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CONCEPTIONS OF MOTHERHOOD IN PROVERBS USED BY GHANAIAN WOMEN

Abstract: Motherhood has been established as a key distinguishing factor of African gender relations. What remain unexplored are the circumstances under which African women find motherhood to be most fulfilling. In this paper I examine this subject by analyzing proverbs used by Kasena women from northern Ghana. The women take advantage of a socially sanctioned medium, the joking relationship that exists between a woman and her husband's kin, to critique traditional constructions of motherhood via an innovative use of proverbs. From using clever and witty modifications of traditional proverbs, to creating brave new ones, Kasena women subvert, critique, and deconstruct the meaning of existing proverbs during joking in order to register their views on motherhood. Via their proverbs women indicate that motherhood is neither the only indicator of female identity nor the sole source of female fulfillment, as 'traditional' Kasem proverbs seem to suggest. They draw attention to other aspects of their identity, presenting themselves as persons with aspirations and ambitions for individual fulfillment and group well being.

Keywords: proverbs, motherhood, gender identity, joking relationships, Ghana, African feminism

Scholarship on the social functions of African proverbs has focused on proverbs as a genre that "invite[s] investment in conservative subject positions" and not as a tradition that "encourage[s] transformative redefinition of roles" (Sawin 2002: 55). Very little work has been done on the way(s) that proverbs are used to challenge or rebel against traditional perceptions in contemporary society. Yet there is evidence that proverb use in modern African societies is undergoing radical transformation in the wake of metropolitan- and gender-consciousness (Raji-Oyelade 1999; Yitah 2007; 2009). In this paper I examine how Kasena women from northern Ghana use a socially approved medium, the joking relationship that exists between a woman and her hus-

band's kin, to critique traditional constructions of motherhood via an innovative use of proverbs. From using clever and witty modifications of traditional proverbs, to creating brave new ones, Kasena women subvert, critique, and deconstruct existing proverbs in order to register their views on motherhood and to articulate the conditions under which they find motherhood fulfilling. Exploring the "antihegemonic potential" (Sawin 2002: 40) of this emerging culture of "proverbial" jesting can point to ways in which it is transforming the limited and limiting gendered space of proverb use and interpretation in African society.

The joking relationship is characterized by what Radcliff Brown terms "permitted disrespect" (1940:103) as well as by license. Joking relationships exist in many African cultures and provide a safe context for expressing subversive views without upsetting social harmony. Joking relationships, according to Regnar Johnson, are "relationships in which joking or behavior deemed to conflict with the norms of social order [is] contained by its institutionalization" (1978: 131). During joking the women ingeniously critique, appropriate or subvert existing proverbs deployed by their husbands' kin (i.e., their symbolic husbands), creating counter-proverbs in the process. To the extent that the women's counter-proverbs are modifications of existing expressions to suit current situations, they function like the witty anti-proverbs that Wolfgang Mieder (1993) has recorded from English and German, and Harry Walter and Valerii Mokienko (2005) have complied from Russian. However, while anti-proverbs are said to be created to reflect harsh realities of the moment (Andrey Reznikov pp.468; 473), Kasena women's counter-proverbs deliberately oppose or contradict regnant perceptions of gender while also offering feminine insights. Through the tapestry of philosophical sayings that they weave, women express their ideals and aspirations and determine ways to ameliorate their circumstances.

The majority of the proverbs analyzed in this paper were collected between April 1994 and June 2000, while a few were recorded between December 2008 and January 2010. During these periods I visited my native village, Nogsenia, each visit lasting between two and eight weeks. In all cases I noted down in diary form the context and content of each proverb exchange as I observed it, and in cases where I needed clarification I interviewed

the users of the proverbs. A proverb exchange typically begins as a conversation between a woman and her symbolic husband in a joking situation, during which existing proverbs used by one joking partner, usually the symbolic husband, are subverted or appropriated by the other, usually the "wife". In the process the women create counter-proverbs that parody the form yet contradict the meaning of the traditional proverbs. Data gathered by documenting proverbs as they are deployed in real life situations has been used by earlier scholars and found to be the most appropriate. According to Kwesi Yankah (1989), who has written extensively about the Akan proverb in Ghana, recording proverbs as they occur in actual life situations is the preferred method of data collection. Yankah contends that, "Doubtless… proverbs recorded in actual life situations, with the full complement of social, situational and discourse contexts would be the ideal data" (1989: 172). The contextualized examples of proverb exchanges that I recorded in joking situations allow me to examine the socio-cultural background to the proverbs and their users, and therefore to present a clear picture of the nature of this "proverbial" revolt.

The women whose counter-proverbs I discuss here are people of minimal or no literacy, although this situation is changing now with more girls staying in school (Mensch et al, 1999: 97). Their ages range from the mid-twenties to the early sixties. For these women, the main sources of income are subsistence farming and petty trading. Living mainly in and around Nogsenia village, a largely rural area that surrounds central Navrongo, the small capital of the Kasena-Nankana District, the women nonetheless have access to the radio, TV and women's organizations such as the 31st December Women's Movement founded about thirty years ago by former First Lady, Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings. They are therefore informed about gender issues, and their increasing awareness threatens traditional social organization, noticeable in husband-wife relations where women have wrested from their husbands the right to use their income as they deem appropriate. Their growing gender consciousness is also evident in their recent efforts at commercial farming through their Dezemdaane Women's Union, a welfare association that doubles as a forum for discussing individual and collective concerns. The women's "proverbial" revolt, and in particular their

counter-proverbs that turn traditional construction of female roles and worth on its head, can therefore be considered as part of their expanding knowledge of their rights and roles in society.

