

[http://doi.org/ 10.29162/pv.40.1.54](http://doi.org/10.29162/pv.40.1.54)

Original scientific paper

Received on 25 June 2022

Accepted for publication on 14 May 2023

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## A CONTEXTUAL-ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF NZEMA PROVERBS RELATED TO SOME ‘MEDICAL CONDITIONS’

**Abstract:** Proverbs are terse but ‘condensed’ expressions which contain moral lessons. In every culture, proverbs form part of the nuggets of popular wisdom, expressed in the form of wise sayings (Maledo 2015). Among the Nzema of Ghana, proverbs permeate almost all communicative encounters. They are ‘injected’ into discourses to motivate people to behave well, and to repudiate vices in the society. This paper discusses the didactics and communicative values of Nzema proverbs related to health conditions (and impairments) such as blindness, deafness, leprosy, hunchback, goitre, hernia, rickets and migraine. Using primary data recorded during arbitration proceedings among the Nzema, the paper examines the advisory role of the proverbs. The findings demonstrate that many virtues are concealed in Nzema proverbs that incorporate certain medical conditions, which paradoxically are not about the mere experiences of such conditions; rather, the deeper meanings highlight the essence of hospitality, contentment, patience, hard-work, and genuine love among others. The paper has also shown that the Nzema employ such proverbs in appropriate discourse contexts to rebuke deviants, and to redirect the paths of members of the society. It is argued that the advisory messages entrenched in this category of proverbs largely promote ethical standards and help maintain social equilibrium and solidarity. The paper engages Hymes’ Ethnography of Communication model in the data analysis.

**Keywords:** Nzema proverbs, ailments, ethnography, communication, pragmatic implications

## ***1. Introduction***

The Nzema people are located in the South-west part of the Western Region of Ghana, West Africa. In terms of political demarcation and jurisdiction, they represent three constituencies in the Western Region of Ghana; namely Nzema East, Nzema Central (Ēlemebēle) and Nzema West (Dw̄om̄olo) (Kwaw 2008). The Ghana Population and Housing Census carried out in 2021, revealed that the total number of Nzema was 342, 090. Their language is also known as Nzema, which forms part of the Kwa languages family (Annan 1980; Kwesi 1992). Most of the Nzema population engage in subsistence farming, while some relish in fishing to supplement their livelihood, since the Nzemaland stretches along the coast (Yakub and Agyekum 2022). 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; Yakub 2019). These proverbial expressions largely incorporate animal and plant imageries, including features of rocks, rivers and mountains among other creatures within the ecosystem (see Yakub and Wiafe-Akenten 2023). Most proverbs in Nzema are also ‘coined’ based on human body-parts, the experiences of certain ailments, and the imagery of ‘food and consumption’ (Yakub 2022).

Recent studies on Nzema proverbs, e.g., Yakub (2019) and Yakub and Owu-Ewie (2023) have discussed the pragmatic functions of animal metaphors and plant metaphors respectively. However, little seems to be known about the discourse relevance of Nzema traditional proverbs that are basically grounded in ailments, but communicate deeply by means of implicature. The current paper, therefore, focuses on Nzema proverbs that literally talk about some medical conditions and/or impairments, which are embedded in rich metaphoric meanings and ethno-pragmatic interpretations. The paper aims to unravel the various medical conditions that are incorporated in the oral composition of Nzema proverbs and how these proverbs are used to entreat people during arbitration for a change of attitude. I demonstrate that the Nzema depend on proverbs related to ailments such as blindness, deafness, leprosy, rickets, hunchback, goitre, migraine, and hernia to make constructive comments on critical issues that need

to be addressed, especially in the context of arbitration. It is important to emphasise that these ailment-related proverbs are not basically about the physical features of the sufferers (victims) and the inconveniences that they encounter; rather, they convey pragmatic implications that transcend the basic perceptions that people have about such conditions. I also demonstrate that many positive virtues are encoded in these proverbs, which portray fundamental Nzema cultural values and ideologies. The paper is significant to deepening our understanding of the Nzema cultural worldview, as it unravels folk perceptions and philosophies that are entrenched in ailment-related proverbs.

Beyond the introductory section, I provide an overview of the concept of proverbs, looking at its nature and function in section 2. Section 3 draws on the methodology employed in carrying out the study, whereas section 4 provides an orientation on the theoretical framework adopted to guide the analysis. The data presentation and discussion are done in section 5, and the conclusion is presented in section 6.

## ***2. The concept of proverbs***

Achebe (1958) described proverbs as ‘the palm oil with which words are eaten’. This alludes to the fact that proverbs serve as a lubricant to facilitate ‘language consumption’. In other words, speakers can rely on proverbs to make succinct comments and contributions, whereas listeners can easily interpret the intended meanings with the aid of such proverbs. Finnegan (1970) sees proverbs as a body of short statements built up over the years, which reflect the thought and insight of a group of people. According to Mieder (2004: 24), “proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphoric, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation”. Strengthening the observations made by Finnegan (1970) and Mieder (2004), Oludare (2017) contends that:

African proverbs are short, witty and pithy statements with implicit truths. They are a distillation of the wisdom of the people derived over the ages from careful observation of everyday ex-

perience, involving human beings, nature and animals, as well as natural phenomena and social events (Oludare 2017: 55).

