

The Ethnosemantics and Proverbs of *ohia*, “poverty” in Akan¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of *ohia*, ‘poverty’ in the Akan sociocultural worldview. These include factors that cause it, the people who suffer from poverty and the implications of their condition. It identifies social, cultural, individualistic and fatalistic sources of poverty. The paper is discussed employing the theoretical framework of language ideology, which reflects people’s beliefs about their language and how they justify the language structure and practical uses. To understand the Akan concept of poverty, one must resort to their cultural beliefs, past experiences, perception, worldview and social structures. The paper employed the qualitative method, using interviews for the primary data. The secondary data was collected from Akan highlife songs, books on proverbs and oral and written literature books. The major finding of this paper is that poverty in Akan is best viewed from Akan language ideology and proverbs. It is also worth noting that despite the negativity of poverty, some proverbs console the poor, and stress that poverty is not the only adversity as other conditions in life are more stressful than poverty.

Keywords: Akan, poverty, language ideology, proverbs, marginalisation

Mmuabɔsem

Saa krataawa yi hwɛ sedɛɛ Akanfoɔ hunu ohia wɔ abrabɔ, amammerɛ ne wiase asetena mu. Yɛbɛhwɛ nnoɔma a ede ohia ba, deɛ enti a ohia ba, ne nnipa ahodoɔ a ohia ka wɔn. Nhwɛhwɛmu yi da ohia farebae ahodoɔ nnan adi, weinom ne asetenam, amammerɛ, ankoreankore ne hyɛbere. Yɛgyinaa kasa adwenemusem nnyinasoɔ so na pɛsɛmpɛnsɛm nhwɛhwɛmu yi mu. Saa adwenemusem yi da ɔmanfoɔ gyidie a wɔwɔ wɔ wɔn kasa mu, sedɛɛ wɔtwitwa gye wɔn kasa nhyehyɛɛ ne ne dwumadie ahodoɔ. Krataawa yi da no adi pefee sɛ yɛbete sedɛɛ Akanfoɔ hunu ohia aseɛ no, gye sɛ yɛgyina wɔn amammerɛ mu gyidie, abrabɔ mu suahunu wɔn anibusem, ne sedɛɛ wɔhunɔ wiase ne wɔn asetena mu nhyehyɛɛ. Yɛfaa sukyere nsemmoano kwan, anim-ne-anim nsemmissa, so na nyaa mme ahodoɔ de dɔ dwuma yi. Afei yetaseɛ ohia ho mme firii, Akan anom ne atwerɛ kasadwini mme nwoma ahodoɔ ne Akanfoɔ nnwom mu. Deɛ krataawa yi hunuu pɔtee ne sɛ yɛbetumi agyina

¹ This paper is a contribution to the debate on the sociocultural concept of poverty in Akan in the song of a renowned highlife composer, Alex Konadu (cf. Agyekum 2016).

mme ne Akan kasa adwenemusem so ate ohia ase yie. Yesan hunuu se ewom se yehunu se ohia ye adebone dee, nanso Akanman mu no enye ohia nko ne ka.

Nsemfua titire: Akan, ohia, kasa adwenemusem, nhyehyeee ne amammere nnyinasoo, mme

Introduction: Definition and Factors of Poverty

The UN (1998) defines poverty as follows:

Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and cloth a family, not having a school or clinic to go to; not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation. (UN Statement, June 1998 – signed by the heads of all UN agencies)

The definition above is all-embracing and the Akan concept of poverty may capture some of its features. Poverty, in the view of the UN, is a multifaceted concept, denoting limited access to technological and infrastructural amenities, thus making the poor only able to survive with the absolute minimum of daily food. Poverty is extended to lack of access to social, economic, infrastructural facilities, deprivation, and remoteness, disempowerment, lack of freedom of speech and unfairness in development (Agyekum 2016). Harrison (1981) outlines issues on poverty to include lack of fertile land, denial of land, inequality, injustice, blatant ruthless and violent exploitation. Based on these definitions, poverty, in the current study, is used to mean the condition in which one lacks the necessary resources to meet socially expected ways of living.

Scholars of social inequality, such as Generalao (2005), Jordan (2004), Stephenson (2000), Smith and Stone (1989) and Feather (1974), have identified four basic causes of poverty and wealth. These are: (a) individualistic attributions, which draw attention to the behaviour and/or actions of individual people, (b) structuralist beliefs that concentrate on socio-economic factors that affect people, (c) cultural notions, which look at poverty through the culture or group of people and their beliefs, and (d) the fatalistic principles, which attribute poverty to luck and fate. Stephenson (2000), however, uses the social construction theory where social reality is the basis for the explanations and policies that cause poverty. He asserts that, "beliefs in the causes of wealth and poverty are determined by the individual's perception of the justice of the current economic system" (p. 85).

Each of the causes of poverty are briefly discussed below.

Factors that explain Poverty

Studies on poverty have outlined some basic factors that act as the catalyst for poverty. In some cases, it is possible to attribute poverty to one or more of these factors. They are individual, cultural, structural and fatalistic determinants. Let us briefly look at them.

The Individual Factor in Poverty

Some social psychologists discuss poverty from the standpoint of the individual. In discussing the individual factor, Nilsson (2014) avers that

“this approach suggests that the individual is the source of his own poverty, and other factors, such as the structures of a society are not very important. If a person is unemployed, it is the individual’s own responsibility to find a job, rather than society’s responsibility to create more job opportunities.” (p. 23)

Stephenson (2000, p. 89) did a comparative study on poverty in Russian and Estonia from 1991 to 1996. He observed that respondents predominantly blamed the poor for their poverty and identified the sources of their poverty as their loose morals, drunkenness and lack of effort (cf. Agyekum 2016; Generalao 2005; Smith and Stone 1989). This notion of the individual being responsible for poverty cannot solely explain the incidence of poverty worldwide. It is thus not wholly acceptable and has been criticised by those who allude to cultural, structural and fatalistic factors of poverty. Agyekum (2016) interrogates the concept of poverty as espoused in the song *enneε mekɔ na maba* by Alex Konadu, a renowned highlife composer. It is worth noting that while society blames the poor for being lazy, the poor exonerate themselves by saying *enyε me a, ofie nnipa ayε me bɔne, obi na ɔde biribi ayε me*, “I am not the cause of my woes; it is caused by family members and other people”. Poverty is thus not attributed to only the individual’s behaviour. These other factors are explored in subsequent sections.

