such expressions of reverence for aspects of the environment based on mythology are, however, more abstract.

Of more practical relevance is the spiritual dimension of the environment. This consists of entities in the physical environment that are believed to be endowed with the supernatural – rivers, trees, mountains, rocks. While these are not deities in themselves, they are believed to be the dwelling places of deities, and belong to the pantheon of protective spirits and gods, through whom the Supreme Being may be reached for help. Certain parts of the environment, such as forests, may also be set aside for the interment of chiefs and kings, or may be considered as groves of ancestors or deities, and may not be used for farming. *Nananompow* is one well known sacred grove among the Fante in the Central region of Ghana.

It is perhaps deities embodying rivers that are the better known. Like other deities in the physical environment, river deities may be called upon to help the living, grant womb fertility and deliver children. But such deities may also exact penalties from the wayward, or be used as agents of curses by individuals wronged in the society. Thus while a river may be a source of drinking water, life, or fertility, it may also be invoked to wreak havoc. Such curses are, however, illegal, and may lead to suits during which rituals may be performed to reverse the curse.

The naming of people after rivers points to the significance Africans attach to the environment. Among the Akan of Ghana, names like Tano, Ayesu are river names; and individuals so named are at least expected to aspire to the attributes associated with the rivers. The Ayesu river, for instance, is believed to be flooded even in times of drought. More significant is the pervasion of oral tradi-

tions and verbal art forms with river imagery. The following proverb/riddle found within Akan drum language points to the association of the river with creation.

The path crosses the river
The river crosses the path
Which is the elder?
We made the path and found the river
The river is from long ago.

A people may pride themselves in associating with a particular river, or using it as their source of sustenance. This is evident particularly in Akan dirges, in which the singer may trace the deceased's ancestry, or express pride in the deceased's home of origin. In the following dirge, the singer expresses pride in the river associated with the deceased's ancestry:

Your ancestor is Twumasi Ankra of Adankrannya
Would someone please tell grandsire that he is greedy
It is grandsire that drinks at the source of Dankran,
That gets his drinking water from the South as well
And purifies himself in the middle on Adae Sundays.
(Nketia 1955: 154)

or

Asiannaa's grandchild hails from home
Gyekye's grandchild drinks Ataniannom.
(Nketia 1955: 148)

The Akim of Ghana, that drink of the Birim river, do not only pride themselves in it; they attribute their very eloquence to the river in the associated appellation. *The Akim born that drinks of the Birim river.*

Often times, it is the size of a river from which the greatest pride is derived. In the dirges of the people of Akwamu in Ghana, who live beside the Volta river, may be found a profound statement. *It is due to the big river /That the small fish is arrogant.*

Another verbal art form whose texts are suffused with items in the physical environment is drum communication, which is very predominant in West and Central Africa. Here the drum communicates through simulation of speech patterns of the community in which it is used (Nketia 1971; Yankah 1985). The drum may be used to announce messages, invoke ancestral spirits, communicate history, or convey the appellations of individuals of the community.

The Akan talking drummer prior to announcing his message at dawn may pray to certain entities within the environment, who he believes are spiritually capable of interfering with the flow of his message. These may include river deities, such as Tano, and the various materi-

als out of which the drum was made, which are believed to be spiritually potent. Even before the drum carver cuts down the tree, *tweneduro*, out of which the main body of the drum is made, he performs certain rituals, believing that the tree is capable of transforming itself into a viper snake and causing havoc. This ritual is continued in the act of drumming itself when the drummer, in drum language, prays to the spiritually potent entities in the environment, ending his prayer with the words, *I am learning, let me succeed; or Let my drumming proceed smoothly, smoothly, smoothly.*

Perhaps the most potent force in the physical environment is the earth – Mother Earth, among the Akan. The earth is the source of life and fertility, and the mainstay of the farmer's profession. Yet the earth on which the farmer cultivates the soil is much more than a physical, inanimate entity. Among the Akan, the earth has a supernatural dimension; it is the embodiment of a female deity, that attracts the day name normally given to Thursday born females – Yaa. The earth's expansiveness and fertility and the stability it lends to nature attracts for it the appellation, *Mother Earth that smarts under the weight of the rock/Yet balances it in style.* In the drummer's invocation message, Mother Earth is one of the earliest to be invoked.