Many recent specific studies have been done on the role that proverbs and other genres of folklore have played and continue to play in the oppression and devaluation of women in African societies. Among the scholars who have written on this subject are Amba Oduyoye (1979) and Kwame Safro (1995) on the negative images of Asante women in Akan proverbs; Adefioye Oyesakin (1985) on images of women as "agents of indiscipline" and Iyabode Omolara Akewo Daniel (2008) on the low esteem of women in Yoruba proverbs; Kavesta Adagala (1992) on Kenyan oral literature as the root of patriarchal economic domination; Yeshi Habte Mariam (1995) on the role of Ethiopian Amharic proverbs in articulating the interests of the dominant group (men); Obododimma Oha (1999) on the devaluation of the female in Igbo proverbs; Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang (1999), Catherine Ndungo (2002), and Egara Stanley Kabaji (2005) on the construction of gender in the Akan folktale, Gikuyu and Swahili proverbs, and the Maragoli folktale, respectively; and Jeylan Wolyie Hussein (2009) on the discursive representation of women in Ethiopian, Sudanese and Kenyan proverbs.

The works of these writers reveal striking similarities in the way that roles, statuses and identities of women in different African cultures are represented in folklore, particularly in proverbs. The collective image of women that emerges from these publications seems to justify Mineke Schipper's provocative title for her collection of African proverbs on women: *Source of All Evil* (1991). In all cases gendered ideology is found to be discursively framed in sexist texts. Proverbs are powerful ideological instruments, as their portrayal of women creates "near-indelible impressions" that "lay down the rules of social behaviour [and] determine how boys and girls eventually view each other as wives, husbands, parents, political leaders and owners of resources" (Kiyimba, 2005:253). According to Fasiku (2006: 51), proverbs constitute "a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs." Because of their didactic nature and their "rootedness in social imagination" (Gandara 2004: 347), proverbs are deemed to exert a formidable

moral force. In patriarchal cultures where a male orientation holds sway the proverb's authoritative force is strongest in matters concerning women. Schipper (1991:5) supports this view when she observes that "Although there are cases where the authoritative aspect of the proverb is not so much stressed, in many proverbs on women it apparently plays a role."

The patriarchal mindset that has shaped proverbs in Kasena society is evident in the stereotypical role that they construct of women as wives and mothers. When a Kasena girl is born it is presumed that she will grow up, get married and have children. The Kasena girl is therefore socialized to see marriage as her ultimate goal (see also Onayemi 2004: 125). Marriage is regarded as a matter of honor: it is seen to ensure respect for the woman and secure a good reputation for her family. If she fails to marry she is referred to as *kavello*, which means that she is "a woman adrift" with no defined purpose or destination in life. Once married, however, she is often seen as a destructive force—a point also made by Yisa Kehinde Yusuf (1997: 50) who finds that both English and Yoruba proverbs represent marriage as an "essentially male-serving institution and yet claim that marriage diminishes a man's happiness and increases his exposure to destruction," by the woman.

Although marriage is regarded as the high point of the Kasena woman's life, procreation is deemed the main reason for marriage and it is only when she bears children that she is considered to have attained the highest mark of womanhood. This view is illustrated by Kasena proverbs such as:

1. *Kaane nyoori wo o bulura ne mo* [A woman's worth lies in the children she bears];
2. *Kaane kuri mo lomma, se o ni ba lomma* [A woman's bottom should be warm (enough to bear children), but her mouth must not be warm]; and
3. *Kadiga ye cheeri kuri mo* [A barren woman is (like) an infertile piece of land].

Although Kasena place a high premium on children in general, they give prior place to male children and view females as inferior and less desired. Proverb scholarship on other African societies indicates that a similar perception of females pertains in other societies. Onayemi (2004:125) compares images of women in

classical and African proverbs and finds that women are portrayed as inferior to men. She concludes that this devaluation of women accounts for the preference for male children as articulated in the proverbs she examined, a trend that further places the female in a disadvantageous position. Similarly, Abasi Kiyimba (2005: 255) says of misogynistic Baganda proverbs that they express gender bias in favor of males while also "transmitting to [girls] the sense of being the less wanted." This perception of the devalued female child has found expression in proverbs used by Kasena women. For example, one woman responded to her joking partner's remark that "it is a male child that is a human being" with the proverb, *Ba ba zage teo ba li bu* [We do not hack away at a tree to find a child], which was a reminder that it is the woman, who is regarded as less than human, who gives birth to the much cherished male child.

It is such dehumanizing images of women, and specifically those pertaining to their role as mothers, that Kasena women deconstruct in their "proverbial" jesting. Yet women's reactions to such discourse-based patriarchal oppression has eluded scholars, with the exception of my earlier studies on Kasena women (Yitah 2007; 2009). This is in spite of the disturbing picture of women that emerges from many concrete, rooted studies on African proverbs, and regardless of some concerns that traditional proverbs do not reflect women's lived realities (Mariam, 1995: 79). Feminist scholars working on gender in Africa have brought the concerns of the subaltern woman into the wider discourse of feminism, but they have yet to give due attention to women's radical response to society's instruments of control. Some, like Ogundipe-Leslie, contend that African women are "shackled by their own self-image, by centuries of inferiorization of ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy" (Ogundipe-Leslie, quoted in Boyce Davies, 1986: 8). For such scholars, to perceive the situation of the African woman in any other way is to ignore the general subordinate position of the female (see Sudarkasa 2004).