Gleaning from the above, we can notice that proverbs deal with pithy sayings which contain traditional truism and belong to a specific cultural group. They abound in moral lessons and can portray the thoughts and beliefs of a people. Taking the Akan socio-cultural context as an example, Agyekum (2005: 10) remarks that “*ɛbɛ ne ɔkasa mu abohemaa* ‘the proverb is the most appropriate aspect of speech’, *ɛtwa asem tia* ‘it curtails matters’, *enka asem ho a enwie dɛ ye* ‘without the proverb, a speech does not acquire its seasoned nature’”. In the words of Agyekum (2019: 319), “proverbs are interpretations of traditional wisdom based on the experiences and socio-cultural life of our elders”. He explains further that proverb can emanate from religious systems, philosophical principles and the overall cultural ideologies of a people instituted by their forefathers based on life encounters. Advancing the popular notion that proverbs are socio-culturally oriented, Degener (2022) also opines that:

Proverbs reflect notions about society and human behaviour; they express common observations and experiences as well as normative values. Their status as culturally transmitted and formalised figurative utterances qualifies proverbs as indicators of the values and habits predominant in given societies (Degener 2022: 1).

Ashipu (2013) attempts to explicate the relevance of proverbs in the use of language. He proffers that, in traditional African societies, a speech without a proverb is as unproductive as a skeleton without flesh, and as a body without soul. Similarly, Agyekum (2017: 30) asserts that proverbs are aesthetic devices of vitality in speech, and the ‘salt’ of language, without which the real taste of the ‘language dish’ cannot be felt. Insights from the above postulations reveal that proverbs are indispensable ‘discourse ingredients’ which contribute to effective communication, especially in the African context.

It is ascertained that speakers who are culturally-oriented, also demonstrate communicative competence by employing proverbs in suitable discourse situations (Obeng 1996; Mensah and Eni 2019; Agyekum 2022). Communicative competence, as Hymes (1972) explains, underscores the importance of the so-

cial-cultural context in language use. Inherent in this view is the assumption that speakers just do not know the grammar of their language, but also how the language is used appropriately in varying social contexts. Scholars such as Yankah (1989), Hallen (2000) and Moshood (2016) share the view that effective use of proverbs in discourse interaction is largely 'context-dependent'. As Yankah (2012) mentions, each new socio-cultural milieu or context affects the performance of proverbs. This suggests that context of communication occupies a significant place in the use of proverbs. Adesina (2015) makes a contribution to corroborate Yankah's position such as follows:

Proverbs in every culture depends 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, we will notice that, like in other African cultures, the Nzema do not just garnish their speech with proverbs; rather, they quote them in discourses within the befitting socio-cultural context to ensure conciseness and clarity in the communication process. Proverbs are used mainly to admonish, rebuke and reprimand, direct, praise, encourage, educate, and to entertain people (Adesina 2015; Oludare 2017). Crucially, it will be shown that Nzema proverbs that capture some medical conditions are not meant to ridicule people with such conditions and/or disabilities, but are used to make pertinent contributions that encourage desirable attitudes, and to repudiate vices in the Nzema society.

### ***3. Methodology***

The study employs qualitative ethnographic research design. According to Duranti (1997), ethnography deals with the description of social organisation, social activities, symbols and material resources, and interpretive practices characteristics of a particular group of people. "Ethnographies are based on first-hand observation of behaviour in a group of people in their natural settings" (Wardhaugh 2006: 249). The primary data for this

study were obtained through participant and non-participant observations, as well as semi-structured interviews.

As a native speaker of Nzema who had lived with the people for over thirty years, I attended traditional gatherings such as marriage and naming ceremonies and arbitrations, among others within the Nzema society. At various arbitration settings, I sought permission as a matter of ethics and had the opportunity to audio-record the proceedings with an android phone. The duration of data gathering was from January, 2021 to December, 2021. I recorded such proceedings because the gathering usually involved elders who used proverbs profusely in their communication. Through semi-structured interviews, I crosschecked the data and sought clarifications from four (4) native Nzema scholars whose ages range between sixty-five (65) and seventy (70) years. These informants (two males and two females) were purposively consulted because they are competent users of traditional proverbs, and for the fact that they have had tertiary education.

I transcribed and translated the data for analysis and discussion. Proverbs related to medical conditions were purposively considered in this study because they were used predominantly in the various conversations (arbitrations), and that they were employed to make critical comments on the issues at hand. The analysis is situated within the framework of Ethnography of Communication. I categorised the data based on the various ailments mentioned in the proverbs and provided the background/context of use of the proverb as well as the excerpts in which the specific proverbs are found.

