

# Unraveling the Knot: A Microethnography of the Use of Proverbs, Proverbial Language, and Surrogate Languages in an Akan Royal Court

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## Introduction

Proverbs are storehouses of traditional wisdom and are highly valued in Africa. Among the Akan of Ghana, proverbs are used in everyday conversations, storytelling, ancestral and royal praise singing, and conflict resolution, among other contexts. Proverbs may be expressed through drumming, horn-blowing, and dance gestures, and they may be illustrated on textiles, royal staffs, and swords. This article examines the use of proverbs, proverbial language, and surrogate languages in an Akan royal court.

## Background Information about the Akan

The word “Akan” refers to an ethnic group and to the language spoken by some members of the group. The Akan occupy most of southern Ghana and represent about 47.5% of the total population of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service 2012:5).

Akan subgroups in Ghana include the Agona, Akuapem, Akwamu, Akyem, Asante, Assin, Bron, Buem, Denkyira, Fante, Kwahu, Twifu, Wassa, and others. These subgroups speak mutually intelligible dialects and have some shared cultural practices (Yankah 2012:10). Some Akan people also live in Côte d’Ivoire, but they speak different languages. While each Akan royal palace may have unique customs, the verbal art forms and traditions described in this study are likely to be shared by many Akan communities. The literacy rate of Akans in their first language is 30%-60%, and 5%-10% in a second language (Eberhard, Simons, and Fenig 2019). The present study was conducted in an Akan community in Ghana.

## Definitions and Conceptual Framework—The Proverb and Related Forms

Proverb scholars have yet to find a cross-culturally valid definition of the proverb. Norrick has argued that “we should not expect to discover a single characteristic *proverbiality* or a single inclusive definition of the proverb” (2014:7). He defines the proverb as “a traditional

figurative saying which can form a complete utterance on its own” (2014:8). The proverbial phrase differs from the proverb in that it is not syntactically complete and cannot stand on its own. Both proverbs and proverbial phrases are typically figurative and are pertinent to this study. Literal (that is, non-metaphorical) proverbs are known as maxims or aphorisms. Moreover, Yankah correctly notes that the proverb, in the African context, evokes a “broad spectrum of verbal and behavioral phenomena” (2012:196).

The goal of ethnography is to seek the insider’s perspective. So, this researcher elicited definitions of the proverb from two Akan elders, an *ɔkyeame* (“royal spokesperson”) and an *ɔdomankoma Kyerema* (“Divine Drummer”).<sup>1</sup> The *ɔkyeame* said: “A proverb is a veiled statement: an expression that can only be quickly understood by the wise.”<sup>2</sup> The *ɔdomankoma Kyerema* said: “Proverbs are expressions embedded in our traditions and customs by our forefathers; they want us to use proverbs and to interpret them.”<sup>3</sup>

I define proverbs as traditional, often figurative and coded, utterances that are expressed in the verbal and nonverbal performances of a community. Proverbs are frequently metaphorical, so this study will discuss some underlying metaphors as well.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “proverbial” as “used or referred to in a proverb or idiom.” Therefore, the word denotes the proverb, the proverbial phrase, and the idiom. The word “proverbial” as used in this article refers to proverbs as well as to fragmentary, idiomatic, and metaphorical expressions, including ancient horn and talking drum texts. This study assumes broad definitions of the “proverb” and the word “proverbial.”

Proverbial discourse is defined as speech in which a string of proverbs (or proverbial phrases) is used by a speaker, or an interaction involving two or more speakers in which a proverb (or proverbial phrase) used by a speaker elicits proverbs (or proverbial phrases) from other speakers. Elicited responses may be figurative, metaphorical, hyperbolic, or allegorical. This definition rules out, as a proverbial discourse, for instance, a speech in which only a single proverb is used. This view is consonant with Yankah’s description of *kasabebu* (“proverbial speech”), which involves “a series of metaphorical utterances from which a well-bred Akan could draw a lesson” (2012:64).

Proverbs are sometimes embedded in stories. Finnegan (1967:46) notes that the Limba of Sierra Leone, for example, do not have separate words for proverbs and stories. So, they do not distinguish between the two.

Yankah (2012:62) provides a useful model for categorizing proverbs. He postulates two broad types of proverbs: the attributive and the non-attributive. The attributive type is shorter, crisp, and usually attributed to an authoritative source that might be either personal or impersonal. The non-attributive proverb is longer and takes the form of an animal tale, parable,

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<sup>1</sup> The *ɔdomankoma Kyerema* is commonly referred to as the *ɔkyerema* (“the drummer”). The sites for this study were Akropong and Aburi Akuapem in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The *ɔkyeame*’s testimony was collected at Akropong on January 4, 2019, while the *ɔkyerema*’s testimony was collected at Aburi on January 10, 2019. The *ɔkyeame* is an elderly man in his seventies, and the *ɔkyerema* is in his sixties.

<sup>2</sup> *Ebe ye kasasie: asem a woka a, obi nte ase ntem gyese ɔye ɔbadwen ba.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ebe ye mpanyinsem a, ewɔ yen amammre ne yen amanne mu a, yen nananom kantetefo hyehye too ho maa yen. Wose yenbube na yenkyere be ase.*

or story. Both types were encountered in this study, but most of the proverbs were attributive.

While proverbs occur naturally in discourse, they do not occur in every conversation. Nonetheless, there are contexts in which they are more likely to occur. According to an Akan saying, “It is the situation that calls for the proverb.”<sup>4</sup> The Akan royal palace, where traditional elders meet regularly to steer the affairs of the state, was thought to be a place where proverbs were most likely to be used. The Akan royal palace is a storehouse of customs and traditions. Agyekum states that the palace “embodies the law, tradition, philosophy, religion, norms, and values of the Akan people” (2011:588). The royal court is a rich and inexhaustible source of traditional items of folklore.

Proverbs are part and parcel of the language of the king’s court. As an Akan elder put it: “If you are an elder speaking in the palace, your speech must contain proverbs so that people would know that you are an elder. It is the proverb that supports the argument. It is the proverb that gives weight to what is being said.”<sup>5</sup> People of the court are expected to be well-versed in proverb lore and traditions. Furthermore, in some traditional societies, laws are codified in proverbs.

### **Interpretation of Proverbs and Limitations of the Study**

We have noted that proverbs are veiled utterances; they are often dense, so it may take some effort to interpret them correctly. Cohen (1978:8) rightly observes that the speaker of a metaphor and the appreciator are involved in a transaction that draws them closer to each other and that the use of a metaphor by a speaker involves a “concealed invitation,” while the appreciator’s efforts to comprehend the metaphor are an acceptance of this invitation. This transaction, according to him, constitutes the acknowledgement of a community. Following Cohen, the transaction can be schematized as follows:<sup>6</sup>

Step 1—The speaker uses a metaphor, thereby extending a “concealed invitation” to the appreciator.

Step 2—The appreciator (hearer) recognizes that a metaphor has been used and makes an effort to comprehend it.

Step 3—“Intimacy” is achieved between the communicants.

Thus, a successful transaction is contingent on the appreciator’s realization that the expression is figurative and on the appreciator’s ability to decode the metaphor. Cohen’s three-step communication model is applicable to the proverb. For his use of the word “metaphor” one can substitute “proverb.” A discourse interaction involving proverbs can thus be likened to the tying and untying of a knot, in which a proverb speaker ties a knot that encapsulates a message, and

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<sup>4</sup> *Asem mmae a, abebu mma.*

<sup>5</sup> *Se woye ɔpanyin na worekasa wɔ ahenfie a, ese se wokasa no abebu ba mu senea nnipa behu se woye ɔpanyin na worekasa. Wode be no horan asem no. Ebe no ma asem no mu yedru.*

<sup>6</sup> Cohen (1978:8) notes that all three steps are involved in any communication but generally go unnoticed, because they are so routine; the metaphor, however, highlights them.

the interlocutor unties the knot in the light of contextual cues.<sup>7</sup> In Akan society, the ability to use and to decode proverbs is highly valued. Interestingly, coding and decoding are implied in the emic definitions of the proverb stated above.