Others, including Ifi Amadiume (1987a; 1987b) and Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), attempt to counter popular myths about the 'subaltern' African woman as oppressed and submissive by undertaking to represent African women and to articulate their difference from Western women. To this latter group, to view the Afri-

can woman as oppressed is to subscribe to "a master narrative [which] works persistently to homogenize differences that matter"(Ritchie 1993:368). However, their own nostalgic recourse to a pre-colonial past in their attempt to represent the local on the global stage has drawn much criticism. For instance, Imam (1988:39) remarks that in their representation pre-colonial Africa becomes "a harmonious age of male-female complementarity". In Imam's view these feminists inadvertently replace the myth of the subservient African [woman] with another: "the concept of 'the Golden Age of Merry Africa' in which pre-colonial Africa is seen as a land of peace and harmony free from conflict—something like the garden of Eden before the serpent" (1988:34).

While Imam may seem to have overstated his case against these African feminists, the positions that some of them take regarding gender relations in Africa indicate that they blame colonialism for "the growing patriarchal systems" on the continent (Amadiume, 1987a: 9) while reinforcing standard stereotypes in a 'traditional' African society. For Amadiume, as for others such as Oyewumi, pre-colonial Africa becomes the focal point in their effort to formulate epistemological critiques of feminist concepts such as 'woman' and the notion of gender. Their investigation of gender relations also focuses on the analysis of external influences, mainly the consequences of colonialism and modernization (Oyewumi 1997; Zdunnek 1995) and the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Nzegwu 2004) as disruptive forces that significantly altered gender identity in an African context. Such scholarship tends to ignore irregularity, uncertainty, and instability, and to efface the experiencing self. In their effort to present a broad picture of gender relations in pre-colonial Africa through their native cultures, these scholars have paid little or no attention to the network of different types of gender relations that would have ensured a balance between the local and the inter-cultural. Theorizing about African oral literature and about women oral artists in particular demands rigorous analysis, in-depth historicization, and close attention to specificities of time, place, and culture. The rewards of such historicization can be seen in research by scholars such as Gorog-Karady (1994), Mills (1992), and Donovan (1987) which reveals that in Africa, as in Western and other non-Western societies, "performances are often overtly

concerned with deconstructing dominant ideologies and expressive forms" (Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 66).

Schipper (1996:162) has pointed out that "oral literature …can never be pinned down once for all on the basis of form, content, or perspective. Depending on societal changes, stories are adjusted in various directions." In order for women to "adjust" existing stories to reflect their changing perceptions, they need a discursive space within which to "edit" the prepared script of female identity and to recreate themselves. This is why the work of feminism involves clearing "a space…from which woman can speak" her own reality (Pathak and Rajan, 1989: 562). From this space she can articulate possible futures, or what Afzal-Khan terms "the radical possibilities for change that can emerge if we really engage seriously with a vision of where our world is headed" (12). One way in which women have demonstrated the way to the future is via the proverbs they create and use. For instance, Mariam (1995), in her work on Amharic proverbs in Ethiopia, has uncovered a few female authored proverbs of rebellion. One of them is on the subject of divorce: "When a peasant gets sated he beats you with a ploughshare; leave him and come home, let him bake his own k'it'a" (p.55; proverb 257 in Appendix). The proverb is a product of women's changing reality, for as Mariam points out, women's economic independence has made divorce instigated by them quite common. The second proverb expresses the idea that women's self-worth should not rest entirely in the rearing of children: "Who has been buried in her children's hide?" (p.58; proverb 258 in Appendix). It is perhaps no co-incidence that I recorded a similar proverb created by a Kasena woman: "Who has been sacrificed to the gods for failing to bear a child?"

It is important to explore such perceptions of women regarding themselves as women and mothers and the meaning that they make of their experiences of womanhood and motherhood based on lines of thought derived from their proverbs. These new lines of thinking allow for a fresh analysis of African gendered realities in order to develop perspectives for a different future. My analysis of proverbs as they are used by Kasena women reveals that through their appropriation and re-creation of proverbs, those most powerful of instruments "for stifling change [and] silencing ques-

tions," women seek to delink their individual identities from "their sex roles and the way those biological activities are 'gendered' or understood by their culture" (Fontaine 2004:196).

Based on my research, I agree with Carole Fontaine, who has studied women's use of proverbs in the Bible, that women who define their legitimacy outside of the orbit of motherhood seem to "feel more free—or, more appropriately, are *shown* as more freely using frames and proverbs which do not depend on the tropes of motherhood for their legitimacy" (2004:196). Kasena women do not hesitate to invoke their own or others' motherhood as a legitimizing base, but they also critique any attempt on the part of their male joking partners to present motherhood as synonymous with *the* identity of women. By thus refusing to don what Fontaine refers to as "the cloak of cultural approval that archetypal images of motherhood could provide" (2004:196), Kasena women seem intent on focusing attention on other aspects of their identity—as persons with aspirations and ambitions for individual fulfillment and group well being.

Achieving their ambitions precludes any anxiety on the part of these women to fulfill cultural requirements for proper womanhood. Therefore, the verbal strategies that they deploy in their proverbs transgress such expectations, as can be seen from examples that follow. The first proverb exchange occurred in the house of a woman who had just had a baby. Her male joking partner had gone there to congratulate her on her safe delivery, as is the custom among the Kasena:

Man (to the woman): My wife, where is my baby? Bring him out and let me see whether he looks as handsome as I do.
Woman: Which child? Who says he is yours?
Man: Go on, bring out my son and stop wasting my time.
Woman: Not until you answer my question. [You are] *The stone that does not know that it gets to taste oil because of the bean*. Did I tell you that I bore the baby for you?

