CHAPTER 1

ORAL POETRY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT

1 : 1 The Contemporary Relevance of Orality

The purpose of this thesis can be summarized in four brief sentences: 1) There are texts of traditional oral Asante’s African literature which constitute an enormous repository of environmental knowledge. 2) This knowledge is generally left out of current efforts that seek to address issues of environmental degradation and the conceptualisation of ecological literary theory. 3) If explained, endorsed, adapted, and officially integrated into the notion of development, this knowledge may make a positive impact on the control of environmental degradation and the promotion of socio-economic development. 4) A literary study of these traditional oral texts will contribute to raising the public environmental consciousness that will eventually feed into attitudes and policies which are directed at addressing the challenges that must be surmounted for the developmental endeavour. The ultimate purpose of the study is, thus, to indicate that literary activism/concerns can contribute toward the provision of a public orientation that could eventually feed into environmental policy and attitudes. In this regard, I undertake a literary study with an approach known as Ecocriticism, whose purpose is stated by Jonathan Bate in these terms:

Ecocriticism began in consciousness-raising; it has much to say about the specific histories and the mythical structures in which humankind’s consciousness of environment has been and continues to be expressed…its

---

1 See maps A and B. The Asante are a West African people who form part of the Akan group. The word Asante is often mispronounced and misspelled “Ashanti” by the British, “Achanti” by the French, and “Ashantee” by early British visitors. Created as a Confederacy in the 17th century it later became an Empire.

2 I offer evidence of this claim in the fifth chapter where the issue is amply discussed. Researchers include Posey, Capra, and Follér.
ultimate value will be as a form of consciousness: it models an attentiveness, an attunement to words and to the world that acknowledges the intricate, inextricable networks linking culture and environment, …

This thesis, therefore, contributes to the efforts needed to ensure that eventually appeals for environmental consciousness and activism reach communities through concepts, metaphors, holophrases, beliefs, and discourses which are familiar and comprehensible to the culture-specific perceptions of the local communities concerned.

The above perspective, therefore, constitutes an instance of the deployment of artistic expression to save Nature. The significance and urgency with which I handle the issue of the deployment of literature in the service of Nature is premised on the view that Nature is not only influenced by the forces of wind, rain, sunshine, temperature and atmospheric pressure; it is also influenced by the beliefs and activities of humans. This position implies that aspects of Nature’s state are not as ‘natural’ as that, but incidental, constructed and can, therefore, be changed by humans for bliss or for woe. Because Nature can be reshaped it follows that its resilience has limits, and therefore, it is capable of being destroyed and, by that same token, is capable of being resuscitated. This destructibility of Nature imposes a concern for the care of Nature by humans. In a sense the frailty of Nature and the need to save it forms the starting point of environmental action of which poetic expression and ecocritical analysis constitutes an integral part.

---

It has, however, been observed that this ecocritical analysis for environmental action has not received adequate response from Black African researchers. William Slaymaker notes, for instance, that:

…however, the African echo of global green approaches to literature and literary criticism has been faint….Black African writers take nature seriously in their creative and academic writing, but many have resisted or neglected the paradigms that inform much of global ecocriticism. The (siren?) call of the Green Wave resounding through much of the literary world has been answered weakly by black African writers and critics.4

In his discussion, Slaymaker cites one of my articles as making a contribution to this relatively neglected area. This thesis seeks to extend the concerns presented in that article by bringing aspects of African literary studies within the ambit of an ecocritical framework. The thesis, thus, seeks to open up comparative possibilities for an international literary study of the subject of African Literature and the Environment in the framework of Ecocriticism.

The thesis, therefore, touches on the following interconnected areas. First, it presents a selection of Asante proverb-poems in the context of their historical, cultural, and economic milieu. Second, it makes an analysis which presents the literary, formal, and thematic features of each of these proverb-poems as advocating a specific nuance of the poets’ quest for co-existence between humans and Nature founded on three main notions: the role of humans in Nature’s history, the intertwining of human/Nature interests, and humans’ ethical accountability to Nature. These proverb-poems are read against the changing environmental history of Asante across both pre-colonial and the colonial periods. Third, the literary analysis made will strengthen the theoretical base of

environmental literary criticism, link it to environmental history, enhance its activist concerns, and eventually help in finding solutions to environmental problems in present-day Asante by taking inspiration from these proverb-poems.

The data I analyse are drum poems. Finnegan describes them thus: “In the West African forest there are panegyrics, historical poems, dirges and extended poetic proverbs, all commonly performed on the drums.” The proverb-poems I deal with in this work belong to the general category which Rattray describes as follows:

…But among the Ashanti the drum is not used as a means of signalling, in the sense that we would infer, that is, by rapping out words by means of a prearranged code, but (to the native mind) is used to sound or speak the actual words. That is, we have drum talking as distinct from drum signalling, a tympanophonetic as opposed to a tympanosemantic means of communication. Tympanophony or drum talking is an attempt to imitate by means of two drums, set in different notes, the exact sound of the human voice.5

Ellis confirmed this by indicating that: “the native ear and mind, trained to detect and interpret each beat, is never at fault. The language of the drum is as well understood as that which they use in their daily life.”7

In this sense the occasion of their performance is varied and more frequent than other genres. In addition to being used to offer greetings to the people at dawn, announce the outbreak of fire, or the presence of a dangerous beast in a nearby bush, these proverb-poems are drummed by the poet-drummer on national festive occasions.

---

The material for this work is taken from the section which John Henry Kwabena Nketia in his book, *Ayan* calls “poetic proverbs”. The book is a collection of texts of Asante talking drums. He classifies them into four categories according to their functions. The first section is *Nkyia ne kasaeb* (greetings and announcement). The second is *Anyaneanyane* (awakening). He denotes the third as *Ahenfo abodin* (*Yampeaa*), (the appellations of kings), and the fourth he calls *Abebuo*, (proverbs). I have chosen to deal with the fourth category concerning which he notes: “The last group of poems are the proverbs. These may be used separately or they may be incorporated into other poems or into drum pieces intended for dancing.”*8* As proverb-poems they are often integrated into tales and other oral genre to summarize the main points or theme of a long story. I have called them “proverb-poems” because as I will indicate in their analysis in chapter four, the terseness of imagery of these texts gives a captivating appeal whose pedagogical and social depth make them more resonant compared to the relative wordiness of tales, dirges, and songs which also contain information about Nature.

