The Elder and His Elbow: Twelve Interpretations of an Akan Proverb

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During research on the meaning of old age in a rural Ghanaian community,[1] I asked some people to explain certain proverbs that referred to elderly people.[2] Proverbs, according to Kwesi Yankah, are aesthetic performances to persuade people or to attract attention. Yankah emphasizes that proverbs in Akan society are only cited in a context, when there is an occasion that calls for their use. My research about elderly people provided such an occasion.

Akan proverbs are the domain of the elder (*òpanyin*). The ancestors, the elders of the past, are believed to be the makers of proverbs. A formal citing of a proverb starts thus: *Mpanyimfoò bu bè sè . . .* (The elders have a proverb saying . . .).[3] The elders are also the most frequent proverb tellers. They show their wisdom, wit, and oratory talent through their knowledge of a broad repertoire of proverbs. And finally, elders are the main character in many proverbial aphorisms—not surprisingly since they are both the makers and most common users of proverbs.

The *òpanyin* is the elderly "gentleman."[4] His manners are gentle in the sense that he never gets angry at people (*Òpanyin bò mfu*) and does not listen to gossip and slander (*Òpanyin nni abansosèm akyi*). He is patient and can keep silent (*Òpanyin due mante mante*; lit. "The elder says: excuse me, I haven't heard, I haven't heard"). He knows that listening to everything people say and taking hasty action based upon rumors will bring trouble to the house. The elder is not worried about material needs: if there is not enough food in the house, he can forgo his part and give it to the children (*Òpanyin mee nsono*; lit. "The elder gets satisfied by his own intestines"). The elder does not complain about hunger (*Òpanyin mpere kòm*). When the elder eats, he will always leave some of the food for the children in the house. It is a bad elder who washes his own plate (*Òpanyin bòne na ohuru n'ankasa ayòwa*).

The most prominent feature of the *òpanyin* is that he has life experience, *wanyin* (he has grown). He may not yet be an old man (*akokora*) or an old woman (*aberewa*), but he will be at least over fifty. His advanced age has brought him wisdom. He has seen many things in his life and on the basis of that experience, he can predict what is going to happen. That is why they say: *Òpanyin ano sen suman* (The mouth of an elder is more powerful than a talisman). If an elder says that something is going to happen, it will happen. So you should listen to his advice.

The elder is a receptacle of traditional knowledge. He can tell the history of the town and the clan, and he remembers the names of the ancestors. He recites stories, riddles, prayers, and songs. At public meetings he excels through his eloquence and wit, and through his shrewd debating and dexterity in the use of proverbs.

Finally, the elder is treated with respect because of his wisdom, his refined manners, and his age. The younger generation is expected to show its respect all the time. I remember how, at a family palaver in "my" house, a young man who was trying to present his views was shouted down with "*Woyè òpanyin anaa?*" (Are you an elder?). Children are supposed to heed the calls of the elders and sit quietly at their feet to listen to their wisdom. *Abofra kotow òpanyin nkyèn* (The child squats near the elder). If a child does not respect the elder, he will get into trouble and be disgraced. *Abofra yaw òpanyin a, ne hwene bu gu n'anom* (When the child insults the elder, he has his nose knocked into his mouth).

The long list of proverbs used by the elders to extol their own virtues is gradually turning into a rhetorical weapon to defend their traditional position against the undermining forces of a changing society. S. A. Dseagu rightly says that "one of the main uses of proverbs is to preserve the status quo of things" (89). The new generation, however, is hardly interested in the knowledge of the elders and finds their dignified manners pompous and archaic. The evanescence of the *òpanyin* culture can be observed in almost every domain of daily life, but particularly at funerals, which used to be the preeminent occasions for the elders to "shine." At present, enormous amplifiers that spew out the sounds of modern highlife music have pushed the drums and dances of the elders from the funeral grounds. "Jamborees" (hired entertainers) now control the course of events at funerals. The elders are literally blasted away by the advances of technology and commerce. Their culture is rapidly becoming obsolete.

To record this rear-battle of the elders against the upcoming generation, I visited a number of them and asked them to explain the meaning of some proverbs concerning the *òpanyin*. They did so gladly. In fact, many elders have become easily approachable. People nowadays rarely come to them to ask for a share of their knowledge, so they were happy when I entered their houses for some conversation.