#### ***4. Theoretical framework: The Ethnography of Communication***

Hymes (1962) elucidates what he refers to as the ‘Ethnography of Speaking’ framework, popularly known in contemporary discourse and sociolinguistic researches as the ‘Ethnography of Communication’ (EC). The approach is particularly concerned with language use in culture and society (Hymes 1974; Saville-Troike 2003). According to Saville-Troike (2003: 2), “the focus of the ethnography of communication is the *speech community*, the way communication within it is patterned and organ-

ised as systems of communicative events, and the ways in which these interact with all other systems of culture”. Ethnography of communication considers communication not simply with language structures, but with language use, taking into cognizance the rules of speaking... the ways in which speakers associate particular models of speaking, topics, or message forms, at a particular setting (Oludare 2017). Hymes (1972) contributes to Chomsky’s notion of linguistic competence from another important perspective; arguing that, beyond one’s knowledge of the structures and rules of language, social context and appropriateness and cultural norms are key to the effective use of language. Hymes stresses the notion of communicative competence, which deals with the social and cultural knowledge speakers are presumed to have which enables them to use and interpret linguistic forms. Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language code but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately in any given situation (see also Saville-Troike 2003). “The ethnography of communication takes language first and foremost as a socially situated cultural form, which is indeed constitutive of much of culture itself”, as Saville-Troike (2003: 3) puts it. Emphasising the significant place of communicative competence, Saville-Troike contends that:

Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, to whom one may speak, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what non-verbal behaviors are appropriate in various contexts, what the routines for turn-taking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, how to give commands, how to enforce discipline, and the like – in short, everything involving the use of language and other communicative modalities in particular social settings (Saville-Troike 2003: 18).

Hymes’ speaking model takes into account the participants at discourse, channels for transmitting messages, the codes, setting, genres, topics, comments generated from discourse, the events, and characters (see also Maledo 2015). In the view of Hymes, therefore, ethnography of speaking (communication) describes

all the factors that are necessary for understanding and interpreting a particular discourse interaction. For the sake of suitability, he outlines his proposition with the acronym, SPEAKING; giving the following description/explanation:

- S** – Setting or scene (context): The setting and scene of any discourse situation constitute the situational background context of the discourse.
- P** – Participants (interlocutors): The participants are the people who are either actively or passively involved in the speech event.
- E** – Ends (purpose, function, reasons for the communication): Every conversation is meant to achieve some **goal**. In the SPEAKING Model, “Ends refer to the conventionally recognised and expected outcomes of an exchange as well as to the personal goals that participants seek to accomplish on particular occasions” (Wardhaugh 2006: 247). In my analysis in this paper, I will discuss the discourse relevance of the various proverbs under the component labelled *Ends*, highlighting the themes and purpose of the use of the proverbs.
- A** – Act sequence or ordering: The act sequence refers to the **form and content** of the specific speech act. This component of the art of speaking looks at the various things that are said in the different speech scenarios, the words that are used and how they are relevant to the precise issue being spoken about.
- K** – Key (the tone, manner, spirit): Key concerns how we speak and what body language we employ when we speak. The message could be light-hearted, serious, humorous, precise, pompous, mocking, sarcastic and so on (Wardhaugh 2006: 248; Maledo 2015: 27). Hymes (2003: 43) indicates that “[k]ey is introduced to provide for the tone, manner, or spirit in which an act is done”.
- I** – Instrumentalities (code or channel): Instrumentalities relates to the **channels** or **modes** through which we communicate. These channels are the **media** we employ in our daily interactive enterprises and so it includes whether the speech act is done through a written, spoken or telegraphic medium.



- N** – Norms of interaction: Norms relate to standard patterns of behaviour, the “specific behaviours and properties that attach to speaking that one must not interrupt...” (Hymes 2003: 44). The norms have to do with interaction and interpretation of speech. They refer to the form of behaviour that accompanies language. Some of these are speaking turns, loudness, interruptions and pauses (Oludare 2017: 60). To this end, when we interact, we are bound to the various norms that go into structuring the entire speech act.
- G** – Genres: Genre is the type or **category of utterance** that is used in the speech event. It is concerned with whether the utterance is a poem, letter, novel, play/drama, magazine, lecture, song, commercial, editorial, proverb, riddle, curse, prayer, oration, sermons, casual speech, or interview, etc. In this study, **Nzema proverbs related to medical conditions** represent the key Genre that is used to encourage positive attitude in the society, and to disapprove vices.

From the foregoing orientation, it is obvious that Hymes’ SPEAKING model benefits the analysis of data in this study, since the use of proverbs in the Nzema community subscribes to the above factors that ensure meaningful communication. As will be seen in the analysis below, the use of Nzema proverbs satisfies these factors, as for instance, there is the indication of time and place (Setting), speakers and hearers/audience (Participants). There is also an indication that the ‘ailment-related’ proverbs are used to arrive at a goal/an outcome (Ends), which aims at reshaping the psychological and moral attitude of the addressees, which in turn promotes peaceful societal coexistence.