This work, therefore, addresses the concern of the practical developmental role of the discipline of Literature. Its central concern is, therefore, to address the environmental aspects of literary issues which A. Dundes expresses in the following terms:

> The aspect of folklore of least concern to literary folklorist is function. The important question is neither what is folklore, nor where does folklore

---

To indicate what the folklore of the proverb-poems does for ‘the folks’, I present the particular features of the traditional Asante folklore I deal with in this work. In this regard, I consider them to be what I. G. Simmons observes when he notes:

An environmental construction, often of a normative kind, is frequently embedded in orally transmitted traditions and custom. One of the best documented is that of the aboriginal human populations of North America. A very wide gap existed between the constructions of the Indians and those of the European colonists. To the latter, this continent was often a threatening and untrodden tract empty of human life other than that of the ‘savages’, or possibly a sublime solitude waiting for the axe and the plough.10

Here, Simmons is alluding to the fact that the folklores of different cultures can produce contending realities of the environment. In this regard, I should say that the folklore I deal with in this thesis presents the attitudes, perceptions, values, and practices which allowed the innovations by which the traditional Asante attained socio-economic sustainability through the appropriate management of their environment. In this regard it is pertinent to note that:

The river, for instance, became a god whose wrath falls mercilessly on whoever ..... goes fishing in it at prohibited times and in a manner such as to make extinct its children - the fish. Several villages did not only impose time-tables for fishing, hunting, and even everyday farming activities, but also stipulated the number of fish or game a person or a family could take at a time if the ‘gods’ were not to be provoked. It was the central role of oral literature to create, nurture, and nourish the taboos that protect the environment from human abuse, and avert any reckless acts of abuse that could compromise environmental sustainability and occasion any disaster and human catastrophe.11

---

What I refer to as development in traditional Asante concurs with the observation of Federico Mayor that: “The paradigm equating development to modernization and modernization to Westernization has long been, and still is, the conventional wisdom, although it has been recognized that there are several alternative strategies of development.”

The reappraisal of the ideas which led to a revival of interest in the traditional knowledge of other societies has been advocated by The Brundtland Commission Report commissioned by the United Nations Organization in 1987. It reinforced the lack of consideration for local perspectives in environmental and developmental issues by stating a problematic paradox about traditional ecological knowledge such as those contained in these proverb-poems I deal with in this thesis. Discussing traditional societies, the report noted that:

Their very survival has depended upon their ecological awareness and adaptation …These communities are repositories of vast accumulations of traditional knowledge and experience that links humanity with their ancient origins. Their disappearance is a loss for the larger society, which could learn a great deal from their traditional skills in sustainably managing very complex ecological systems. It is a terrible irony that as formal development reaches more deeply into rainforests, deserts, and other isolated environments, it tends to destroy the only cultures that have proved able to thrive in these environments.

---


The contention of the above citation is that local environmental knowledge is most suitable for the socio-cultural contexts in which production takes places; and that it must be safeguarded to ensure the sustainability of the environment.

Gustavo Estava expresses the same opinion of achieving development by building on the contexts of local environmental knowledge when he attacks the goals and programmes of the notion of “development” in these terms:

The metaphor of development gave global hegemony to a purely Western genealogy of history, robbing people of different cultures of the opportunity to define the forms of their social life….It impedes thinking of one’s own objectives, as Nyerere wanted; it undermines confidence in oneself and one’s own culture, as Stavenhagen demands; it clamours for management from the top down, against which Jimoh rebelled; it converts participation into a manipulative trick to involve people in struggles for getting what the powerful want to impose on them, which was precisely what Fals Borda and Rahman wanted to avoid.14

These views are pertinent to developmental efforts which place emphasis on local initiative as a way of forestalling those conditions of pauperization and penury which often degenerate into violent conflict. Marvin S. Soroos acknowledges this direct link between socio-economic conditions and military insecurity by noting that: “progress in addressing environmental problems advances the cause of peace.”15

I deduce from the above that in order to address the “terrible irony” of “formal development” mentioned by the Brundtland Commission Report and counteract its nefarious environmental/economic repercussions, those oral texts which contain

environmental oral traditional knowledge should be properly studied, assessed, understood, and harnessed. This is the reason why I would like to undertake a careful literary dissection and description of traditional Asante/Ashanti proverb-poems in order to show that they contain values which must not be forgotten in any quest for solutions for current environmental problems related to development/standards of living - a concept which I explain in the fourth chapter.

It is, however, necessary to underline that the enthusiasm about the reliance on local ideas for developmental efforts should be tempered with the caution expressed by A. Escobar concerning traditional ecological knowledge. He says that one should be wary:

…to embrace them uncritically as alternatives; or to dismiss them as romantic exposition by activists and intellectuals, who see in the realities they observe only what they want to see, refusing to acknowledge the crude realities of the world,…..

Mindful of the local perspective of the Brundtland Report and the cautious note of Escobar that not all the effects of traditional ecological knowledge could be positive, my inquiry employs literary approaches to analyse traditional Asante/Ashanti proverb-poems found in Ayan, a section of the Asante ‘Talking Drums’. In this investigation, I reveal a nexus that connects the following three: traditional oral literature, how the indigenous ecological knowledge contained in (it) these proverb-poems can feed into the enhancement of development and the link between these proverb-poems and Asante

---


17 Rattray explains concerning this genre that: “…But among the Ashanti the drum is not used as a mean of signalling, in the sense that we would infer, that is, by rapping out words by means of a prearranged code, but (to the native mind) is used to sound or speak the actual words. That is, we have drum talking as distinct from drum signalling, a tympanophonic as opposed to a tympanosemantic means of communication. Tympanophony or drum talking is an attempt to imitate by means of two drums, set in different notes, the exact sound of the human voice.” (From: R. S. Rattray, Religion and Art in Ashanti, London: Clarendon Press, 1927, p. 242-3).
environmental history. Thus, from both the conceptual and empirical perspectives, the analysis has implications for “the applications that it offers and the theory that it develops.”

