

BOOK REVIEW

A.K. AWEDOBA, 2000. *An Introduction to Kasena Society and Culture Through Their Proverbs*. Lanham: University Press of America, Pp. 290, cloth. ISBN 0-7618-1542-2

Introduction

The gathering of proverbs (in the form of written collections) in various ethno-linguistic areas of Africa over the past two centuries has played an active role in the development of African "Folklore" Studies. And, just as the concept of "folk-lore" has itself undergone a fundamental questioning and change, so has the analysis of "pro-verb/s".

The proverbs of the Akans of Ghana (*ɛbɛ*), one of the most documented West African cultural entities, have for instance been approached in various manners during the colonial period and up to the present times. Several collections came to fruition :

- Rev. J.G. Christaller, the Basel Missionary based in Akwapem at the end of the 19th Century, edited 3600 Twi proverbs "collected by missionaries from oral communication", retained their variations and arranged them alphabetically into *A Collection of Three Thousand and Six Hundred Tshi Proverbs* with the strong view that "They contain[ed] almost inexhaustible material for the grammar and dictionary, and still more for those who aspire to a sound knowledge of the Negro mind". But since his collection was published solely in the vernacular, he opened the way to further works;
- R. S. Rattray, the colonial ethnographer employed to help the British carry out their Indirect Rule policy in Ghana, took on the task of translating and commenting on 830 proverbs of Christaller's collection; he declared that he had eliminated all those which "seemed to bear traces of European influence" and that he had kept mainly those which could be of interest to either the anthropologist or the linguist. R. S. Rattray published his *Ashanti Proverbs* in 1916, suggesting that "These sayings would seem to be [...] the very soul of this people, of a truth all such sayings really are. They contain some thought which, when one, more eloquent in the tribe than another, has expressed in words, all who are of that people recognize at once as something which *they* knew full well already, which all the instinct of their lives and thoughts and traditions tells them to be true of their own nature." He classified the 830 chosen proverbs in themes, similar to those which had been suggested in Christaller's preface, reproduced their Twi version,

added an “almost literal translation” and linguistic and / or anthropological notes, wherever a remarkable linguistic construction or an untranslatable word appeared;

- In 1958, a Ghanaian scholar, C. A. Akrofi, on the pretext that both Christaller’s and Rattray’s prior collections of Twi proverbs were out of print, embarked on a “new collection” of 1000 proverbs with the hope that it would meet the demand of learners of Twi in schools and of “the growing number of people who are seeking to understand Akan folklore” since, as he asserted, “Akan proverbs are a reflection of the philosophy of the Akan” and since “Proverbs play a very important role in the everyday language of Twi-speaking people” by enriching their speech and giving it flavour. His 1000 proverbs appear in alphabetical order, in their Twi form with a comment in Twi on one side and in their English translation and explanation in English on the other (Akrofi 1958);
- It may appear quite amazing that in 1985, one hundred years after its first publication Christaller’s entire collection was again taken up by Fr. Kofi Ron Lange, S.V.D., who, without any mention of Rattray’s work, published a translation of all the 3600 originally compiled proverb-texts, in their original order, and without any form of linguistic or anthropological commentary.

The common assumption, in all these successive collections, was that the compendium of sayings was worthy of transcription – that is, of permanent remembrance – since they entailed both verbal artistry and cultural meaning.

Yet, although “variations” were cited in the anthologies and although the authors declared having “verified” the proverbs’ meaning(s) with elders – proverbs they had not themselves heard in discourse – no real “contextual study” (Yankah, 1989) was attempted in any of the works.¹

Our four collectors, translators and commentators, seeking to provide tools for a better understanding of the Akan language and culture, neglected the “dynamics of these words ascribed to the sages”. Unaware of Dell Hymes’ ‘Ethnography of Speaking’ (1962), they did not take into account the fact that proverb use (*ebebu* in Akan) is much more of a “performance” than of a “quotation”, for proverbs are not just rhythmic and metaphorical frills; rather,

Proverbs are [according to Kenneth Burke] strategies for dealing with situations.

Insofar as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop *names* for them and *strategies* for handling them.

(Quoted in Yankah 1989: 37, our emphasis.)