Of the proverbs I presented to them, one proved particularly refractory and difficult to explain: *Òpanyin nni biribi a òwò abatwè* (If an elder has nothing, he has elbow). A related proverb says: *Òpanyin nyin wò n'abatwè* (The elder grows at his elbow). After I had approached eight different persons, I had nine different explanations. The initial disappointment about this lack of unanimity gradually gave way to a vague feeling of serendipity. Perhaps the manner in which the elders and some of the young tossed and jiggled with the meaning of this proverb revealed a dimension of the social use of proverbs that has so far received little attention. That dimension may be briefly coined as the loss and regaining of metaphoric and metonymic concreteness. Many proverbs provide an instant insight into a given social, moral, or philosophical situation by presenting a powerful image that simplifies that situation. Commenting on an Akan proverb ("If all seeds that fall were to grow, then no one could follow the path under the trees"), Kwame Anthony Appiah remarks, "The message is abstract, but the wording is concrete. The concreteness makes the proverb memorable . . ." (213). The

concreteness of the metaphor or metonym attracts all our attention and entices us to view a situation in a particular light (cf. Fernandez). The concreteness of metaphor and metonym has indeed great rhetorical potency.

But it may happen that the given metaphor or metonym is no longer understood or recognized because it originates from a period or a culture that is not familiar to those who use the proverb. Proverbs in particular, which may have a life of several generations, are likely to contain such images that are no longer part of the context and life experience of the present generation. They may have been taken from professions and activities that have completely vanished. In my own language, Dutch, for example, many proverbs carry references to the world of sailing, navigation, and shipbuilding or to the operation of windmills. These areas of life have by now become alien to almost everone in Dutch society. An example may clarify this. One Dutch saying, *spijkers op laag water zoeken* (lit. "looking for nails in low water"), means to cavil, to raise trivial objections. As people commonly use this saying without really understanding the metaphor that provides its substance, an interesting situation occurs. The proverb may still be understood in its general meaning, but the mental picture that was formerly produced by the concreteness of the metaphor is lost. Instead, people may develop new pictures that are spontaneous associations with the key words of the proverb. These spontaneous associations are usually based on a—barely recognized—misunderstanding of those key words.[5] In fact, these pictures are seldom made explicit—there is no need because everybody knows what the proverb means. It is probably only on a half-conscious level that people continue to have mental pictures accompanying the proverbial wisdom. Thus the Dutch idiom quoted above which contains two concrete images, *nails* and *water*, produced very different pictures—most of them mistaken—in the heads of those I asked about the original meaning of the saying. No one knew that the saying derived from shipbuilding, during which some nails fell into the water and were then collected by the workers. Although nails were precious at the time, the saying came to mean "looking for trivial things, quibbling."

Confusion also occurred when I asked Ghanaian informants about the original meaning of *Òpanyin nni biribi a, òwò abatwè* (If the elder has nothing, he has elbow). I asked eight elders for their explanation and also invited two of my Ghanaian coresearchers to give their views. As mentioned earlier, I ended up with many different interpretations. Seven of the eight persons largely agreed on the general meaning of the proverb: If the elder has nothing, he has at least wisdom. When I asked what the elbow had to do with wisdom, however, the views started to diverge.[6]

The first person I asked was Nana Kwaku Agyei, an old man who became my most prolific and proficient informant on traditional knowledge. His explanation was the most elegant of all. I quote the translated transcription of our conversation:

Q: *Nana* (Grandfather), we have come to ask you to explain some proverbs which we find difficult to understand.

A: You see, some of the proverbs have two or three meanings. *Èbè no bi asekyerè yè mienu anaa mièns*a. If you give one explanation, somebody may not understand. That is why we give such explanations.

Q: What is the meaning of the following proverb: *Oypanyin nni biribi a, òwò batwè* (If an elder has nothing, he has elbow)?

A: Yes, *Òpanyin nni biribiara a òwò nhwèsoò bi wòhò*. If the *òpanyin* has nothing at all, he has an example (something to emulate). If you go to an *òpanyin* and he has nothing to give to you, he can warn you: *Hwè yie* (Be careful). He can curse you. He can choose not to curse you but say to you: "If you don't listen to what I am saying, I will not save you when you fall into trouble. *Asèm a mereka yi sè woantie no yie na wòde wo rekò a, minni hwee de rebègye wo*.

Q: Why did the elders use *abatwè* (elbow) in the proverb? Children and adults have elbows but . . . .