The man's discourse is typical of "the male-centeredness of both motherhood and parenting that Pandey (2004:117) observes in her study of representation in the works of West African women writers: *my* baby, *my* son, *my* wife. Citing examples from Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen,* Pandey (2004: 114) argues that in women's writings the male dominating role comes

through in self-centered references such as "first wife," "his children," and "she bore him another child." Such representations make "a menacing statement about power relations" between male and female (Kiyimba, 2005: 255). They celebrate male power by taking for granted the woman's subordinate position and her child-bearing role, and rigidly delineate her place in society by affirming the man's right to demand that she fulfills it.

Hussein (2009: 98) remarks that "one way in which women participate in the patriarchal discourse is through using and maintaining proverbs that disparage them or articulate their subordinate position." The woman, however, is not persuaded to accept her own subjugation. Instead, she deploys a proverb that critiques and scrutinizes the role society has ascribed to her. She thus rejects the discourse of control and resists the man's egocentric gestures, preferring instead to assert her authority to determine for whom she bore the child. By so doing, she also suggests that motherhood is a decision a woman makes *on her own terms*; it does not come about as a result of male expectations. She points out to her male joking partner that, regardless of what he might think or say, he owns neither her nor her baby. Rather, like a tiny stone that gets to taste oil because it happens to find itself among cooked beans, he gets to share the child by his association with her. This is a radical move to displace and replace the ideology that perceives motherhood and parenting as male-centered. Such transgression of male ownership of women and children is at the center of the verbal moves Kasena women make in their proverbs.

In the next example, a similar verbal struggle arises over who gets to decide when a woman should become pregnant. In the process, the woman determines with finality that after one child she is through with childbirth. The exchange took place in front of the woman's house, where she was sitting under a baobab tree with her two-year old child in her lap. The man had gone to a nearby house and stopped by on his return for a chat with the woman:

Man: Put this big child down and let me have access to my wares
(implying: It is my right to have sex with you).
Woman: Me? Again?

Man: You never know; *there is always a trace of urine over excreta*. (Implying: One birth is a good sign that a woman can bear another child.)

Woman: But what have you done for me and for this child, that I should want another? *Is 'leave my hand' not always better than 'allow me to get up'?* (Implying: Is it not better to avoid trouble than to try to get out of it after it arrives?)

Man: What you said does not make sense to me. When a chief asks you to dance, do you say that *you have trouble with your hips?*

Woman: Eeeeh! *I am telling you that fire has burned sheep, and do you ask me where are the skins?*

All the proverbs used in this conversation already exist in Kasem, but the woman quotes two of them in a context in which they typically do not occur. The first proverb that the man cites, *there is always a trace of urine over excreta*, reveals his assumption that as long as the woman is capable of bearing children it is the prerogative of the male to regulate her reproductive role. This perception is also captured in his use of the possessive form, "my wares," in the first sentence. His second proverb affirms this position, since it casts him in the role of a powerful chief whose command must be obeyed unconditionally. An interesting point about this interaction is that the two speak at cross purposes; throughout the conversation the man is focused on his male privilege, and therefore either oblivious to or dismissive of the woman's meaning. He sees her emphatic expression of unwillingness only as reason to assert his hegemonic masculinity and his authority over her.

The proverb, "*leave my hand*" *is better than* "*allow me to get up*," is usually cited to indicate the need to deal with undesirable behavior before it gets out of hand. Since traditionally Kasena regard children as a woman's crowning glory, it is inconceivable that they would consider childbirth a problem to be nipped in the bud. In this sense the woman's use of the proverb is subversive and articulates her view of childbirth, which is that one child represents "leave my hand" (meaning she is still on her feet and can fight or run away from trouble as necessary) while two or more children would constitute, "allow me to get up," implying that at this point she would be hampered and helpless. These

comments about every successive child further weakening the mother's ability to fend for herself and her children must not be construed as portraying African motherhood as undesirable. Instead, they should be considered in light of the huge responsibility that is placed on African mothers in a time of postcolonial economic crisis. Structural Adjustment Programs, Civil Strife, and AIDS have exacerbated the severe threats to life in African countries where women form the majority of the poor, the illiterate, and the under-resourced. In such conditions, one more mouth to feed can make all the difference between survival and starvation; hence, the woman's first proverb.

The second proverb she deploys is a slightly modified version of the traditional saying, *when you are told that fire has burned sheep, do you ask, "where are their skins"?* By quoting it she declares futile the man's insistence that she should bear him a child against her wish, and suggests that his behavior is captured by the idea that the proverb expresses; that is, he is making a desperate effort to save a hopeless situation. It is ironic that the man attempts to assert his authority only to have it undermined at each turn by the woman, and this is probably the most entertaining part of the performance. Yet it is this irony that draws our attention to the grounds for the battle: the question of who has power over the woman's body. Perhaps it is significant that the woman has the last word on the issue—an indication that male power has been dislocated, or at the very least, challenged. Her second proverb, left, as it is, in the air, carries a deafening ring of defeat for the man. It brings the conversation to a dramatic close, literally leaving him speechless, yet making its poignant point that parenthood is not all about numbers.

In the two examples that follow, Kasena women demonstrate their self-assertiveness by challenging the image of the woman as "a beast that produces the man's children" (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994:35). In the first exchange the woman had gone to the man's house to visit his brother who was ill and bed-ridden. The woman's house had earlier been devastated by a storm, but her male joking partner had not yet visited her and sympathized with her as custom demanded. He therefore felt quite uneasy on seeing her and attempted to sooth his conscience by joking on the subject:

Man: Don't worry. I am about to build for you a house of cement and stone, one that you'll live in till you die.