Culture and Poverty

Nilsson (2014) opines that “the cultural approach to poverty, explains poverty through a culture or group of people, rather than one individual... if a person is poor, it is likely that other persons within the same culture are also poor” (p. 24). In support of this notion, Agyekum (2016) argues that

² He provided an example where in the 1960s, a Ghanaian church did not allow its members to be cocoa purchasing clerks fearing that they may cheat the farmers.

“the sociocultural structures in the society, the perceptions, beliefs, taboo systems may debar some people from entering into some modern entrepreneurship thereby pushing them into conservative jobs” (p. 164).² The cultural approach postulates that a given culture has certain values and attitudes that make the culture to survive. Undoubtedly, if one is born into a culture of poverty, she can hardly release herself/himself from the vicious circle of poverty. The Akans refer to this state as *ohia ntentan*, ‘poverty web’, which entangles the individual. As one struggles fiercely to release oneself from the web, some of the branches push the one back to the centre of the poverty web.

Kirby et al (1997) consider the cultural factors to poverty and note how certain cultural norms, values and attitudes make the poor resign themselves to their fate. Discussing the cultural theories of poverty in Ghana, Asiedu et al. (2013) assert that among Ghanaians, “poverty or the lack of economic advancement can be attributed to demons and other spirits (the spirit of poverty) or be the result of a accure through witchcraft or sorcery” (p. 20). The belief in supernatural beings and what they can do is part of the cultural beliefs of Ghanaians and Africans.

Structural Factors in Poverty

The structural factor of poverty extends beyond the individual, ethnic group or the culture, stressing the structures in society (Beeghley 1988 p. 201; ³ Jordan, 2004, p. 22; Nilsson, 2014 p. 25) as the major cause of poverty. Nilsson (2014) explains:

According to the structural approach, it is not only the responsibility of the individuals to tackle poverty, but rather the structures within a state that keep individuals poor, should help them to escape from poverty. Poverty can emanate from social stratification and institutional discrimination, if the structure of a society’s economy, employment, political system, education, class, race, gender is skewed towards the disadvantage of the masses, it creates social inequality. Inequality in the distribution of the resources creates poverty. (p. 25)

Harrison (1981) discusses the structuralist notion of poverty, and posits “gross inequality is more usually the result of a deliberate and calculated attempt by the rich to increase their wealth to widen the gap between themselves and the masses [at the cost of absolute poverty]” (p. 331). Galtung (1990) describes this phenomenon as ‘structural violence’, which is considered from the basis of gender whereby women are discriminated against in most patriarchal societies.

³ Beeghley (1988) argues that “the structure of a society could work as an indication of how people behave; if people have fewer choices on how to deal with their situation, they would also be less effective to change it” (p. 205).

In Akan communities, certain professions were traditionally the preserve of men, and women did not participate in them. These included driving, police, army, sports and lumbering. The inequality could be ethnic, racial, religious, partisan affiliation and cronyism that create a gap between US and THEM. In such a situation, where you find yourself determines whether you would be rich or poor.

Stephenson (2000) compares the individualistic and structural factors behind poverty and wealth, contending that “people who view society as operating unfairly tend to attribute wealth and poverty to societal causes and those who consider society to be fair see poverty as a result of individual deficiencies” (p. 98). If the basis of structural factors is inequality, then it is the responsibility of governments to design interventional mechanisms to reduce poverty. This is the basis for setting up welfare mechanisms to cater for the poor (Kirby et al 1997 p. 590). In Ghana, such social interventional programmes include: Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS), National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), Ghana School Feeding Programme, Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) and Free Senior High School (FSHS).

Fatalistic Explanation of Poverty

The fatalistic factor argues that one’s poverty is not caused by the individual or the social inequalities in the society but rather by bad luck. Stephenson (2000, p. 91) argues that fatalism is partly a consequence of the growing uncertainty and risk which has become an important factor of modern societies. Sen (1992) similarly states that personal responsibility does not apply in conditions of uncertainty- “the predicament of a person due to adverse happenings over which he has no control can scarcely be dismissed on the ground of personal responsibility” (p. 149). One’s poverty could result from sickness, epidemic, disaster, fire outbreak, sudden death of one’s benefactor or a vicarious curse inherited from a previous generation.

Theoretical Framework: Language Ideology

An ideology is a body of shared and predictable beliefs, values and cherished notions of a people that are real and implicit in their everyday life situations within a period of time. In the view of Fairclough (1989), “ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behaviour” (p. 2). For Silverstein (1998), “language ideologies are sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (p. 123). Language use and its interpretation are based on the linguistic ideology of the group. Speakers’ awareness about the structure and nature of their language, affects their social and rational behaviour. Verschueren (1999) states that “language ideologies are habitual ways of thinking and speaking about language and language use, which

are rarely challenged within a given community” (p. 198).

Irvine (1989) postulates that “Language ideologies are the cultural systems of ideas about social and linguistic relationship, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (p. 225). Language ideology effectively oscillates between language, culture, politics, concepts, perceptions, worldview, people’s intellect, psychological behaviour and sociocultural world. Rumsey (1990) opines that “linguistic ideology refers to shared bodies of common sense notions about the nature of language in the world” (p. 346). Since the beliefs are shared, their application is also predictable. Language ideology provides a sociocultural understanding of the worldview, as well as the interpretation of the political, cultural, economic, law and religious processes and people’s way of life that inform the local beliefs about language and culture (Kroskrity, 2006 p. 498).