In revealing these conceptual and empirical ramifications of the analysis, I review the belief system and practices within which those environmental perceptions embedded in the proverb-poems find their ontological, epistemic, and intertextual references/origins/similitude. I undertake this referencing in order to explain why I argue that traditional Asante belief system and the practices thereof are the “…philosophical and scientific premises on the basis of which intervention in nature (as is the case in agriculture and health care) takes place” among the Asante.

To this end, therefore, I define the Asante in relation to the salient points related to the aims of this thesis. These points are their origins, the features of their geographical location, as well as the overall relationship with the long history of Asante traditional (pre-colonial and colonial) environmental thinking. Without rejecting that traditional Asante was “intensely and pervasively religious” I object to the opinion held by scholars like Opoku and Busia, who imply, for instance, that in traditional Asante/Africa taboos and dietary abstinence, which directly or indirectly resulted in environmental conservation, were based only on spiritual considerations, and that “in traditional African

---

communities, it was not possible to distinguish between religious and nonreligious areas of life. All life was religious.” 21 Instead, I demonstrate that these observances, which turned out to have conservationist significance, were no less rooted in material or realist pursuits than in spiritual/religious one. It is in this connection that I read these traditional proverb-poems against both the pre-colonial and colonial horizon of Asante environmental history.

1 : 2 Ecocriticism and the Nature-Focused Orality

In order to use the belief systems of the proverb-poems to support my claim that these proverb-poems advocated human co-existence with Nature, I have done a thematic categorization of the contents of the proverb-poems. For this categorization, I draw on two classifications done by Lawrence Buell and I. G. Simons. In answering the question “What is an environmentally oriented text?”, Buell stipulates that such a text is one in which any of the following four requirements appear: 1) nature is “not merely present as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history”, 2) “human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest”, 3) “human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation”, 4) there is “some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given.” 22 Simmons speaks of 1) “Environmental determinism” which “centres on the proposition that the environment is a primary determinant of the affairs of human individuals and societies.” He also mentions 2) the “construction of the world of mankind within the world of nature: the natural world provides, so to speak, an envelope,

21 Ibid., p. 7.
within that, humans rearrange the parts as they wish...The notion stresses creative transformation of nature and the idea of careful stewardship of resources.” Equally, he observes 3) “The conquest of nature [where] Natural systems could be replaced by man-made ones which were in general superior.” Finally, he deduces that the preceding three points could be the reason why people believe in 4) “the concept of a Golden Age some time in the past when all was lovely.”

Against the background of the above propositions of Buell and Simmons, I note that each of the proverb-poems can be read as capturing a unique nuance/emphasis/notion which falls under the general theme of co-existence between humans and Nature. These sub-emphases which characterize the respective proverb-poems include: the appeal for consideration and recognition or respect for elements of flora, fauna, and landscape; the inevitable association between humans and other species; the revelation of kinship between humans and Nature; the admonition that violence against Nature is unacceptable; the idea that Nature has values which should be *intrinsic* (in the sense of what Callicot designates as the human trend “to value non-human natural entities for what they are - irrespective both of what they may do for us and of whether or not they can value themselves” and be respected; the claim that humans owe Nature care and relief from suffering. It is pertinent to underline that the role of each of the emphases gravitates towards the overarching theme of Nature-human co-existence as versions or forms in which “a general abstract idea is conveyed not through any direct generalization.

---


at all but through a single concrete situation which provides only one example of the general point.”

To capture the plenitude of these thematic nuances, therefore, I blend the insight of Buell and Simmons with the critical approach called Ecocriticism. For the purpose of this work I locate Ecocriticism in the concern which Slovic describes as follows:

The phrase environmental literature is used today to describe all literary forms (oral, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama) that investigate the human-nature relationship. Environmental literature, however, should be categorized separately from environmentalist propaganda and from nonliterary writing on environmental topics.

My particular concern in referring to the relationship between literature and the environment is to draw on those of their aspects that will help the ecocritical description of my selected texts. To this end, I find useful the observation of Ursula Hessie who has noted:

Ecocriticism analyzes the role that the natural environment plays in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific historical moment, examining how the concept of “nature” is defined, what values are assigned to it or denied it and why, and the way in which the relationship between humans and nature is envisioned. More specifically, it investigates how nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary or aesthetic genres and tropes, and what assumptions about nature

---


underlie genres that may not address this topic directly. This analysis in turn allows ecocriticism to assess how certain historically conditioned concepts of nature and the natural, and particularly literary and artistic constructions of it have come to shape current perceptions of the environment. In addition, some ecocritics understand their intellectual work as a direct intervention in current social, political, and economic debates surrounding environmental pollution and preservation.29

In view of the manner in which environmental issues are crucial to the general welfare of human communities, I conceive of the ecocritical analysis of this work as being the environmental/ecological wing of a wider concern for human survival, a survival which is dependent on the survival of Nature - flora, fauna, and landscape. Marié Hesse and Robin Lawton capture this concern, of which the ecocritical endeavour constitutes an integral part, in these terms:

While we can appreciate a lighthearted poem which is excellent in its own way, we are more likely to place value upon a poem which has something profound to say about human relationships. The same would apply to novels, plays or any other writing. The text, while having an immediate meaning in its specific (historical, political, social) context, should be able to take its place in the wider, more universal context of the destiny of humanity.30

In response to the above requirement I highlight the environmental implications of “the wider, more universal context of the destiny of humanity” (not just “something profound to say about human relationships”). I narrow down the analysis to what Lawrence Buell calls a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.”31 Others go further to locate this commitment in the context of environmental crisis. For Richard Kerridge, for instance:

---


...the ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis.\(^{32}\)