The Key, which specifies the general tone or manner under which a speaker quotes a proverb, either serious, harsh, mockery or persuasive etc. is also indicative. The Instrumentality appears obvious, as the use of Nzema proverbs is in the spoken form. The proverb users, who are elders of the Nzema society with higher communicative competence to apply the rules that ensure effective communication, makes the Norm obvious. Finally, the Genre, which concerns the category of utterance, whether it is a poem, riddle, novel, lecture, song, proverb etc. is obvious, since this paper relies on the use of proverbs.

## 5. Data and discussion

In this section, ten (10) proverbs related to some medical conditions are discussed within the purview of Hymes' SPEAKING model. The ethnographic context/background where the proverbs were employed have been presented, as well as the excerpts that contain the proverbs.

### 5.1. Proverb related to leprosy

**Ethnographic background 1:** [On Sunday, 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2021, at *Anagye* (a community in Nzema East), there was arbitration to settle dispute between a young man and his wife. The man decided to divorce his wife because of his stepdaughter's misconduct. In addressing the man (husband), one of the elders employed the proverb shown in excerpt 1.]

**Excerpt 1:** Speaker (elder): *Nrenyiakpa, kakye ke agyale bekɔ ye meke mɔɔ enea a wɔnyia raale mɔɔ edawɔ ekulo ye la. Ene adwuleso mraale nee mrenyia bedabe yee bekɔ be agyale a. Saa wɔgya raale na ɔ ra bie enla subane kpale ali a mmaafa ekɔ e ye anwo zo, ɔluake mgbanyima se saa ekulo kokobevole a ekulo ye nee ye mbgɔlaboa (proverb 1).* "Youngman, note that a man decides to marry when he thinks he has found a good partner. You the youth of today do not allow any elderly person to make choices for you in terms of selecting a marriage partner. Now, if you are not satisfied with your stepdaughter's character, do not extend your anger to affect your wife. Remember, our elders said that **whoever decides to love the leper must appreciate his/her footwear as well (proverb 1).**"

Analysis:

*Saa ekulo kokobevole a ekulo ye nee ye mbgɔlaboa (proverb 1)*  
 'Whoever decides to love the leper must appreciate his/her footwear as well' (proverb 1).

- S – Proverb (1) was used during arbitration at the chief's palace at *Anagye*.
- P – The participants were a man and his wife, some traditional elders and other bystanders. The speaker (proverb user) was actually an elderly man.

- E** – The speaker uses the proverb to persuade the man to show **genuine love** to his wife, despite his stepdaughter’s misbehaviour. A leper’s footwear, according to this proverb, and for that matter from the Nzema cultural perspective, does not appear very attractive. However, once one decides to love the leper, the person must admire the footwears as well (see also Ibrahim et al. 2022: 36). The proverb therefore advises the man not to reject his wife and stepdaughter. He must rather strategize to reprimand the girl to change for the better in order to maintain peace within the family.
- A** – The elder quoted this proverb after the young man and his wife each had narrated their side of the story (issue). The **leprosy-related proverb** used is relevant to persuade the man.
- K** – The tone is that of light-hearted (persuasive).
- I** – The mode of communication is verbal.
- N** – There was no interruption, speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.
- G** – The genre is the use of proverb.

### 5.2 Proverbs related to blindness

**Ethnographic background 2:** [There was arbitration to resolve conflict between two brothers at *Akpatam* (a community in Nzema East) on Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup> July, 2021. The elder brother promised to sponsor the younger one to go into apprenticeship. When the date set for his departure elapsed, the younger brother got furious and decided to leave the house. In the course of settling the matter, the proverbs in excerpt 2 emerged.]

**Excerpt 2:** Speaker 1 (elder) addresses the younger brother: *Nea, edawɔ mumua ne wɔ awovole wule nde mɔɔ enee enle neavole biala a. Ɔti saa ε diema ye elebede ke ɔkedo wɔ gyima nu a ɔwɔ ke edi pilasili, ɔboaleke bese saa ε nye bazi na edele tenla zo a enee wɔva ye zo (proverb 2).* “Look, your parents passed on when you were still a toddler, and so you did not have anybody to look after you. So, if your elder brother is hustling in order for you to go into apprenticeship, you have to be happy because it is said that **for one to suffer from cataract is better than total blindness (proverb 2).**” Speaker 2 also addresses the young-

er brother as follows: *Yemɔ ala yɛɛ ɛ nlenyia eze wɔ la. Mame, menea a ɔwɔ ke nzelele bɔbɔ a eye ke ɔkenyia ezukoa na ɔkedo wɔ gyima nu a na te ke ɛfi sua nu, ɔluake bese **anyenzinliravole ɔdaye ɔnva eya wɔ kpɔke nu (proverb 3)***. “That is exactly what your grandfather has told you. For me, you must rather pray for your brother to get the capital to let you start the apprenticeship, but not to pack your luggage away, because it is said that **a blind person must not become angry in the forest (proverb 3)**.”