Woman: Hmm hmm! Look at you talking big. Can you even provide a meal a day?

Man: Be careful. Remember that *a woman's bottom may be warm, but her mouth must not*.

Woman: How does it happen that my bottom should be warm but not my mouth? Is it not said that *one mouth does not stay silent while another speaks?*

Man: First of all, because a warm mouth in a woman can destroy a whole clan, and secondly, because your duty is to bear for me children; as many children as I can father.

Woman: I don't need a warm mouth, just an ordinary mouth to tell you that I'm not a nanny goat whose main duty is considered to be littering kids for its owner.

We encounter in this instance the kind of patriarchal discourse that also characterizes the previous exchange, that is, the view of the woman as subordinate to the man, who perceives himself as naturally superior and arrogates to himself the authority to dominate and silence her. The association of women with beasts in the woman's subversive last sentence is an allusion to another proverb: *Noono na tera songo ne, o bone lura bobale mo* [When its owner is absent, the nanny goat gives birth to only males]. The meaning of this proverb lies in the fact that, while Kasena men prefer male children who will ensure the continuity of their lineage, they also stand to benefit from young female goats that will "litter" more young ones. The traditional view is that children are an investment for the man, with the woman being important only as provider of the necessary capital. From this perception comes the proverb that all a woman needs is "a warm bottom" to incubate babies; beyond that she must recognize her subordinate position and not challenge a man's authority.

According to Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:34-35, 36), this perception accounts for "the physical control of woman's body and its products," a practice that she traces back to pre-colonial times. In such a system, the woman is treated as "a beast that produces the man's children on his behalf." In Ogundipe-Leslie's view, in order to bring about the redistribution of power, property, and privilege between men and women, African wom-

en must, among other things, learn not to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. The woman appears to heed this advice, as she rejects the woman/beast association while also suggesting that she must not be perceived as "having a warm mouth" for rebelling against such a disparaging image of women. Rather, her action should be considered as the natural way to assert her humanity, as *one mouth does not speak while the other stays silent*. She thus takes on one of the paradoxes that confront Kasena women, which is that women are belittled as being stupid, yet when a woman demonstrates intelligence she is severely criticized for "having a warm mouth."

For other women, however, whenever men express such views, they provide an occasion for demonstrating female intellectual power and for refocusing attention on discourse as a means for broadening conceptual space. Witness the following example, which is an encounter between a man and two of his cousin's wives on the farm. The man's farm and his cousin's were in the same vicinity, and he had gone over to eat his lunch and to joke with his "wives," with whom I was sitting under a tree.

1st Woman (to man, who was eating bean cakes): Can I have some? I have not eaten all day.

Man: Look at you sitting down empty (i.e., not pregnant) and wanting food to eat. What are you going to eat for? *(*To second woman, who is visibly pregnant) You take this cake and eat it for me. As for your co-wife, *giving her any food is like planting my millet by the path;* whether or not I will get to harvest it is uncertain.

2nd Woman: Is it not the case that *when you plant your millet away from the path, the path can still widen to meet it*?

1st Woman: Do not mind him. He does not seem to realize that *if you move a load from your head onto your shoulders, it brings you no relief*. Besides, is it not the wayside millet that protects what is further in-land?

Man: Is it me you are speaking these proverbs to? Oh ho! Women have changed!

The man cites an existing proverb in a context in which it "remorselessly down-plays or nullifies the value of women in society" (Hussein 104). He expresses the kind of outdated beliefs and

values that contemporary African philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu (1995) and Paulin Houndtondji (1996) contend should be discarded. Before them, Kwame Nkrumah and Franz Fanon were among those who thought that Africa's uncritical wisdom was part of the weakness that left the continent an easy prey to colonialism. Such wisdom, to these thinkers, was therefore contrary to the needs of modern independent Africa (Sumner, 1991: 57-58).

Oblivious to the urgings of these thinkers, the man revels in the perception that childbirth provides as much security as does planting millet away from the wayside. The implication is that, in a patrilineal society such as the Kasena, children are insiders among their father's kin. Conversely, wives are outsiders among their husbands' kin (although married women are considered by their fathers' kin to belong with their husbands), and their main value lies in bearing children who will ensure the survival of the patrilineage. Kasena millet farms typically surround every house, making it necessary for passageways to be made through the farms. A number of factors make planting millet (or any crop) by the wayside a risky affair. If the path is too narrow, as it often is, people may trample the young plants closest to the wayside. During the harvest season, it is also easy for passers-by, particularly children, to fetch some of the millet closest to the path, thus denying the farmer of part of his harvest. In the context of this exchange, the man compares the "empty" woman with wayside millet, which is equated with insecurity. In other words, until the woman is pregnant with his child, he cannot be sure that she will "bring him any yield," and investing in her at this point may be a lost cause. To invest in a pregnant woman, on the other hand, is to "plant away from the path."

However, the women subject to rigorous rational scrutiny and evaluation the ideas he seems to glorify . They deconstruct the proverb that he quotes to support his view, demonstrating the need to transform his kind of ideology and the structures that sustain it. Fontaine (2004:196) has argued that even such proverbs as the one cited by the man:

> can be strategically deployed to teach the opposite. Where proverbs are used to restrict and bind, their citation can be undermined in a variety of ways in the arena

of performance, opening the group to new directions in action and thought.