A: Yes this is to stop somebody from doing or saying something. When you are in the chief's palace and you are saying something which you should not say, an *òpanyin* who is sitting in front of you will touch you with his elbow to stop you from speaking that may lead you into trouble. [He later explained that the Adam's apple also stops men from saying unwise things that may cause trouble for them. The implication is that women do not have such a "warning system."]

Q: So the proverb means: if the *òpanyin* has nothing at all, he has a way of advising and talking to people. He can blink the eye or make a simple gesture . . . .

A: Yes and that is why in the chief's palace, if he fears that you may fall into trouble, he touches you with his elbow and whispers to you to stop. If he would speak aloud or make the gesture with the hand, everybody would know that he is warning you. If he does it with the elbow and if you are wise, you will understand and stop.

The second person we approached about the proverb was *òpanyin* Edward Yaw Addo in the town of Abetifi. Three other elderly men attended the discussion and took part in it. After we gave him the proverb, *òpanyin* Addo replied:

> The explanation is this: You are my son or nephew; you are my everything. But when I advise you, you don't pay heed. So, when you bring [are involved in] a case, I don't mind you.
>
> [He made a movement with his arm. He bent the arm and made a backward movement with the elbow signifying that he does not care. It is not his concern.] *Èmfa me ho*.

Q: Does this mean that if the old man has nothing, he can at least say: *Èmfa me ho* (I don't care)?

A: Yes. Because I have told you already that what you are doing is not good. You don't respect me, so if you get involved in any case/**anyway**, it does not concern me.

The next two informants were Mr. George Adu Asare and Mr. Kwaku Martin, both elderly men from Kwahu-Tafo. The two were friends and often visited one another. I arranged a meeting with them and we discussed many things, including the meaning of some proverbs. When I asked Mr. Asare for his interpretation of the proverb about the elbow of the elder, he replied:

> It means: if an elder has nothing at all, he can kick you from the back with his elbow. He can hurt you (he makes the movement with both elbows backwards).
>
> Q: But I thought an *òpanyin* does not hurt people?
> A: He does. Say, you may offend him, then he will kick you with the elbow.

His friend Kwaku Martin said he did not agree with this explanation:

> To me it means that the elder has gained some experience. So he can threaten you: Do this and don't do that. If you don't listen, it will have an effect on you.
>
> Q: But why is the word *batwè* (elbow) used? What has the elbow to do with experience?
> A: The elbow is a very hard bone. The words of an elder may also be very hard and stiff on you. The words of an elder may knock you out.

I confronted them with the explanation by Kwaku Agyei; they did not agree. Asare said there are many ways to stop someone from talking, so why the elbow? He gave as an example the gesture of one hand placed in the open palm of the other. It did not really become clear to him that in Agyei's explanation the sign was secret and thus saved the other from disgrace.

The next day I went back to Nana Kwaku Agyei, my first informant, and reported to him what *òpanyin* Addo and Mr. Asare had said. He shook his head and made a disapproving sound with his tongue. An *òpanyin*, he said, could never shrug his shoulders and move his elbows to mean "It does not concern me" (*Èmfa me ho*). Such a reaction would not befit an elder. *Ènyè fè* (It is not nice). Mr. Asare's explanation aroused even more disapproval. How could an elder poke someone in such a way? An elder does not get angry (*Òpanyin bò mfu*), let alone hurt someone.

We went to see an old lady, Nana Bimpomaa Nifahene at Kwahu-Tafo, and asked for her explanation of the proverb. She said she could not help us. We should go and ask a certain man, Owusu, a former driver. We went straight to him. Mr. Owusu, about 60 years old, was sitting in his yard, conversing with a young man. He allowed us to interrupt him and gave the following explanation:

> Whatever you do, you have to do it with your elbows. Your strength is in your elbows. Whether you are weeding on the farm, working in the house, cutting wood, or driving a car, you have to do it with your elbows. If you have an accident and, as a result, you can't bend your elbows, you can't do anything anymore. An elder has stronger elbows than a child, that's why we say: If the elder has nothing, he has his elbow.

I answered that one would rather expect the proverb to refer to old people's loss of physical strength. His explanation that the *òpanyin* who has nothing at least has physical strength did not satisfy me. Mr. Owusu did not reply to my objection and repeated what he had said before.