Analysis:

*Ɛnye bazi na edele tenla zo a enee wɔva ye zo (proverb 2)*

‘For one to suffer from cataract is better than total blindness’ (proverb 2).

- S – Proverb (2) was used during arbitration at the forecourt of the chief’s palace at *Akpatam*.
- P – The participants were two brothers, some traditional elders and other bystanders. The speaker was an elderly man.
- E – An elderly man used the proverb to inform the younger brother on the essence of **contentment**. This is in line with what an informant observed that the Nzema cherish people who appreciate any little thing they possess and/or whatever a benevolent donor would offer them. Though cataract is not a convenient health condition, one would prefer it to absolute blindness. The proverb seeks to say that the boy must, at least, be ‘satisfied’ and appreciate the fact that his elder brother has good plans for him, since his life could have been more miserable because of the untimely demise of his parents.
- A – After the two brothers had spoken, an elderly man cited this proverb in his speech. The **blindness-related proverb** used is relevant in advising the boy to be content.
- K – The tone is that of seriousness.
- I – The mode of communication is verbal.
- N – There was no interruption, the speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.
- G – The genre is the use of proverb.

Analysis:

*Anyenzinliravole enva eya wɔ kpɔke nu (proverb 3)*

‘A blind person must not become angry in the forest’ (proverb 3).

**S** – Proverb (3) was used during arbitration at the forecourt of the chief’s palace at *Akpatam*.

**P** – The participants were two brothers, some traditional elders and other bystanders. The speaker was an elderly man.

**E**– The speaker uses the proverb purposely to advise the younger brother **against quick-temperedness**. In this proverb, the boy is likened to a blind person who needs guidance. When a blind person becomes angry with his/her guide dog, especially in the forest, he/she may be left in the forest to fumble. Thus, the proverb informs the boy to live harmoniously with his elder brother because he can become frustrated if the elder brother decides not to sponsor his apprenticeship.

**A** – Another elderly man quoted proverb (3) right after the first elder had cited proverb (2). The **blindness-related proverb** used is relevant to admonish the boy.

**K** – The tone is that of seriousness.

**I** – The mode of communication is verbal.

**N** – There was no interruption, the speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.

**G** – The genre is the use of proverb.

**Ethnographic background 3 (another use of blindness-related proverb):** [On Wednesday, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 2021, there was arbitration that was meant to settle dispute between a young lady and her parents at *Kekam* (a community in Nzema Central). The lady, who was an illiterate, rejected a marriage proposal made by a guy who was highly educated. Her reason was that the guy, being educated, may later take her for granted. Therefore, she insisted on marrying another guy who was equally an illiterate. Her parents disagreed to her decision, which generated a conflict between the lady and her parents. During the arbitration, her father quoted the proverb in excerpt 3.]

**Excerpt 3:** Father: *Me ra raale, ɔle zɔ ke kekala edawɔ ekola ekponde nrenyia mɔɔ ekulo ye la, noko mame mennie mendo nu*

*ke ekegya mawɔ daye noko yeangɔ sukulu la. Oboaleke saa anyenzinlirama nwiɔ dua a betɔ kuma nu (proverb 4).* “My daughter, it is a fact that you are mature enough and now you have the opportunity to marry a man of your choice. Notwithstanding this, I disagree to your decision to marry the guy who is as illiterate as you are, because **when two blind people move together, they can fall into a pit (proverb 4).**”

Analysis:

*Saa anyenzinlirama nwiɔ dua a betɔ kuma nu (proverb 4)*  
 ‘When two blind people move together, they can fall into a pit’  
 (proverb 4).

- S – Proverb (4) was used during arbitration at the forecourt of a family house at *Kekam*.
- P – The participants were father, mother, daughter, some traditional elders and other bystanders. The father was the speaker (proverb user).
- E – Using this proverb, the father warns his daughter not to forgo such opportunity of grabbing an educated man as a husband. Here, the proverb reminds the lady on the essence of **circumspection**. Through the proverb, her father tells her to recognise that she is illiterate, and so must choose to marry the guy who is educated. This, in a way, can contribute to their progress and success in life. However, as an informant highlighted, this proverb does not seek to say that uneducated people are inferior, but to indicate how much importance the Nzema attach to education; describing EDUCATION figuratively as an EYE-OPENER. As one can infer from the proverb, the Nzema conceptualise ILLITERACY as BLINDNESS. Therefore, the proverb suggests that when the lady and the young man get married, both as illiterates, they may not be enlightened, and that they may face many difficulties that can hinder their progress in life (as captured in “they can fall in a pit”).
- A – The father said this proverb to his daughter after her mother had offered some advice. The **blindness-related proverb** used is relevant to warn the lady.

- K** – The tone was that which indicated seriousness.
- I** – The mode of communication is verbal.
- N** – There was no interruption, speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.
- G** – The genre is the use of proverb.