Even so, and especially in the context of the Akan royal palace, recognizing and understanding a proverb in speech or other interactions is not always easy. Proverbs are sometimes veiled and not always preceded by attributive formulae such as “Our elders said.” While the plain use of language may be understandable by all, the figurative use of language may be accessible to only a few who share common knowledge. A key principle applies: the greater the mutual knowledge of the speaker and the hearer of the proverb, the less explication is required. Sometimes the model described above does not play out smoothly because the hearer needs help in decoding the proverb. The hearer may then ask the proverb speaker (or a third party) to help untie the knot, so to speak. This model was repeatedly enacted during this study of Akan royal proverbs.

I relied on my interlocutors for the interpretations of the proverbial expressions and most importantly on their willingness to share information with an outsider. I also relied on my own cultural and linguistic fluency as a native speaker of Akan. Furthermore, given the role of shared knowledge in the coding and decoding process, what may be perceived as a proverb by members of a group may appear less so to others outside the group. These limitations notwithstanding, it is my hope that this study provides some insight into the use of proverbs in an Akan royal court.

## Literature Review

African proverb scholarship has focused on many aspects of the proverb. These include the role of proverbs in the administration of justice (Messenger 1959), the iconographic representation of proverbs on linguist staffs (Ross 1982),<sup>8</sup> proverbs as a politeness and mitigation strategy (Obeng 1996), and proverbs as devices of humor in African literary fiction (Mané 2015). Seitel’s (1972) study, which examines the use of proverbs among the Haya of Tanzania, is significant for its treatment of metaphors and the complexities of proverb use.

Studies on Akan drumming include Rattray 1923a and 1923b; Finnegan 2012; and Nketia 1954, 1963, and 1966. Nketia’s works focus on the role of the drummer, on Akan drumming, and on talking drum texts, respectively. Locke and Agbeli (1980) explore drum language and the Azogbo dance among Ewes in Ghana and Togo. Salifu (2008) focuses on the Dagbon royal court in Ghana. Salifu’s study has a few things in common with the present study, namely his focus on a royal court and on proverbs, praise singing, animals, and drumming. He notes for example that among the Dagomba, some praise epithets attributed to royalty are inspired by animals (Salifu 2008:11). Such studies could yield greater insights into how animals inspire and extend humans’ descriptive abilities in different cultural settings. These lists are by no means exhaustive.

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<sup>7</sup> The knot metaphor is applicable to the riddle, another enigmatic form that shares some common elements with the proverb.

<sup>8</sup> The linguist is the spokesperson, envoy, and chief diplomat in the royal court.

On the subject of African horns, only a handful of studies were found. These include Sarpong 1990 and Kaminski 2012, both of which focus on the horns or trumpets of Ashanti kings. Hence, more scholarly attention needs to be paid to the intriguing subject of proverbs expressed through drums, horns, and the dance.

### Research Purpose and Research Questions

Using ethnographic microanalysis, this study examines the use of proverbs, proverbial expressions, and surrogate languages in an Akan royal court. Ethnographic microanalysis has different names. It is often referred to in the literature as microethnography (Mehan 1998), ethnographic microanalysis (Erickson 1992), and constitutive ethnography (Mehan 1979). Ethnographic microanalysis or microethnography is an approach and perspective that employs “fine-grained sequential analysis (akin to that of conversation analysis . . .) to examine interaction as constitutive of particular settings and activities” (Mehus 2006:51). Microethnography and conversation analysis are both grounded in sequential analysis but an important difference between them is that microethnography focuses on “aspects of bodily communication, such as gaze, gesture, postural configurations, and interactions with artifacts and the built environment” (Mehus 2006:73-74). Ethnography is “the work of describing a culture” (Spradley 1979:3).

This study focuses on aspects of Akan culture such as announcing and discussing the death of kings, the surrogate languages of drums and horns, and proverbial depictions on royal spokespersons’ staffs. The study addresses the following questions:

1. What roles do the *ɔkyeame* and the *ɔkyerema* play in the royal court?
2. What is the role of proverbs and proverbial language in the royal court?
3. What is the role of surrogate languages (of drums and horns) in the royal court?
4. What is the role of proverbial language in the activities of the *asafo*?<sup>9</sup>

The study focuses on situations of proverb use and on the behaviors of the *ɔkyeame*, the *ɔkyerema*, and the *asafo*.

### Methodology

The research project began in the summer of 2015. The initial field visit was at Akropong, Akuapem, in the Eastern Region of Ghana. It lasted eight weeks and yielded a

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<sup>9</sup> *Asafo* is a warrior association. It is made up of strong and healthy male adults living in the township. In the distant past, especially during the days of intertribal wars, they defended the city from enemies whenever it came under attack. Their activities include drumming, singing, and dancing. *Asafo* groups play active roles during festivals. They also organize themselves to do communal work such as clearing paths, putting out fires, building bridges, and other tasks. *Asafo* groups fall into two main categories: companies of the royal court and associations of the common people. See, for example, Nketia 1963 for a detailed discussion of *asafo* warrior associations.

substantial corpus of voice and video recordings. Subsequent field visits were made in 2016 and 2017, and each lasted about six weeks. The researcher also interviewed some interlocutors at Aburi. The last visit was in 2019 and lasted about two weeks. Throughout the process, there were multiple contacts with informants to cross-check data. The research was based on participant observation.

While the researcher is a native speaker of Akan (Twi), the language in which interactions took place, he did not have prior knowledge of the phenomena he sought to investigate. Yankah correctly points out that “Belonging to a culture does not necessarily make the researcher an insider to all constituents of the group he studies; within each culture, there is a wide array of close esoteric groups and in-groups to which all non-initiands are outsiders” (2012:6-7). Also, gaining access to groups and to information is not automatic and needs to be carefully negotiated.

The translation of proverbs from Twi into English posed some challenges. Dundes points out that “while it is a relatively simple task to translate African trickster tales into English, it was nearly impossible to do so for most African proverbs” (1973:246). There was difficulty in finding *le mot juste* in English for some archaic expressions used in the royal court. Translation was done as literally as possible. When possible, the proverb in the source language is presented with its English translation.

## Research Participants

Eight interlocutors were interviewed as part of this study. They include two chiefs, four *akyeame* (royal spokespersons), and two *akyerema* (divine drummers).<sup>10</sup> One person helped with negotiation of access but was not interviewed. Their ages ranged from thirty to seventy-eight years. The median age of interlocutors was fifty-six years. All the interlocutors were male. In Akan society, royal spokespersons and drummers are predominantly male. All had received basic formal education. Interviews were held in Twi. The interlocutors reported that they learned proverbs and traditions from their parents, grandparents, and chiefs (*nananom*).

Through chain referral, early informants introduced this researcher to others who also contributed to the study. As an elder figuratively put it: “The weaver bird and the sunbird can weave concurrently. Both are good nest builders, but each has its own style of weaving.”<sup>11</sup> The collaborators granted the researcher interviews, access to meetings, material artifacts, and ethnographic documents. They have been anonymized in accordance with the protocol governing this research. The researcher witnessed some events in which proverbs were used, recorded conversations in Twi, and translated them into English. Follow-up interviews were conducted with informants to clarify the use of proverbs. This enabled informants to confirm or to correct this researcher’s interpretations of the proverbs. It is also in line with Dundes’ (1966:507)

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<sup>10</sup> *Akyeame* and *akyerema* are the plural forms of *akyeame* (“a royal spokesperson”) and *akyerema* (a divine drummer), respectively. Royal titles have been omitted to maintain anonymity. Care has been taken to ensure that any modifications to original texts do not lead to misrepresentation.