Following the above consideration, I proceed to make meaning by indicating that the “environmental praxis” of Buell is intended to contribute to the resolution of what, to Kerridge, is an “environmental crisis.” These two perceptions - crisis/action and praxis/activism - concerning Nature allow me to arrive at the need to search for the presence of Nature in texts with the view to becoming conscious of the crisis Nature is in, and what can be done to alleviate environmental degradation. In undertaking this re-reading, therefore, I concur with Marié Hesse and Robin Lawton that in ecocritical meaning-making:

A text does not have one correct, fixed meaning waiting to be discovered; its meaning is to be found in the interaction of the reader with the text. Provided we can support a comment by referring to the text, it is considered valid, no matter what the writer’s intention may have been.\(^{33}\)

I find the above precept of meaning-making to be all the more significant for my work when I realize that the kind of meaning one reads into a text goes a long way in determining attitudes and convictions. I, therefore, judge that in environmental terms, therefore, the concerns expressed in the texts of the proverb-poems constitute an engagement within what Cheryll Glotfelty refers to as “literary studies in an age of environmental crisis.”\(^{34}\)


I have to underline that the quest for change through activism in environmental literary theory and criticism presupposes a juxtaposition of two interconnected elements, namely - literary theory and social theory. Simon C. Estok notes concerning this distinction:

If the matter of applying social history to literature is, at best, problematic, a constant sore spot for serious New Historicism, then doing it the other way around is no less difficult: petitioning real world issues with literary theory, in fact, seems even more demanding. Though ecocritics with the very best intentions want to change things, there are important questions waiting for our answers about how literary theory might cause such changes.35

From the observations made by Buell, Kerridge, Estok one notes that two notions: “praxis” and “crisis” emerge as perceptions that guide environmental discourse. One can deduce from their perception that environmental literary theory/criticism or the ecocritical effort is not simply a trouble-shooting enterprise but is also a concern for issues of normal day-to-day environmental management. Recognizing their respective importance in understanding the nature of the relationship between literature and the environment, I would concur with the view of Donald Worster that: “Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding.”36

Thus Ecocriticism operates in conjunction with the endeavours of other disciplines. This conjugate dimension of the ecocritical endeavour invalidates the point of view of Richard

Kerridge, who in disregard for the multidisciplinary interconnectedness of Ecocriticism considers as a weakness of Ecocriticism the claim that:

Unlike feminism, with which it otherwise has points in common, environmentalism has difficulty in being a politics of personal liberation or social mobility … environmentalism has a political weakness in comparison with feminism: it is much harder for environmentalists to make the connection between global threats and individual lives.  

Contrary to the above view, my analysis uses literary analysis to connect environmental texts to the developmental issue of indigenous knowledge, thereby showing that there is a link between the “global” and the “individual” in the multidisciplinary ecocritical endeavour concerning which Stanley Wells notes that: “The truest, most balanced criticism is that which takes account of many different points of view, which synthesizes a variety of approaches.”

The following position of A. Dundes on the role of oral literature equally enhances the ecocritical emphasis of linkage between literature and other issues:

There are many diverse functions of folklore. Some of the most common ones include aiding in education of the young, promoting a group's feeling of solidarity, providing socially sanctioned ways for individuals to act superior to or to censure other individuals, serving as a vehicle for social protest, offering an enjoyable escape from reality, and converting dull work into play.

The above enumeration of functions by Dundes makes no direct mention of Nature-focused texts or ecological concerns. It is thus possible for one to assume as many have done, that oral literature functions to serve human interests only and that Nature is hardly

---

evoked for Nature’s own sake. Ruth Finnegan gives this impression when she notes regarding animal tales in Africa:

> What is involved in the animal stories is a comment, even a satire, on human society and behaviour. In a sense, when the narrator speaks of actions and character of animals, they are representing human faults and virtues, somewhat removed and detached from reality through being presented in the guise of animals, but nevertheless with an indirect relation to observed human action [...]. The foibles and weaknesses, virtues and strength, ridiculous and appealing qualities known to all those present are touched on, indirectly, in the telling of stories and are what make them meaningful and effective in the actual narration.\(^{40}\)

While the above assertion of Finnegan has some truth it overlooks the fact that in oral literature, Nature can be evoked for Nature’s own sake. Isidore Okpewho holds a position contrary to Finnegan’s in this regard. After citing a traditional oral poem about the baboon he comments that the essence of the poem is to construct interest in the animal *per se*. He notes accordingly:

> Many poems of the oral tradition are devoted to observing those aspects of nature that relate to man's sources of livelihood... Such evidence has led some scholars, especially anthropologists, to conclude that African oral literature has fundamentally a *functional* value, in the sense that it reflects practical concerns. But it is clear from the brilliant description of the baboon that the poet is guided more by a sense of physical appeal than by practical interests. Modern African environmental poetry owes very little to the oral tradition.\(^{41}\)

I will add Okpewho’s idea of “physical appeal” to the metaphoric perspective of Finnegan and conclude that the evocation of Nature in oral African literature contained both the *intrinsic* (what Callicot designates as the human trend “to value non-human natural entities for what they are - irrespective both of what they may do for us and of


whether or not they can value themselves" and the utilitarian dimensions. Hence, I hold and show that in addition to the functions given by Dundes (to which I have referred above) oral literature has an environmental dimension that is often left out. Allen F. Roberts notes: “Rarely was the wisdom which Africans derived from their hunting and mediating over the variegated wild and domestic animals of their surroundings brought to our attention. Rarely were the many ways that African wildlife and livestock related to the understanding of their human co-occupants made clear”.

It is important to note that this wisdom and the knowledge thereof are akin to some ideas found in the maxims and proverbs of the Asante. Typical among them is the maxim: “Asansa se adee a Nyame abo biara ye” (The crow says that all that God created is good). This maxim locates the raison d’être of the merit attributed to nonhuman species to the fact that they have been created by God. This recourse to God as the justification of human co-existence with Nature is a non-anthropocentric perspective. It shows that the traditional Asante deemed Nature’s value as inherent or intrinsic rather than derived from the use to which humans put it. This intrinsicity is equally evoked in a proverb usually shortened to the expression “Gye Nyame”: “Abɔdeε santan yi firi tete: obi nte ase a onim n’ahyaseε, na obi ntena ase nkosi n’awieε, Gye Nyame.” (Translation: “This complex myriad of creation/nature is from time immemorial: no one alive saw its beginning, and

---

45 <http://users.erols.com/kemet/adinkra.htm>
no one will live to see its end, except God”). Here, Nature is given an indefinite and infinite purpose. The position is akin to that of “Deep ecologists [who] object to anthropocentrism on the grounds that it values nature according to its benefit to people” 46.