### 5.3 Proverb related to hunchback

**Ethnographic background 4:** [On Friday, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2021, there was arbitration to settle a case between a woman (single parent) and her son at *Samenye* (a community in Nzema West). The boy, who had finished his fitting apprenticeship, demanded a shop in haste in order to start his business independently. As a single parent, the mother could not afford to provide the shop immediately. This resulted in misunderstanding between them. One of the elders used the proverb in excerpt 4 in entreating the boy during the arbitration.]

**Excerpt 4:** Elder: *Me anlɔnra, ɛdawɔ eze ke ɛ ze ɛnde aze ɔti ɛ nli fe dɔɔnwo wɔ be ɛnleanle nu. Eleka mɔɔ ɔwɔ ke besiezie bɛmaa ɛye wɔ gyima ne la bahyia ezukoa koatee. ɔti, nyia abo-tane maa ɛ nli eziezie nwole ezukoa ɔluake bese afuvole teladeɛ betɔ alagye a bebu a (proverb 5).* “My grandson, you are aware that your mother is widowed, and so she struggles a lot to cater for you (and your siblings). The shop you are demanding requires a huge amount of money to furnish it for you. So, do not be in hurry, as our forefathers said that **it takes ample time to sew a perfect dress for the hunchback (proverb 5).**”

Analysis:

*Afuvole teladeɛ betɔ alagye a bebu a (proverb 5)*

‘It takes ample time to sew a perfect dress for the hunchback’ (proverb 5).

- S** – Proverb (5) was used during arbitration at the forecourt a family house at *Samenye*.
- P** – The participants comprise a mother and her son, some traditional elders and other bystanders. The speaker was an elderly man.

- E**– According to an informant, this proverb is significant in advising a person to avoid rush in dealing with ‘sensitive’ issues that require careful examination and attention. In excerpt 4 above, the goal of the proverb is to inform the boy on the virtue of **patience**. Basically, the proverb says that, in order to sew a dress perfectly for the hunchback, the tailor/seamstress must be patient and meticulous. This is likened to providing a well-furnished fitting shop, where the woman (as a single parent) needs ample time to mobilise resources (money) to be able to accomplish it. The proverb instils in the boy the ‘spirit’ of avoiding rush in life.
- A**– The elderly man used the proverb after the boy and his mother each had told their side of the matter. The **hunchback-related proverb** cited is essential to inform the boy to avoid rush in life.
- K**– The tone is that of seriousness.
- I**– The mode of communication is verbal.
- N**– There was no interruption, the speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.
- G**– The genre is the use of proverb.

#### 5.4 Proverb related to rickets

**Ethnographic background 5:** [A father decided not to pay his son’s admission fee to enter university because the boy unlawfully impregnated a lady, a situation which caused the father to pay a fine of Ten Thousand Ghana Cedis (HG¢ 10.000). Some traditional elders sat with the father and his son to settle the case, which was meant to beseech the father to pay the admission fee. It happened on Sunday, 31<sup>st</sup> January, 2021 at *Nsein* (a community in Nzema East). Excerpt 5 reveals the ailment-related proverb that was cited.]

**Excerpt 5:** Elder: *Egya X, ε ra ne ambɔ ebela kpale mɔɔ ese ke edi ɔ nzi a ɔbaye edweke dɔɔnwo. Noko nea na fa ɔ nwo edweke kye ye maa ɔdoa ye sukulu zo ɔluake bese saa betenre ananda a eza bengyea ye (proverb 6).* “Mr. X, we acknowledge that your son has done wrong, however, if you consider this it will result in a lot of problems. So, we implore you to let him further his



education, and note that **in trying to straighten the rickets, one must not end up making it more crooked (proverb 6)."**

Analysis:

*Saa betenre ananda a eza bengyeya ye (proverb 6)*

'In trying to straighten the rickets, one must not end up making it more crooked' (proverb 6).

- S – Proverb (6) was used during arbitration at the forecourt a family house at *Nsien*.
- P – The participants comprise a father and his son, including some traditional elders and other bystanders. The one who quoted the proverb (speaker) was an elderly man.
- E – The purpose of citing the proverb is to entreat the father to pay his son's admission fee. As an informant explained, among other cultural values, the advisory content of the proverb teaches **tolerance** and **forgiveness**. The fact that the son has unlawfully put a lady in family way is rather unfortunate, a situation that can disparage the young man as well as his parents. Therefore, the father is implored to be tolerant, and to strategize to comfort his son, but not to 'worsen' his case by denying him access to tertiary education. Hence, the use of proverb (6) above.
- A – After the father had spoken, an elderly man employed the proverb. The **rickets-related proverb** used is essential to advise the father to be tolerant.
- K – The tone is that of light-hearted in order to arrive at the persuasive function of the proverb.
- I – The mode of communication is verbal.
- N – There was no interruption, the speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.
- G – The genre is the use of proverb.

### *5.5 Proverb related to inguinal hernia*

**Ethnographic background 6:** [On Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> December, 2021, at *Bolfo* (a community in Nzema East), there was arbitration to settle conflict between two men (one of them was a stranger who had come to live with the other in search of a job).

The man who owned the residence complained bitterly about the overstay of the stranger. During the arbitration, one of the elders quoted the proverb in excerpt 6 in persuading the landlord.]