<sup>11</sup> *Akyem nwen no, na ahorobea nso nwen, ne nyinaa ye berebu, nanso nsonsonoe wo mu.*

recommendation to actively elicit the meaning of folklore items from the folk themselves and ask them to comment on their own lore.

The hypothetical situation method or *mise en situation*, to adopt a term used by Leguy (2001:71), consists in asking an informant to recall the use of specific proverbs and contexts in which those proverbs were used. If informants have no recollections, they are asked to provide contexts for the use of the proverbs.<sup>12</sup> This technique yielded much information about the proverbs. In some cases, it led to anecdotes. Most of the events recalled by the interlocutors were recent, having taken place between two weeks and five years prior to the interviews, except for one event that took place in 1979. Thus, data in this article are based on natural contexts, hypothetical situations, physical inspection of artifacts, and informant recollections of proverb use.

### Proverbs in Contexts

Why do Akan people use proverbs? Seitel notes that a Haya may choose to use a proverb when it serves his interest to name a situation in a certain way, to persuade, to be ambiguous about a subject, to finish off a discussion, to display knowledge, or to entertain (Seitel 1972:244-45). Any of these reasons could motivate an Akan to use a proverb. As noted earlier, it is the situation that calls for the proverb. In the ensuing sections, I discuss some proverbial expressions and their related contexts.

In the early days of the fieldwork for this project, I was introduced to an elderly *ɔkyeame*, a highly skilled proverb speaker. When he learned about my interest in the proverbs and traditions of the royal court, he said: “If you want to hear *adomankomasem*, you beat the old lady’s grandchild.”<sup>13</sup> I parsed the proverb hoping to use the literal meaning as a bridge to the figurative, but to no avail. When he perceived my trouble in understanding the proverb, he went on to say, “as you have come to hear *adomankomasem*, I assume you are ready to do what it takes to hear them.”

*Adomankomasem* is from the Twi word *ɔdomankoma* (“the Creator”). The word means “myths” or “great things.”<sup>14</sup> The old lady symbolizes wisdom in Akan culture. The expression *kɔbisa aberewa tia* means to seek counsel from the old lady. The old lady knows the origins of things and of people. She is knowledgeable in proverb lore and traditions. If anyone beats her grandchild, she may react “angrily” by revealing the person’s secrets or origins. So, the proverb means one should not provoke a powerful person’s protégé.

In this context, however, it appeared the proverb was not being used in a conventional sense. I asked for the *ɔkyeame*’s help in understanding the puzzling proverb. He explained that beating the old lady’s grandchild meant taking an action that would cause the old lady (the

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<sup>12</sup> This technique was used by Herskovits (1950:32) and Leguy (2001:71). Arewa and Dundes (1964:72-73) discuss the method.

<sup>13</sup> *Se wo pe adomankomasem ate a, na woboro aberewa nana.*

<sup>14</sup> Nketia notes that the *ɔdomankoma Kyerema* (“Creator’s drummer”) tells of the origin of things and says “great things,” *ɔka adomankomasem* (1954:38).

*ɔkyeame*) to respond favorably by providing the needed information. *Aberewa nana* (“the old lady’s grandchild”) also means a person trained by the old lady, who knows proverbs and traditions, so it was a veiled metaphor for the *ɔkyeame*, who represented both the old lady and the old lady’s grandchild.

The *ɔkyeame* had subjected the proverb to creative deformation: by the use of the phrase “beating the old lady’s grandchild,” something negative was being presented in a positive light and expected to yield a positive outcome. *Creative deformation* is the ingenious reinforcement, modification, or transformation of a proverb’s meaning by a speaker during performance (Yankah 2012:198). After the *ɔkyeame* had unraveled the proverb knot, I agreed to the terms of my apprenticeship. This was my first encounter with the proverb in the field.

The proverb’s ability to engender double meanings and ambiguity (as in the *aberewa* and *aberewa nana* metaphors) and its enigmatic nature are exemplified by the *adomankomasem* proverb. The figurative proverb, like the idiom, or its offspring the euphemism, is clearly more than the sum of its parts. This research was an exploration of *adomankomasem*. My interlocutor started teaching about the role of the *ɔkyeame* and the traditions of the royal palace.

### A Sensitive Mission

Akan elders say, “It is the wise person that is sent on errands, and not the long-legged person.”<sup>15</sup> The wise person may be relied upon to deliver messages intelligently. On the other hand, the long-legged messenger (a fast messenger who lacks intelligence) may arrive quickly at the destination but may not be able to accomplish the mission satisfactorily. This saying is applicable to the *ɔkyeame*, the king’s spokesperson and emissary. He is usually an eloquent orator and well versed in the traditions of his people. Yankah notes that he is appointed on the basis of “intelligence, knowledge of traditional lore and proverb eloquence” (2012:59). Yankah (1995) gives insight into the role of the *ɔkyeame* in Akan society.

According to an Akan proverb, “A royal is not a common fellow, so his name should not be associated with death.”<sup>16</sup> In announcing the passing of a king or making any reference thereto, a speaker must be very tactful. He cannot simply say that “the king has died.” Doing so would be tantamount to violating cultural norms and committing a faux pas. If the offense is committed before a royal court, the punishment could be hefty. It is only through *kasakoa* (“idiomatic expressions”) and euphemisms that such a sensitive announcement can be made. The following account of a major event that had recently occurred contextualizes the wise emissary proverb cited above and highlights the rhetorical skills of the *ɔkyeame*.

A king had just passed away, and, in line with tradition, a royal delegation was sent to break the news to another king in his palace. Upon arrival, they were asked about their mission. Excerpts from the discourse are presented below.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Wɔsoma ɔbanyansafo, na wɔnsoma anammɔn tenten.*

<sup>16</sup> *Odehye nye abofra na w'abɔ ne din abɔ owu din.*

<sup>17</sup> This account was obtained from a member of the delegation. Identifying details have been removed.

Twi	Translation
<p><b>SPOKESPERSON:</b> Nana ho mmfa no, ebere bi a, atwamu, enti yede no kɔɔ oduroyɛfo bi nkyɛn. Oduroyɛfo no asoma abɛka akyɛrɛ abusafo sɛ, yare no ani adan, enti ɔrentumi nnhwe Nana bio, enti yɛnkɔ hwehwe oduroyɛfo foforo mma no.</p>	<p><b>SPOKESPERSON:</b> The king was not feeling well some time ago, so we took him to a healer. The healer has just sent us word that the sickness has taken a turn for the worse. So, he is no longer able to treat the king and has asked the family to come and take him somewhere else for treatment. [<i>Upon hearing this report, the king rose from his seat, went back and forth, came back to sit down, and asked through his okyeame:</i>]</p>
<p><b>KING:</b> Asem a woreka yi, mente ase. Den asem na wope se woka kyereme yi?</p>	<p><b>KING:</b> What do you mean? What do you want to tell me? [<i>The spokesperson repeated the message but in a different form:</i>]</p>
<p><b>SPOKESPERSON:</b> Nana atukwan akɔtwere odupɔn. Odupɔn atutu ama mmerɛnkɛnson asi ni ti ase.</p>	<p><b>SPOKESPERSON:</b> Nana has traveled and leaned against the big tree, the big tree has fallen and the <i>mmerɛnkɛnson</i> (the central branch of a palm tree) has bowed its head. [<i>The king stood up again, went back and forth, came back to his seat, shook his head, and asked thoughtfully:</i>]</p>
<p><b>KING:</b> Asem a woreka yi mente ase ara. Den asem na wope se woka kyereme yi?</p>	<p><b>KING:</b> I still do not understand your message. What do you want to tell me?</p>
<p><b>SPOKESPERSON:</b> Nana, asaase mu apae. Odupɔn atutu ama mmerɛnkɛnson asi ne ti ase. Nana de n'akofena ato hɔ. Nana kɔ koraenkɔsan: kurow a wɔnkɔ nsanmma bio.</p>	<p><b>SPOKESPERSON:</b> Nana, the earth has split, the big tree has fallen, and the innermost palm branch has bowed its head. The king has laid down his fighting sword. The king has traveled to the city to which no one goes and returns.</p>

*Koraenkɔsan* is an aggregated Twi word that means “the city to which no one goes and returns.” At that point, the host king understood the message. The mission had been accomplished.