As the second woman points out, planting one's millet further away from the path may keep it protected from passersby for a short while, but people looking to widen the path will soon extend it to fill up the empty space so created, just as devaluing women in an attempt to create space for children can be counterproductive. A woman, they suggest, is worth more than just a potential or actual mother. The women's univocal message, clinched in the last proverb of the exchange, is a sobering one for this man whose untenable position on the relative values of wives and children it effectively debunks.

The futility of trying to pin a woman's worth down to motherhood is also the subject of the next example, in which, unlike her counterparts in the above examples, the woman abandons any considerations of subtlety in her choice of imagery. The conversation, in which I participated, took place between two brothers and their eldest brother's wife under a kapok tree in front of my father's house. It began with one brother making a comment that the woman, who had just finished threshing some millet, was physically weak and therefore of no more use to him:

1st Brother: Is it this little millet that you took so long to pound? You are really useless to me now. I should let you go and then I'll bring a new wife.

Woman: Make me go. Since you are not useless, why did you not come and take over and pound it faster?

2nd Brother: You must not talk as if she is of no more use to us. *No matter how ugly a tree is, it can still provide shade*.

Helen: What does the shade refer to?

2nd Brother: Well, she is still capable of bearing children. If she bears me a child, that is my shade.

1st Brother: But with so many attractive trees around to provide me with shade, what do I need an ugly tree for?

Woman: Whom are you calling an ugly tree anyway?

2nd Brother: Our ancestors said that *it is more than needed is better than it is not enough* (i.e., it is better to have more than you need, than to have less). Do you think they were wrong?

Woman: I see that you two are really concerned with trees and shade today. Do you know that *a person who is enthralled by shade gets no work done?*

Through her spontaneously created proverb, this woman raises a number of crucial issues. First of all, in spite of her question, she clearly understands that she is the "ugly tree" that is perceived to have no use except to provide shade (i.e., children) for her "husbands." A more crucial (albeit implied) question is, should a tree be thought of only in terms of the shade it can provide? Is a woman worth anything more to her husband than a child breeder? The second brother, by focusing on child bearing, appears to subscribe to the traditional view that *the woman's worth lies in the children she bears*. By thus critiquing the tree/shade image the woman offers some conceptual possibilities for viewing gender. Her remark about the men being overly concerned with shade seems to imply that a tree, like a woman, has many more uses than just to provide shade, and that focusing solely on shade, even if it is an ugly tree that is being considered, causes them to overlook these other uses. Among the Kasena, who depend mainly on subsistence farming, the shade is a place for relaxation after hours of farm work in the sun. But until the day's work is done, the hardworking farmer only takes brief rests in the shade. Thus, to be enthralled to the shade is to literally get no work done. Metaphorically, the men's conversation "gets no work done" in terms of assessing the worth of a woman. While she would be happy to bear children, she considers herself to be worth much more. Interestingly, while other Kasena women have compared polygamy to oppression and servitude (see Yitah, 2007:383), in her focus on her self-worth she ignores the first man's suggestion that he will marry another wife—an indication that such critiques of polygamy vary according to context and individual interest. A common denominator, however, is that in suggesting alternative paradigms for analyzing gender the women speak *as women*, and not as mothers.

One striking feature of the proverbs discussed in this paper is that the most seemingly un-gendered expressions are invested with gendered meanings, suggesting a high level of consciousness on the part of the women regarding gender identity. Thus, conversations that begin with general topics often veer into gen-

dered territory as the women begin to make connections between what is said and what is left unsaid. In the following example, what is said reveals the man's presumption to determine whether his goat gives birth to males or females. What is left unsaid is the connection between the way he regards his goats and the way he perceives his women and children. The setting is the crowded house of a bereaved family, where the joking partners had just spent the night, as is the custom among clan members during funerals. The initial topic, the sale of groundnuts in the market, soon gives way to a critique of male assumptions about controlling when and to what a female gives birth:

Woman: Did your groundnut sale go well yesterday? The market was rather bad for me.

Man: I had to go home and prepare to come here, so I put what was left of it in the care of my daughter, who "threw it away" [i.e., sold it very cheap] in her hurry to go home. You know, *when its owner is away, the nanny goat gives birth to only males*.

Woman: What could the goat's owner have done to change the situation? I sat by my wares until dark, but still finally "threw them away." [pause]. But there is one thing I don't understand about you men. You want male children from your wives, and females from your goats. One can understand the case with your wives, since it is said that you men determine the sex of a child. But with goats… [laughter from onlookers].

2nd Woman: Let's not even debate that issue. Men *think* they can control what a woman gives birth to, but we all know this is only the case of *the plough claiming to be pushing the bullock*.

The first woman demonstrates a high level of consciousness by reading gender difference into the man's spoken proverb about goats, their offspring, and their owners. She critiques the assumption that a man owns his wife and children in the same way that he does his goats, and that he determines the sex of the offspring in both cases. The laughter that greets her statement from the onlookers suggests not only their perception of the ridiculous nature of such an assumption, but also their admiration for the

woman's ingenuity and her good sense of humor. While some women have rejected the image of the woman as childbearing beast, the second woman associates a woman with a bullock—another instance that indicates that attitudes to such images tend to be context-bound. It is perhaps worth noting that she chooses a bullock and not a cow, which is the female. In her effort to transgress the cow-image in 'traditional' proverbs, which some women have critiqued in other joking situations (Yitah, 2007:384-385), she steps outside the orbit of stereotypical images to construct one that she considers would most appropriately communicate her view.