Language ideology further links language to social identity, class, ranks, status and indexicality, gender, aesthetics, morality, epistemology, and operations of institutions of power, law and economics as we find in Akan socio-economic systems (Agyekum 2016 2010; Kroskrity 2001, p. 413; Silverstein 1998, p. 126). Interrogating language ideologies from the standpoint of law, Haviland (2003), submits that “linguistic ideology reflects the ‘ideas about language and its place in social arrangements or its use and usability for social and political ends, of which the concept of “language rights” must surely be a part and a product” (p. 764). With regard to the use of language, language ideology discusses language policies in multilingual societies and choice of language in education, politics and judicial systems. The emphasis can be on the major and official languages and any attempt to use any of the minority languages in official settings will be considered as linguistic paranoia (Haviland 2003).⁴

The understanding of the Akan sociocultural concept of *ohia*, ‘poverty’, its types and characteristics is based on the Akan worldview, society and cultural beliefs. Irvine and Gal (2000) aver that linguistic ideologies refer to “the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them” (p. 35). Participants in the linguistic environment are thus at the very centre of linguistic ideology.

Language ideology is a useful framework for the ethnographic and comparative analysis of ideological systems and communicative practices in different societies (Van Dijk 1998). The theory of language ideology has been used in many interactional concepts and studies of ethnographic topics.

⁴ Haviland (2003) states that linguistic paranoia “is the presumption that when co-present persons use a language you cannot understand, it can only be because they are saying something they do not want you to understand, probably because whatever is being said is “against” you” (p.771). The use of such a minority language in a multilingual society is taken as inherently insulting or threatening. There are misfeelings of insecurity since people think that they are being harassed by not knowing what is being stated.

For instance, Agyekum (2012, 2011, 2010, and 2006), employed it in his study on Akan aphorisms and proverbs on marriage, language and conflicts, language, gender and power, and Akan traditional arbitration. In these studies, it was noted how these practices are performed based on the perception and worldview of the Akan people embodied in their language ideology.

The Akan People

The word ‘Akan’ refers to both the people and their language. The Akan language has 13 dialects, namely Asante, Akuapem, Akwamu, Fante, Akyem, Agona, Assin, Denkyira, Twifo, Wassaw, Kwawu, Bron and Buem. Some Bron speakers are in the Ivory Coast. The Akan people are the largest ethnic group in Ghana. According to the 2010 national population census, 47.5% of the Ghanaian population are native Akans and has the majority of the Ghanaian population, speaking it fluently as non-native speakers.

The Akans are found predominantly in southern Ghana. Akan is spoken as a native language in six of the ten geographic regions in Ghana namely, Ashanti, Eastern, Western, Central, Brong Ahafo and Volta (northern part) Regions. The Akan speaking communities in the Volta Region of Ghana are sandwiched by the Ewe communities. Akan is studied from primary school up to the university level.

Methodology

The methodology employed for this paper was basically qualitative. The specific method used was interviews. The interviewees were four retired Akan lecturers of the University of Ghana, Winneba and Cape Coast. All of them are MPhil holders in Akan.

A greater proportion of the data was collected from library studies as secondary data that I picked from books on Akan proverbs, especially Appiah et al (2000) and Ayisi (1966). I also collected some of the proverbs on poverty from Akan written literature books including fiction (*Brako* by Adi), drama (*Etire nni Safoa* by Amoako) and poetry (*Mewɔ Bi Ka* by Adi). Furthermore, I tapped some of the proverbs from Akan oral literature materials such as recorded folk songs, proverbs, folktales and dirges.

I crosschecked the proverbs from the secondary data with the four renowned Akan speakers and fellow Akan lecturers mentioned above who gave their comments on issues. A renowned speaker in this context is one who speaks the Akan language fluently and can read, write and analyse the language. On the whole, I collected 64 proverbs on *ohia*, ‘poverty’ among the Akans. Some relate specifically to poverty, poor persons, money, and the power of money. The expressions are analysed from lexical, syntactic and semantic perspectives.

Proverbs in Akan

Proverbs are terse sayings that embody general truths or principles and ways of life of a people. The general truths are based on people's past experiences, philosophy, perception, ideology, socio-cultural concepts and worldview. We will see how the Akans view poverty. Their perception cannot be separated from their experiences about poverty, and how they look at poverty and wealth through proverbs.

Oral literature scholars such as Finnegan (2012), Agyekum (2005), Okpewho (1992) and Yankah (1989) have researched extensively into proverbs. Agyekum (2005) postulates that "proverbs are interpretations of traditional wisdom based on the experiences and socio-political life of our elders" (p. 9). In Akan indigenous communication, the use of proverbs is the acknowledged mark of one's communicative competence.⁵

Agyekum (2005) asserts that, In Akan, there are adages such as *ɛɛ ne ɔkasa mu abohemmaa*, "the proverb is the most appropriate aspect of speech", *ɛtwa asem tia*, "it curtails matters", *enka asem ho a, ɛnwie de ye*, "without it, a speech does not acquire its seasoned nature" (p. 10). Akan proverbs are aesthetic devices of vitality in speech, and the salt of a language, without which the real taste of the 'language dish' is not felt.

Proverbs are used as verbal strategies to stave off, or contain, tense situations stemming from face-to-face communication in Akan (Agyekum, 2010; Yankah, 1989). Multiple proverbs concretise the value of language and the positive attributes of the speaker to handle face-threatening acts and to depict his politeness level. If an Akan speaker is well versed in the culture and knows the background of his/her interactants, s/he would be able to use the proper thematic proverbs as we find in this paper.