This discourse shows that the announcement of a king’s death is not a simple matter. It is characterized by indirection, euphemisms, and by many twists and turns. Despite the host king’s requests for clarity, the spokesperson did not hurry through the announcement.

The *okyeame* spoke the language of elders. His language was euphemistic and metaphorical. There is some evidence in the literature to suggest that the use of euphemism is “an important stylistic feature in the speaking of proverbs” among the Aniocha of Nigeria (Monye 1996:71, with examples of euphemisms in Aniocha proverbs). Hence in the African

context, the two forms are not mutually exclusive. Skilled speakers are able to seamlessly combine verbal forms such as proverbs, anecdotes, and euphemisms, as seen in the next section on the royal funeral.

Furthermore, proverbs are closely related to idioms and may occasionally be considered as such. Norrick argues that “Proverbs, at least all figurative proverbs, are idioms in that they have SPIs [Standard Proverbial Interpretations] which are distinct from the literal readings which would be assigned to them on the basis of straightforward and compositional semantic principles” (1985:3). In the African context, proverbs often overlap with other kinds of verbal art. Hence the boundaries between the genres of folklore are flexible in Africa (Yankah 2012:196; Finnegan 2012:381). Future research could take a closer look at these intricate relationships.

Of significance is the progressive aspect of the report cited above. The message was that the king’s illness was getting worse, so the family should take him elsewhere for treatment. The king asks questions to disambiguate the utterance. In Akan culture, the announcement of the passing of a chief is not entrusted to just anyone but to a wise and highly skilled orator. Agyekum (2010:156) rightly points out that in Akan society, the death of a king is expressed in entirely different terms than that of an ordinary member of society. He analyzes a variety of euphemisms used among the Akan to refer to this unmentionable event.

## Royal Funeral

Royal spokespersons usually serve as masters of ceremonies at royal funerals and other state gatherings, where their roles include making announcements, telling stories, speaking proverbs, telling genealogies, and entertaining audiences, as appropriate. According to an Ovambo saying, “A speech properly garnished with proverbs, parables, and wisdom is pleasant to hear” (Ojoade 1977:20). This belief is shared by the Akan.

Kings customarily travel with large entourages. According to an Akan proverb, “The bird owes its larger size to its feathers.”<sup>18</sup> This means a king’s greatness is reflected in the number of his subjects. An *ɔkyeame* used this proverb to refer to a king and his large entourage who were arriving at the funeral of the late king. At the ceremony, the spokesperson of a visiting king’s delegation (Spokesperson A) requested permission for his retinue to leave and return the next day. The request and the responses it elicited were particularly figurative. Spokesperson B, an *ɔkyeame* acting as a master of ceremonies, rephrased and embellished the request with proverbs.<sup>19</sup> Their speeches are presented below:

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<sup>18</sup> *Aboa no ntakra na ema no ye kɛse.*

<sup>19</sup> The request made by Spokesperson A mentioned going to the “bottom of the big river” to find a cure but contained no attributive proverbs.

**Spokesperson A (spokesperson for a visiting royal delegation)**

<b>Twi</b>	<b>Translation</b>
Ɔse ɔrekɔ hwɛhwɛ aduro foforo aba na ɔde abeka Nana.	He says he is going to look for a new medicine to treat the king.
Ɔse senea ɔhu yare no fa no, eye abese we, enti nea edi kan, ɔma mo nyinaa hyeden.	He says he sees the king's sickness as very serious, a situation that calls for the chewing of kola nuts, so he first of all wishes to console the entire state.
Ɔse momprim mobo, na asem a abetɔ [ɔman yi] mu no, eye awerɛhosɛm.	He says, "do not lose heart." What has befallen the state is very sad indeed.
Ɔse, senea w'ahunu yare no ani afa no, na ɔno ara aba yare no anim na aye den afa no, ɔbeserew mo nantew na wakɔ Firaw ase ako hwɛhwɛ aduro aba. (Enye saa na wokae?)	He says he has seen, the gravity of the illness, so he is asking permission to leave, and to go to the bottom of the Volta River to find a remedy. [ <i>Turning to the king, the Spokesperson asked, "Was that not what you said?" The king responded with a nod and a smile.</i> ]

**Spokesperson B (master of ceremonies)<sup>20</sup>**

<b>Twi</b>	<b>Translation</b>
Ɔse sebe mpen aduasa, asu a onni patafo no na ɔtwa kwan mu.	The king says, thirty apologies, it is the river that has no pacifier that crosses the path.*
Nana yare a, sebe nne, adodow no yi, wode ama mmerewa tia se wɔmpɛ aduro pa bi mmesaw.	My apologies, regarding the illness that has today affected the king, old ladies have been asked to find a cure for it.
Ato abesewe, ato mfɔte, ato nkyereso.	We are at the point of chewing kola nuts, <sup>†</sup> we are at the point of termites, we are at a critical point.
Ɔse, sebe, ɔbarima a, onni akofo no, na ɔtwamu wɔ guam keke.	He says, my apologies, the man who has no fighters on his side easily passes through the crowd.
Enti Nana se, se eba saa mpo a, na eye den se ara a, ɔbe wura Firaw ase, na nnuro pa biara a, ewɔ ho a, wotew, na wode besa saa ɔyare yi, wode besa.	So, the king says if the need arises, he will go to the bottom of the Volta River to find a remedy for this illness. <sup>‡</sup>
	*Royal titles and other identifying information have been removed to protect anonymity. †Kola nut is used as a stimulant by mourners at funerals in Africa. ‡The Volta River is the biggest river in Ghana.

The references to the Volta River, a clear hyperbole, drew laughter and applause from some members of the audience. The speeches of Spokespersons A and B elicited the following response from Spokesperson C, acting on behalf of the bereaved family:

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<sup>20</sup> The spokespersons (A, B, and C) spoke one after the other, and their remarks were spoken without interruption.

## Spokesperson C (family spokesperson)

Twi	Translation
Saa asem yi too yen . . . yetoo nsa frɛɛ wɔn se wɔmmɛboa yen.	When this event occurred, we invited our brothers . . . to come and help us.
Na wɔn aba, na wɔn ahu nea ɛsɛ se wode sa, nea ɛsɛ se wɔyɛ na saa akwantu yi, ɔbɛ sɛsa n’adwene na w’aka akyerɛ yen se, “saa akwantu yi m’asan m’akyi.”	They have come, and they now know what to do so that our king will change his mind and say to us, “I am no longer going on this journey.”
Yɛwɔ awɛn mu, yɛrɛwɛn. Yɛnim se yen nuanom . . .	We are keeping vigil. We are keeping vigil. We know that our brothers, from . . .
Sebe wɔn suman kwaa nɛ wɔn neema, yɛnim se ɛbɛ du memeneda anadwofa de, na wɔn anya n’akade a ɛbema yen wura yi asɔrɛ na w’abɛ ka yen ho.	My apologies, thanks to their medicines, healing powers, and other things, from now until Sunday night, [our brothers] would have found a cure so that our leader would come and join us.
Enti se wɔn aba, na wɔn ahu se ɛmu ayɛ den, na wɔrɛkɔ wɔn akyi aba a, wɔsɛ nɛ kwan ara nɛn. Yɛwɔ atwɛn mu ara. Biribiara a wɔbɛyɛ, na yen wura yi abesesa n’adwene na w’abeka yen ho bio no, yɛwɔ atwɛn mu ara.	So, if they have come, and have seen the gravity of the situation, and are going home, to come back later, tell them permission is granted. Anything that they will do to make our king change his mind and come to join us again, we are waiting.