“Variations”, when noted, were also left unexplained; yet, as Charlotte Schapira postulates, the proverbial treasure accumulated by a community’s Oral Tradition structurally changes

alongside with the movements undergone by their socio-cultural environment itself; proverbs are altered (truncated, embellished, expanded), new proverbs enter the dictionary, archaic ones are condemned to death :

Le fonds des proverbes de la langue constitue, du point de vue linguistique, un ensemble spécial et unique. Il offre à tout locuteur un ensemble d'arguments tout faits, investis d'un prestige qui ne permet pas d'en contester l'autorité. À chaque moment de l'histoire d'une langue, en fonction du développement de la communauté qui la parle, les « vérités » se font et se défont, des proverbes se perdent et d'autres se créent et prennent leur place dans le vocabulaire actif des sujets parlants (Schapira 2000).

It is with these semiotic considerations in mind that we shall now proceed to find out whether or how A.K. Awedoba has been able to present *An Introduction to Kasena Society and Culture through their Proverbs*.

“This is not a creative work...” (Awedoba 2000: Acknowledgements)

266 Kasena “proverbs” (*memane*) and 39 Kasena “popular sayings” (*sinseira*) which have been transcribed in their original language, translated into English and commented constitute the body of Awedoba’s book (Chapters III & IV); they were listed in no particular order (neither thematic, nor alphabetic) but simply kept, according to the author, “in the order in which [they] were collected” (p.227) over a rather lengthy period of time, mainly in the Navrongo chiefdom (p.29) – the area best known to him, because he had “interacted with the people from this region all his life”. The basic assumption of the work is that “since proverbs are not coined in a vacuum but derived from the culture and the society in which they are current” (p.13), this collection of “traditional” texts will serve as “valuable evidence” of the “unwritten culture” of a people of Upper Eastern Ghana – the Kasena.

But, although these cultural values are to be revealed through an attentive reading of the “proverb texts”, bringing forth their “literal meaning” and more essentially their “deeper and underlying meanings” (Preface), the author has nevertheless found it necessary to pre-empt the findings of his paremiological quest by presenting key elements of the Kasena social organisation, political structure, geographic and economic situation and religious beliefs in a first introductory chapter, based on the scholarly works listed in the Bibliography and thematically detailed in the Index.

In order to help the non-Kasena reader understand the hidden meaning(s) of the corpus, A.K. Awedoba has added a second introductory chapter in which he considers “how the Kasena

themselves make sense of the institution of proverb in the context of their language" (p.31). He argues that the Kasena believe that their proverbs (*memane*) sum up the wisdom of the *diim* world (the ideal, pre-colonial past) and that their uninterrupted (even when disrupted) oral transmission did facilitate the partial survival of their ancestors' culture. In this present, degenerate world (*zen*) proverbial utterances do therefore constitute paradigms for better behaviour, of an unchallengeable nature. Similarly to what K. Yankah had noted about *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric* (Yankah 1989) and S.G. Obeng on "The Proverb as Mitigating and Politeness Strategy in Akan Discourse" (Obeng 1996), the author elaborates that the Kasena people do not use proverbs for their own sake either, but "in discourse" – as "clinchers for arguments", as a means for illustrating the logic of a statement and as face-saving mechanisms ; this functionality of proverbs in adult discourse was verified, he claims, through a "participant observation" approach (p.30).

The reader, of course, who is expecting to understand, as announced in the title, "the Kasena society and culture *through* their proverbs" (our emphasis) is free to ignore the introductory chapters, and to simply hop from one item of the collection to the other, in no particular order – just as he would be glancing through an encyclopaedia. Let us verify with him (or her) how this understandable expectation of answered by the author's explanatory work.

On the "Subject Matter" of *Kasena* Proverbs...

The on-going process of proverb-reformulation (that is of synchronic or diachronic alteration of proverbs, either in the form of variations in the same language or of corresponding proverbs in other languages) has been verified over and over again in comparative proverb studies. Whilst the semantic "sameness" wherever it is exhibited does prove the universality of common sense, the "difference" in formulation between comparable proverbs will be of interest to the linguist and to the sociologist who are both concerned with the fluctuating "social discourse" in the Bakhtinian sense. On the other hand, whenever a proverb has not been or cannot be "translated" in a proverbial manner into another language, then that proverb must be the singular expression of an original cultural value and will become of great interest to anthropological studies.