I have also drawn ecological/conservationist significance from the following logic of the critic, Gyekye: “Akan [hence Asante] proverbs are the wise sayings of individuals with acute speculative intellects. They become philosophically interesting when one sees them as attempts to raise and answer questions relating to the assumptions underlying commonly held beliefs and to make a synthetic interpretation of human experience.”47 Thus, among the traditional Asante Nature is both an end in itself as well as a means to an end, namely human sustenance. The Asante perceived that the reason for Nature’s existence cannot be reduced to the anthropocentric utilitarian purpose. It was polyvalent.

The focus these texts give to Nature can be said to reveal a scheme that puts beyond question the consideration for Nature. It puts divine values/purposes alongside human48/instrumental ones. I have found it acceptable to liken the intelligibility of traditional Asante attitude to Nature to the following idea of Immanuel Kant when he notes:

48 It must be noted that such duality is characteristic of traditional Asante thought. Kwame Gyekye refers to one of them when he notes that: “Thus, just as African ontology is neither wholly pluralistic nor wholly monistic but possesses attributes of both, so is it neither idealistic - maintaining that what is real is only spirit, nor materialistic (naturalistic) - maintaining that what is real is only matter, but possesses attributes of both.” From: Kwame Gyekye, An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p.197.
Suppose that there were something the existence of which in itself has absolute worth, something which, as an end in itself would be a ground for definite law. Now, I say, man and in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. Such beings are not merely subjective ends - whose existence, as a result of our action, has a worth for us - but are objective ends, i.e. beings whose existence in itself is an end. 49

In a sense the traditional Asante position on non-utilitarian value of other species negates anthropocentrism by allowing a candid consideration for Nature. The position goes beyond this view of Schweitzer:

Just as in my own will-to-live there is a yearning for more life, and for that mysterious exaltation of the will-to-live which is called pleasure, and terror in the face of annihilation and that injury to the will-to-live which is called pain; so the same obtains in all the will-to-live around me, equally whether it can express itself to my comprehension or whether it remains unvoiced.

Ethics thus consists in this, that I experience the necessity of practicing the same reverence for life toward all will-to-live as toward my own. Therein I already have the needed fundamental principles of morality. It is good to maintain and cherish life: it is evil to destroy and check life. 50

My point is that here, Schweitzer ascribes an intrinsic value that falls short of the considerations for non-sentient elements (such as rocks, rivers, and landscape in general) which experience neither pain nor terror nor pleasure. I show how contrary to the above position of Schweitzer, the traditional Asante would attribute intrinsic value to such non-sentient elements on account of the divine origin of all things 51 and the power they are

51 Kofi Abrefa Busia, for instance notes in this regard that: “To the Ashanti the universe is full of spirits. There is the Great Spirit, the Supreme Being, who created all things, and who manifests his power through a pantheon of gods; below these are lesser spirits which animate trees, animals or charms.” From: Kofi Abrefa Busia, “The Ashanti of the Gold Coast,” in Daryll Forde (ed.), African Worlds, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 191.
said to possess. There is, however, a slant in the traditional Asante attitude to Nature which did not just cherish and maintain life but extended this attitude to a wider spectrum of objects. Gyekye states that “According to Akan thinkers, then, activity is a property intrinsic to matter, that is, natural objects; it is the essence of natural objects to be active, to possess power.”52 I will evaluate how the consideration that the Asante had for Nature is due to this element of power possessed by the object to which consideration is given. By so doing I address the fear of Paul W. Taylor that: “One can acknowledge that an animal or plant has a good of its own and yet, consistently with this acknowledgement, deny that moral agents have a duty to promote or protect its good or even refrain from harming it.”53

I indicate that the ascription of intrinsic value to Nature in traditional Asante as shown in these proverb-poems is, thus, derived from familiar sociological, philosophical, linguistic, and historical data that are primarily founded on the unquestionable goodness and omniscience of a perfect Creator who created all things. By that logic the mere existence of a thing as a natural object makes it worthy of intrinsic value and hence worthy of human consideration.

The Dynamic Dimension of Oral Literature

But to illustrate the developmental essence of these proverb-poems it is not enough to show that they constitute local environmental knowledge founded on both intrinsic and utilitarian concerns and center on environmental concerns. It is equally necessary that I show that the ideas presented by these proverb-poems were not obtrusive to progress. For this reason, I remove a second aspect of the obstacle to my thesis, namely, I debunk the claim that oral African literature has little to offer modern developmental effort. I would like to underline that oral African literature is capable of being an instrument of progress. I need to show this in order to lay the foundation of two of my major arguments, namely:

1) environmental oral literature made a positive contribution to traditional society; 2) this positive contribution can be readapted to help in the present search for solutions to environmental problems. For if indeed there is nothing progressive about oral African literature, as some scholars I discuss below have claimed, then how would I show that in the past it did, and can continue in the future, to serve a good purpose? My first objection in this regard is to the following claim of Kwesi Wiredu, a Ghanaian scholar of African Philosophy. He has argued that:

Our traditional culture is famous for an abundance of proverbs - those concentrations of practical wisdom which have a marvelous power when quoted at the right moment to clinch a point of argument or reinforce a moral reflection. However, it is rare to come across one which extols the virtues of originality and independence of thought.54