**Excerpt 6:** Elder: (addresses the man): *Me diema, yenwu kpale mɔɔ wɔye la amuala. Kemɔ enwunle ke eyevole ye anvunvone na eliele ye la, bɔ mɔdenle maa ye meke ekyii boka nwo maa ɔkponde sua ne bie. Akee kakye ke bese **tuoke amba ndɔmale ma evoanle na ɔrale ke ebarakponde tenlabela ala (proverb 7)***. “My brother, we recognise your good hospitality. Since you realised that a stranger usually encounters challenges, and thus allowed him to live with you, kindly spare him to look for another accommodation within a few weeks. Then also, remember that **the hernia came not to drive away the testicles, but to seek a place to settle (proverb 7)**.

Analysis:

*Tuoke amba ndɔmale ma evoanle, ɔrale ke ebarakponde tenlabela ala (proverb 7)*

‘The hernia came not to drive away the testicles, but to seek a place to settle’ (proverb 7).

- S – Proverb (7) was used during arbitration at the forecourt of a man’s house at *Bolɔfo*.
- P – The participants comprise a landlord and a tenant (stranger), some traditional elders and other bystanders. The one who resorted to the proverb (speaker) was an elderly man.
- E – The purpose of ‘injecting’ the proverb into the advisory discourse is to persuade the landlord to allow the stranger to live with him for some time, while searching for other accommodation. The proverb underscores the essence of **Hospitality**, as an informant reported. Just as inguinal hernia comes to live with the testicles, usually in harmony, so is the landlord expected to embrace the stranger during their stay.
- A – After the landlord and tenant each had narrated their issues, the elderly man cited proverb (7). The **hernia-related proverb** is relevant to beseech the landlord.
- K – The tone is less harsh in order to enhance the persuasion.

- I – The mode of communication is verbal.
- N – There was no interruption, the speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.
- G – The genre is the use of proverb.

### 5.6 Proverb related to goitre

**Ethnographic background 7:** [On Tuesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2021, there was arbitration to resolve dispute between a marriage couple at *Yediyesele* (a community in Nzema East). The man owned 20 acres of land, but he used only 5 acres for rubber plantation project and left the rest uncultivated. His wife had continuous quarrels with him because he refused to cultivate greater portion of the land. During the arbitration, one of the elders employed the proverb in excerpt 7 in admonishing the man.]

**Excerpt 7:** Elder: *Kpavole, wɔmɔ ɛ ti eye boɛ kɛ wɔnyia azele koatee zɛhae. Eza noko etede anwosesebe ɔti anree ɔwɔ kɛ emia ɛ nwo eye ɛya ne kpole. Kakye kɛ bese eye ekɔminzale kpɔke a ɔwɔ kɛ eye ye kpole na yeamaa ɛ ne api (proverb 8).* “Youngman, you are very fortunate to own such a vast land. Besides, you are strong and energetic enough, so you could have cultivated greater portion of the land as rubber plantation. Remember that our early people said **if you decide to develop goitre, target the bigger size in order to amplifier your voice (proverb 8).**”

Analysis:

*Saa eye ekɔminzale kpɔke a eye ye kpole na yeamaa ɛ ne api (proverb 8)*

‘If you decide to develop goitre, target the bigger size to amplifier your voice’ (proverb 8).

- S – Proverb (8) was cited during arbitration at the chief’s palace at *Yediyesele*.
- P – The participants comprise husband and wife, traditional elders and other bystanders. The proverb user was an elderly man.
- E – The purpose is to rebuke the man for being indolent. As an informant pointed out, the Nzema detest laziness, but believe in **hard-work**, as this is inherently celebrated in proverb (8).

Here, the proverb reprimands the man for failing to expand his farm (rubber plantation), since he owns enough land and also very healthy to work. The ‘bigger size of goitre’ that can ‘amplifier’ one’s voice, as the proverb describes, implies that the man will be able to extend his (financial) support for the benefit of his relatives and the society at large if he expands his plantation project. This among other positive behaviours is what the people of Nzema cherish.

- A – The wife was the first person who spoke to express her displeasure, followed by the husband who tried to defend why he cultivated a small portion of his land. The elder then used the **goitre-related proverb** to advise the husband against laziness.
- K – The tone is that of seriousness in order to put the man on his toes.
- I – The mode of communication is verbal.
- N – There was no interruption, the speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.
- G – The genre is the use of proverb.

### 5.7 Proverb related to deafness

**Ethnographic background 8:** [There was arbitration on Saturday, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2021 at *Salman* (a community in Nzema Central) to settle dispute between husband and wife. The man gave money to the woman to buy stationery and foodstuffs for their daughter in a boarding school. The woman spent part of the money on her clothing, a situation which resulted in a quarrel. During the arbitration, an elderly man said the proverb seen in excerpt 8.]