I then asked my coresearcher Kwame Fosu for his opinion. He answered that when people get old, parts of the body become more prominent. The elbow bone is an example. If you look at a young child, the bone hardly shows, it is hidden under a thick layer of flesh. Old people, however, are lean and one often sees the

elbow bone protruding. So the elbow becomes a symbol of old age, a *pars pro toto*, as it were, for the entirety of the old body, while the old body stands for old age and old age for wisdom and experience. So the proverb means that the old person has wisdom. Another coresearcher, Anthony Boamah, said he knew the meaning of the proverb (the *òpanyin* has wisdom). He had come to that understanding by listening to a conversation in which the proverb was used. He could not explain, however, what the elbow meant.

I then went to see Nana Yaw Donkor, an *abusua panyin* (family head), and asked him about the meaning of the elbow in the proverb. He began by citing another proverb, *Òpanyin nyin wò ne batwè* (The elder grows at his elbow). Here is a part of our conversation:

A: It means that when a person becomes old he gets *nankromaben* at the elbow. Many elderly people develop *nankromaben*.
Q: What is *nankromaben*?
A: When a person grows very old, the elbow develops to be like a horn. That is *nankromaben*.
Q: Can't a young person develop it?
A: No, any young person with *nankromaben* may have developed it through an injury.
Q: Do all old men develop it?
A: No, some don't.
Q: Are you sure that thing that develops at the elbow of some elderly people is not a disease?
A: No, it is not a disease; as you grow old and get lean, it develops.

When we asked him about the other proverb, the *abusua panyin* answered:

A: Usually, when there is a very hard case among people and an elder raises his hand and says: "It is all right," everybody keeps quiet. When he lowers the hand, it means he has put his elbow on the matter and everyone there has to listen to him.
Q: Is it common for elders to raise their hands when there is a hard case?
A: Yes, they have been doing it all the time. I have been sitting with elders and they do it always. Any time they see a case is getting out of hand, they raise their hand and everyone keeps quiet.

On another occasion, when we had a discussion with Nana Donkor about the concept of *òpanyin*, we gave him money to "eat" (as he had requested through a proverb). He asked us to put the money on the floor. With laughter, he explained that if he received it directly with his hands, it would prevent other people from giving him gifts that day. *Na wo asò woayè yè deè nsa*. You have seized the hands that would offer gifts. So we put the money on the floor in front of him and he called his wife to collect it to buy some fish. He said:

That is why we say *Sè òpanyin nni biribi a òwò abatwè*.

Q: What is the meaning?
A: Every *òpanyin* has a strong elbow to protect his relatives with.
Q: How does he protect with the elbow?

A: Whenever there is trouble, he raises up his hands to stop it and by doing so exposes the elbow.

Finally, more than a week after my conversation with Mr. Asare and Mr. Martin, the former came to visit me. He said he had been thinking a great deal about the proverb and had discussed it with several others. He now wanted to present me with yet another explanation. The elbow, he said, also provided a measurement, *abakòn*.[7] The proverb therefore also meant that old people have the wisdom of measurement. Being able to measure is part of their experience in life. You can solve problems by measuring. The concreteness of this proverb lies in the elbow. Body parts are indeed the most direct and most concrete "things" at hand. They are by far the most productive suppliers of metaphors and metonyms. The attraction of the body part used in this proverb is clearly demonstrated in the keen attempts of the informants to come to grips with the elbow. Only by understanding the function of the elbow in this context could one grasp the true meaning of the proverb.

The rich diversity of the answers shows the creative potential of the body as a source of symbolic images. They remind us of the famous dictum by Lévi-Strauss that animals, by their concrete presence, are good to think with. Though most of the informants had no authoritative knowledge of the exact meaning of the elbow in the proverb, they did not hesitate to create a meaning, some of them probably instantly. By conjuring up an acceptable function of the elbow, they had come to a satisfactory image to support their understanding of the proverb. The concreteness that had been lost into oblivion was regained in this act of recreation.

Postscript

After returning home I realized that I had failed to question one important informant: Rattray, the British anthropologist in colonial service who published five books on Akan culture. I took his book on Asante proverbs and found my tenth interpretation of the elder's elbow. Rattray only discusses the proverb *Òpanyin nyin wò ne batwèw* (The elder grows at the elbow). "To grow at the elbow" (*Nyin wò ne batwèw*), he writes, means to have amassed riches, to have put aside money.[8] This time, even the total meaning of the proverb has changed. It does not refer to wisdom and experience but to richness. Rattray maintains silence on the symbolic meaning of the elbow.

