

ETHNO-PRAGMATIC IMPLICATIONS OF FOOD AND CONSUMPTION-RELATED PROVERBS IN NZEMA

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Abstract

Proverbs are a collective wisdom of a people, which are richly characterised by figurative-metaphoric interpretations. They are considered pithy and witty expressions in which cultural values, morals and philosophical messages are ingrained. In this study, I discuss the didactics and communicative implications of Nzema proverbs that relate to 'food and consumption'. Using primary data recorded from naturally occurring speech contexts, the study examines the advisory contents of the proverbs. The findings indicate that many virtues and didactics are imbued in Nzema traditional proverbs. Such positive virtues specifically highlight the socio-cultural significance of obedience, patience, unity and cooperation, hard-work and perseverance, forgiveness, tolerance, genuine love, vigilance, and the principles of justice and fairness, among others. It is argued that the Nzema dwell on 'food and consumption' proverbs to discourage and curb awkward behaviours, and to redirect the conduct of members of the society towards acceptable norms. The analysis draws on the theoretical assumptions of Ethno-pragmatics, which deals with cultural peculiarities and posits that speech practices are best understood from cultural-context (Agyekum, 2019; Ameka, 2006; Goddard, 2006; Goddard & Ye, 2015; Wierzbicka, 2003).¹

Keywords: Nzema, culture, proverbs, communication, ethnography, pragmatic interpretations

Sinliplele

Mrele le nrelebedweke maa menli ekpunli bie die to nu, na edwendonwo dɔɔnwo da ali wɔ nu la. Gyima ehye kile maa yenwu ezukoaledɛe nee foledule maa kola finde Nzema mrele maa fale 'alee nee aleelile' nwo la anu. Gyima ne gyinla mrele maa menyianle be menville Nzemama adwoleelile nu la azo kilehilenu maa yenwu foledule titili bie maa maa wɔ mrele ne maa anu la. Gyima ne guabele kile ke Nzema mrele tu fole dɔɔnwo na beboa maa menli da subane kpale ali. Subane kpale ngakyile maa mrele ehye maa kile ke ɔwɔ ke menli fa tenla be maanle nu la a le debiebulɛ nee melazolile, abotane, koyele nee ngambɔnu, gymasesebeyele, fakye, ehulole tagyee, pepelelile nee dɔɔnwo maa boka nwo la. Megyinla gyima ehye azo mehile ke Nzemama bu mrele dɔɔnwo wɔ be edwekelile nu, bɔbɔ mrele maa fale 'alee nee aleelile' nwo la bɛmaa menli kakyi be subane maa enle kpale la, eza bedua zo betu fole bɛmaa awie maa bɔ ebela kpale. Agyekum (2019), Ameka (2006), Goddard (2006), Goddard nee Ye (2015) yee Wierzbicka (2003) adwenle maa beda ye ali ke saa yekede menli ekpunli bie anee bo kpale a enee agyi maa yeze yefale be maamule nee ebelaɔle nwo la yee boele mrele ne maa ngilehilenu kpale a.

Edwɛmgbɔke titili: Nzema, maandee, mrele, adwoleelile, etenogelafi, pelagematɛse

1. Introduction

The Nzema people occupy the South-western part of the Western Region of Ghana, West Africa. Some Nzema people are also located in La Côte d'Ivoire (Kwesi, 1992). Their language is also called Nzema, which forms part of the Kwa languages family. The dialectal components of Nzema are Dwɔmɔɔ, Elɛmgbelɛ, Adwɔmɔɔ, Egila and Eyalɔɛ (Annan, 1980; Kwaw, 2008); with Dwɔmɔɔ as the standard dialect that is studied from Basic to the Tertiary level of education in Ghana. The Ghana Population and Housing Census conducted in 2021, puts the total number of Nzema at 342, 090. The Nzema area is predominantly agrarian; most of the inhabitants are peasant farmers, while some engage in fishing for a livelihood since the Nzemaland stretches along the coast (Yakub & Agyekum, 2022).

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Most Nzema philosophical principles and worldview can be identified in some of the manifestations of oral literary genres, such as libation rituals, riddles, folktales, myth, and proverbs—the most prominent one being their proverbs (Kwesi, 2007). These proverbial expressions usually incorporate animal and plant attributions, including features of rocks, rivers and mountains among other things in the ecosystem. Most proverbs in Nzema are also created based on ‘body parts’, ‘food and consumption’ as well as ‘disease and sickness’ imageries (Yakub, 2019). Given that farming is the primary occupation among the Nzema, plants and food/consumption related experiences seemingly abound in their traditional proverbs (Quarm & Kwesi, 1998; see also Yakub & Owu-Ewie, 2023: 51). This partly serves the motivation for exploring in this study the communicative functions of such proverbs.

Works such as Nyame and Tomekyin (2018), Yakub (2019), and Yakub and Owu-Ewie (2023) have discussed the communicative values of gender-related proverbs, animal imagery in proverbs and plant-related proverbs in Nzema respectively. These previous studies, however, did not deal with data obtained from naturally occurring discourse contexts. Yankah (1989), Hallen (2000) and Moshood (2016) contend that an effective use of proverbs is dependent on appropriate context of communication. This shows that proverbs best achieve their purpose when speakers rightly employ them in conversational setting. The current study, thus uses data recorded from various discourse situations among the Nzema where ‘food and consumption’ related proverbs are predominantly employed to offer pieces of advice.

The paper focuses on ‘food and consumption’ symbolisms in Nzema proverbs, embedded in rich metaphors and ethno-pragmatic readings. I show that the people of Nzema view the world partly through the experience of ‘food and eating’. This is to say that they make critical comments on issues by employing food-related proverbs. These proverbs, however, are paradoxically not about food and the basic act of eating; rather, the behaviour of the consumer, the consequences encountered and the nature of the consumable are usually the basic sources of providing metaphorical messages to audience. I also demonstrate that many positive virtues are encoded in such proverbs which highlight fundamental Nzema cultural values and mores. The study is significant to the understanding of the Nzema cultural worldview and philosophy, as it uncovers folk perceptions and experiences that are concealed in food-related proverbs. The following research questions are intended to guide the study:

- a. What socio-cultural situations trigger the use of ‘food and consumption’ related proverbs among the Nzema?
- b. What themes do the pragmatic implications of these proverbs highlight?

