

## Literary Analysis of Wellerisms in Nzema Proverbs

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### Abstract

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This paper presents a qualitative literary investigation on wellerisms (a subtype of proverb) in Nzema—a language spoken in the Western part of Ghana, West Africa. The study aimed at ascertaining whether the need to factor them (wellerisms) in conversation would be based on their context of use. It also investigated as to whether wellerisms in Nzema proverbs had metaphorical messages and implications which would transcend beyond their literal meaning. Findings confirmed Yankah's (1989) assertion that there cannot be a use of proverb without context. The paper also argues that, wellerisms in Nzema are interwoven with literary features and behaviours, especially 'metaphor'. They were found to perform didactic functions (teach morals) and discourage human attitudes which societies frown upon. Structurally, wellerisms in Nzema were noted to be short and pithy but retained their central messages and implications even from generation to generation. Above all, they were seen to touch on all aspects of human life.

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**Keywords:** wellerism, proverbs, metaphor, didactic, conversation, generation, ethnography.

### 1.0 Introduction

The most efficient communicator in any language is not always the one who best manipulates the language structures; it is often the person who is most skilled at processing the complete situation involving him/herself and his/her hearer, taking into account what linguistic knowledge is already available between them and selecting items which will communicate the message effectively (Little Wood, 1981 (cited in Amegashie & Asilevi 2010)).

Nutsuako (1977: 92-93 (cited in Amegashie & Asilevi 2010)) also posits that, as speakers of a language, we need not acquire the repertoire of linguistic items only, but also a repertoire of devices for using them in concrete situations. Proverbs among others are found to be some of these devices used in these concrete situations and are able to put spice into our speech.

The paper seeks to give a literary analysis of some wellerisms in Nzema proverbs. The paper is a bit far from being a detailed and technical appreciation and analysis of Nzema proverbs in general. Nevertheless, the study seeks to draw a brief attention to the similarities and differences between wellerisms and proverbs even though the former is perceived literary as part of the latter. Very many of these proverbs/wellerisms are imbued with didactics such as unity, transparency, loyalty, kindness etc and are enriched with literary devices such as metaphor, simile, personification, contrast, allegory and many more.

### 1.1 Theoretical Framework and Assumptions.

The primary assumption of this study is based on Yankah's (1989) assertion that the meaning of a proverb is dependent on the context of situation. According to him, there cannot be a proverb without a context. The other assumption is that Nzema proverbs/wellerisms would have extended or metaphoric implications and that; literary devices are the building blocks of such creative verbal work.

### 2.0 General Literature Review

A proverb is a short sentence or phrase that has a special message. It forms an integral part of the lives of the speakers of the language (Ababila, 2010).

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Touching on the nature of African proverbs, Asare (1997) observes that, African cultures are rich in proverbs. He holds the view that anyone who is born and brought up in a village is a “living carrier of proverbs”

Proverbs are short sayings which contain the wisdom and experiences of the people of old. This view was acknowledged by Amegashie & Asilevi (2010) who described proverbs as short statements of moral truths drawn from Sundry of experiences and observations. Dzobo (1973 (in Amegashie & Asilevi *ibid*)) describes the linguistics forms of proverbs as simple statement of truth whose moral lessons call for some deeper thinking and imagination before one can deduce their moral implications. Proverbs in Nzema also possess all of these characteristics as asserted by some scholars above. Even across cultures, proverbs are understood to be short and pithy sayings of the wise which are didactic (teach morals), able to spice the speech of the people and are descended from generation to generation.

Finnegan (1970:399) posits that “proverbs are generally marked by terseness of expression, by a form different from that of ordinary speech and by a figurative mode of expression abounding in metaphor”. The figurative quality of proverbs as especially one of their noticeable features is their allusive wording usually in metaphoric forms. Just as in other cultures, Nzema proverbs are employed into conversations at significant moments to show the speakers linguistic competence and performance, a mark of verbal artistry and maturity in language use and makes the audience appreciate the conversation.