Analysis of the Proverbs on Poverty

The proverbs on poverty in this paper are analysed from the point of view of (a) conditional clauses, (b) use of causative marker **ma**, "let, cause", and (c) the use of the copular verb *ye*, "to be".

Use of Conditional Clauses to depict the Effects of Poverty

The proverbs under this category show that when you are afflicted by poverty there are certain negative results that dog your life. The proverbs in this section are captured in conditional clauses to indicate that the presence of the entity X calls for Y and vice versa.

⁵ Speakers' ability to use appropriate proverbs in their appropriate socio-cultural contexts depict their language competence (Agyekum 2012; Yankah 1989). For instance, in Agyekum (2016 and 2005) the composer, Alex Konadu, uses a series of proverbs to depict his competence in the Akan language. The proverbs are aesthetically woven to promote the song's functions and confirm the artist's creativity.

They are marked by the split conjunction (*sɛ*)...*a*, which can denote the concept of conditionality (**if**) and temporality (**when**); both are expressed by identical lexical and syntactic forms in Akan. The first part (*sɛ*) is optional but the ...*a*, is obligatory and it is always followed by a comma to mark the clausal boundary between the subordinate conditional clause and the main clause.

- (1) (*Sɛ*) *ɛhia buroni a, ɔsan ɛpo*.
“If the white man becomes poor he crosses the ocean.”⁶

Traditionally, the Akans assumed that the white man lived in a country of abundant wealth and therefore felt comfortable over there. For him to travel overseas, implies that he was driven by a certain crucial need that he felt could be only satisfied in Africa.

- (2) (*Sɛ*) *ɛhia ɔbarima a, ne yere bɔ no so mpokua*.
“If a man becomes poor, his wife despises him” (Appiah et al 2000 p. 465).

Among the Akans, (a traditionally male-dominated society), the husband traditionally exerts absolute power and control over his wife and children. The wife should respect him because he is the breadwinner. If the man is poor and thus becomes irresponsible, and his financial duties are performed by the wife, he is not respected. The wife can control the husband. An extension of the above is captured by the expression *X bɔ Y so mpokua*, which means X bluffs on Y. Poverty has reduced the status, dignity and power of the man.

- (3) (*Sɛ*) *ɛhia wo a, ɛnwu*.
“If you are poor do not die.” Do not despair in adversity.

This proverb consoles the poor, and stresses that poverty is not the only adversity as there are some other situations in life (sickness, bereavement, false accusation, etc.) that are more stressful than poverty. It is supported by another Akan motivational proverb; *wowɔ nkwa a, na wowɔ adeɛ*, “If you have life you have wealth.” In so far as there is life, there is hope.

- (4) (*Sɛ*) *ɛhia wo a, woka asempa mpo a, ɔmanfoɔ bu no nsenhunu*.
“When you are poor, even when you say sensible things, it is regarded as nonsense by the people.”

This denotes the power of money and the predicament of the poor person.

⁶ A need is what drives people to do things and is normally referred to as *adehiadeɛ*, while *ohia*, ‘poverty’ normally refers to money and other material things. Everyone has needs which may drive them to do certain things, but not everyone is poor.

- (5) (Sɛ) ohia hia wo a, ɔba kwasea mpo tu wo fo.
“If you are poor, even the foolish person advises you.”

In proverbs (4) and (5), poverty is associated with folly and non-intelligence. It is assumed that the poor have nothing sensible to offer. S/he is side-lined when it comes to deliberations of important issues even in their own family. Example (5) further indicates that the poor person's intelligence becomes evident when fools arrogate to themselves the right to advise him/her on financial issues so as to reduce poverty. The advice is not restricted to finances as it also relates to a general disregard for the poor due to their low financial social status. This is based on the concept of the individual as the source of poverty (cf. section on the individual factor in poverty).

- (6) (Sɛ) ohia hia wo a, w'anɪm tɛ sɛ akaatia, w'ano sɛ onipa ano nso wontumi nkasa
“If poverty afflicts you, your face looks like a chimpanzee, your mouth resembles a person's mouth but you cannot speak.”

(This proverb is cited from one of the highlife songs of the renowned composer Agyemang Opambour entitled Ohia asem.)

- (7) (Sɛ) ohia soma wo a, ebeyɛ dɛn na worenkɔ?
“When poverty sends you on an errand, how can you refuse?”
- (8) (Sɛ) ohia ka wo a, na woayɛ mmɔbɔ.
“When you are afflicted by poverty you become miserable.”

In proverbs (6), (7) and (8), poverty is connected with silence, vulnerability and pity because of how the society perceives the poor. A poor person is downgraded to the level of an animal. S/he has all the features of a human being but does not have the human mouth and potency to participate in human communication. In the chronology of evolution, the closest animals to human beings are apes and chimpanzees. In this proverb, a poor person is equated to a chimpanzee who has some similar linguistic human features but cannot talk. The poor man's human rights to freedom of speech are trampled upon and curtailed. This notion supports Harrison's (1981) assertion that “the greatest tragedy of Third World poverty today is the underdevelopment of man himself. Poor people never reach their full human potential in physical strength, intelligence and well being. They are trapped in a pattern of overlapping vicious circle” (p. 212–213). In ranking the status of people in society, the poor are placed very low.

In proverb (7), poverty controls the person and decides even his/her movements. Wherever poverty sends you, you cannot refuse; poverty causes

you to do menial jobs and run errands for little money. Poverty does not respect age even in African where age is often highly respected. In proverb (6), if a person is reduced to the level of an animal, s/he is a non-entity, marginalised and despised. In present-day Ghana, young employers can engage older people and disrespect them, due to the power of money.

(9) (Sε) *wo ni di hia a, wonnyae nkɔfa obi nye na.*

“If your mother is poor, you do not put her aside and take somebody as your mother.”