Beyond the introduction, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the relationship between language and culture. Section 3 presents some literature on the concept and functions of proverbs. The next section, 4, highlights the methodology employed in carrying out the study whereas section 5 provides an overview of the theoretical framework adopted to underpin the study. In section 6, the data (in excerpts) are presented and analysed, whereas the conclusion is drawn in section 7.

2. Language and culture

Duranti (1997) puts it that language is a powerful tool for evoking social and moral sentiments, collective and personal identities tied to beliefs of a group of people. Language is not only a means of communication, but also the medium through which people make sense of the vast universe in which they live, as Lomotey and Chachu (2020) point out. Chaturvedi (2015) tells us about language as follows:

Language surrounds us, defines our personality, determines our social behaviour, supports our societal system, indicates our thoughts and feelings and provides us a platform to share our ideas, co-operate and refine our development process. Language is thus a product of active human consciousness working in well-defined social groups. Society and language are easily identified by each other and are quite interdependent (Chaturvedi, 2015: 107).

The above assertion suggests that language helps us as humans to transmit and portray our ideologies, perceptions, attitudes, and sociocultural norms. Nyame and Tomekyin (2018) argue that the language that is used in a particular community is considered as part of the culture of that society. Culture may be simply described as the totality of the way a group of people live (Asiamah & Lugogye, 2008: 3; Oweleke, 2021: 287). Culture is considered a complex whole; a concept that encompasses all aspects of a people's social life, including their knowledge, art, morals, custom, food, dance, clothing, religion, language use and naming practices, among others (Sharifian, 2011). Language and culture have been argued to be firmly interwoven (see Agar, 1994; Risager, 2015; Onwe, 2018; Wardhaugh, 2006). Agar (1994: 28), for instance, asserts that "culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture." Risager (2015) also understands culture typically as a kind of extension of language; you study language and 'its associated culture'. She argues that "an examination of the relationship between language and culture must combine perspectives from both linguistics and anthropology" (Risager, 2015: 87). Kecskes (2015: 113) points out that language also reflects the ways members of another speech community think about the world, their environment and their contexts. This view assumes that, through language, we create and share with others our identities, attitudes, values and belief structures. Sekyi-Baidoo (2022: 1) captures it succinctly, such as; "language expresses the life and experiences of humans".

A closer look at the foregoing assertions reveals that language and culture are inextricably intertwined. Reflecting carefully on Kecskes's (2015) and Sekyi-Baidoo's (2022) positions, especially, one observes that language is not merely a rule-governed system which is learned by every child in a given community, but a system of tools for the constitution of social life and culture. Furthermore, studies have shown that language plays a crucial role in constructing and promoting cultural worldview (Sharifian, 2014; Lomotey & Chachu, 2020). Based on the above postulates, I argue that proverbs are a productive linguistic tool that provides window to understanding cultural perceptions, cosmology and philosophical principles of a group of people. Wu (2019) describes proverbs as ubiquitous expressions rooted in culture. "Proverbs deliver cultural knowledge and express the life experiences of human beings" (Wu, 2019: 12). This observation points out that proverbs, as rooted in language, can portray a people's culture and philosophical principles through the didactic messages that they convey (see also Bisilki & Nkamigbo, 2017). In essence, this study attempts to explicate how the Nzema dwell on 'food and consumption' related proverbs to offer pieces of advice, and to perpetuate aspects of their cultural beliefs, values and norms.

3. The concept and function of proverbs

African proverbs have been extensively explored from different scholarly perspectives. Some of the studies include Olatunji (1984), Obeng (1996), Adeeko (1998), Agbaje (2002), Odebunmi (2008), Yankah (2012), Maledo (2015), Owu-Ewie (2019), Agyekum (2021a), Bobuafor (2021), Mariwah et al. (2022), and Yakub (2023) among others. These works have examined proverbs from Akan, Afenmai, Urhobo, Ewe, Nzema and Yorùbá cultural and discourse perspectives. Essentially, these studies foreground the socio-pragmatic significance, functions, and form of African proverbs. The literature of paremiology, therefore, presents various but apparently similar notions about proverbs,

pointing to their nature, origin and rhetoric functions among other characteristics of the oral genre.

Mieder (2004), for instance, suggests that proverbs constitute everyday experiences and common observations in succinct and formulaic language, which make them easily memorable and available to be employed in oral and written communication. Mieder's observation assumes that proverbs form an essential part of the oral tradition of a speech community (see also Yankah, 2012). According to Agyeman et al. (2015: 16), proverbs are viewed as vehicle for communicating beliefs systems, values, prescribed and proscribed attitudes and behaviours of people at personal, group or societal levels. Agyekum (2017) considers proverbs as traditional terse sayings that can portray a people's ideologies, values and norms. This suggests that proverbs convey general truths based on people's past experiences, principles, ideologies and ways of life (Agyekum, 2017: 30). In the view of Oludare (2017: 71), "proverbs are very informative as they provide access to the traditions and the popular beliefs of a community". He observes that proverbs are hardly out of fashion; they permeate many traditional rhetoric and touch on all aspects of life.

Proverbs may be 'crafted' from what happens in a specific socio-cultural environment. This may account for why Mensah and Eni (2019) opine that proverbs may mean different things in diverse cultures. Achebe (1958: 6), for instance, describes proverbs as the palm oil with which words are eaten. Achebe suggests that language use must appropriately be accompanied by proverbs. Olatunji (1984) considers proverbs as 'horses of speech'; they are used to discover the truth when it is missing in a discourse interaction. Proverbs form part of most African traditional discourses (Yankah, 2012). Interestingly, "there is no aspect of life that escapes the sharp eye of the proverbial, whether private or public", as Adeoti (2019: 83) puts it. This assumes that the didactic messages embedded in proverbs can touch on all experiences in life; poverty and wealth, sickness and health, life and death, success and failure, among others.