In a later interview I had with the second woman to establish the meaning of her bullock and plough analogy, she told me that in this era of "opened eyes" (the phrase means consciousness or awareness) a woman could decide whether to fall pregnant, and at what point in her menstrual cycle to do so. "Even in the days of our ancestors," she opined, "women had ways of doing this." As far as this woman is concerned, women have always been in control when it comes to decisions about pregnancy and childbirth, although men, blinded by their anxiety to dominate, have remained oblivious to this situation. Scholars have increasingly recognized the indirect power of women in situations such as the one outlined by this Kasena woman, although they have found it difficult to measure. Some ethnographers have observed that women may appear to be passive actors, but through female strategies, women exercise indirect power by using the marital role to manipulate situations to their advantage (Pellow 1977:31; Louise Lamphere 1974:111). It would seem that women's covert control of their bodies, sexuality, family, and reproduction, forms part of such female strategies.

Women's constant critique of the portrayal of females via animal imagery is also evident in the next "proverbial" exchange, where once again a woman alludes to the proverb about the goat that is expected to do nothing but bear kids for its owner. To focus solely on her reproductive role, she asserts, is to consign her to the status of an animal and therefore to nullify her humanity. Although this proverb is not central to the conversation, it prepares the ground for her spontaneously authored masterpiece, in which is clinched a profound philosophical statement about motherhood and female identity. It was a Navrongo market

day in December, 2008, and my mother was making brisk business selling her locally brewed beer made from guinea corn or sorghum, called *pito*. Among the small group of customers gathered under her shed were two joking partners, my father's cousin and my young aunt (my uncle's twenty-two year old wife). As I was arriving my aunt was leaving, and the following conversation ensued between her and her "husband":

Young Aunt: I am leaving. Give me money for ingredients so that I can go and begin cooking.

Cousin: Give money for what? It is not food I want from you but children. *A woman's worth lies in giving birth to children*. When you begin bearing them then you can ask me for money day and night and I would gladly give you whatever you want.

Young Aunt: But you [the husbands] say that *a woman's glory is in being married*. Then when she marries you demand children as a condition for her peace and successful stay with her husband. Even when she bears children, she is not free unless she has males. Where does all this end?

Cousin: Why should it end? Is it not normal for a man to expect children from his wife?

Young Aunt: All this talk about my bearing you children makes me feel like the proverbial female goat. In any case, *has any woman ever been sacrificed to the gods because she failed to bear children?*

Cousin: You have such a warm mouth! Oh! You women have indeed changed!

The first two proverbs quoted are existing ones that attempt to define women's worth from a male perspective. The man takes advantage of the view that the proverb is a neutral traditional "truth" from an authoritative source, the ancestors. From this perspective the proverb, *a woman's worth lies in giving birth to children*, appears to lend validity to his argument that motherhood is synonymous with female identity, while also allowing him to hide behind a traditionally sanctioned message. The situation recalls Yankah's observations regarding the use of proverbs in Akan oratory. In *Speaking for the Chief* (1995:52) Yankah says that the proverb is effective in communication because,

among other things, it is ascribed to parties other than the interactants, it states a cultural truism, and it saves face. In this proverb exchange the proverb also serves as a convenient vehicle for the man because its connotations are well known and there is no risk of his being misunderstood.

From the woman's standpoint, however, these connotations only reinforce her subordinate position in traditional society. Thus, when she recalls the proverb, *a woman's glory is in being married*, she does so only to distance herself from its "truth." It is significant that she prefaces the proverb with the expression, "but you [the husbands] say that…." As Carole Fontaine (2004:184-185) has rightly observed, the introductory expressions through which performers key in their performance form an important part of proverbial speech. The woman's disclaimer is one such introductory strategy that subverts traditional wisdom while appearing to appeal to it. In order to buttress her point, after citing the proverb she follows it up with the three binding hoops that circumscribe a woman's life in traditional society: marriage, reproduction, and male children. In her discussion of the role that Akan proverbs play in female socialization, Amba Oduyoye (1979:5) has argued that the imagery about women that we find in idioms and proverbs lead us to form sociolinguistic associations of what a person is—associations that then shape what we consider to be that person's capabilities. Proverbs thus "serve as socialization maxims, reinforcing the image of women as well as constituting the justification for their ascribed roles." In a similar context, Mariam (1995:5-7) observes that proverbs on women do not reflect the viewpoints of the whole society, but instead represent the interests of the dominant group in patriarchal societies. Proverbs, says Mariam, reinforce patriarchal structures through persuading the people to accept patriarchal views as normal.

This is why we must take note when women undertake to "halt, reverse, and challenge" the patriarchal perceptions of their male joking partners, "in a word, to interrupt business-as-usual" (Afzal-Khan, 2004: 15). In order to do so these female interrogators have to look beyond the individual male user's interpretation and examine the collective image that proverbs present of women, even if they do so within the seemingly harmless medium of the joking relationship. The female joking partner "interrupts

business as usual" when she creates the proverb, *has any woman ever been sacrificed to the gods because she failed to bear children?* This proverb is remarkable because it deconstructs the idea that female worth is solely located in motherhood, and it does so by drawing evidence from the very culture that discards childless women. Through it the woman articulates a "truth" that had until that moment remained concealed by misogynist rhetoric. Kasena would offer local produce from their farms, such as millet, guinea corn and sorghum, chickens, goats, sheep, or cows to their gods, but they would never sacrifice a human being. The fact that not even the childless woman, who is thought to occupy the lowest status in society, can be sacrificed to the gods and ancestors, therefore proves that society recognizes her humanity and distinguishes it from her reproductive role.