This proverb is in line with the structural factor in poverty discussed earlier. When you find yourself in a certain social stratum of poverty, it is difficult to move out of it. Hence, you have to be content with what you have and who your relatives are. You cannot despise your mother because she is poor. Proverb 9 further indicates that even though poverty is negative, family and community ties are ranked higher than money. There are times therefore when the poor, on account of their social ties and good interpersonal relations, are revered despite their material status. We saw in proverb 3 that life supersedes poverty and wealth. Therefore if you have life, it is better. These two proverbs imply that poverty is not negative in all cases.

The Use of Causative *ma*, ‘let’ in Proverbs on Poverty

Some Akan proverbs on poverty have the causative marker **ma** to imply that poverty causes you to fall into some unpleasant situations. The causation implies that poverty is so strong that it acts as the CONTROLLER and AGENT while the poor person is the CONTROLLED, UNDERGOER and the PATIENT (cf. Agyekum, 2004 and Dua, 2013 on causation).

OHIA (poverty) -----> OHIANI (poor person)
CONTROLLER (AGENT) -----> CONTROLLED/UNDERGOER
(PATIENT)

In all the Akan proverbs and ideology under this section, poverty is the powerful stimulus and the person has to respond to the dictates of its power. Poverty leads to stress, loss of one’s intellect and wisdom and suppression by the rich. Again, poverty causes the poor to reveal their expertise or sell their conscience to the rich who are then glorified. It reduces the poor person to the level of an animal (a vulture). It makes one eat unwholesome food, and deprives one of one’s favourite dish. It drives away one’s friends and makes one aware of real friends. It can finally change one’s status drastically and turn a royal into a slave.

Most of the causative sentences in the proverbs employ the focus marker **na**, ‘it is’, which implies that *ohia* is exclusive to cause the situation inherent in

the proverb. A focused item in a sentence refers to the most relevant information in a given discourse. According to Boadi (1974) in Akan, *na* is the basic focus marker and implies an ‘exclusive, emphatic, restricting’ item in a sentence. In Akan, an item focused with *na* is normally fronted and the subject is repeated after the *na*. If the focused item is human, it is represented by the 3rd person singular pronoun *ɔ*- ‘he /she’; if it is inanimate, as in poverty, it is represented by the inanimate pronoun *ɛ*- ‘it’, as in the examples below. Some of the proverbs indicate that poverty triggers the emotional state of the individual or make him/her act in a certain way. These examples are based on Akan folk knowledge, wisdom and experiences. In Duah (2013, pp. 212-217), *ohia* in proverbs 10-17, would be acting as the TRIGGER/PROMPT, which causes a voluntary or an involuntary change in the cause.⁷

- (10) *Ohia ma adwenedwene.*
“Poverty causes worrying/planning”
- (11) *Ohia ma awiemfoɔ nyansa yera.*
“Poverty makes the humble person lose his/her wisdom.”
(Poverty lowers one’s standard (Appiah et al 2000, p. 469).
- (12) *Ohia na ɛma ohiani tɔn ne nyansa ma osikani.*
“It is poverty that makes the poor person sell his/her wisdom to the rich.”
(If you are poor, you are easily influenced or deceived (Appiah et al, 2000 p. 470).
- (13) *Ohia na ɛma ɔdehyɛ dane akoo.*
“It is poverty that makes the royal become a servant.”
- (14) *Ohia na ɛma ɔkanni ye aboa anka enye saa na ɔtee.*
“It is poverty that makes the Akan person look like a beast, for that is not his/her nature.”
- (15) *Ohia na ɛma ɔpete di bini anka enye aduane a ɔpe ne no.*
“It is poverty that makes the vulture eat faeces for that is not the food it likes.”

(This is one of the lines in a song entitled *Ohia asem* by the highlife musician, Agyemang Opambour).

⁷ In discussing causation Duah (2013, p. 217) posits that “The PROMPT and TRIGGER configurations are similar in some ways. In both TRIGGER and PROMPT, the causer is usually an event acting as a stimulus which causes the causee to undergo a change of state.”

- (16) *Ohia na Ema obi tua n'akɔnnɔdeɛ.*
 "It is poverty that lets someone abstain from his/her favourite delicacy."
- (17) *Ohia da na ema wohunu nnipa.*
 "It is the period of poverty that makes you see people."
 "Adversity tests the sincerity of one's friends or neighbours."

In examples 14 and 15, we encounter the subjunctive marker *anka* 'would have' to imply that since the proposition stated is not real and practical, there is the need for circumspection. The discourse marker **anka** also indicates that an occurrence is based on the absence of a necessary condition that did not materialise (Agyekum 2012, p. 140). Amfo (2007) posits that *anka* is one of the modals in Akan.

In the translated English versions, the proverbs start with '**it is**' which is the gloss for the Akan focus marker **na**. In English grammar, such constructions are labelled as cleft constructions. In Akan, they are referred to as **focus constructions**. Cleft sentences are used to help us focus on a particular part of the sentence and emphasise this part by fronting it, and in the Akan construction, focus sentences are treated the same way. The importance of the focus marker **na** in the proverbs of poverty as seen in examples 12-17 is that it focuses on the power of poverty to trigger the actions and inactions of the poor person.

Downing and Locke (2006) indicate that "In clefting, we re-organise the content of a single clause into two related parts. The effect of the resulting structures is to focus on one element, the **New**, which always follows a form of the verb **be**" (p. 250). There are two kinds of **cleft**: the ***it*-cleft** and the ***wh*-cleft**, and they both put the element under discussion into a strong focus. The main function of the ***it*-cleft** is to mark **contrastive focus**, which is very often implicit. When the focus items are highlighted the other elements are 'given' or 'presupposed information.' Downing and Locke (2006) define presupposition as a piece of information, which is assumed by the speaker, without it being asserted (p. 250).