Mother Earth, as I live I serve thee
As I am about to die I serve thee.

The spiritual significance of the earth is even more evident during libation prayers. The prayer officiant first invokes the almighty God, and follows this with the invocation of *Asase Yaa*, Mother Earth, then follow other deities, ancestors and spirits. Significantly, libation prayer forms the nucleus of most rituals and official social undertakings such as birth, marriage, death, and land sale. Indeed, all major activities involving the displacement of the soil are incomplete without the invocation of Mother Earth. The farmer thus prays for soil fertility and good harvest prior to the start of a new farm, and joins in the seasonal harvest festivals. Similarly, the digging of the soil for the interment of a corpse should be preceded by a libation prayer.

Even so, tradition has set aside certain days when the soil may not be disturbed. Thus farming, fishing, and burial of a deceased are prohibited on such sacred days, declared as the days for forest deities. Any such activity is believed capable of defiling the earth, and negating soil fertility. Those days are normally referred to as *da bone* (sacred days). In most parts of Ghana, it is a taboo to go fishing on Tuesdays. Violators that defy such taboos are believed likely to be confronted by spirits, or meet with occupational fatalities.

While the religious aspect of such taboos is significant, it is worth noticing their possible economic rationale. Days

declared sacred for farmers and fishermen are also market days, specially set aside for farmers in remote parts to bring their produce to bigger towns for marketing and distribution at great discounts. An Akan proverb makes allusion to this, *A busy market day begins in the morning*.

Despite the belief that there is a spiritual dimension to the environment, the Akan have recorded in various forms of their oral traditions statements that do not completely rule out the artificial element in some sacred groves. Despite the existence of a sacred thicket among the Fantes of Mankessim, the following saying is widespread, *Nananompow nyipa na woyee* (The sacred grove of the ancestors was made by man). Furthermore, within the apellation verses recited for Ashanti kings may be found the following,

*Mmirikisie se yeantumi anno a
Na yefre no nsamanpo.*

The thicket when we are unable to clear it
We call it a sacred grove.

Whether imbued with spiritual forces or not, the environment provides material for creative verbal art. Poets, narrators and other oral artists feed on the physical world around them to create literary forms in metaphorical language, such as in appellations, and proverbs. Metaphors comparing great chiefs to aspects of the environment abound, as in,

The rainbow that encircles humanity
You are in part the odum tree
You are in part the odan tree
You are in part the akakapenpen

in reference to some Akan kings.

Sometimes, verbal artists compare themselves or other individuals to very common plants and fruits with notable characteristics. The fertility of womb or soil may be expressed in metaphor as in the following dirge,

The priest's grandchild
He hails from Asumegya Gyankobaa
Where the fruit of the pawpaw grows on the banana tree.
(Nketia 1955: 139).

Here fertility is depicted in hyperbolic terms, indicating that the deceased comes from a location where ungrafted fruits germinate everywhere and spread with ease. Womb fertility may also be metaphorically depicted as in,

Mother, the okro, full of seeds
of many issues and proven. (Nketia 1955: 36)

where a mother's fertility is compared to that of the okro fruit.

The natural environment may also provide a fitting metaphor for the expression of beauty. The following lines in a dirge exemplify this,

Saakodee of Atwea,
Ayia whose neck is like
A bunch of small-fingered plantain.
(Nketia 1955: 141)

And in the following, a mother's ability to provide protection to her young ones is compared to a specific feature in the physical environment,

Tweneboa Gyan
Child of Abea Yaa, the big thicket
Underneath which there is shade and coolness.