G. Kleiber (2000) also suggests that the fact that in each culture a formula is or is not recognised as a "proverb" tends to indicate that *there is* a universal model of a proverb's semantic structure, namely that of an "implication, in the form of a generic sentence-name, between situations concerning human beings" (our translation). To search for a proverb's meaning then boils down to looking beyond the literal significance of the words used and of the

proverb-sentence itself; it requires the ability to decipher the symbolic (human or cultural) implication behind the proverb-text's figurative and rhythmic expression.

So, when Awedoba writes that ...

...the *Kasena* proverbs have as **their subject matter** those values that *Kasena* cherish so much, such as industry, love and concern for others, especially kin, respect for old age, patience, foresight, etc., as well as those values that they abhor such as greed, abuse of power, laziness, disrespect, etc..." (p.57, our emphasis)

he brushes aside the fact that the values mentioned by him are not *Kasena* values *per se*, but rather universal (African) values and that their "Kaseness" resides mainly in their linguistic formulation; Awedoba does also not clearly differentiate (even if this can be deduced from his explanatory notes) between the common or universal [*Kasena*] proverbs and those in the collection, which can be considered as real "cultural" treasures – in the sense that they *name* typical "cultural" situations much more than stereotyped "human" relationships.

Universal values in *Kasena* fashion

Proverbs # 35 and # 36 are introduced by the author as representing two variations in the *Kasena* proverbial expression of gratitude and appreciation, as "an acknowledgement of a state of indebtedness" as well as "part of the counter flow of prestations" in the Maussian sense :

35 *Naao ba ke bwolo lei.*

The cow does not thank the valley.

(the cow feeds all the time in the *bwolo*, the low land which is not put under cultivation every year)

36 *Chworo ba ke kazogo lei.*

The chicken does not thank the mortar.

(fowls keep on picking grain which falls around the mortar)

Although the imagery, in both cases, may be linked to everyday life in a *Kasena* village, the actual proverbial meaning has its equivalent in Akan :

Esie ne kegya nni aseda.

The *kegya* tree does not (have to constantly) thank the ant-hill.

In this first comparative example, a "different" imagery is being used which is linked to a "different" geographic and economic environment (the *Kasena* savannah versus the Akan forest), but the syntactic formulations remain "similar" and the implied meaning is, in all three cases :

if I (a human being, indebted to you, another human being) do not say "thank you!" all the time, this does not mean that I am ungrateful, just like "the cow...", "the chicken...", or "the *kegya* tree..."

Proverb # 55 and its variation are another example worth of notice :

55 Ba ba du mene dedwoŋi baŋ a ne.

One does not sow millet on millet.

(literally an allusion to a farming practice as well as, figuratively, a criticism of unwarranted discrimination)

Such as in "One does not bypass one needy mouth to give water to another." (variation)

The author's commentary, which starts as usual with a development on the literal contextual meaning of the proverb, continues with extrapolations on comparable Kasena proverbs which, in some cases, do *not* say exactly the "same thing", for instance :

107 Ba ba le soŋo sugu yi ba ke ga-sugu yi ne.

One does not rob the domestic guinea fowl of its eye to save the sight of the wild guinea fowl.

(the domesticated guinea fowl is [rightly] given preference above its wild cousin; kin come first)

A.K. Awedoba ends his interpretation by proposing a proper Kasena variation and an English equivalent :

Kasena have another saying which sheds light on this proverb : *Ba ba mage bu ba woli odwoŋ* (one does not beat one child in support of another). The English proverb that says that the goose should be sauced like the gander is a good paraphrase.²

One could continue the author's investigation by asking oneself whether the Akan :

Wusum brɔde a, sum kwadu (bi), [na obi nim nea obegu kɔm].

If you plant plantain, plant banana also, [for you don't know which of them will save you in times of famine]³

is or is not a corresponding proverb, to Kasena proverb # 55 or to # 107...

Even the scatological and provocative imagery used in some Kasena proverbs (#54, #57, #228, #246), finds its humorous equivalents in other languages. One example will suffice to prove the point :

57 Nná kweere de n bɔɔlo bu o ja n peini o maa wu wua.

If you play with your girlfriend's child he will play a whistle tune on your penis.