The mode of the discourse was extraordinary. An *ɔkyeame* commenting on this discourse explained: “The royals were speaking in the proverbial mode.”<sup>21</sup> The above exemplifies what can be described as a proverbial discourse (*kasabebu*). It is characterized by euphemisms, indirection (*kasakoa*), proverbs, expressions of politeness, and hyperbolic forms. I argue that a proverbial discourse is a special mode of communication, a combination of verbal art forms that goes beyond the citing of single proverbs.

Spokesperson B rephrases and embellishes the request for permission to leave made by Spokesperson A. He cites two proverbs, both prefaced with the excusatory remark, *sɛbe* (“my apologies”). The first proverb, “it is the river that has no pacifiers that crosses the path,” implies that everything will be done to turn the course of the river and prevent it from crossing the path. The river in this context is a proverbial symbol of a difficult problem. The statement is a *euphemistic proverb* in that it is intended to mitigate the impact of the sad reality on the audience. The proverb was effectively functioning here as a “mitigating and politeness strategy” (Obeng 1996).

<sup>21</sup> *Ahenfo no rekasa wɔ abebu mu.*

Furthermore, Spokesperson B uses a string of metaphors to underscore the bitterness and pain caused by the event. He uses expressions such as *Ato abesewe, ato mfote, ato nkyereso* (“We are at the point of chewing kola nuts, we are at the point of termites, we are at a critical point”). His use of anaphora in the source language is remarkable.<sup>22</sup>

Spokesperson B uses a second proverb that reinforces the first: “the man who has no fighters on his side easily passes through the crowd.”<sup>23</sup> This implies that the king has armies who will fight to save his life. Both proverbs are highly figurative, and their meanings can hardly be fully explicated.

Although the speech of Spokesperson C does not contain quotable proverbs, it can nonetheless be described as figurative, idiomatic, and euphemistic. The audience knows that Spokesperson C was not speaking plainly but figuratively. A request for permission to leave and find a cure for an illness was rephrased in proverbial terms by Spokesperson B. Spokesperson C expressed confidence that the delegation would find a cure for the illness. Of significance in the proverbial discourse are:

- 1) the use of indirection and euphemisms;
- 2) the use of hyperbole (for example, going to the bottom of the big river to find a cure);
- 3) the use of two attributive proverbs by Spokesperson A;
- 4) the present progressive aspect (which suggests an evolving situation);
- 5) the rhetorical posture of the interlocutors.

The speeches support the argument that the proverb (the proverbial mode) is “an unusual speech and behavior strategy” that has the propensity “to violate the norms of conventional speech and behavior” (Yankah 2012:8). In the next section, I discuss surrogate languages, another channel for the expression of proverbs in the royal court.

### Surrogate Languages of Drums and Horns

While context is key to understanding proverbs in spoken discourses, it is insufficient for understanding the language of the drums and horns at the Akan royal court. What is required is an in-depth knowledge of the traditions and customs of the people. In-depth knowledge includes the ability to decode drummed messages. Sarpong describes horn language as “symbolic, idiomatic and proverbial.” He notes that “to understand the language of the horns, an individual must have knowledge of historical facts, animals, habitats, objects, colors, and word usages” (1990:7). This assertion is applicable to the talking drum as well.

A surrogate language is the reproduction of human speech through musical instruments such as drums, horns, and flutes. Drum and horn languages are esoteric and intriguing. They are highly coded and intended for those well-versed in oral traditions. Surrogate languages serve as

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<sup>22</sup> It was difficult to render the poetic effect of the original into English without stylistic losses.

<sup>23</sup> *Ɔbarima a, onni akofo no, na ɔtwamu wɔ guam keke.*

signals and as substitutes for spoken language (Nketia 1971:701). Hence, they constitute an alternative means of communication to insiders. Finnegan describes drum language among the Ashanti and the Yoruba as “very highly developed” and notes that expert drummers are usually attached to kings’ courts (2012:470). This study also examined the role of the *Ɔdomankoma Kyerema* and the languages of the drums and horns of the royal court.

According to an Akan saying, “Without the drummer, there is no king.”<sup>24</sup> Conversely, they say: “Without the king, there is no drummer.”<sup>25</sup> These sayings underscore the importance of the drummer in the Akan royal court. An *ɔkyerema* explained: “It is the drummer that strengthens the wings of the king.”<sup>26</sup> The king does not attend ceremonies without the drummer, and most ceremonies have no weight without him. The *ɔkyerema* played the following poetic piece on the *atumpan* talking drum to portray his role in the palace:

Ɔdomankoma bɔɔ ade.

Ɔbɔɔ ɔhene.

Ɔbɔɔ ɔkyerema.

Ɔbɔɔ kasa kronkron.

The Supreme Being created things.

He created the king.

He created the drummer.

He created sacred language.<sup>27</sup>

The *ɔkyerema* decoded the message to this researcher. The ability to decode the messages of the divine drummer is, undoubtedly, a key differentiator in this communicative process.

In this section, I discuss what I will broadly term *kasa kronkron* (“sacred language” or “pure language”). *Kasa kronkron*, as explained by the *ɔkyerema*, refers to the traditional language spoken by the *Ɔdomankoma Kyerema* (“divine drummer”) through the drum (and by extension, the horn-blower through the royal horn) to the king. *Kasa kronkron* is often proverbial, solemn, and cryptic. I argue that *kasa kronkron* derives its proverbiality from its surrogate mode of expression, its idiomatic nature, and its ability to communicate with a few within a larger audience. It is a language heard by many but understood by a few.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Se ɔkyerema nni ho a, ɔhene nni ho.*

<sup>25</sup> *Se ɔhene nni ho a, ɔkyerema nni ho.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ɔkyerema na ɔma ɔhene ntaban mu ye duru.*

<sup>27</sup> Consult the eCompanion, sound file 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Kasa kronkron* cannot be understood by uninitiated persons.

### Some Drums and Horns of the King's Court

Drums are important symbols of royalty, and there are many drums in the royal court. An informant explained that some drums are displayed only on special occasions such as during festivals. Only a few royal drums are mentioned here.

Three types of drums are played before the king comes to sit in state. These are the *nkrawiri*, the *petepire*,<sup>29</sup> and the *mpebi*.<sup>30</sup> They are short drums (*twenesin*) reserved for the exclusive use of the king. They are used mostly as signal drums to transmit short messages. The *nkrawiri*, the *petepire*, and the *mpebi* are less common than the *atumpan* talking drum. Although the *atumpan* is one of the most important state drums, it is owned by popular bands.<sup>31</sup> Drums such as the *mpebi* and *aburukuwa* are special royal drums and may not be owned by private individuals. There is a special drummer for each drum in the palace.

At the king's court, the three drums serve as talking drums. The *nkrawiri* says: "Go ahead, say it and pay the penalty for it."<sup>32</sup> Thus, people should be mindful of their utterances because they may be held accountable. The *petepire* says: "You will hear the judgment soon."<sup>33</sup> The *mpebi* says: "I practice no favoritism."<sup>34</sup> This means the king is fair to all. The *mpebi* is the symbol of the king's impartiality.

These maxims are spoken repetitively by the royal drums. Taylor (1962:95) points out that legal maxims are proverbs of a very special kind. In this Akan royal court, talking drums articulate proverbs relating to the administration of justice. They echo principles relating to (1) people's accountability for actions; (2) open hearings and timely rulings; (3) the impartiality of the king's court. Drum languages in Akan royal courts differ from palace to palace.

The *aburukuwa* is one of the king's most respected drums. It was described by an elder as "The king of all the drums."<sup>35</sup> The *aburukuwa* is an ancient and a special talking drum. It is a very small, high-pitched drum that imitates the sound of a bird. It is played with sticks and makes a scratching sound. At festivals, the drum is positioned close to the king. The *aburukuwa* was described as a "spirit-filled" drum. According to an informant, royals who know its sound can hear or even sense it whenever it is sounded. The informant explained that "it is a spiritual thing"<sup>36</sup> and declined to provide further details. Unlike the *nkrawire*, the *petepire*, and the *mpebi*,

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<sup>29</sup> *Petepire*, carved from hard wood, means "the tough one." The metaphor refers to the toughness of the king.