Unlike riddle and stories, which may be set apart as suitable for relaxation, proverbs do not often have specialized occasions for their use, but are closely involved with speech and action on every sort of occasion including general conversation (Finnegan, 1970).

Okpweho (1992) mentions some dos and don'ts associated with the use of proverbs. He holds the view that, adult would be in a better position to introduce proverbs into their conversation since they would understand their implications better. He claims that children could also make use of proverbs amongst themselves but would not be appropriate to use proverbs before their elders without making reference to this statement ‘as you, our fathers have said.....’ These etiquettes equally govern the use of proverbs in Nzema culture.

In a literary analysis of Gurenɛ proverbs, Ababila (2010) observes that, Gurenɛ traditional proverbial sayings relate to every aspect of human life. “The ultimate purpose of the proverbs is to teach wisdom and moral lessons’ Ababila (*ibid*). He noted further that, the proverbs touch on all aspects of life as for example wealth and poverty, health and sickness, joy and sorrow among others. Nzema proverbs do not deviate functionally from what has been observed above, rather, they go a long way to also praise and influence people to cultivate virtues that ensure progress and promote well-being such as perseverance, respect, unity, gratitude, humility, loyalty, patience, co-operation, prudence and others.

Many Nzema proverbs also inform people to desist from undesirable vices; as for instance greed, laziness, ingratitude, selfishness, anger, backbiting, pride, lying and procrastination among others. The people of Nzema have a proverb like this; “nyiene soso bɛ nwo na beapɛ azule” literally, (the ants hold one another before they could cross a river).

The proverb cited above teaches togetherness and unity. Ants are tiny insects which can easily be carried away by the river but they are able to cross it because of unity and togetherness. This proverb affirms the claim that “united we stand, divided we fall”

There is also a proverbial expression in the cultural setting of the Nzema which states “Nyamenle kyɛ a bɛnve”. Literally, (if items are shared by God to mankind, there is no need to rush over them). This proverb informs the people and teaches them to have patience. It metaphorically implies that there is the right time for every possible thing to happen in life.

Below is another proverb used in the Nzema cultural discourse to advise somebody against greed such as .“Kakula bɔ ɛnlonkoɛ na ɔmbɔ ɛnrɔnra”. Literally, (A Child is responsible for the snail but not the tortoise).

The shell of the tortoise is very difficult to break and so that should be left to the elderly person so that the child goes to break the shell of the snail. It metaphorically implies that one should not leave what he has at his disposal and go for what other people have. It again teaches that one should be entitled to the work he/ she can do best and the other work beyond his/her control be left for the right person to do.

## 2.1 Related Literature

In this section, I intend to consider the main theme of the paper (Wellerisms) and what some scholars have contributed. As described by Okumba (1994:40) “wellerisms are proverbs which are presented as quotations from some imaginary or actual characters”. Animal characters are given the power of speech and the knowledge of proverbs Okumba (ibid). In Nzema cultural set up, this proverb type (wellerism) is coined in such a way that certain elements are made to speak directly. Some of these characters are from fictional sources such as trees, stones, rivers, birds, ghosts, and insects or from human beings and animals (Ababila, 2010).

Amegashie & Asilevi (2010) also define wellerism as “sayings in which some utterances are supposed to be made by the non-human elements”. Animals such as antelopes, pigs, sheep, mice, ants, fowls and even plants and other elements in the natural environment are personified as teachers or instrument of the moral truth intended for man. For instance, the Ewes have this saying, “Tagbatsu be xexeme le ngɔ”. Literally, (the housefly says the world is behind and ahead). This wellerism originates from the behaviour of the housefly which stretches its limbs backwards and forward alternatively, particularly when it perches (see Amegashie & Asilevi 2010). In Nzema, proverbs of this nature abound. Many of them are intended to be discussed in details later in this paper.