(the 'girlfriend' being a divorced or widowed woman having an affair)

is rendered in Akan by :

Wogyegye wo kraman a, ɔtafere w'ano.

If you cajole your dog too much, it will end up licking you mouth.

both meaning that :

Familiarity breeds contempt.

(English equivalent mentioned by the author)

or, in an even more “abstract” manner :

if you overindulge in... then you will bear the (unpleasant) consequences

The similarity or identity of meaning between variations (in the same language) and corresponding proverbs (in other languages) is generally disclosed by the proverbs’ abstract reformulation (Cauvin 1981) and, mainly, in that logical implication which, as G. Kleiber demonstrates, always underlies it; this re-conceptualization exercise is also known to be the very basis of all “translations” (Pottier 1987).

In one noteworthy case A.K. Awedoba hints at this himself :

65 Vala gurim mo ka boboom.

The beginning of the straw bangle is its ending.

(it is not easy to notice the beginning or the end of the *vala* bangle)

This proverb, comments the author, reminds us of the Akan symbolism of the *sankofa* motif or icon⁴ which suggests that life is cyclic and much history can be learnt from the present just as knowledge of the past sheds considerable light on the present and the future (p.110).

Kasena Proverbial Treasures...

Since geographic proximity induces cultural similarity, it is not amazing that “universal proverbs” expressed in the Kasem language are often closer (in their formulation and tone) to their Akan than to their English equivalents. In fact, comparative proverb studies do help identify one of the major differences between African and Northern European language use, namely a preference for suave and stimulating indirectness on the one hand and a tendency towards abbreviated and aloof abstraction on the other hand.

Common broad cultural themes are bound as well to be “named” in proverbial utterances of various African cultural entities, especially when they are located as close to each other as the Kasena of the Northern Region of Ghana and the Akan of the Central and Southern Regions. Yet, beyond the common ground they share, Kasena and Akan proverbs on the “same” (African) theme are at variance, for traditional choices (norms, values) can vary enormously from one ethnic group to the other, depending on their historical past and even or the more so when they share common borders.

The Kasena do, for instance, reassert the general African belief in the importance of bearing children in order to assure the continuity of communal life (not only of one's family, but also of one's clan); in some African communities (amongst the Akan, for instance), severe punishments are applied even after their death to those who did not agree to or could not bear children when they were alive. They will not, in particular, be remembered by the collective memory during traditional rites. This common belief is summed up in Kasem by two proverbs listed by A. K. Awedoba in his collection :

26 Te se n daare mo toom lira.

The antidote to death is off-spring.

(a direct assertion of the cultural norm)

44 Badeinu ba jege badein-yoro.

There are no proud bachelors.

(= an allusion to the rule and to the consequence of disobedience of the rule)

Yet the condemnation of barrenness is proverbially alleviated and sounds less absolute in the following Kasena proverb :

13 N ná ba jege se ba jwa bwoŋi n yere ko buga.

If you do not have a child to ensure that your name will be remembered, then dig a well.

Although this proverb continues to portray childlessness as a misfortune, it "however offers consolation to the childless" comments Awedoba; and, in order to explain this peculiar connotative effect further, the author refers to al-Hasan Mole's view, according to which "making a well comes second to building a mosque" in a savannah area often devastated by the aridity of the dry season; this leads him to conclude that to the Kasena "good deeds are also an important social investment almost comparable to having children" (p.77).

The same restraint in categorical pronouncements seems to apply to the Kasena proverbial