The Use of the Copula Verb *yɛ*, 'to be' in Poverty Proverbs

In the Akan proverbs under this category, poverty is metaphorically compared to some negative social aspects of life to indicate that poverty is actually negative. Some of the negative things compared with poverty are madness, loss of reputation, unpreparedness, bitterness, etc. In some of the proverbs, the link between poverty and the negative attribute is the copula verb *yɛ*, 'to be'. The metaphor implies that poverty has all the semantic attributes that come after the copula verb; *X yɛ Y*. The stative verbs that encode the Akan copula verbs indicate that the antecedent NP is in a state of affairs. The copula verb also connotes that the NP that comes after it, complements the antecedent and that

they both share a commonality.

- (18) *Ohia ye adammɔ.*
“Poverty is madness.”

A popular Ghanaian song entitled *Sika frɛ bogya* by Slim Young in 2004 has the line *Ohia ye adammɔ*, “poverty is madness”. He then laments on poverty as follows:

- (a) *Ohia hia wo a, hwɛ sɛ wiase tee.*
“If you become poor look at how the world is.”
- (b) *Wonam baabi a, mmɔbɔmmɔbɔ.*
“You walk at places miserably.”
- (c) *Amanfoɔ hunu w’anim a, ɛwɔ deɛ wɔbɛyɛ.*
“When people see your face they behave differently”
- (d) *Wotwe wo ho nso a, ɛwɔ deɛ wɔbɛyɛ.*
“When you depart they do something different.”
- (e) *Abusua kɔ agyina a, yɛnhwehwe wo.*
“When the family goes into counsel they do not look for you.”
- (f) *Woka asempa koraa a, yebu no nkwadaasem.*
“When you say something very important, others consider it childish.”

The statements in **a-f** reflect Akans’ ideology and perceptions about the poor and how people despise and marginalise them on all fronts.

- (19) *Ohia ye animguaseɛ.*
“Poverty is a disgrace.”
- (20) *Ohia nam ye nwono.*
“The meat of poverty is bitter.” This implies that poverty is a cruel state of affairs.
- (21) *Ohia panin nyɛ panin pa.*
“An impoverished elder is not a real elder.”

(If you do not have the financial means you do not wield power)

The status of the poor elder can be changed and handed over to a younger person who is rich. A typical example is when there is a chieftaincy vacancy in the family.

- (22) *Ohia nye adepa.*
“Poverty is not a good thing.”
- (23) *Ohia nhye da.*
“Poverty does not appoint its day of visitation.”

This example alerts people that there is uncertainty as to when poverty can afflict a person. A rich man can easily become bankrupt and poor; invalidity and loss of job and property can easily change the rich person for him to become very poor. In examples 21-22, the copula verb is in the negative to indicate that poverty does not match with the positive complements after it.

The concept of *Ohiani*, ‘a Poor Person’, in Akan

Agyekum (2016) states that “the word *ohia* is derived from the verb stem **-hia**, ‘to be in need’, plus the nominalising prefix **o-**; the agentive suffix **-ni** is added to derive *ohiani*, ‘a poor person’, (pl. *ahiafoɔ*)” (p. 165). *Ohia-ni* is a poor person, who is in need of money and other essentials of life to function like others in the society. S/he is a person who does not have the basic means and resources of subsistence and living. Asiedu et al. (2013 p. 19) record that where the elite perceive poverty as a lack of basic necessities and provision of social services, the rural poor see poverty in terms of the vulnerability to environmental factors that affect their livelihood including lack of food security. Even though Akan is a communitarian society where people traditionally care for one other, there is a latent economic class system whereby the poor are distinguished from the rich. The proverbs and concepts about poverty and the poor people discussed in this paper are clear manifestations of a covert class system which marginalises the poor.

When you are pushed into the vicious cycle of poverty, there is no way you can disentangle yourself. Even when there is a chance, there would be an obstacle that closes the door to prosperity and wealth. Proverb 29 refers to this situation as follows;

- (29) *Ohiani benya ne ho no na bata kwan asi.*
“By the time the poor man becomes wealthy, the road for monetary ventures would have ‘been blocked’.”

This is best appreciated from the viewpoint of structural violence. The semantic domains in which the poor person finds himself include pandemonium, loss of items, accusations, regret, lack of sympathy and ill-luck. Others are non-discrimination of food and accommodation, non-recognition of one’s good deeds and potentials, attachment to dirt and insects, lack of love for one’s wife/husband and lack of a befitting funeral.

Other issues portrayed by the proverbs imply that the poor should be tolerant and hide their ideas and good thoughts, for nobody takes them seriously. Proverb 26 states that *Ohiani asem hwehwe nnipa aso*. “A poor man’s problem is ‘wondered about’ by people.” His/her ideas, speech and thoughts are always misinterpreted such that even when he says good things they are considered bad. His wisdom resides in the hands of the rich and they can only display their wisdom in private where nobody recognises them (see Proverbs 30 and 39). When the poor person blows a melodious tune on the horn it is considered cacophonous. This is explicated by proverb 36 as (*Se*) *ohiani hyen aben a onnya tiefo*. “If the poor person blows his/her horn s/he does not get a listener.”

The poor wear ragged clothes, are always found guilty, shunned and cheated, cannot brag in public and do not have friends (Proverbs 45 & 46). They are cursed not to be wealthy because the day they become wealthy, the State will be ruined (Proverb 48). All accusations and criminal activities are attributed to them. Finally, the poor treat their sores in a corner to avoid the gaze and sympathy of others (Proverb 51). Some proverbs depict that being poor evokes sympathy and it is painful to be poor (Proverbs 27-28).