While prosperity, fertility, and other positive attributes are metaphorically depicted by comparison to features of the environment, negative attributes may be similarly conveyed. The non-prosperous may find a fitting comparison in an unfavorably placed plant as in the following in a popular song,

I am the green pepper plant on the dunghill
If well placed, I would have bloomed
Plantain tree by the wayside
Indiscreet peeling by the farmer made me unyielding.

Sometimes, an indiscreet farming practice may provide a useful experimental resource for proverbial counselling. A woman whose husband divorced her for another woman, and later returned to her in tears, was convinced that her husband deserved the following proverb that advises against mono cropping,

If you prop the plantain tree
Prop the banana too
For in times of hunger you know not
Which your saviour will be.

The plantain and banana trees bear similar fruits. Having weak fibrous stems, both trees should normally be provided with support at the stage of fruiting. But the banana, eaten only as a snack, is often ignored by the imprudent farmer who pays more attention to the plantain. Yet in times of hunger, the banana is an important substitute, and may save a life. This proverb counsels against the practice of mono cropping.

Farming indeed provides a rich resource for imagery in several forms of oral art. Several African proverbs make

reference to various aspects of farming. *If you have several farms, you attend to all* is an Akan proverb, admonishing that one should attempt to fulfil all one's obligations, rather than dealing with one to the neglect of the other. While this proverb cautions against concentrated focus on single events, it also implies that one should appraise one's limitations before taking on responsibilities.

If you brush your farm with fibre, you will eat rice under your chin is a Mende proverb from Sierra Leone, implying that you reap what you sow. A well cultivated rice farm grows beyond the head and blooms. Badly ploughed, it bears scant grain.

The above conveys a similar message as the Akan proverb, *If you plant maize carelessly it germinates beside your foot*.

The Sherbro of Sierra Leone say, *A quick move is the correct medicine after harvest*. This implies that burning of the bush to make the farm, if done early enough will deliver a good yield.

It is also said, *In the old cola nut plantation farm, there you will find a cola nut tree*. This is in reference to the sudden sprouting of a particular crop on a farm where that crop was once rotated. The implication is that traces of old habits are never completely wiped out. Among Akan farmers, it is a common habit to go "hunting for cassava" (*ko bankye ha*). Here, farmers do not visit cassava farms; for it may be a famine period or the farms may not be ready for harvesting yet. They go hunting for cassava on soils that have been allowed to go fallow, or in deserted places where cassava was once rotated. Often times, they come home with rich harvest from such fallowing lands. It is for a good reason, therefore, that Akan farmers have a specific name for food crops they unexpectedly encounter when weeding a thicket. They call such a crop, *odokoto* 'one weeds to discover it'. *Odokoto* is considered a reward for the efforts of the hardworking farmer.

The Sherbro of Sierra Leone may say, *An orange tree does not bear a lime*, by which they imply that crops or humans reproduce their own species.

Such imagery draws the attention of the people to various aspects of the farming practice, even while they are deployed in the art of moral counselling or persuasion. The predominance of the imagery of farming in a people's oral traditions or verbal art forms reflects their agrarian inclination. Similarly, a fishing or hunting community is bound to have their oral traditions saturated with equivalent imagery.

It is not by accident that folktales in subsaharan Africa reflect a harsh physical environment where hunger prevails, and sets the hero trekking to outwit bigger animals in search of food. In most such cases, moral values are reversed by heroes to secure sustenance and livelihood. They reap where they have not sown, or outwit opponents into forgetfulness while the tricksters escape with a boun-

tiful harvest.