Kwesi Wiredu expatiates on his contention by indicating three classes of tendencies that he says are the categories of the negative aspects of African oral tradition. He classifies them as: “Anachronism”, “Authoritarianism”, and “Supernaturalism”. Wiredu describes

as anachronistic anything “which outlasts its suitability.”\textsuperscript{55} He considers such things to be outmoded and detrimental to progress by saying that: “anachronism becomes the failure to perceive anachronistic things for what they are and to discard or modify them as the case may require.”\textsuperscript{56} He distinguishes between two types of this anachronism. The first, he says, relates to: “various habits of thought and practice”, which he says, “can become anachronistic within the context of development of a given society…”\textsuperscript{57} The second has to do with his idea that: “… an entire society too can become anachronistic within the context of the whole world if the ways of life within it are predominantly anachronistic.”\textsuperscript{58} I agree that when truths have lost their validity they must be discarded or modified. What I contest is the claim that oral African tradition never “extols the virtues of originality and independence of thought.” It is important that I demonstrate that the proverb-poems I analyze in this work constitute a critique of anthropocentrism and uphold Nature’s interest. By so doing I will be demonstrating that these proverb-poems are texts of African oral tradition which possess originality and independence of thought. Again, it would mean that the ideas in them can be reinvigorated to contribute to the “consciousness-raising” which can enhance the environment dimension of development in today’s context.

I draw this debate into my thesis and indicate that the proverb-poems I study in this work constitute a \textit{rejoinder} made by the poets. They are, thus, texts of oral African literature exemplifying the idea that there was “originality and independence of thought” rather than a blanket unquestioned unanimity which did not “extol the virtues of originality and

\textsuperscript{55} ibid, p. 1  
\textsuperscript{56} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{57} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{58} ibid.
independence of thought” in those societies. More importantly, it is essential for me to show that this virtue existed also in the environmental dimensions of communal life.

In the same vein I look at the obstacle of authoritarianism which Wiredu ascribes to African (oral) traditions and which he defines as “any human arrangement, made, to entail any person to do or to suffer something against his will, or if it leads to any person being hindered in the development of his own will […] it is a justified overriding of an individual will.”59 By the logic of this argument, he sees oral literature, including its environmental component, as a feature of African traditional thought tailored to instill indoctrination and regimentation and to undermine individual initiative and independent thinking. He then explains how these ideas lead to dictatorships and the imposition and exploitation of the people.

Similar to Wiredu’s view, Kwame Anthony Appiah, a scholar of philosophy says that: “Oral traditions have a tendency of transmitting only consensus, the accepted views: those who are in intellectual rebellion […] often have to begin each generation all over again.”60 I will describe my selected texts to challenge this view as well as the following by Paulin Hountondji, a Beninois scholar and philosopher, whose views concur on this issue with those of Wiredu and Anthony Appiah. He sees the use of proverbs in Africa as an approval of the dictatorship of traditionalism since they reject critical thinking and

59 ibid. p. 2.
simply endorse ideas by means of what he captions as: “Alleluia, our ancestors have spoken!”\textsuperscript{61}

I will describe these poems to explain how they extol the qualities of innovation and critique of tradition or independence of thought. I argue that there is in these oral texts a challenge to existing practices which the poet deemed unacceptable and abusive of flora, fauna, and landscape. It is the basis for my contention that this tradition of critique can be adapted to contribute to solving present environmental problems by contesting current or prevailing practices and also by reappraising literary theory for the environmental reading of texts. I demonstrate that these imaginative expressions of human relations with Nature were made to object to practices that abuse Nature rather than to endorse such practices in the name of spiritualism, fatalism, authority, tradition, and ancestors, as Wiredu, Appiah, and Houtoundji would have it respectively. For if indeed the hunting of the antelope evoked in one of the texts or the persecution of the lizard, for example, are established by unquestioned precepts of ancestors and enforced by traditional authority, then the abuse of Nature implied in these traditional precepts could not have been redeemed in traditional Asante communities. I have, thus, concurred with Bala Musa that: “From pre-colonial times, Africans have used various media in varying ways to articulate their feelings of marginalization from political power”\textsuperscript{62} and add that the poets’ critique of the treatment of Nature in these proverb-poems is part of a manifestation of a tradition of critique and counter-discourse authentic to African oral communities.


I accordingly illustrate that there existed a plurality of environmental discourse within the pre-colonial and colonial Asante context in a manner similar to that used by Henry Odera Oruka, a Kenyan philosopher and scholar, who argues that pluralism exists in traditional African political discourse and practice:

Africa is a place of philosophical unanimity allowing no room whatsoever for Socrates or Descartes. This means that no indigenous African person had the frame of mind let alone the inclination to detach himself (herself) from the prevailing established beliefs (and taboos) and offers a critical assessment or rationative rejection of such beliefs. The practice of critique, it is claimed, is Western not African. And so it is just in order, for example, that most current governments in Africa are based on one party system since an opposition party would be a critique. This claim is false and absurd; “false” because traditional African thinkers are as diverse in their views as any system of thinkers can be, “absurd” because its application makes African politics totalitarian and African philosophy motionless.

Thinkers are not always rulers. Let us not forget the failure of Plato’s Republic. Rulers everywhere demand unanimity, where thinkers crave for dialogue. If then traditional Africa had no opposition that was at the level of rulers not of thinkers.63

I show that this pattern of opposition among thinkers existed in matters concerning environmental issues. It is from this perspective64 that I have found it necessary to accord these environmental proverb-poems their right/environmental and full meaning, and to let them emerge as functioning to contest anthropocentrism in a traditional community. In this sense I see the poet-drummer as having the role of a sentinel who keeps vigil in order to watch over the interest of Nature by deterring and reminding the community of its responsibility towards it. This is why I have argued that in spite of any demerits it might

---

64 This position is shared by researchers like Basil Davidson. It remains a hotly debated issue.
have, oral tradition of the type I analyze in my work shaped and enhanced human-Nature relations among the traditional Asante.