- (24) *Abogyanbumbɔ a, ohiani na ne nnoɔma yera.*
“In times of pandemonium it is the poor person’s goods that are missing.”
- (25) *Asembɔne se ohiani. Enti deɛ enni me soɔ no momfa nto me so.*
“Criminal cases befit the poor, so level false charges against me.”⁸
- (26) *Ohiani asem hwehwe nnipa aso.*
“People wander about a poor person’s problem.”
- (27) *Ohiani asem ye ya.*
“Issues about the poor person are painful.”
- (28) *Ohiani asem ye mmɔbɔ.*
“Issues about the poor person are pitiable.”
- (29) *Ohiani benya ne ho no na bata kwan asi.*
“By the time the poor person becomes wealthy, the road for monetary ventures would have ‘been blocked’.”

This proverb is used when poor people miss good opportunities that could have freed them from poverty.

⁸ Proverb 25 is the title of a song composed in the 1970’s by Vasco Osei Kofi, a renowned highlife artist.

- (30) (Sε) *ohiani bu ebe a, yemfa.*
“If a poor person quotes a proverb, it has no value.”

The import of this proverb is that proverbs are supposed to come from the wise people and in the Akan society it is wrongly perceived that a poor person cannot be wise.

- (31) *Ohiani didi abra-abraa.*
“A poor person eats without discrimination” (Appiah et al 2000, p. 473).

A poor person has no choice and it tallies with the English proverb, “a beggar has no choice.”

- (32) (Sε) *ohiani do ne yere a, onhunu.*
“When a poor man loves his wife, she does not see it.”

A poor husband cannot express his love by providing his wife with cash and gifts.

- (33) *Ohiani funu nkyere fie.*
“A poor man’s corpse does not remain in the house for a long time.”⁹

- (34) (Sε) *ohiani fura kente a, yese ofura kyenkyen.*¹⁰
“If a poor person puts on a kente cloth, we say that s/he is wearing an inferior cloth.”

- (35) (Sε) *ohiani fura kyeme a, aye se efura dunsini.*
“If a poor man wears an expensive cloth, it looks like a cloth on the stump of a tree.”

- (36) (Sε) *ohiani hyen aben a onnya tiefo*
“If a poor person blows his/her horn, s/he does not get a listener.”

(This proverb was tapped from a song entitled ‘*Aba Saa*’ composed by the late highlife musician, Dr. Paa Bobo).

⁹ The family of the poor person is not ready to spend so much time, energy and funds on his/her funeral so s/he is buried very early. These days, Akans put their corpses at the morgue. They put the poor person’s corpse there for a few days/weeks but a rich person can be there for months while the family prepares for a glamorous burial.

¹⁰ Kente is a rich and expensive cloth occasionally worn by chiefs, rich people and dignitaries.

(37) *Ohiani mfura ne ntomago mfa nni apiripiragorɔ.*
“The poor person does not wear his/her cloth and engages in dangerous games.” Since it is the only cloth s/he cannot afford to lose it though tough games.

(38) *Ohiani gyaaseni ne nwansena* (Appiah *et al* 2000, p. 473).
“A poor person’s domestic attendant is the house fly.”

A poor person has to put up with dirt and discomfort. S/he wears ragged clothing and eats poor food where house flies hover around the food.

(39) *(Se) ohiani ka asem a, edane asemɔne.*
“If a poor person says something it is misinterpreted and depreciated.”

40) *Ohiani kanea ne ayeremo*
“The poor person’s light is lightning.”

S/he stays in darkness and it is only lightning that provides him/her with light.

(41) *Ohiani mfa abofu.*
“A poor person does not become angry.’ S/he has to tolerate all provocations.”

When s/he becomes angry and offends others s/he has no money to settle the case. If s/he is angry, s/he may lose favours and gifts from benevolent people.

(42) *(Se) ohiani ne sikani goro a, ensɔ.*
“If a wealthy person befriends the poor, the friendship does not last”
(Akrofi 1958, p. 147).

People always befriend their peers; the rich only play with their fellow rich people. He/she may over-cheat the poor friend and the poor will definitely break off. If the rich person becomes fed up with the consistent requests from the poor, the friendship breaks up.

(43) *Ohiani mpo dabere.*
“A poor person does not refuse a sleeping place.”

(44) *(Se) ohiani nim nyansa a, eka ne tirim.* (Appiah *et al* 2000, p. 475)
“A poor person keeps his/her wise ideas to himself.”

This implies that when the poor even express their wise ideas, nobody listens to them.

- (45) *Ohiani nni asem nni bem.*
“A poor person is never innocent in a case.”

Prejudice is always against the poor. In the current Akan situation, the poor can only win a case if s/he can hire a good lawyer.

- (46) *Ohiani nni adwamsem.*
“A poor person does not brag in public.”

This is so because nobody takes the poor serious.

- (47) *Ohiani nni yɔnkoɔ.*
“The poor person has no friend.”

- (48) *(Sɛ) ohiani nya adeɛ a, ɔman bɔ.*
“If a poor person becomes rich the state is ruined.”

(Quick acquisition of wealth results in dissension (Appiah et al 2000, p. 475)).

- (49) *Ohiani nyansa hyɛ osikani nsam.* (Appiah et al 2000, p. 476).
“A poor person’s wisdom is in the hands of the rich person.”

A poor person’s intelligence is of little use unless he/she is backed by a wealthy person.

- (50) *Ohiani nyansa/ano nnuru dwam.*
“A poor person’s wisdom/mouth does not reach public places.”

The wisdom or ideas of the poor person are disregarded.
The poor are not invited to public deliberations that involve monetary affairs.

- (51) *Ohiani tutu ne kuro mantwea.*
“The poor person treats his/her sore in the corner.”

All the above notions about the concept of poverty reflect the folk knowledge and wisdom of the Akans based on societal evidence rather than on scientific evidence.

Proverbs based on the Word *Sika*, ‘Money’.