An important aspect of life in Africa that reveals man's interaction with the environment is the festival. In Ghana, most festivals reflect agrarian or occupational practice, or re-enact the people's history of settlement or migration. The *homowo*, observed among the Ga of Ghana, recalls a critical period in their history when there was great famine. The festival is observed to "hoot at hunger", a crisis that has been overcome. During this, corn meals are prepared and feasted upon, while food sacrifices are made to the gods that delivered them from the crisis. The *odwira* festival observed among the Ashanti and Akwapem also relates to agricultural practice. It is a combination of thanksgiving for the harvest of the new yam, and a cleansing of the ancestral stools and the people. On each day of the festival, certain events take place including a visit to the royal burial place, and a ceremony involving the bringing into town of the fresh yam. During the festival, mashed yam is also offered to the ancestral spirits (Smith 1972: 116).

The *akwambo* festival observed among the Agona of Ghana is also agriculture inclined. The festival literally means 'path clearing' and, among other things, involves a communal clearing of overgrown paths leading to farms.

The *kundum* festival celebrated among the Nzema of Ghana may not evince agrarian practice in the present day, but according to their oral traditions, the festival in ancient times was associated with the ripening of a legendary palm tree. The annual ripening of the palm tree became a signal for the festival to begin (Agovi 1982: 72).

A significant area where the physical environment and farming practices merge with oral traditions is in the naming of the lunar calendar. Despite the existence of a traditional calendar that spans the entire year, months may be named after predominant farming traits, the type of climate they call forth, or their impact on the farmer. Akan days of the month exemplify this.

January – *Opepon*. This means 'the big harmattan', during which it is foggy, and mornings are relatively cold.

February – *Ogyefuo*, 'Farm saviour'. It refers to the month where clouds are clearer, and farms begin improving after the spell of dry weather. Mornings are generally dewy. Farmers find it expedient to begin weeding their farms.

March – *Obenem*, 'Stinging Fly'. This is the month where a fly by that name disturbs farmers working on their farms. They sting and impede the farmer's progress.

April – *Oforisuo Ogyenko* 'rain that saves the *nko* species of yam'. Frequent drizzles are experienced, and that species of yam begins sprouting.

May – *Kotonimma* 'a small species of crab'. This is the month where rains begin and a crab called *kotonimma* is very common. Plants continue to bloom, and farmers find the ground soft enough to uproot weeds.

June – *Ayewohomumo* 'You have made yourself ugly'. Due to the heavy rains, the environment is swampy, muddy, and generally unattractive. The unwary pedestrian may slip, fall, and make himself muddy; pigs in the neighborhood bathe in the mud and appear particularly dirty. The month may also be called *Akoko-watiri-bamma-ho* 'The hen slips on the wall' in reference to the slippery conditions that make it difficult for the hen to stand firm on the wall.

July – *Kitawonsa* 'Restrain your hand'. Rains may continue and prevent farmers from reaching their farms. It then becomes tempting for farmers to stop at the nearest farm and harvest another's crop. The month is named after the need for the farmer to restrain himself from stealing another's crops.

August – *Osannaa* 'Wealthy month'. This month brings riches to the farmer. It is a great harvest period. Cassava, yam, plantain, and several crops are ready for harvest and sale. The month is supposed to be the custodian and epitome of wealth.

September – *Ebo* 'Fog or mist'. Rains are over, flowing streams and rivers enter the sea. It is generally foggy on the coast.

October – *Ahinime* 'I am choked with food'. There is so much food to eat that one can get choked this month.

November – *Obubuo* 'Harvest time'. Crops bear fruit in large numbers.

December – *Openimma* 'Small Harmattan'. Rivers begin drying up; it is generally cold, dry and dusty.

Names the Akan and several African communities give to the lunar calendar are significant insofar as they reflect the agrarian occupation of the people. Like other aspects of the oral tradition, they find their reference point in the physical and spiritual dimensions of the environment.

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Almendannende geografiundervisning: Nogle tendenser og spørgsmål

Ove Biilmann

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Keywords: Aims, attainment, core curriculum, national curriculum, curriculum development, curriculum studies, educational research, educational development, evaluation.

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