Commenting on the discourse functions of proverbs from Akan socio-cultural context, Agyekum (2005) says: *ɛbɛ ne ɔkasa mu abohemaa, ɛtwa asem tia, ɛnka asem ho a ɛnwie de ye* 'the proverb is the most appropriate aspect of speech, it curtails matters, and without the proverb, a speech does not acquire its seasoned nature' (Agyekum, 2005: 10). In consonance with Agyekum's assertion, Ashipu (2013) explains the essence of proverbs in the use of language. He argues that, traditionally, a speech without a proverb is as unproductive as 'skeleton without flesh', and as 'body without soul'. Ashipu's view suggests that the incorporation of proverbs in any discourse does not only garnish one's speech, but also 'strengthens' the impact of the message that is carried across. Agyekum (2017) and Akanbi (2020) make a similar observation that proverbs are regarded as aesthetic devices of vitality in speech. Proverbs serve as the 'salt' of language, without which the real taste of the 'language dish' cannot be felt (Agyekum, 2017: 30). According to Agyekum (2022: 40), "the Akan people 'eat and drink' proverbs, they bathe with proverbs, smear proverbs and sleep with proverbs". This points out that the Akan use proverbs profusely in their discourse encounters. It also suggests, by extension, that African societies relish in proverbs and appropriate the genre so much (see Akanbi, 2020: 261 in the case of the Yoruba people of Nigeria). Among the Nzema, as in many other African cultures, proverbs are used as a verbal strategy to contribute to critical and sensitive issues (Yakub & Osei, 2020).

Agyekum (2005) contends that speakers employ proverbs to sum up situations. In the African context, for instance, among the Akan and Nzema of Ghana, the right citation and interpretation of proverbs, forms the bases for judging the communicative competence of a speaker (Agyekum, 2017; Yakub, 2019). Hence, an average native speaker is expected to use proverbs among other indirect expressions, especially in an appropriate discourse context

(Hymes, 1972; Yankah, 1989) to contribute effectively to a matter under discussion. Taking the traditional rhetoric of the Akan people of Ghana as an example, Yankah (2012) notes that each new socio-cultural milieu or context affects the performance of proverbs. He avers that context of communication occupies a significant place in paremiology (see also Agyekum, 2022: 40). Adesina (2015) posits as follows:

Proverbs in every culture depend on context for use in communication among the people. Meaning in relation to speech situation seems to be the major concern of pragmatics and whatever intrinsic meaning the grammatical categories may have, context plays a crucial role in the interpretation of such meanings (Adesina, 2015: 3).

In this paper, I demonstrate that Nzema-speakers make conscious choice of proverbs in befitting discourse context to achieve communicative goals. Adeoti (2019) argues that proverbs are associated with ‘elders’ who are considered to be wise with age and not expected to speak in plain terms. Thus, it will further be shown in this paper that the Nzema do not merely embellish their speech with proverbs, but they, especially the grownups, cite proverbs (related to food and consumption) to reinforce desirable behaviours, and to condemn uncouth practices. This seems to align with Yakub and Owu-Ewie’s (2023: 53) view that proverbs are “concise figurative statements which mirror societal norms and philosophical principles of a people, used to make critical comments on essential issues”.

4. Methodology

Data for this qualitative ethnographic study were obtained from a primary source, through participant and non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Hancock and Algozzine (2006) see an ethnographic study as a type of qualitative research that investigates intact cultural or social groups to find and describe beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behaviour, language, and interactions of a group of people. They aver that findings of ethnographic studies are based primarily on observations by the researcher, who is immersed in the group’s setting for an extended period of time (see Hancock & Algozzine, 2006: 10). This study employs ethnographic design and methods because it allows for an in-depth observation and description of a research phenomenon (Wardhaugh, 2006; Saville-Troike, 2003). As a native speaker of Nzema who had lived with the people for quite a long time (over thirty years), and as a language and culture activist, I had usually been invited to be part of the council of elders who sat to settle many disputes to ensure reconciliation among the Nzema people. Therefore, I happened to be present during various traditional gatherings such as marriage and naming ceremonies and arbitrations among the Nzema, where I had the opportunity to gather data for this study from (January, 2021) to (December, 2021). During such occasions, I sought permission as a matter of ethics, and audio-recorded the conversations with an Android phone. I recorded such proceedings because traditional elders who are competent users of proverbs were usually at the functions to offer pieces of advice.

I made ample time and listened to the audio-recordings to be acquainted with the data (conversations). I then transcribed and translated the data. Through semi-structured interviews, I crosschecked the authenticity of the proverbs with four native Nzema scholars who were purposively selected based on their competence in the citation and interpretation of proverbs. The participants comprised two males and two females whose ages range between fifty-five and seventy-five years. I was not bias in the selection of my participants (i.e., two males and two females) because the Nzema believe that both males and females can be

competent proverb users and interpreters (see Yakub & Owu-Ewie, 2023). In the interviews, I interrogated the participants to fully understand the advisory contents and ethno-pragmatic implications of the proverbs based on the Nzema cultural conceptualisations. In all, twenty proverbs that incorporate the imagery of ‘food and consumption’ were purposively chosen for analysis. The rationale for selecting such proverbs is that they featured greatly in the advisory messages that the elders provided. Again, unlike other proverbs that emerged in the discourses, ‘food and consumption’ proverbs were used to make succinct but pertinent contributions to the critical issues under discussion.

5. Theoretical orientation

The analysis of data in this study takes significant insights from the notion of Ethno-pragmatics, or what may be described as ‘anthropological pragmatics’ (Locastro, 2012: 5). This is an approach to the study of meaning that is based on local conditions and perceptions of language use (Goddard, 2006; Mensah & Iloh, 2021: 702). Central to Ethno-pragmatics is the claim that speech practices are best understood and interpreted from culture-internal perspective (Goddard, 2006: 2). This pragmatic paradigm, as Goddard explains, has refused to go away, although pragmatic universalist over the years has gained dominance. It focuses on understanding discourse from the point of view of specific cultural perceptions, experiences, linguistic choices and communicative practices that are well conceived by a specific cultural group (Wierzbicka, 2003). Goddard posits that:

Ethno-pragmatics is necessarily intertwined with cross-linguistic semantics because the whole idea is to understand speech practices in terms which make sense to the people concerned, i.e., in terms of indigenous values, beliefs and attitudes, social categories, emotions, and so on (Goddard, 2006: 2).