This section discusses proverbs based on the Akan socio-cultural concept of money which sees poverty as something unwarranted. The presence of money marks poverty as a social canker. Some of the examples denote the humiliations

and difficulties people experience when they lack money. This is depicted by the verb *nni* (do not have). Some of the examples were adopted from Akrofi (1958), Ayisi (1966) and Appiah et al (2000). The semantic domains expressed by poverty are lack of wisdom, forced mutism, having faint ideas, rejection of one's suggestions, complaints about hunger and small thefts. The examples are couched in conditional clauses indicating that if you do not have money, then something negative happens. They are marked by the conditional clause marker (*se*)*a*, 'if/when' as we saw in the first section.

- (52) (*Se*) *wonni sika a, ase wonnim nyansa.*
 "If you do not have money it looks as if you are not wise."
- (53) (*Se*) *wonni sika a, woka asem a, yemfa.*
 "If you do not have money you are not taken seriously."
- (54) (*Se*) *wonni sika a, wonni ano.*
 "If you do not have money you lose your power of speech."
- (55) (*Se*) *wonni sika a, wose akura afa wo nam.*
 "If you do not have money you claim that a mouse has taken your meat."
- (56) (*Se*) *wonni sika a, wose emo mmee.*
 "If you do not have money you claim that rice does not 'make your belly full'."

The traditional staple food of the Akans is *fufuo*, a very heavy food; a small quantity can fill the belly, but rice is lighter. It is believed that to fill your belly with rice, you have to eat a lot, and thus you need to spend more money. A poor person who can afford to buy only a little amount of rice will complain that it does not fill the belly. He/she will rather prefer to use the small amount of money on a heavier meal that can sustain him/her for a longer period.

- (57) (*Se*) *wo sika sua a, wo koso nam nso sua.*
 "If you have little money your share in meat is also very little."
- (58) (*Se*) *wo sika sua a, w'asem sua.*
 "If you have little money, you do not have much to say."

Even when the poor have much to say, the society and the rich may not invite them or will not be ready to listen to them.

The Power of Money

Akan proverbs under this section reveal how powerful money is. The proverbs elevate money and make it more powerful and indispensable in life such that without it one is nothing. The semantic entities to which money is compared are innocence, chieftdom, power, masculinity and suppression. There is the English adage that states that ‘He who has gold makes the rules.’ In the Bible, Ecclesiastes (10:19) states that ‘A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry: but money answers everything.’ (New King James Version (NKJV)). The latter part of the text shows the absolute power enshrined in money; it can make and unmake.

(59) *Sika na ema ɔɔdifoɔ di bem.*
 “It is money that makes a guilty person become innocent.”

(60) *Sika frɛ bogya.*
 “Money attracts relatives”

The proverb literally means that money ‘invites blood.’ In Akan, the word *bogya* ‘blood’ refers to blood relations and the society thinks that if you are rich then your relatives are always ready to draw closer to you. On the contrary if you are poor, all your relatives will despise and avoid you. In a song *Sika Frɛ Bogya* by Slim Young composed in 2014, he compared richness with poverty and gave the accolades of money as follows:

(61) *Sika ye ɔmama,* “Money is a dignitary”

(62) *Sika wɔ tumi,* “Money has power.”

The power attached to money makes the rich powerful enough to control the entire family. The musician states that *Abusua anhu wo a, wɔmmɔ pɔw.* “If the family does not see you they do not take any firm decision.” *Abusua anhu wo a, wɔnkasa,* “If the family does not see you, they do not speak”, and finally *sɛbe wotumi keka deɛ wope,* ‘You can say whatever you like.’ The rich person is also linguistically powerful and can therefore break the decorum of communication and say what he/she likes.

(63) *Sika ne barima.*
 “Money is the man.” (Money is powerful.)

(64) *Sika ne ɔhene.*
 “Money is king.” (Money rules all.)

Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered how the Akans conceptualise poverty based on their language, culture, society and experience. We discussed poverty under language ideology, which rationalises people's experiences, behaviours, attitudes and expressions based on their culture, beliefs, religion, philosophy, economic and political systems.

We identified four basic sources of poverty and these are individualistic, cultural, fatalistic and structural. The Akan sociocultural concept of poverty was discussed through the lenses of proverbs. The proverbs were discussed under the negative attributes of poverty. These include foolishness, disgrace, madness, de-personification, lack of speech, vulnerability, solitary life, marginalisation, stigmatisation, suppression and oppression, prejudice, lack of love and respect, and lack of intelligence. These notions and concepts about poverty in Akan cohere with Akan language ideology.

The paper sees the use of indirection through proverbs as a channel of expressing the Akan sociocultural concept of poverty. The concept still prevails in modern times even when the class system in Akan has widened on account of western education, globalisation and technology all of which have created various strata, nuances and differences between the rich and the poor. The degradation of the poor person has been worsened now that the society has become more materialistic. The economic power anchored on monetary gains is now associated with linguistic power, and the poor have to keep quiet in most sectors of public life. Ghanaian politics, civil service, other parts of the economy, religion, education and the whole society have become more materialistic. Akans, and Ghanaians as a whole, have fallen prey to the western capitalist idea of development and the society. For example, politics has become so monetary based that if one is not rich, one cannot join the main stream partisan politics since electioneering campaigns involve a lot of money. The smaller parties that are not rich have performed abysmally low in all elections. The proverbs in this paper point to the power of money and the woes of the poor and further account for why people try all means, fair or foul, to become rich.

The paper noted that poverty does not relate only to lack of money but also lack of basic items, accusations, ill-luck, non-discrimination of food and accommodation, non-recognition of one's potentials, lack of love for one's spouse and non-befitting funerals.

Notwithstanding the negative connotations painted by most of the proverbs and Akan ideology about poverty, the paper stresses that poverty is not negative in all aspects because some of the proverbs rate family and social ties over and above money. Again, the paper has through one of the proverbs argued that poverty is not the only adversity since there are some other conditions in life that are more stressful than poverty. Poverty then does not warrant death. We have also seen that the definition of poverty and a poor person may change from

one community to another. However, there are common denominators.

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