**Excerpt 8:** Elder: *Raale ye, maa menga mengile wɔ ke wɔanyɛ deɛ fee. Asoo ɛ ra ne nwomazukoale hyia wɔ ɔ? Duzu a maanle evale ezukoa ne edɔle edanle a? Kakye ke ayile mɔɔ befa beayɛ anzodilira la benwɔza ye be gyake anwo (proverb 9).* “Woman, I tell you that you did not do what is right at all. Do you really care about your ward’s education? What motivated you to use the money to buy your clothing? Remember that **one does not apply medication on the feet when it is meant for curing deafness (proverb 9).**”

## Analysis

*Ayile mɔɔ befa beaye anzodilira la benwɔza ye be gyake anwo*  
(proverb 9)

‘One does not apply medication on the feet when it is meant for curing deafness’ (proverb 9).

**S** – Proverb (9) was cited during arbitration at the chief’s palace at *Salman*.

**P** – The participants comprise husband and wife, some traditional elders and other bystanders. The proverb user was an elderly man.

**E** – The purpose of the proverb is to rebuke the woman for misuse of resources, and for not attending directly to a problem to solve it. Applying the medication for deafness on one’s feet, as the proverb describes, does not result in curing the deafness. Similarly, for the woman to spend the money on her clothing, while it is meant for buying items for the student, is a deviation from solving the exact problem.

**A** – The elders allowed the husband and wife each to narrate their concerns. Then one of the elders used the **deafness-related proverb** to rebuke the woman for waste of resources.

**K** – The tone is that of seriousness in order to reprimand the woman.

**I** – The mode of communication is verbal.

**N** – There was no interruption, the speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.

**G** – The genre is the use of proverb.

### 5.8 Proverb related to migraine

**Ethnographic background 9:** [On Tuesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2021, some elders sat during arbitration to resolve conflict between two young men at *Kegyina* (a community in Nzema East). One of the young men had alleged that the other was flirting with his wife who worked in a restaurant owned by the accused person. Later, the situation escalated into a serious confusion. In the arbitration, the accuser insisted on knowing the truth, and so he requested for curses to be applied. The accused, in proving innocent, resorted to the proverb illustrated in excerpt 9.]

**Excerpt 9:** Speaker (the accused): *Mame meze ke metefale e ye eti mɔɔ ekulo biala la ye. Saa bewa amonle bɔbɔ a ɔnrɛha me, ɔluakɛ bɛse atimbakyele ba azule nu a bie engā kanra (proverb 10).* “For me, I know I have not had any sexual affair with your wife, and so you can do whatever pleases you. Even when you rain curses, I will not incur the wrath of the gods because it said that **an outbreak of migraine does not affect the crab (proverb 10).**”  
Analysis

*Atimbakyele ba azule nu a bie engā kanra (proverb 10)*

‘An outbreak of migraine does not affect the crab’ (proverb 10).

- S – Proverb (10) was cited during arbitration at the chief’s palace at *Kegyina*.
- P – The participants comprise a man (i.e., the owner of the restaurant), husband and wife, some traditional elders and other bystanders. The proverb user was the accused.
- E – The accused employs the proverb for the purpose of indicating **sincerity**, and to prove that he is innocent. The use of ‘crab’ in the proverb is actually symbolic. According to the Nzema cultural worldview, as an informant indicated during an interview, the crab is perceived to be headless. Thus, unlike other inhabitants of the river/stream, the crab cannot be affected should there be an outbreak of any head-related disease in the river. In this context (excerpt 9), the accused uses the proverb to imply that he is not guilty (meaning that he has never had sexual intercourse with the lady), and so he is not bothered about the repercussions of any curses. In other words, no curses can harm him as far as the alleged sexual affair is concerned.
- A – The accused, after some participants had spoken, quoted the **migraine-related proverb** essential to show sincerity.
- K – The tone is that of seriousness in order to express sincerely that he is not guilty.
- I – The mode of communication is verbal.
- N – There was no interruption, the speakers had the opportunity to make their contributions.
- G – The genre is the use of proverb.

## 6. Conclusion

Employing the Ethnography of Communication as a theoretical lens, the paper has unravelled the pragmatic imports of ailment-related proverbs in Nzema language and culture. It has been shown that Nzema-speakers resort to such proverbs related to medical conditions to express the innate principles and cultural values and ethics of the society. The specific ailments which featured in the proverbs include: deafness, blindness, leprosy, rickets, hunchback, goitre, migraine, and hernia. It is observed that these proverbs are not cited to derogate victims of the various ailments. The sampled proverbs, though may sound disparaging or ridiculous on the surface level of meaning, tend to communicate deeply, aiming at maintaining social equilibrium and enforcing morality. Crucially, the didactic messages of the proverbs seek to foreground the essence of virtues like patience, circumspection, hard-work, contentment, hospitality, guanine love, and truthfulness among others. We observe that in order to cite the proverbs in a way that will make the addressees keep the message and act accordingly, some verbs like *remember*, *note*, *know* and *recognise* were employed before the actual proverbs. These are what Agyekum (2019) referred to as **advisory verbs**.

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