It is significant to note that contrary to the opinion of Wiredu, Appiah, Houtoundji and those who share this view, Gracia Clark contends that:

> The adaptability and resilience that locally specific ideas and practices of kinship in Africa show today are not post-colonial aberrations but have deep roots within African societies….Throughout the long and complex histories that had brought them into the colonial period and through it, African peoples nurtured the cultural skills and values related to renegotiation and redefinition, invention and resurrection that they continue to deploy with mastery and desperation in the face of unprecedented challenges today.65

It is obvious that Wiredu’s argument exaggerates the disadvantages of unanimity or communalism of pre-industrial African society. It ignores the idea that in these societies culture has always been dynamic; the proof being that these societies have always undergone social change born of rift and discord both within itself and between it and other societies of the neighbourhood. It was such rifts that made forward movement or even bare survival possible. Clark’s observation goes to confirm the more pertinent observation made by Paul Richards regarding the environmental dimension of the progressive content of African oral tradition as not being just intuitive as Bateson would have it. He argues:

> African traditional cosmologies often embody notions which, far from being ‘illogical and anti-scientific’, and therefore ‘barriers to progress’, serve to protect the community and its lands from the depredations of the individual and so act in the long-term interests of environmental conservation. While it is true that these cosmologies are being eroded by the newer capitalistic religion of commodity fetishism … it is a matter of urgency as well as importance that their truly progressive elements should

---

be identified and given due recognition, in order that they might make an effective contribution to the world-wide debate concerning the need for new attitudes towards, and alternative educational standards in, environmental resource management.66

Upon these two pillars - the idea that oral African literature is capable of making a positive contribution and the idea that oral African literature runs on a dynamic of constant debate and critique - I will raise the major points of my thesis by endeavouring to answer the following questions: what belief system and social organizational practices sustained those ecological thinking? How do the form and content of these proverb-poems reflect a quest for co-existence between humans and Nature? What ecological roles do the attitudes presented by these proverbs-poems play in traditional Asante? What permits me to claim that the message contained in them can be readapted to meet the needs of modern society to promote environmental awareness and to regenerate and advance development? How will the contribution of literary theory to the elucidation and recovery of indigenous environmental knowledge ensure a reintegration into modern ways in a manner Basil Davidson describes as a “reinstallation of Africa’s people within the culture of the world […] within what may reasonably be called the equality of world consciousness?”67

I have chosen to answer these questions with reference to the data of traditional drum proverb-poems of Asante for the following reasons. First, very little has been done in a systematic way on this subject of traditional Asante perceptions of Nature sensibilities. Though there is an enormous literature on traditional Asante literary forms, history, and

---

anthropology, none of it gives sustained attention to the environmental dimensions of poetic representation of landscape, flora, and fauna in traditional Asante from the literary perspective. Second, I judge that for a fuller understanding of these texts, it is important to clarify the interconnectedness between the epistemological foundations of traditional Asante spirituality and political institutions on one hand and their literary representation of the relationship with flora, fauna, and landscape on the other. It is laudable that in one of his works T.C. McCaskie deals with the attitude to animals in Asante but he does not deal with the ecological dimension of the issue per se, let alone pursue its implication for the resolution of present-day ecological problems or for the uncovering of its implication for the environmental dimension of current notions such as development, environmental regeneration and literary theory. I hold that these lacunas can be investigated by the detailed study I undertake here of traditional Asante environmental poetry. Third, I reckon that the contents of the texts indicate that traditional Asante response to the environment was guided not only by instrumental, exploitative, and tyrannical considerations but rather by a set of practices which equally valued human-Nature coexistence. Thus, the description of these proverb-poems reveals how coherent traditional Asante agrarian ecological thought was, the historical place of such coherent ideas, their value for contemporary ecological thought, their linguistic devices, and their contribution to environmental literary theory.

1 : 4 The Multi-Disciplinary Nature of the Inquiry

The inquiry has linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural ramifications, so in saying that solutions to present environmental problems can take inspiration from traditional precepts, I am indicating that the issue of human-Nature co-existence should be approached or constructed from various angles. One of them is familiarity with the natural surroundings. In this regard it is interesting to note that traditional Asante proverbs, which contained the ideas which sustained the conservation of Nature, are akin to Zande proverbs in which: “...the metaphors seem most frequently to arise from the intimate Zande knowledge of the wild life all around them. Very many of the images are taken from wild creatures, from hunting, and from collecting activities...”69 The traditional Asante proverb-poems I deal with in this work had a didactic function of imparting knowledge. It thus disseminated traditional knowledge embedded in the metaphor in a sense in which Pierre Fontanier noted that a metaphor consists: “...in presenting one idea under the sign of another that is more striking or better known.”70 Thus, if the lives of flora, fauna, and landscape are being used as metaphors it is because they are known and mastered by both audience and speaker. The fact that knowledge, rather than decoration, is at the basis of the metaphor and the proverb, therefore, refutes the claim of Lawrence Boadi that:

A careful observation of language in context will reveal that in Akan society the primary function of proverbs is aesthetic or poetic and not didactic. Naturally, in most discussions and dialogues each participant is involved in putting across a point, exhorting, admonishing, or concealing a fact, and these ends could, in the majority of cases, be achieved without

resort to proverbs. Yet a speaker often selects a particular proverb or striking metaphor because he wishes to embellish or elevate his message with a poetic dimension, or demonstrate to his opponent his superior sophistication, education, eloquence, or sensitivity in the use of his language. These goals need not be moral or didactic. My own experience with situations in which brilliant speakers use proverbs supports the view that they are motivated in the main by a desire to heighten their message poetically.71

It must be made clear that Boadi’s use of the words “metaphor”, “education” and “message’ in the above context speaks for the moral dimensions of the use of the proverb in Akan and thus, invalidates his claim that the goal of the deployment of the proverb “need not be moral or didactic”. More pertinently, I would like to highlight the fact, implicit in the above opinion of Boadi, that the proverbs-poems I study here have functional as well as aesthetic dimensions. The brevity and imagery that characterise a proverb are made to have the effect of carrying acceptable communal values for didactic effect of disseminating knowledge. In this regard it is informative to note that Finnegan undertakes an elaborate discussion of the controversy surrounding the role and definition of a proverb, and presents some of these features when she notes: “The exact definition of ‘proverb’ is no easy matter. There is, however, some general agreement as to what constitutes a proverb. It is a saying in more or less fixed form marked by ‘shortness, sense, and salt’ and distinguished by popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it.”72