## 2.2 Brief Similarities and Differences between Proverbs and Wellerisms

It seems quite difficult to draw a clear line of distinction between proverbs and wellerisms because it has been discussed earlier in this paper that the latter is a type of the former. This notwithstanding, a slight comparison could be made among the two. Proverbs are didactically used, just as wellerisms, to teach morals. Apart from their moral implications, both seem to be permanent, transmitted to succeeding generations and tend to recur with the same meaning. In both cases, animals and other creatures can be incorporated as elements to portray all aspects of human life, either positive or negative. All the above are common features of proverbs and wellerisms but a significant difference is that, with proverbs, speakers mostly begin by saying our elders say/said ....” whereas wellerisms would begin like, the ant says.....” or the sheep says .....” In this sense, in wellerisms, these creatures or elements are personified as if they are capable of quoting the statement.

## 3.0 Methodology

The method for gathering data was the ethnographic approach. This school of thought believes in studying and investigating a group of people by their natural ways of living, their mode of conversing and their general ways of life as a group. In this wise, the researcher’s data collection technique was primarily based on observing and recording the speech of the people in their normal discourse including gatherings at funerals, child naming ceremonies, marriage ceremonies among others. I also contacted four chiefs from various palaces and interviewed them on wellerism as a subtype of proverbs in Nzema. A secondary data was obtained from sources such as Nzema novel and drama books and students’ manuscripts (Nzema students at Baidoo Bonsoe Senior High Technical School, Agona-Ahanta in the Western Region of Ghana).

## 4.0 Data Analysis and Discussion: Wellerisms in Nzema Proverbs

This section of the paper entails the analysis of data (i.e wellerisms in Nzema, their background /context of use, their metaphorical implications and further literary analysis).

### Wellerism 1: On the need to exercise patience

Ngyigyilira se, “saa enyia alagye ekpakye me kunlu a ebanwu me anyanle”. Literally; (the ant says if you take your time to open my stomach, you can find my intestine).

#### Context of use

This wellerism would be used to advise someone who seems to be rushing in life. He touches one thing and refuses to do it very well to see the final outcome but jumps onto another thing.

#### Analysis

The central theme of this wellerism is to inform people to have patience, be very vigilant and spend enough time to do something until they succeed. Metaphorically, the ant is a tiny creature whose intestines are very difficult to be found. Therefore, it is being compared to a situation where one needs to exercise patience and critically do something before getting accurate results.

**Wellerism 2: On transparency and fairness**

Twea se, “dasele ti a mefa me ye gua zo a” Literally, (the dog says I mate my wife in public for the purpose of witness).

**Context of use**

This wellerism would be more useful when someone wants to prove evidence of an event. In this case, if it is a material thing, the person can bring it at hand for all to see the truth.

**Analysis**

It teaches a moral lesson of being transparent. The act of the dog mating its wife in public symbolizes transparency and fairness between two parties so that judgment could easily be made as to who is responsible for a certain act.

**Wellerism 3: On personal desire and sole decision making**

Boane se, “eleka mo mekulo la ye mesie me fufule a” Literally, (the sheep says I place my white colour on any part of my body that I wish/desire).

**Context of use**

When somebody wants to do something that suits him/her while other people are not in support, citing this wellerism would be helpful. For instance, if a man finds a woman who he wishes to marry and his parents or other family members are not in support, he could use this saying to inform his parents including other people about his right and personal desire for making such a choice.

**Analysis**

The lesson here is that, individuals must be allowed to make their rightful decisions. In other words, it discusses the theme of decision making. The wellerism also portrays the image of the usual colours amongst sheep. Some place their white colours on the neck, the tail or any other part of the body especially when it is not naturally a white colour sheep in totality.