<sup>30</sup> The name *mpebi*, meaning "I don't want any," originated from "the refusal of King Opoku Ware (1731-42) to take his share of the booty obtained from the Ashanti-Kete Krachi war" (Nketia 1963:28).

<sup>31</sup> Nketia notes that popular bands were permitted to use "a few essential drums like *atumpan*, *apentemma*, *akukua*" (Nketia 1963:119).

<sup>32</sup> *Kɔka ma yenkum wo.*

<sup>33</sup> *Wobe te mpren.*

<sup>34</sup> *Mempe bi n'gyaw bi.*

<sup>35</sup> *Twene no nyinaa tikora.*

<sup>36</sup> *Eye sunsum mu ade.*

which are played during regular palace meetings, the *aburukuwa* is heard only on special occasions, such as during festivals and in the event of the death of a chief.

According to an Akan proverb, “It is only the fitting animal’s skin that may be used for the drumhead.”<sup>37</sup> Drums are covered with animal skin, but not just any animal’s skin is fit for that purpose. An informant narrated that all the quadrupeds met one day to look for an animal whose skin was resilient and suitable for making a drumhead. Each animal cut a small piece of its skin for an experiment. After a few days of exposure to the sun, all but the antelope’s skin had shriveled. So, the animals concluded that the antelope’s skin was the most suitable for the drumhead. After donating more skin tissue, the antelope reportedly became so weak that she could not attend a gathering of the animals. Nonetheless, the drum was sent to the ceremony. The animals agreed that the antelope had done them a great honor and granted her an “excused absence.” Hence the Akan proverb, “If the antelope does not go to the gathering, its skin does.”<sup>38</sup> This proverb means that if, for instance, there is a funeral and a person is unable to attend the ceremony, it is fitting for that person to make a meaningful contribution to help organize the event.

In the past, elephant skin was used as the drum membrane.<sup>39</sup> An *ɔkyerema* explained that the skin of the antelope (*ɔdabɔ*) makes the best sound, but it usually lasts for less than a year if played vigorously. So, cow skin is used instead because it is tougher and can last longer.

At public ceremonies the king is welcomed by *fɔntɔmfrɔm*,<sup>40</sup> also known as *ɔman fare bae* (“the drums that bring together the entire state”). The *atumpan* is the main talking drum in the set. The *atumpan* repeatedly says: “The noble one walks majestically.”<sup>41</sup> A drummer said that he uses the *atumpan* to speak exclusively in proverbs to the king, but he can “say virtually anything” with the drum. Another drummer said that he cannot officially speak to the king except through *kasa kronkron*. He often uses the *atumpan* to make requests of the king; his “favorite” request is: “Chief, bring drinks.”<sup>42</sup> The king obliges and sends money or drinks to them. Asked if the king understands all his messages, he responded in the affirmative and said, “If not, how can he know if he is being insulted?” The informant also uses the talking drum to invite members of the audience to the dancing ring by calling their names on the drum, and if they are unwilling or too tired to dance, they send money instead. He noted that when money is received, “the powers descend,” and he is energized to play more. The *fɔntɔmfrɔm* is a favorite set of drums not just for chiefs, but for all who understand its coded language.

After the king has sat down, the *ɔkyerema* drums a proverb or two in his honor. The following is a typical example:

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<sup>37</sup> *Aboa a ɔfata na wɔde no were yere twene.*

<sup>38</sup> *Se ɔtwe ankɔ gua a, ne homa kɔ.*

<sup>39</sup> The practice has ceased due to restrictions on the hunting of elephants.

<sup>40</sup> See pictures of the set of drums in the appendix.

<sup>41</sup> *Obrempon nante brebre.*

<sup>42</sup> *ɔhene, fa nsa bra.* Consult the eCompanion, sound file 2.

Esono akura, sono akura, sono abotokura, sono akura pa, sono akura kronkron.

There are differences between the ordinary mouse, the striped mouse, and the sacred mouse.<sup>43</sup>

The proverb means there are royals among royals and not all royals can ascend the throne. The king is referred to as *akura kronkron* (“a sacred mouse”). This saying affirms his legitimacy. *Ɔdehye kronkron* means “true royal.” The term *kronkron*, as noted above, is used to describe the sacredness of the talking drum language (*kasa kronkron*). Typical proverbs played on the *atumpan* by the drummers include for example: “It takes patience to build a nation.”<sup>44</sup> This maxim relates to governance.

The *ɔkyerema* controls many aspects of the ceremony by speaking to the initiated through the *atumpan* talking drum. Therefore, the *ɔkyerema* and the *ɔkyeame* are both royal spokespersons: one is an expert in the surrogate language of the drum, the other in the spoken word.

In the old days, royal horns and flutes were used to warn people of danger in times of war and other emergencies. So, people needed to understand the language of these instruments. According to an old Akan proverb, “The person who forgets his royal horn may get lost in the crowd.”<sup>45</sup> A variant of the proverb replaces the word *abentia* (“short horn”) with *atenteben* (“flute”). The *atenteben* is used to play funeral dirges for royals. The proverb means one should know one’s own customs and be able to interpret signals correctly. The saying underlies the importance of recognizing and responding to clarion calls.

The king’s horns are made of elephant tusks.<sup>46</sup> The elephant is the symbol of strength and majesty. For this reason, it is evoked in many Akan proverbs. At gatherings, the king’s horn sings his praises. It says:

Wopɛ ko, wopɛ ko dodo  
Katakylie pɛ ko dodo  
Mo po sasa sasa a,<sup>47</sup> mokoto barima  
Mokoto barima!

You love fighting, you love fighting  
The valorous one loves fighting  
If you dare attack, you will meet a man; you will meet a man!

*Barima* (“man”) in the horn language recalls the attributes of masculinity in Akan society, not the least of which is bravery.

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<sup>43</sup> Consult the eCompanion, sound file 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Yede brebre na ekyekye kurow*. Consult the eCompanion, sound file 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Se worefiri wo kurom abentia a, woyera wo bedwa ase*.

<sup>46</sup> In modern times, cow horns are sometimes used in place of elephant tusks.

<sup>47</sup> An archaic expression in Twi (meaning “to attack aggressively”).

On special occasions, the Adum people<sup>48</sup> play their own drum, which says *Hurow taban*, literally, “Jump wings.” The term refers to the eagle, a big bird that symbolizes strength. It flies higher than all the others, and if any bird misbehaves, it comes down quickly to exterminate the offender. The Adum people see themselves as the “eagles” in the state. The Adum people also have their own horn.<sup>49</sup> The horn says:

Esono ee soree,  
Esono ee soree,  
Asem yi, εεε me yaa a, se!

Elephant, arise!  
Elephant, arise!  
This issue has caused me so much pain.<sup>50</sup>

While the Adum horn is speaking, the Banmu horn responds:

Asem yi, gyei ye pe ano.  
We must find a solution to this issue.<sup>51</sup>

In traditional terms, the *banmuhene* (chief of the mausoleum) is considered the father of the *adumhene* (state executioner).<sup>52</sup> Adum’s message is cryptic and proverbial. It does not refer to any grievance in particular. The horn language is invariable. Kaminski (2012:107) has suggested that one of the underlying reasons for surrogate languages is to conceal information from outsiders. This is also true of enigmatic royal proverbs. This communication shows the ambiguous and polysemantic nature of surrogate languages.

Twi is a tonal language. So, a single word could mean different things depending on the context and on how it is pronounced. *Osono* or *Esono* in Twi means “elephant.” In the horn language, *Osono* is a metaphor for the king (the strong leader). *Esono* may also mean “different.” Hence, *Esono wonko*, or *Osononko*, translates as “He who is different.”