Rattray adds to the confusion. How should we appreciate his reading? Having interviewed people more than eighty years ago, he is likely to have caught a more "original" meaning. But what sense can we make out of "If an elder has nothing, he has riches?" Bible exegesis has taught that the more difficult reading (*lectio difficilior*) is most likely to be the correct one. But let us not get entangled in exegesis, looking for "correct" or "original" meanings. Akan proverbs are living things and they are recreated continuously in conversations and disputes, changing their meanings and appearances all the time. As one person said to Yankah (28): "The proverb does not stay in one place, it flies" (*Èbè deè èngyina faaku, ètu*). Proverbs are appropriated by people of different backgrounds and interests and shaped to their liking, unscrupulously.

When I returned to Ghana a year later, I could not resist continuing my quest for interpretations of the elbow proverb. Anthony Boamah, my coresearcher, came to me and told me he had been thinking about the proverb and had now reached the following conclusion. In the olden days, when life was full of hazards, the elders had developed spiritual powers to defend themselves and their families against all kinds of dangers. One such power was that when they hit someone with their hand, they would kill that person. Therefore, he said, to prevent you from dying, the elder would hit you with his elbow, if he wanted to punish you. So the proverb referred to the elders' wisdom and power in punishing.

The last person with whom I spoke about the proverb was a 90-year-old lady, Nana Yaa Amponsah. She was my only informant (outside Rattray) who did not link the elbow to wisdom. Her explanation was: "When an *òpanyin* is able to care for his/her children, they will never forget him/her." I asked her what the elbow had to do with it. She had no idea, but that was the meaning. When I asked her about some other proverbs, she gave the same explanation. To her, every proverb meant the same thing: that children should care for their old parents. It was the only thing that counted for her as an old woman. She had subjected all traditional wisdom from proverbs to that one basic concern.

NOTES

1. Most of the research was carried out in 1994 and 1995 at Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town on the Kwahu Plateau in Southeastern Ghana. I acknowledge the help of the elders and several Ghanaian coresearchers and assistants including Kwame Fosu, Samuel Sarkodie, Patrick Atuobi, Buaben Michael, Anthony Obeng Boamah, and Benjamin Dei Boadu.
2. Many of these proverbs are—in their Akuapem version—listed in Christaller's old collection (1879), which has recently been translated and reedited by Kofi Ron Lange (1990).
3. The literal meaning and etymological origin of *bu bè* (to cite a proverb) is not clear. Gyekye suggests that the idiom literally means: to cut (bu) a palm tree (abè): "Products like palm oil, palm wine, broom, palm-kernel, and soap can be derived from the palm tree. The point to note is that these products all result from processes such as distillation. The palm-kernel or the palm wine is not immediately obvious to the eye as the juice of the orange is, for instance; they lie deep in the palm tree. In the same way, when someone says something that is not immediately understandable, the Akans say *wabu èbè*, 'he has created or uttered a proverb.' In such a case one must go deeply into the statement in order to get at its meaning. The meaning of a proverb is thus not obvious or direct; it is . . . the distillate of the reflective process" (16). Whether Gyekye's exegesis is correct ot not, it is a beautiful illustration of a point which I am trying to make in this brief note: the attraction of proverbs lies in their use of concrete images. Cutting a palm tree is such an image.
4. An *òpanyin* can be a man as well as a woman, but the dominant picture that arises from the proverbs is definitely male. However, if I use masculine nouns in this essay, it does not exclude the female *òpanyin*. For more extensive discussions of the concept of *òpanyin* and its relationship with old age, see Yankah 71-86 and van der Geest.

5. Interestingly, one of my Ghanaian coresearchers who read this essay thought the Dutch proverb was about snails, another example of the point I am trying to make: people create concreteness. The recreation of concreteness nearly always implies some form of indigenization. Snails, which are a favorite food in Kwahu-Tafo, were more concrete to him than nails.
6. A similar example of confusion about the meaning of a concrete image in a proverb is provided in Brempong 144-45. The proverb reads: *Nsamanpow mu soduro, wo na wu a, w'abusua asa* ("The hoe handle of the cemetery, when your mother dies, your family is finished"). A highlife singer replaced the unintelligible *soduro* (hoe handle) with *soa koduro* (carrying the corpse to its destiny).
7. *Abakòn* means "wrist." Christaller (in *Dictionary*) does not mention any measurement connected with the wrist. No one in Kwahu-Tafo was able to give me information about the precise meaning and measurement of *abakòn*.
8. Christaller confirms that this translation is correct (*Dictionary* 10) and Lange also accepts Rattray's version.

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