From Goddard’s assertion, one can infer that Ethno-pragmatics concerns itself with such discourse practices which make sense to specific cultural group concerned. “To understand and explicate the key Ethno-pragmatic concepts of another culture; however, is no easy matter precisely because of their ‘embeddedness’ within their own language” (Goddard, 2006: 2). Goddard and Ye (2015: 66) state that “the term ethno-pragmatics designates an approach to language in use that sees culture as playing a central explanatory role, and at the same time opens the way for links to be drawn between language and other cultural phenomena”. In a cross-cultural study, Ameka (2006) notes that Ethno-pragmatics typically deals with speech practices that are well comprehended based on culture-specific values and worldview. He argues as follows:

We cannot understand these expressions unless we take into account the sociocultural practices, beliefs and values of the communities concerned. Such cultural knowledge is used by members of a speech community (or in this case, a speech area) in the interpretation and understanding of the routine expressions in social interaction (Ameka, 2006: 233).

In the view of Agyekum (2019; 2021b), Ethno-pragmatics describes and explains people’s way of speaking that makes sense to them in terms of indigenous values, beliefs, and social categories. Beyond semantics, pragmatic rules offer interpretation to sentences and assign illocutionary and perlocutionary forces to utterance (Searle, 1969; Leech, 1983; Yule, 1996; Goddard, 2006). Largely, proverbs are characterised by pragmatic interpretations, and the ethno-pragmatic readings of proverbs reflect the cultural values and worldview of a group

of people (Yakub et al., 2021). Yakub et al. (2021: 154) argue that “proverbs are a form of communicative device which are best understood and interpreted from cultural-context”. Following this postulate, I argue that the interpretations of ‘food and consumption’ proverbs analysed in this study do not merely rely on the semantics or literal contents, but also on culturally-constituted norms, beliefs and the lived experiences of the Nzema people. Hence, the Ethno-pragmatics framework, which highlights insiders’ perspectives on how people use and interpret language (Goddard & Ye, 2015; Mensah & Iloh, 2021), is deemed useful and thus adopted for this study. The framework helps to provide adequate description and explanation of the Nzema cultural values and worldview via ‘food and consumption’ related proverbs treated in this study.

6. Data presentation and analysis

This section deals with the presentation of data (in various excerpts) followed by the analysis. Within the discourse, the proverbs are identified in **boldface**, and are numbered consecutively. In all, twenty (20) proverbs related to ‘food and consumption’ are discussed.

Ethnographic context 1:

[On Sunday, 7th March, 2021, a young man who is posted to teach at a remote area hesitates to accept the appointment. His parents and uncle meet together with him in their residence at *Yediyesele* (a community in Nzema East Municipality) to offer him pieces of advice. Part of what transpired is presented in excerpt 1:]

Excerpt 1:

SPEAKER 1 (father): *Me ra, na wɔmɔ ese duzu? Etetele ke ene gyima mumua ne menli ennya bie enye ɔ? Wɔmɔ e ti eye boe ke wɔnya bie la. Mmadwenle ke adenle ne wale la ati enrehɔ na kpɔnzɛ se ale adenle anwa (proverb 1). Akee saa ekɔdwu nehane na elɛye wɔ gyima ne a anrɛ nea e nwo boe kpale, kakye ke mgbanyima se ekpɔte didi fovole zo kpondɛ ngoane tendɛle (proverb 2).*

“My son, what are you saying? Are you not aware that many people are unemployed these days? You are very fortunate to have this appointment as a teacher. Never think that the place (your station) is far and that you will not go. Note that the porcupine says; **one who embarks on a journey to obtain food does not mind the distance (proverb 1)**.² Moreover, when you arrive at your workplace, please take precaution, remember that **the vulture feeds on waste materials (carcass) in order to live long (proverb 2)**.”

SPEAKER 2 (his mother) further advises him as follows: *Me ra, saa Nyamenle boa na ekɔ a kakye ke eleka mɔɔ bɛ sa kɔ bɛ nloa la benzɛkye ekɛ (proverb 3). Eza nwu ye ke saa e nli ara de aduoba zo a enli aduoba amunli (proverb 4), ɔti mmamaa e rele fi e mediema mɔɔ eha sua nu la. Mmayɛ angomedi, ɔluake bese saa e ngome edi enyenle a ɔtenrɛ e kunlu (proverb 5).*

“My son, if you arrive at your station, note that **one does not cause any destruction at a place where one gets his daily bread (proverb 3)**. Also, remember that **whoever climbs a guava tree must let his relatives eat the ripe fruits (proverb 4)**, so do not forsake your siblings. Never be selfish,

² This proverb is specially constructed as though the porcupine (animal) has the capacity to articulate such proclamation. Proverbs of this form are what have been referred to as ‘wellerisms’, where certain creatures (animals, plants etc.) are personified and made to quote the proverbial statement (Okumba, 1994, Amegashie & Asilevi, 2010).

because it is said that **if you consume an entire python alone, it stretches inside your stomach (proverb 5).**"