An informant explained that *Esono wonko* refers to the king. “He who is different” implies there is no one like him. The *abentia* (“the short royal horn”) repetitively praises the

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<sup>48</sup> Executioners and royal security officers.

<sup>49</sup> The horn is traditionally made from an elephant tusk. The Adum people belong to the royal palace.

<sup>50</sup> This is pronounced entirely by the horn and not expressed in words.

<sup>51</sup> Adum is telling Banmu that someone may have aggrieved him. Banmu assures Adum that they must find a solution to his grievance. This is the language spoken by the two horns. The communication shows a close traditional relationship between a father and a son. The Adum people and the Banmu people are divisions of the royal palace. They are led by the *adumhene* (chief of Adum) and the *banmuhene* (chief of Banmu). This communication is between an Adum horn-blower and a Banmu horn-blower.

<sup>52</sup> Traditionally, the *banmuhene* is senior in rank to the *adumhene*. The two are represented by their horn-blowers, who communicate with their horns.

king, “You are unique.”<sup>53</sup> He related that at the palace, whenever there is commotion, the *abentia* is heard calling the people to order. The horn says: “You are too noisy, the elephant is among you, the unique one is among you. Don’t you know that the king is among you?”<sup>54</sup> He noted that as soon as the *abentia* is heard, calm is restored. Royal horns are not used only to sing the praises of the king and to warn in times of emergency, but also to restore order in the palace and at gatherings.

I have provided some examples of the verbal messages expressed by royal drums and horns. These instruments give the aural impression of speech. As mentioned by the *ɔkyerema*, they can express virtually anything in the language, proverbial or non-proverbial. Tone is important in the encoding of the messages. From the foregoing, one can argue that there is a syntactic and semantic system that enables the drummer or horn-blower to match Akan speech sounds to the tones of the *atumpan* or *abentia*. This is what enables the drummer, for example, to mention the name of a member of the audience and the king to understand the messages of the drummer. For our purposes, however, a brief explication should suffice. The *ɔkyerema* played the following simple messages on the *atumpan*, which he decoded later:

Example 1: ɔhene, fa nsa bra!

Chief, bring drinks!

Example 2: Kete kiti, kete kiti krekre (2x), meaning, ɔhene, ma wo homene so bre bre na be saw.

Chief, get up gently and dance.

The message in Example 1 involves about five beats on the *atumpan*, with a pause after the name of the king. Example 2 is an *atran*, a musical piece that invites the king to dance. The notes are played in rapid succession. Example 2 includes both a “vocalization” of the drum beat by the *ɔkyerema* and the verbal basis of the drum language.

### The *Asafo* and Other Groups

*Asafo* companies such as Apesemaka (a courageous group that is always eager to say something) and Asɔnkɔ (bearers of the state flag) use proverbial and metaphorical language in their drumming, horn-blowing, and singing. Only royal *asafo* companies are allowed to use horns. The activities of non-royal *asafo* companies involve only drumming and singing. In recent times, the activities of *asafo* groups have been restricted due to fears that they could lead to violence. Among the Adum people, the Apesemaka also had a play or a band (*agoro*) called *Apesemaka*.<sup>55</sup> The *Apesemaka* drums say:

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<sup>53</sup> *Wo ye sononko.*

<sup>54</sup> *Mope dede, mope dede dodo, esono te mo mu, osononko te mo mu, monnim se esono te mo mu.*

<sup>55</sup> An informant recalled that the last time they performed was at a royal funeral in the late 1970s.

Asafo Prampram, Asafo Prampram  
 Anyako a frɛ Kotoko,  
 Ankobea dade ɔkronpɔn.  
 Ogya ɛhew kro.  
 Yabɔ mpintin atra po, na baka ne hena?  
 Y'amene sekan, na bɔha?

Asafo Prampram, Asafo Prampram,<sup>56</sup>  
 Porcupine, called upon in times of war.  
 Ankobea<sup>57</sup> strong as iron.  
 Fire that devours cities.  
 We played the *mpintin* drums<sup>58</sup> and jumped over the sea. How can the lagoon stop us?  
 We swallowed the dagger, why not the sheath?

The word *kotoko* (“porcupine”) indicates that the members of the company are fierce fighters and difficult to capture. The porcupine is symbolic of the Ashanti state. The figurative saying, “porcupine, called upon in times of war,” is an instantiation of animals in the drum language and songs of the people. The animal has many quills with which it defends itself. The metaphor recalls the Ashanti adage, “If you kill a thousand, a thousand more will come back.”<sup>59</sup> This means the warriors of Asafo Prampram are relentless in war. By stating, “We jumped over the sea. How can the lagoon stop us?,” the group is referring to its ability to surmount obstacles. The implication is that the sea is a bigger obstacle to cross than the lagoon. The figurative expression is reinforced by the next one, “We swallowed the dagger, why not the sheath?” This means that having swallowed the deadlier dagger, the group faces no danger from the sheath. Clearly, these are overstatements or hyperboles meant for firing up the rank and file.

The Asɔnkɔ drum says:

Ogya hyiren, hyiren, hwiren, hwiren (2x), Asɔnkɔfo mommra, mommra kiti kiti.	Fire, Fire, Fire People of Asɔnkɔ come. Come quickly in your numbers.
Twerebo pae, twerebo pae, Ebi rewu, ebi repira. . . . Esiw dɔm pintinn Edɔm piti piti, yensuro!	Flint and bullets explode, Some are dying, others are injured. . . . Unshakeable army of the hills! We fear not dense crowds!

<sup>56</sup> Name of the association.

<sup>57</sup> A military wing that takes care of the palace.

<sup>58</sup> *Mpintin* are hourglass drums used in royal processions. The drummers follow the king and repeatedly play the message “Nana duom ma yenko!” (“King, hurry and let’s go!”).

<sup>59</sup> *Wo kum apem a, apem beba.*

The Asonko people are known to be fierce fighters and are led by the *frankaahene* (“chief of the flag bearers”). They describe themselves as the “unshakeable army of the hills.” The Asonko people play two different drums in a call-and-response manner. One drum says: “Hatred is of old”;<sup>60</sup> the other responds: “We will shatter the crowd of enemies!”<sup>61</sup>

Their horn<sup>62</sup> that they play in the background sounds the following warning:

Ogyata ba kyere ye kyere na oo.

It is a hard thing to capture the lion cub!

Otan firi tete.

Hatred is of old.

Bodom anyam pa.

We will shatter the crowd of enemies.<sup>63</sup>

The group refers to the lion cub and not to the lion, because they believe that as children of the king (the lion), they cannot be easily captured. The metaphor stems from the animal kingdom, where it is believed that lion cubs enjoy great protection from their parents. It is also a proverb simile. Just as the lion protects its cubs, so does the king protect his “children.” The statement “It is a hard thing to capture the lion cub” implies that the Asonko people have the backing of the king and so are untouchable. The saying broadly means that certain persons may be untouchable because of their associations with powerful persons.

Other expressions used by the group include, for example, “fire that devours cities” and “flint and bullets that explode causing injuries and death.” Their language is rich in imagery, and animals feature prominently in it. Animals evoked include the elephant, the eagle, the porcupine, the lion, and the lion cub. *Asafo* companies are driven by bravery and a sense of pride in their accomplishments. As shown above, figurative language plays an important role in the activities of these groups.

### Proverbs on Linguist Staffs

Akan linguist staffs or royal staffs (*akyeamepoma*) are another channel for the communication of proverbs. These staffs of office held by royal spokespersons fall into two main categories: proverbial and totemic. The imagery on proverbial staffs alludes to proverbs or wise

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<sup>60</sup> *Otan firi tete.*

<sup>61</sup> *Bodom anyam pa!*

<sup>62</sup> The exact type of horn used by the group could not be ascertained.

<sup>63</sup> The last two statements imply that some foes are intractable, so the best way to deal with them is to fight and defeat them.

sayings, while totemic staffs may display an animal representing one of the Akan clans. This section focuses on the proverbial staffs.