Akan proverbs ⁵	Kasena Proverbs
<p>2760 <i>Nsamanpow mu soduro : wo ni wu a, wo abusua asa.</i> Bent stick in the spirit grove (metaphor), when your mother is dead, that is <u>the end of your family</u>.</p> <p>2068 <i>Wo na awu a, wo abusua asa.</i> When your mother dies, you have <u>no relatives left</u>. (abbreviated form of # 2760)</p> <p>2287 <i>Wo ni wu a, wunwu, na ofere a, na (wo nso) woafare</i> If your mother dies you won't die; but if <u>she</u> is disgraced, <u>you</u> are <u>also</u> disgraced. (variation, on the same theme, of # 2760/2068)</p>	<p>5 <i>Anecham bu sage de chwoya.</i> The son of I-have-experienced-trouble takes his rest with weapons on hand. (indirect evidence of importance of tie between father and son)</p> <p>130 <i>Naao na jaane n kwo n na ne ko beinnu n durt mo</i> If a buffalo has gored your father to death you take to flight at the sight of its dung. (variation of # 5)</p> <p>39 <i>Kaleina ba ka nu swolim yaga.</i> The kaleina fish does not fail to inherit its mother's slippery skin. (# 5 and 130 are hereby confirmed by their inverse = all bad things come from the mother)</p>
<p>2061 <i>Wo na oba ne wo nua.</i> Your mother's child is your <u>real brother or sister</u>. (consequence of the rule stated in # 2760/2068)</p>	
<p>1239 <i>Agya mma nya a, mepe; ena mma nya, mepe papa.</i> When my father's children get anything, <u>I like it</u>; when my mother's children get anything, <u>I like it even better</u>. (variation of # 2061)</p>	
<p>2060 <i>Wo na ba ne Kukuobi a, anka wobese se kyene-kese fata no?</i> Even if your mother's son is "kukuobi" (slave) would you say that the big drum was a fit thing for him to carry? (metaphorical variation of # 2061 / 1239)</p>	
<p>2063 <i>Wo na di hia a, wonnya no kofa obi nye na.</i> If your mother is poor, you don't leave her and make someone else your mother. (reinforcement of assertion of rule of allegiance to the mother, implied in all proverbs quoted above)</p>	
<p>2069 <i>Wo na nye a, na wo na ara nen.</i> Even if your mother is not a good person, she is still your mother. (variation of # 2063)</p>	

representation of patrilinealism; whilst the Akan affirm very strongly in numerous proverbs as well as in other common genres such as folktales or funeral dirges, the sole importance of the "mother's side", the Kasena, who theoretically trace their descent and determine rights to hold

traditional office and inheritance through their father, are again introduced by the anthology's author as asserting this cultural choice with moderation

The two lists in the table clearly establish a difference in tone ; nevertheless mention must also be made of two virtually identical proverbs which, both in the Akan and Kasem languages, do caution against an absolute severance from one or the other side of the family, the understanding being that a father or a mother and his or her relatives can be of help in bad times :

Akan proverbs	Kasena Proverbs
<p>159 <i>Obi nfa ne nsa benkum akyere n'agya amamfo so.</i> Nobody points to the ruins of his father's house with his left hand.</p>	<p>133 <i>Ba ba mae gwia ba bere nabera sɔŋɔ.</i> One does not point to the mother's home with the left hand.</p>
<p>81 <i>Benkum guare nifa, na nifa guare benkum.</i> The left hand washes the right, and the right washes the left.</p>	<p>131 <i>Jazene sane jagwia ye jagwia sane jezene mo.</i> The right washes the left and the left washes the right</p>

Several themes could be investigated in the same manner, but this is neither possible nor necessary in the framework of this review. A temporary conclusion can already be drawn from this limited survey, namely that the reader definitely receives a great deal of anthropological information in the collection of Kasena proverbs assembled by Awedoba; one may also add that the reader is gradually led to take a view of the Kasena society and culture: for instance, where the Akan say that "A crab does not beget a bird", the German that "An apple never falls far from the tree", the English and the French that "Like father, like son", the Kasena rather declare that "It is the puny frog that begets the elephant" (proverb # 157) – just as, adds the author, "the poor apparently inconsequential parent may beget children who achieve great things in this traditional egalitarian society." (p.162, our emphasis)

"Proverbs" (*Memane*) versus "Popular Sayings" (*Sinseira*) amongst the Kasena: on Proverbs' Authorship

According to A.K. Awedoba, proverbs (*memane*) and sayings (*sinseira*) differ mainly from the point of view of authorship ; proverbs, to the Kasena, are "attributed to the ancestors as a collective category", whilst the original author as well as the context of authorship of a *sinseira* are known and are often referred to in the *sinseira*'s statement (p.34).

Despite the acknowledgement of the criteria apparently used for distinguishing these two related genres, Awedoba seems to have encountered a great deal of difficulty when attempting to divide his corpus into two chapters (III & IV). Hesitation on this matter recurs:

About **proverb # 256**, for instance,

Kapaa ná cheiji buga nyeyo ye dwei.