Analysis

A look at excerpt 1 reveals 5 proverbs. In proverb (1), the father urges his son to accept the teaching appointment and be **committed** to the job (teaching). In Nzema cultural context, it is believed that the porcupine can 'travel' a long distance in search of food. The animal, as participants noted, exhibits commitment and never hesitates to cover a very long distance in search of food that is necessary to make it survive. The ethno-pragmatic implication of proverb (1) teaches the young man to overlook all inconvenience, and to go to his station since that is where he can obtain his daily bread. Proverb (2) touches on the theme of **prudence (avoidance of risk)**. *Ekpote* 'vulture', as featured in the proverb, is noted for feeding on unwanted materials and objects that are not cherished by their owners. By feeding on such unvalued items (carcasses), nobody hurts the vulture. The implication of the proverb tells the young man to be **precautious**. He must try to be a 'reserved type', and should not be an intruder. In other words, he should avoid being interested in people's private and sensitive affairs, especially when uninvited. Proverb (3) essentially advises the young man not to create any 'mess' at his workplace. He must conduct himself appropriately to ensure the progress of his profession, which will be of great benefit to him, the society and the nation at large. Proverbs (4) and (5) also remind him **against selfishness**. In Nzema ethno-pragmatics, to say that one's maternal sibling has climbed a guava tree suggests that the person (one said to be on the tree) has been gainfully employed in certain lucrative occupation, usually with series of promotions, as participants reported. Such a person is expected to be much supportive among his/her family members. To 'eat ripe fruits', as incorporated in proverb (4), suggests a 'joyful living'. Thus, the proverb implies that the young man must let his relatives also benefit joyfully from his salary. The Nzema believe in sharing and caring (Nyame & Tomekyin, 2018), as can also be inferred from proverb (5). The woman chances on this witty expression (proverb 5) to inform her son to share his gains with others (especially his relatives). The imagery of eating an entire python alone, which is construed as being able to accumulate and stretch in the consumers belly, is especially striking. The accumulation of the pieces of meat inside the stomach suggests burden and discomfort. How comfortably can a person walk about carrying an entire python in their belly? This alludes to the fact that, if the young man fails to give arms, he will be likely to suffer alone should he encounter challenges in life. It implies that even his kinsmen could neglect him and refuse to sympathise with him in his difficult times, hence, he must be **benevolent** while in active service. The sense in this proverb can also be akin to the Akan saying that; *se wo nko ara wodi a, wo nko ara wone* 'if you consume your food alone, you defecate alone'.³ A Dagaare version is also rendered as; *di yon kpi yon* 'if you eat alone, you die alone.'

Ethnographic context 2:

[There was a marriage contraction ceremony at *Yediyesele*, on Saturday, 20th November, 2021. At the latter part of the ceremony, optional speakers (who are elders) were allowed to offer pieces of advice, where proverbs permeated as evidenced from excerpt 2 below:]

³ The defecation in this context is not merely about the normal/natural instance where a person eats and shits after digestion takes place. The implication rather is that one would suffer their repercussions alone. [I am grateful to participants, Mr. Isaac Osei Mensah and Mr. Titus Nuobepuor, both of University of Education, Winneba, Ajumako campus for sharing with me the Akan and Dagaare proverbial expressions respectively.]

Excerpt 2:

SPEAKER 1 reminds the couple such as: *Me nɔnra, ye muala yeze ke agyale le debie kenlema bɔkɔɔ na mɔɔ hyia kpale la a le ehulole tagyee. Benlea ehye boe kpale ɔluake mgbanyima se; nzule mɔɔ ekenlo la enneenlea ye ahane ahane (proverb 6) yee saa edweke ba be avinli a benlea beziezie be debie ɔluake bese saa bedi konwo a bengyia dadee (proverb 7).*

“My grandchildren, we all know that marriage is something beautiful, but what is more important is genuine love. Take notice of this as our elders said; **whoever decides to drink water from the stream/river should not mind the impurities (proverb 6)**, and when any misunderstanding arises, do well to settle it peacefully, as it is said that **whoever eats banana does not require any sharp instrument (knife) to cut it (proverb 7).**”

SPEAKER 2 continues as follows: *Me nɔnra, ɔye me anyeliele dɔɔnwo ke ene kenle ko ye begya be nwo la. Nyamenle eyila be agyale ne azo, emomu koyele le nvasoe, na behakye ke ngyenle ngome ende alee (proverb 8).*

“My grandchildren, I am personally happy that we are witnessing your marriage ceremony today. God richly bless your union from today, but note that unity is paramount. Remember that **salt alone cannot make food attain its deliciousness (proverb 8).**”

SPEAKER 3 advises them such as: *Bemaa Awulae Nyamenle eli be nyunlu moa wɔ debie biala eyele nu, ɔboaleke bese saa akɔle banlo nzule a ɔfa ɔkile Nyamenle (proverb 9).*

“Let the mighty God be your leader in everything you do, as our elders said that **the fowl first invites God before it drinks water (proverb 9).**”

SPEAKER 4 also states: *Kekala mɔɔ begya be nwo la, benwu ye ke saa e sa anzi keye wɔ fe a ɔnreye ke e sa akunlu (proverb 10) yee eza bese esale mɔɔ enye gyima la enli alee (proverb 11).*

“As both of you are married today, know that **the external part of your palm cannot be as sweet as the internal part of your palm (proverb 10)**, and note also that **a lazy hand does not eat (proverb 11).**”

SPEAKER 5 further entreats the bridegroom as follows: *Me awozoa, ɔwɔ nu ke e ye babɔ mɔdenle aye gyima aboa wɔ, noko kakye nwu ye ke bese nrenyia a kposa maa raale me a (proverb 12).*

“X, my nephew, it is a fact that your wife will also work to support the family financially, but remember that **it is a man who chews food for a woman to swallow (proverb 12).**”

Analysis

In excerpt 2, 7 proverbs related to ‘food and consumption’ emerged to enrich the pieces of advice offered to the married couple. This aligns with Agyekum’s (2017: 30) claim that “multiple proverbs concretise the value of language”. Proverb (6), for instance, instils in the couple the virtue of **genuine love**. The proverb implies that the bride and the bridegroom should overlook each other’s shortcomings, which is captured in the proverb as *impurities in the water*.⁴ They must rather exhibit true love, since both had made the decision themselves