**Wellerism 4: On satisfaction and self reliance**

Molenoma se, “saa me nwo enye fe bobo a metela akole” Literally, (the dove says I am more beautiful than the fowl even if others see me to be ugly)

**Context of use**

This wellerism would be stated if someone sees another person to be inferior or not having anything better. The person being looked down upon can use the statement to prove that despite his/her status, he/she would be better than someone else.

**Analysis**

The metaphorical implication of this wellerism is that, people should be content with whatever is at their disposal. It also informs people to have self-encouragement and confidence.

**Wellerism 5: On friendship and care for others**

Komu se, “agonwole feleko ti a mempele azuleTanoe a” Literally, (the monkey says I crossed the ‘Tanor’ river because I rejoice over friendship).

**Context of use**

Someone can make use of this statement to portray that he/she struggled to perform a difficult task because of love for somebody/thing or because of how he/she finds something to be very precious.

**Analysis**

The central theme of this wellerism is to teach about absolute sacrifice and commitment to do something even when the task is so challenging. It also informs us that, in any kind of relationship, people must strive to overcome obstacles so as to be able to demonstrate concern for one another. The ‘Tanor’ river is used metaphorically to refer to the act of overcoming a difficult situation since it is not so easy for a monkey to cross it.

Thus the ability of the monkey to cross such a widespread river depicts the sense of love, commitment and devoting one's time and energy for the sake of other people. It again teaches that, you must persevere to overcome all barriers if you wish to achieve something you find so much precious.

#### **Wellerism 6: On prudence (avoiding risk)**

Ɛkpote se, "mebadidi fovole zo meapele ngoane tendenle" Literally; (the vulture says I will feed on the waste for long life)

##### **Context of use**

It would be useful to advise someone who intends to go in for something precious which would not give him/her a peace of mind, to refrain from it and rather go for the less valuable one which would not cause any inconvenience to him or her. It could also be expressed to advise someone to stay away from activities that many people appreciate (find wealthy), which in the end could cause harm to him/her.

##### **Analysis**

This wellerism teaches prudence in particular. It tells people to avoid things which may be "precious" but could endanger one's life if one possesses them. In other words, one must avoid risk and be careful in life. Metaphorically, waste materials are always placed far from the reach of normal humans, therefore the vulture feeding on the waste implies a person trying as much as possible to do things which would not put him/her into trouble.

#### **Wellerism 7: On help and assistance**

Keteboe se, "boa me maa memboa wo ti a yetila agonwonle a". Literally, (the antelope says we move in pairs for the sake of help)

##### **Context of use**

The wellerism above would be appropriately stated for advice when somebody wants to avoid another person, not wanting to offer him/her any assistance. It could also be useful when somebody tries to be selfish, not willing to share what he/she has with others.

##### **Analysis**

The basic moral lesson carried in this pithy saying is that a person can never live independently forever. Therefore, metaphorically, helping one another is what appears to be the central theme of the above wellerism.

#### **Wellerism 8: On hard work and subsequent enjoyment**

Dabodabo se, "so ekponde na enyia ye a di" Literally, (the duck says pick it, if you search and find it eat it).

##### **Context of use**

This would be expressed as an advice when somebody has worked so hard and succeeded in life but being so stingy, not even to feed himself better.

##### **Analysis**

The usual stretch of the neck by the duck in search of food is metaphorically attributed to the process of searching for a job through which man can feed himself. Therefore, it teaches that man needs not to remain idle but must find something doing. When the gains are successful, man must enjoy life. In other words, hard work and appropriate utilization of gains are being motivated through the expression of the above Nzema wellerism.

#### **Conclusion**

The primary assumption and hypotheses of the study was to find out whether wellerism, as a type of proverb in Nzema had contextual usage. The other assumption was based on whether or not these wellerisms had metaphorical implications which direct the behaviour of people in any given society. Analysis and findings have shown clearly that wellerisms in Nzema have significant contextual usage and that they abound in metaphorical implications. They teach morals and also advise members to refrain from social vices that societies do not find pleasant.

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