When the cobra claims the pool, the crocodile does not contest.

(critique of use and misuse of power and authority)

the author postulates : "This is one of these borderline utterances which may be classified as either a proverb or a saying" (p.219).

Similarly, on *sinseira* # 12,

Tegɛɔ koro mo tento puu; konkompwɔŋo de ko keira.

Here lies the pile of feathers once belonging to I-take-no-advice.

(mimicry of the cry of the white dove as it supposedly mourns the fate of its young ones)

the commentary ends with : "This saying has proverb quality".

Proverb # 246 surprisingly reappears, with a slight lexical variation, as *sinseira* # 14 :

proverb # 246 Putana daa mo baa daare se wio wó di.

The skin on the belly may not remain but the tree top will be attained.

(= Metaphor taken from tree climbing "used to show determination on getting something done no matter the costs and the consequences")

sinseira # 14 Tɔn zwona mo ba daare se tio wo di.

The skin may not remain but the tree top will be attained.

To give this second version a *sinseira* value, the author adds to the literal explanation some remarks on "authorship":

It is accepted that children say things that make adults laugh (...). The above saying thus becomes interesting coming from an adult who should know better. An adult would not be expected to exhibit such determination where a trivial pursuit such as tree climbing is concerned.

This explanation gives proper information on the original author and does not establish any plausible semantic difference between the two items.

A.K. Awedoba's remarks on *sinseira* # 17 are even more confusing :

Wɔ mo go ye o wo pwoni?

Who killed but failed to skin the game?

This saying [writes the commentator] has no author, which suggests its antiquity. However it seems more like a saying than a proverb and for that reason belongs more in this chapter. It is the kind of utterance for which it would be out of question to assign

authorship to the ancestors collectively, as one would in the case of a true Kasena proverb... (p.241)

It might probably have been better for the author, in order to avoid such flagrant generic hesitations in his commentaries, to have restricted himself entirely to proverbs whose existence in Kasena discourse he did not doubt.

Conclusion

The last concern of this review leads to the general conclusion that Awedoba's work on Kasena proverbs finds its counterpart much more in R.S. Rattray's anthropological book on *Ashanti Proverbs* and customs than in Yankah's recent discourse oriented study on *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric*, to which Awedoba refers in his introductory chapter. No real "contextual study" has actually been undertaken, neither on the proverbs and the situations in which they had occurred and had been recorded, nor even on the *sinseira's* original authors and contexts of first utterance.

The reader of this *Introduction to Kasena Society and Culture through their Proverbs* is therefore confronted with a series of Kasena "proverbial texts", taken out of context, listed out at random, and which serve as a basis for short essays on Kasena "culturally loaded" words and on various aspects of Kasena "traditional" life.

Setting up archives on dying African traditions remains a trend still followed by many Folklore researchers of today and Awedoba did, in his preface, acknowledge this purpose as an all important objective of his book :

To my knowledge the traditional oral literature of the peoples of the Upper East Region of Ghana, unlike their languages, is still to receive the scholarly attention it deserves. (...) There is thus the pressing need to study the institution and practices of people like the Kasena and to document their culture for the present as well as for the future generations. What the Kasena stand in danger of losing most is their literature, given the deleterious effects of the inroads that the electronic media (radio and TV) make into the society and its projection of non-Kasena-Nankana norms and outlook. (Preface)

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Notes

¹Yankah defines "context" as :

- the wider socio-cultural milieu in which proverbs are used;
- the social data of speakers and audience;
- and the immediate situation which inspired the proverb use.

² The English proverb actually goes : What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander .

³ Rev. J.G. Christaller # 3112, Fr. Kofi Ron Lange's translation.

⁴ The open-ended *Sankofa* proverb, artistically rendered by a bird looking back and which has become the [Akan] epitome of the "Book of Proverbs", reads and translates in its complete verbal form as follows :

Se wo were fi na wasan kofa a, yenkyiri.

It is not forbidden to go back and gather what one had left behind (forgotten).

(making up for a mistake; asking for forgiveness; learning from the past; changing one's mind; giving someone a second chance, etc...are all acceptable forms of behaviour)

⁵ Items listed in J.G. Christaller's collection, in R.S. Rattray's or Fr. K.R. Lange's translation (our emphasis).