⁴ As has been hinted earlier, the Nzema are mostly farmers. When they go to farm, they fetch water from the streams and rivers to drink and prepare their meals. Trees around the rivers shed leaves and fruits into the water,

to get married. In proverb (7), the couple is advised **against litigation**. At the normal circumstance, one who eats banana fruits, unlike sugarcane, for instance, may not necessarily require any sharp instrument, say a knife, to chop the banana into pieces (see Yakub & Owu-Ewie, 2023). The ethno-pragmatic implication of the proverb is that the couple must settle any dispute amicably without reporting the matter to any other parties. The ‘knife’ (sharp instrument), for instance, is likened to the most powerful institution such as the law court or a council of elders that can best resolve conflicts among people (see also Yakub & Owu-Ewie, 2023: 63). Just as banana can be consumed without a knife, the married couple is also advised to try solving their problems internally without seeking external intervention. The advice extends to touch on the virtue of **unity and cooperation** as concealed in proverb (8). ‘Salt alone’, as the proverb tries to highlight, cannot ensure the palatability of any soup unless other ingredients like pepper, tomatoes, onion, fish etc. are included. This has analogous pragmatic import with a proverb that uses plant imagery, such as; *baka ko engakyi ehoayele* ‘a single tree does not become forest’ (Yakub, 2018: 50). The ethno-pragmatic interpretation of proverb (8) reveals that the Nzema believe in collective undertaking of activities (see also Yakub, 2018: 51). The proverb thus reminds the couple to work collaboratively to achieve success in life. In proverb (9), the couple is reminded to cherish **divine consultation**. In Nzema cultural worldview, as participants noted in an interview, the fowl that looks up the sky before swallowing water, suggests that ‘the creature invites its creator (God) to witness what it consumes’. In essence, the couple must not do anything in isolation; rather, God’s directives must always be sought to ensure the success of their endeavours. Proverbs (10), (11) and (12) underscore the essence of **hard-work**. According to the Nzema cultural belief, as captured in proverb (10), the external part of one’s palm cannot be as ‘enjoyable’ as the internal part (in terms of food consumption). The proverb communicates that any external support may not be enough to satisfy one’s needs as compared to internally generated resources. The implication of the proverb advises the couple to be hardworking in order to be self-reliant. They should strive to make their own gains, rather than being idle and indolent, and always seeking external support (either from relatives or friends). The message from this proverb is somewhat parallel to the Akan adage that says; *se anoma antu a obua da* ‘the idle bird goes to bed hungry’ (Owu-Ewie, 2019). Proverb (11) further repudiates indolence; stressing that ‘a lazy person always goes hungry’. In this proverb, we can observe a part-for-whole relation, which most scholars e.g., Agyekum (2018: 24), Annan (2017: 104), Cruse (2011: 257) and Kovecses (2006: 101) refer to as metonymy. Agyekum (2018: 24-25) states that “when we talk of any part of the body as being part of the entire body or personality, we are having a partonomic (part-and-whole relation) view between the body and its parts, and these are terms of metonymy”. In proverb (11), one observes HAND FOR PERSON metonymy. The hand is mentioned as part of the body to represent the total human being, who is likely to starve if he/she refuses to work. Proverb (12) also points to the importance of hard-work; emphasising the need for the husband to do the most herculean task for the wife to do less. This seems to portray an aspect of gendered ideologies among the Nzema. According to participants, the Nzema trust that a man (husband) must work harder to bring food to the kitchen. He must fend for the family; ensuring that the woman (wife) would do little to assist him as reflected in proverb (12). This, however, may be contrary to what may be observed in contemporary Nzema society where most women have equally become highly industrious; striving to ensure the success of their families.

which get decomposed and become impurities in the water. This proverb thus is likely to originate from such life experience.

Ethnographic context 3:

[Mr. A's son impregnates Mr. B's daughter without prior performance of traditional marriage rite, an act which the Nzema people highly detest. Traditional elders thus meet to settle the matter at *Ewoku* (a community in Nzema East) on Thursday, 21st January, 2021. Mr. B, the lady's father fines the gentleman to pay an amount of GHS 7,000.00, which is apparently too huge an amount to pay for such an offence (since the lady had graduated from university and was already working). One of the elders admonishes Mr. B by deploying a proverb as indicated in excerpt 3:]

Excerpt 3:

SPEAKER (the elder): *Egya B, ye muala yeze ke kpavole ye eye mɔɔ benye a, noko yese ke yetoa ye zo a yenredwazo ene. Yesele wo ke bo mɔdenle nea ezukoa ne azo ekyii na kakye ke bese saa edi fole sa a anree nea e sa (proverb 13).*

“Mr. B, we are all aware that the young man has done what is prohibited, however, we may spend the whole day trying to settle this matter if we are to prolong it. We therefore beseech you to reduce the amount you have mentioned. Also, remember that our elders said **you must watch your palm as you eat the monkey's palm (proverb 13).**”

Analysis

Excerpt 3 reveals a proverb that instils in the listener the virtue of **forgiveness and tolerance**. The monkey's palm looks like that of man. Therefore, according to the Nzema, whoever eats the monkey's palm must regard him/herself as though he/she is eating human palm. The ethno-pragmatic interpretation of proverb (13) also points to the common adage; *mɔɔ ekulo ke beye bema a wo la yee ɔwo ke eye emaa e gɔnwo a* 'do unto others as you would want them do unto you', which urges people to behave and refrain from treating others unfairly. The proverb is used to admonish Mr. B, who fines the young man to pay an 'abnormal' amount of money for impregnating his daughter. Interpreting the proverbial utterance beyond the image of eating the monkey's palm, the implication entreats Mr. B to recognise that Mr. A (and his son) are also human, who possess similar features as himself (Mr. B). In essence, Mr. B needs to be considerate on them. It also reminds Mr. B to be tolerant, because one or more of his own children/relatives may find themselves in a similar situation someday, where they would expect others to be considerate on them. The proverb seeks to highlight the Nzema sociocultural belief that; *sonla adiem a le sonla; efa e gɔnwo anwo edweke ekye ye a yee befa wo edee bekye wo a* 'we are each other's brother; if you forgive your fellow brother, others would forgive you when you offend them'. This advises people to always treat others on humanitarian grounds, which can result in a peaceful and harmonised social setting, and in turn promote socio-economic growth and development.

Ethnographic context 4:

[On Saturday, 18th September, 2021, there was an arbitration to settle a case between a young lady and her parents at *Ankyenyin* (a community in Nzema East). The lady (23 years) falls in love with a man (66 years) who is apparently irresponsible. Earlier, the parents had made efforts to break up the relationship, but their ward would not listen. During the arbitration, the lady's grandfather advised her as presented in excerpt 4:]

Excerpt 4:

SPEAKER (grandfather): *Me anlɔnra, duzu ati a wo awovole tu wo fole a enva a? Nea, saa enze a mese wo ke akɔle mɔɔ toa ɔ nli la yemɔ a di abebe ezole a (proverb 14). Nrenyia mumua ne*

noko tela wɔ evole dɔɔnwo kpale. Kakyɛ kɛ, mgbanyima se kakula te kɔndɔma a ɔte mɔɔ kɔ ɔ nloa anu (proverb 15), yɛɛ bɛse kila kakula biala noko didi nwoma nloa (proverb 16).