Uncovering a "truth" that was waiting to be made known is also the subject of the next example. The joking situation arose during the naming ceremony for a baby boy, when one man remarked to the new mother that by giving birth to a male she had "produced" a human being. A second woman, who also shares a joking relationship with the man, joined in towards the end:

Man: Congratulations, my wife; you have done well, you have produced a real human being.

New Mother: What is that supposed to mean? That I, the mother, am a goat?

Man: I did not mean to offend you, but let's face it, *a woman's worth lies in giving birth to* ***male children***.

New Mother: A woman may not be worth much to you, but *we do not hack away at a tree to find a child*.

2nd Woman (to new mother): My sister, don't mind him. What has he achieved that you have not? *If a woman does not climb a kapok tree, neither should a man*.

Man: So now you women are ganging up against me? My fellow men, where are you?

Among the Kasena and some other peoples in Ghana, it is quite common to hear men refer to male children as "human beings." For instance, when I had my first child, a son, a male acquaintance from another northern Ghanaian culture jokingly remarked that I had given birth to "a human being." This type of back-

handed comment may have been received as a compliment in the past, but clearly, in contemporary times it is met with disapproval. The male joking partner realizes this rather late, when his attempt to put the new mother down backfires and he becomes the butt of the two women's jokes. In a feeble effort to support his view, he alters a traditional proverb by adding the phrase, "male children," but the women are not fazed by this misogynist maneuver.

The mother modifies the form and extends the meaning of an existing proverb. A person to whom inhumane treatment has been meted would typically cite the proverb, *I was not cut out of a tree*, in order to indicate that she or he is also a thinking, feeling being and therefore deserves compassion. In the woman's rendition, however, she replaces the speaking "I" with an indefinite "we," a change that transforms the proverb from a specific protest by an individual into a general statement of "truth" about humanity. "Nobody was cut out of a tree," she seems to say; "every person was born of a woman." Through her proverb she criticizes the folly of placing a greater value on male children than on the women who bring them into existence. In this sense she appropriates the existing proverb to achieve "the radical spirit of textual/verbal liberation" (Raji-Oyelade, 1999:76). Through her artistry and wit she wrests from tradition "a meaning of her own" which both derives from and contests the grounds of a traditional proverb. To quote Harold Bloom, she achieves a:

> freedom of meaning, the freedom to have a meaning of one's own. Such freedom is wholly illusory unless it is achieved against a prior plenitude of meaning, which is tradition, and is also against language…Freedom of meaning is wrested by combat, of meaning against meaning. (qtd. in Raji-Oyelade, 1999:76)

An analysis of the second woman's proverb indicates that she joins in the meaning wresting war that her counterpart has initiated. Clearly, she invokes the themes that the first woman sets forth in her "proverbial" appropriation. In addition, there are parallels between their gendered interpretations about the rights and statuses of mothers in a patriarchal society. The second woman's proverb is an adaptation of a Kasena idiom, *to climb a mahogany tree*, which denotes a rise in the price of an item or in

the status of a person. When used in the latter sense the saying also connotes putting on airs, boasting, and arrogance, among other things. In the savannah grassland that the Kasena inhabit, where the mahogany appears to be the tallest tree, this expression is not farfetched. In the woman's recreated version, however, the kapok tree is used because not only is it common in her neighborhood, but also its height, particularly its tall stem, makes it a suitable substitute. The joking context suggests that in her proverb it is the connotative meaning of the phrase that is implied. While her "sister" focuses on the primacy of motherhood, she concentrates on the right that women have earned to flaunt their achievements as mothers (that is, *to climb the kapok tree*)—a right that in her view is not due men. Taken together, the proverbs that both women deploy reveal some of the resources available in African women's verbal art for facilitating critical thinking against the grain of stereotypical representation and controlling images.

The proverbial jesting analyzed here allows us to see the processes whereby social relations that determine existence in Kasena society are produced, reproduced, and transformed. The proverbs themselves are texts that people can play with, and through that play, generate new possibilities of being. As is probably clear by now, gender identity in Kasem is a charged space full of moves and counter moves, in which the female mind becomes a mode of self-assertion and a contributor of unique insights. In this space, everyday discourse is not ephemeral, but an important site for psychological and relational transactions. In such joking situations people formulate their mental states, construct themselves, and present their motives to others—all important actions in identity-positioning work. Thus identity and consciousness seem to be created at the point of performance. For the women involved, joking is a discourse that is aimed at reconstituting the world in less oppressive ways and generating new possibilities of being. For men (and women) who want to look and listen, those who can see, those who want to see a more liberated (because less conventional) vision of women's subjectivity, the Kasena women offer it in their subversive proverbs.

While there is some justification in the accusations that African gender theorists have leveled against Western feminists for

their over-commitment to general laws and lack of attention to cultural realities, African scholars' rootedness in their native cultures, as I have indicated, has not entirely eliminated a tendency to represent gender identity in Africa as a closed system built on a shaky ground of gender neutrality. Both groups can learn from Wai Chee Damock's comments on the direction in which literary "families" should be heading. Literature, writes Damock, "needs to maintain an archive that is as broad based as possible, as fine grained as possible, an archive that errs on the side of randomness rather than on the side of undue coherence, if only to allow new permutations to come into being" (90). What emerges from my analysis is a view of African society not as a gender-neutral system, as Oyewumi and others have argued, but as a multi-system in which all interpersonal relationships are determined by gender hierarchies combined with other determinants of priority to construct the place of the individual. In this gender-scape, identity is a position and a place that is achieved rather than ascribed.

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