Akans have mainly black and gold linguist staffs. *Asempa ye tia* (“The truth is brief”) is a black linguist staff. It has a simple design; however, it is considered the most powerful royal staff. The *Asempa ye tia* is used to perform customary rites. It is covered with the skin of the monitor lizard (*omanpam*). Figure 1 is a photograph of an *Asempa ye tia*. An informant explained that the main difference between the black and the gold staff is that the black staff has *sunsum* (“spirit”) in it, but the gold ones are ceremonial and have no spirit in them.

Figure 2 is a gold royal staff called *Ɔbra tese nkosua* (“Life is like an egg”). The finial shows a hand holding an egg. The proverb means that life is precious. It also means that “power is fragile.”<sup>64</sup> When an egg is held too firmly it breaks, and when it is held too loosely it breaks. So, one should be careful with the use of power.

Figure 3 shows a staff called *Eti wɔ hɔ a, nankroma nsoa kyew* (“The leg does not carry the crown when there is the head to do so”). The finial shows a person with one leg raised and pointing to his head, meaning that only the head can wear the crown. The proverb means only the rightful heir can ascend the throne.



Fig. 1. *Asempa ye tia*; fig. 2. *Ɔbra tese nkosua*; fig. 3. *Eti wɔ hɔ a, nankroma nsoa kyew*; fig. 4. *Ɔdomankoma Kyerema a, ɔyan atumpan*; fig. 5. *Nea adea wɔ no na odi, na enye nea ɔkɔm de no*; fig. 6. *Ɔte atuo so* (photos by K. Addo).

Figure 4 is a staff that honors the *ɔkyerema*. It is called *Ɔdomankoma Kyerema a, ɔyan atumpan* (“The Creator’s drummer playing the *atumpan*”). The drummer speaks *adomankomasem* through the *atumpan*. He is a master of ceremonies and is knowledgeable in the history and the traditions of the people. This staff is meaningful and honors the *ɔkyerema*’s role in the community.

The staff shown in Figure 5 represents the proverb, “It is the owner of the food that eats it and not the hungry person.”<sup>65</sup> The finial shows two people sitting, one of them with his hand in a bowl, while the other looks on. The proverb means that the owner has an exclusive right to what he owns. Figure 6 is a staff called *Ɔte atuo so* (“He who sits on guns”). The finial shows a man sitting with a gun on his shoulder. This means that the king wields power and presides over the army.

There were other royal staffs not pictured. One of the staffs is called *Sankofa wonkyi* (“It is not a taboo to go back and fetch what has been forgotten”). The finial shows a bird that has turned its head backwards to pick something. The symbol refers to the value of history in

<sup>64</sup> *Tumi tese nkosua*.

<sup>65</sup> *Nea adee wɔ no na odi, na enye nea ɔkɔm de no*.

navigating the future. Another staff represents the proverb, “A knot can only be untied by wise persons.”<sup>66</sup> A knot of wisdom is not easily unraveled unless one knows how to do so. The saying refers to a reef knot, a knot that holds firmly and is difficult to untie. Any attempt to untie it the wrong way complicates the situation by further tightening the knot. The proverb means only a wise person can solve a difficult problem.

The proverb, like the riddle, is a wisdom knot. An important difference between them is that while the riddle always elicits a direct response from its audience, the proverb does not necessarily do so. The addressee of the riddle is expected to guess the referent, but the referent of the proverb is usually known to both the speaker and the addressee. Both proverbs and riddles are enigmatic and may be difficult to interpret.

Humor is not left out of these depictions. One of the finials shows two people, one carrying a bowl of fufu<sup>67</sup> and the other a bowl of soup. This scene alludes to the proverb, “If you have taken the fufu, I have taken the soup.”<sup>68</sup> This means that a compromise is needed, because one cannot eat fufu without soup.

These examples show that for each “visual tableau” as represented by the finials on the staffs, there is a corresponding proverb. Therefore, the visual symbol carried by the *ɔkyeame* evokes a corresponding spoken proverb, and the meaning lies in the juxtaposition of the two. Hence, if the spoken proverb were not known throughout the community, the ability to decode the visual symbol would be limited. Therefore, in this context, visual signs and spoken signs have a unique connection.

Linguist staffs are selected to correspond with the message the king wants to convey. The following protocol is followed in the royal palace. There is an *akyeamehene* (“chief of spokespersons”), and he is assisted by an *ɔkyeame panyin* (“senior spokesperson”). The *akyeamehene* is a chief, so he does not carry a staff. It is the *ɔkyeame panyin* who carries the staff. When the king wants to deliver a message, he discusses the assignment with the *akyeamehene*, who selects the staff. The *akyeamehene* delegates authority to the *ɔkyeame panyin*, who may designate any of the royal spokespersons to deliver the message on behalf of the king. If the mission is a difficult one, both the *akyeamehene* and *ɔkyeame panyin*, as well as other chiefs, may accompany the delegation. The king always travels with the *Asempa ye tia*.

## Conclusion

This study has described the use of proverbs, proverbial expressions, and surrogate languages in an Akan royal court. Proverbs are prevalent in the Akan royal court. They are expressed through multiple channels, including human speech, surrogate languages of drums and horns, and artifacts such as linguist staffs, among others. The study noted that the *ɔkyeame* is

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<sup>66</sup> *Nyansapɔ wɔ san no abadwemma mu.*

<sup>67</sup> A meal prepared from pounded cassava, plantain, or yam and eaten with soup.

<sup>68</sup> *W’afa fufu a, m’afa nkwan.*

highly skilled in verbal discourse, while his counterpart, the *Ɔdomankoma Kyerema*, is highly skilled in the language of the talking drum.

The proverb's ability to engender double meanings and ambiguity highlights its enigmatic nature and susceptibility to creative deformation by skilled users. The stretches of discourse analyzed in the study showed the use of proverbs, indirection, idioms, hyperbole, and other verbal art forms. The proverbial mode of discourse, among the Akan, is a rich combination of narrative forms. It is also a rich combination of multiple "semiotic channels," where visual and musical sign systems make reference to spoken proverbs and socially distributed knowledge of proverbs. It is the socially distributed knowledge that enables the linkage of the three sign systems: verbal, musical, visual. The African proverb is an extremely complex phenomenon given these relationships.

Surrogate languages at the royal court are an effective, albeit esoteric, way of communicating among members of the community. The study finds that *kasa kronkron* (the sacred drum language addressed to the king) derives proverbiality from its mode of expression, its idiomatic nature, and its ability to communicate with a few within a large audience. The study also discussed proverbial depictions on spokespersons' staffs, animal metaphors, and the use of proverbial expressions in the court. All in all, proverbs are not simply devices that enable people to say more with less, but most importantly, they are highly instrumental in speaking to limited audiences and in preserving traditions.

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### Appendix—*Fɔntɔmfrɔm* Instruments

There are about eight instruments in the *fɔntɔmfrɔm* orchestra. Figure 7 shows a pair of *atumpan* drums, male and female. The *atumpan* are the main talking drums in the set. The male drum has a lower pitch than the female. Figure 8 shows the *frɔm* (*bɔmmaa*) drums. They are the biggest drums in the collection and are male and female, with low and high pitches, respectively.

Figure 9 shows the *apaso*. Figure 10 shows a pair of male and female *mmeremma* drums. Figure 11 is the *dawuro* ("gong"), also called *Adawura Kofi*. The *frɔm* and *atumpan* are played with *akotokro* ("curved drumsticks"), while the *mmeremma* and *apaso* (the smaller drums) are played with *mmeremma maa* ("straight sticks"). Bare hands are never used to play any of the drums in the set.



Fig. 7. *Atumpan*; fig. 8. *Frɔm* (*Bɔmmaa*); fig. 9. *Apaso*; fig. 10. *Mmeremma*; fig. 11. *Dawuro* (photos by Edmund Asare).

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