“My granddaughter, why do you not heed any advice given by you parents? In case you in are unaware, let me inform you that **the chick that follows its mother (the hen) feeds on the thigh of a grasshopper (proverb 14)**. Moreover, the man is far older than you. Remember, our forefathers remarked that **a child must take a mussel of food that can be swallowed easily (proverb 15)**, and it is said that **a little mouse feeds around the animal skin (proverb 16)**.”

Analysis

In Nzema ethno-pragmatics, to say that ‘the chick that follows its mother (hen) eats the thigh of a grasshopper’ implies that ‘one would have a lot of benefits for heeding advice from elders (authority). Based on the chick-grasshopper metaphor, the implication of proverb (14) especially highlights the benefit of **obedience**. The proverb is employed to rebuke the young lady for failing to take the initial advice that her parents offered her. Participants affirmed that the Nzema do not appreciate children who act beyond their bounds to compete with the elderly; they must act within their own capacity as children (see also Yakub, 2022: 191). To say that ‘a child must take a mussel of food that they can swallow easily’, as we notice in proverb (15), is to restrict the extent to which children may be permitted to engage in some activities. When the mussel is too big/heavy, it can ‘chock’ the child’s throat. In proverb (15), the young lady is entreated to operate within her limit; implying that she must choose to marry a young man of her age, rather than an old man (who appears irresponsible). As an irresponsible old man, he may pass on leaving very little or no property for the young lady (and her children). This can place the young lady in an uncomfortable situation; making it difficult for her to fend for the children. This and other challenges can be likened to a child ‘who swallows a heavy mussel of food and gets choked’. Proverb (16) buttresses the restricted nature of the Nzema child’s operations. Both examples (15) and (16) portray the Nzema cultural belief that a child must not be **presumptuous** (see also Yakub, 2022; Yakub & Owu-Ewie, 2023: 65).

Ethnographic context 5:

[On Wednesday, 23rd June, 2021, at *Bolɔfo/Axim* (a community in Nzema East), there was an arbitration to resolve dispute between a man and his wife. The man decides to build a house in spite of his little (unsustainable) income. His wife disagrees with him; claiming that her house keeping money would be woefully insufficient if her husband starts to build. The following proverbs in excerpt 5 were employed in advising the couple during the arbitration.]

Excerpt 5:

SPEAKER 1 addresses the woman such as: *Me ra raale, ene meke ye saa ese kɛ etoa mɔɔ kɔ ɛ kunlu la angome a enrebɔ ebɛla biala. Maa ɛ hu adenle na boa ye maa ɔzi sua ne, na kakyɛ kɛ saa boane di boane a ɔwɔ boane kunlu (proverb 17).*

“My daughter, in this era, if one only thinks of what one will eat, the fellow will not achieve anything precious in life. So, allow your husband, cooperate with him, and support him to build the house because. Also, remember, **when a sheep eats the flesh of a sheep, it goes into the stomach of a sheep (proverb 17)**.”

SPEAKER 2 also emboldens the man as follows: *Kpavole, medie medi ke mɔɔ wɔzuzu ke eye la le kpale bɔkɔɔ, ehye ati mmatiedie ε nzo anzi na kɔ zo ye wɔ gyima. Nwu ye ke saa boane toa su-su a anrɛɛ ɔnli aleɛ (proverb 18).*

“Young man, I believe you have made a right decision. Go ahead, and do not listen to others. Know that **the sheep would not have eaten if it were to listen to continuous sacking (proverb 18).**”

Analysis

In excerpt 5, proverb (17) highlights the theme of **self-benefit**. The proverb is employed to persuade the wife to agree to her husband’s decision to build a house. The use of *boane* ‘sheep’ in the construction of the proverb seems quite interesting. Sheep are herbivorous, in other words, they do not consume flesh. In the proverb, however, it is said that when the sheep eats the flesh of another sheep, the flesh that is consumed does not reside in the stomach of any other animal, but that of a sheep. In other words, ‘a sheep is still found within a sheep’, which could also mean that ‘nothing is wasted’. This suggests that, the money, which the woman would have wished to spend on feeding, but which the man rather thinks should be invested in the building project, will still be useful to the family in the long run. Importantly, per the Ghanaian-Nzema culture, no one else will eventually be the beneficiary of the house in future except the woman (and her children), should the man pass on and vice versa. The proverb thus entreats the woman to rather liaise with her husband, and to support him fully to accomplish the building project. Proverb (18) was used specifically to inform the man on the need to be **focused**. Sometimes, the sheep remains adamant; not ‘responding’ to any attempt that a person makes to prevent it or drive it away from feeding on their items (such as grass, cassava, cereals and grains among others). If a person (i.e., owner of the cereal, vegetation, etc.) does not hit the sheep very hard, it would constantly feed without fear. The import of proverb (18), through the sheep metaphor, emboldens the man to turn deaf ears to any criticisms against his decision to build a house, since it is a good decision. This aligns with Yakub and Owu-Ewie’s (2023) observation that, among the Nzema, a person who ventures into any profitable activity is encouraged and supported to succeed, as conveyed in a plant-related proverb which says; *mɔɔ fo baka kpale la yeɛ bepia ye a* ‘whoever tries to climb a good tree⁵ must be pushed (encouraged) to go higher’.

Ethnographic context 6:

[A gentleman who lived a promiscuous life was engaged by his parents and two other elderly men to admonish him. It happened on Saturday, December 18th 2021, at *Teleku Bokazo* (Nzema Central). Excerpt 6 represents a section of the advisory messages delivered to the young man with the use of a proverb.]

Excerpt 6:

SPEAKER (elder): *Kpavole, maa menga mengile wɔ, mmatoa ke ele kenlema la ati ebasesa mraale mgbane mgbane. Kakye ke anwodole dɔɔnwo era yeɛ medi-medi nee mene-mene a lua a (proverb 19).*

⁵ A ‘good tree’ conceptually refers to any tree that bears many delicious fruits for animals and human to consume, and which can provide shade. To climb ‘a good tree’ symbolises an attempt to perform a task that could benefit the climber and other people, such as building an apartment, schooling, learning a trade or going through apprenticeship and many more (Yakub & Owu-Ewie, 2023: 59). Therefore, the man who tries to manage his income to be able to build a house can be described as attempting to climb a good tree and deserves backing.

“Gentleman, let me tell you, do not take your handsomeness as an opportunity to flirt around indiscriminately. Note that there are many sexually transmitted infections these days. Also, remember that **continuous eating results in continuous defecation (proverb 19).**”

Analysis

In proverb (19), the reduplicated forms *medi-medi* ‘I eat-and-eat’ and *mene-mene* ‘I defecate-and-defecate’ are significant to enhance our understanding and interpretation of the proverbial utterance, such that, ‘if a person does something repeatedly, they would accordingly see the outcome repeatedly’. The advisory message enshrined in the proverb especially hinges on **cause and effect**, one of the philosophical principles that regulates the actions and/or inactions of members of the traditional Nzema society (Ibrahim et al., 2022). For instance, the expression; *kakula kpale di dikyene* ‘a good child receives precious gifts’ suggests that a person who behaves well is rewarded for their good conduct (Ibrahim et al., 2022: 33-24; Yakub, 2022: 190). However, in Nzema ethno-pragmatics, to say that ‘continuous eating results in continuous defecation’,⁶ specifically implies that any undesirable attitude that a person continuously puts up would account for continuous adverse consequences (see also Ibrahim et al., 2022). Proverb (19) thus reminds the promiscuous young man on the possibility of contracting some sexual-transmitted diseases which may even be deadly. Aside from the fact that he could contract sexually transmitted infections, he could also encounter financial loss in the course of flirting with several women. Furthermore, his reputation in the society could be lost based on the premise that the Nzema strongly disdain promiscuity, although polygamous practice (preferably where a man performs all the necessary marriage rites) is allowed. These and other adverse consequences that may befall the young man are what the proverb tries to emphasise.

Ethnographic context 7:

[A man, his wife and two daughters met at the chief’s palace at *Anagye* (Nzema East) on Friday, April 2nd 2021. The man claimed that he would not send his second daughter to Senior High School because the first daughter dropped out of school due to unwanted pregnancy. One of the elders addressed the man (father) as illustrated in excerpt 7.]

Excerpt 7:

SPEAKER (elder): *Yemenle X, mekola mese ke wɔ edweke ye fe bɔkɔɔ, noko wɔannea ye boe a ebazekye debie. Saa e ra kpanyinli ne annwu nrelebe a enee ɔngile ke mɔɔ doa ye la ɔdaye ɔle koasea. Na nwu ye ye mgbanyima se kekebetele enli dazia na kelene anloa nu endwe ye (proverb 20), ɔti dwenle nwole kpale.*

“Mr. X, you seem to have a case in this matter, however, you must be very careful, or you will cause a great harm. The fact that your first daughter has been unwise does not necessarily guarantee the stupidity of your second daughter. Recognise that our forefathers said **the lizard does not eat pepper for the frog to suffer the hotness of the pepper (proverb 20)**, so, try to reconsider your decision.”

⁶ As noted earlier, the mention of ‘defecation’ here also does not basically point to the usual/natural phenomenon of eating and consequently discharging the stool after digestion has taken place; rather, it suggests suffering and all other unpleasant experiences.

Analysis

As I have pointed out earlier, the Nzema believe in cause and effect. They think that every human conduct, whether positive or negative, has its consequence (Ibrahim et al., 2022). A participant stressed during an interview that, among the Nzema, the repercussions of one's bad deeds must rightly befall the culprit. In essence, the Nzema frown upon blaming the adverse effects of one's negligence or bad deeds on an innocent person, which is reflected in proverb (20). To say that 'the lizard does not eat pepper for the frog to experience the hotness of the pepper', in Nzema ethno-pragmatics, implies that someone must not suffer as a result of another person's misconduct. In excerpt 7, we notice that the man's first daughter did not act wisely. However, the implication of the proverb informs him not to capitalise on his first daughter's negligence to penalise the second daughter. The proverb brings to bare the Nzema philosophy and principle of **justice and fairness**, as Yakub and Owu-Ewie (2023: 62) have earlier pointed out. It entreats members of the society to 'call a spade a spade', to treat people as they deserve, and to make true verdicts. This ensures social cohesion and peaceful co-existence.

7. Conclusion

Relying on the Ethno-pragmatics paradigm as a theoretical anchor, the paper has unravelled the communicative imports and advisory significance of Nzema proverbs that are basically about 'food and consumption', but which pragmatically transcend the experience of consumption. The paper revealed that in socio-cultural contexts such as traditional marriage contraction among the Nzema and largely, during arbitration, proverbs related to 'food and consumption' feature greatly to help speakers achieve their communicative goals. The paper has also demonstrated that many virtues and didactics are entrenched in this category of Nzema proverbs. Such positive virtues specifically highlight the socio-cultural significance of justice and fairness, obedience, patience, unity and cooperation, hard-work and perseverance, forgiveness and tolerance, prudence, among others. It is noted that the Nzema resort to 'food and consumption' proverbs to discourage and curb awkward behaviours, and to redirect the conduct of members of the society towards acceptable norms. The 'food and consumption' related proverbs treated in this paper are paradoxically not about the physical or literal sense of eating. The proverbs rather encode meanings that, to greater extent, demonstrate cultural peculiarities, and which can be best deduced through implicature. We observed the persistent use of some verbs like *remember*, *note*, *know* and *recognise*, which usually occurred before the proverb citation. This is what Agyekum (2019) describes as 'advisory verbs' which illocutionary functions add up to the directive force of a proverb in discourse to make an addressee keep the message and act accordingly. We note that the messages communicated through the 'food and consumption' proverbs are familiar truths that are common to the Nzema community, hence not difficult to be understood by the addressees in the various discourse contexts.

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