Because of this semantic and metaphoric dimension of the proverb, I argue that as a vehicle of daily experience, proverbs are not only aesthetic pieces but also are a

repository of the social psyche and knowledge. The proof is that in traditional Asante, and in Africa in general, those who use them are said to be well versed in the traditions and customs of the community. Another reason why I fully expound the semantic and cultural nature of the proverb-poems I study here is that in addition to these literary manifestations proverbs have a socio-linguistic significance in that they help in the reconstruction of history.\textsuperscript{73} H. Diabaté has noted in this regard that: “Dans l'étude des sociétés africaines, les sources orales [including poems] constituent l'essentiel de la documentation, quelle que soit la discipline envisagée. Et si chaque discipline vise un objectif déterminé, il est cependant des préoccupations qui leur sont communes.”\textsuperscript{74} On the basis of the above, I indicate that the revival and integration of (parts of) oral literature is central to the reconstruction and reintegration of traditional ecological knowledge into modern concepts of development.

The concern and the method to which I resort are akin to those of Kaschula, for example, who examines the differences and similarities between oral literature and the Scriptures\textsuperscript{75} and points out that there are two types of orality. He identifies on one hand primary orality, which he says bears little relation to writing. On the other hand he notes what he calls ‘secondary orality’, which he explains co-exists with writing. He holds that the


\textsuperscript{75} Russel. H. Kashula, “‘New Wine in Old Bottles: Some Thoughts on Orality-Literacy Debate, with a Specific Reference to the Xhosa Imbongi’; in Edgard R. Sienaert, Nigel Bell and Meg Lewis (eds.), Oral Tradition and Innovation: New Wine in Old Bottles, Durban: University of Natal Oral Documentation Centre, 1991, 120-140.
advent of writing often alters the importance of orality and affects its functions and structure. On that score he advises that orality must not be lost to writing but rather its characteristic features must be retained even in its transcribed or written form. He, thus, opts for a transformation of the structure and content of oral tradition.

The insight I take from Kaschula for my work is that though I am analysing an oral text that has been transcribed, I make sure that the texts do not lose their orality in the analysis. To this effect I give prominence to the communicative aspects of these texts by having my eye on the ‘proverb-poem’ and its performance rather than the ‘script’. I add this insight from Kaschula to that of A. H. Krappe who in a study of oral tradition goes to the extent of advocating that since orality has been passed on from generation to generation, it is for that reason capable of being studied scientifically. He notes in this regard that:

…historical because it attempts to throw light on man’s past; a science because it endeavours to attain this goal, not by speculation or deduction from some abstract principles agreed upon a priori, but by the inductive method which in the last analysis, underlies all scientific research, either historical or natural.76

Without considering the details of how Krappe’s scientific study of orality is supposed to proceed, I use his idea that orality can be studied scientifically to guide me in this one direction: I analyze these texts bearing in mind that they belong to a given time in the social and environmental history of traditional Asante. Armed with this insight I look at the proverb-poems with an inductive approach. Thus, I explain them also in the light of the era and the social system from which they are produced since culture is not static but dynamic. This is why in order to demonstrate the ecological function or content of these

poems, and in order to prove that they contain a message of co-existence; I show them as performing ecological function in a traditional setting. But I do not stop there. I link their usefulness to the future.

In making the point that the functions of this oral literature are relevant to contemporary ecological problems of today, I gained insight from additional sources as well. For example, in a study of the fall in the use of proverbs in the Tsonga language, D. J. Mathumba^{77} explains that urbanization and the loss of interest in African traditional beliefs and practices are part of the reasons for the decline in the use of proverbs. In fact, I weigh the arguments of Mathumba against those of Nthuli^{78} who also studied proverbs and modernization but who, unlike Mathumba, concluded that proverbs adapt to change, especially at the lexical level when slang and new terms are introduced to them. Nthuli’s idea that Ndebele proverbs blend continuity with change is a significant insight to claim that these traditional texts can be adapted for contemporary use.

I equally draw inspiration from the work of Mutasa^{79} in which he discusses the structure and function of Shona proverbs. I find useful his observation that neologisms are introduced into these proverbs in order to adopt them to contemporary use and benefit. I draw on this observation to confirm that traditional Asante concepts can likewise be redesigned to fit modern concepts of development and help promote development in the


environmental sphere. Moreover, his contention that the Shona proverb contains philosophical as well as didactic dimensions of that community is important for me in deciding the extent to which these proverb-poems of traditional Asante were and can be instrumental in effecting a consideration of Nature by humans, showing the link between literature, ecological knowledge, and development.

Another important perspective to which I resort in making the environmental meaning of these proverb-poems is the claim of Paul Grice that meaning does not always necessarily correspond to formal or structural devices. He indicates that: “An utterer is held to intend to convey what is normally conveyed (or normally intended to be conveyed), and we require a good reason for accepting that a particular use diverges from the general usage (e.g. he never knew or had forgotten the general usage).“⁸⁰ He explains:

…what a speaker means is to be explained in terms of the effect which he intends to produce in an actual or possible hearer; and what a sentence in a language means is to be explained in terms of directives with respect to the employment of that sentence, in a primitive (basic) way, with a view to inducing in a hearer a certain kind of effect; what a speaker means will very often differ from what the sentence which he uses means, but what he means would or should be discernible on the basis of knowing the directive for the sentence together with facts about the circumstances and intentions of the speaker.⁸¹

He calls this situation “implicature”. But his critics have not hesitated to indicate that:

Le point de vue de Grice peut être corrigé pour rendre compte de contre-exemple de ce genre…. Il nous faut donc reformuler le point de vue de Grice sur la signification de façon à rendre clair qu’il y a, entre ce que l’on veut signifier en prononçant une phrase et ce que cette phrase signifie dans la langue qu’on utilise, une relation qui n’est pas quelconque. Dans notre analyse des actes illocutionnaires, nous devons retenir à la fois l’aspect

intentionnel et l’aspect conventionnel, et spécialement la relation qui existe entre ces deux aspects.\textsuperscript{82}

The point of comparison with Grice is that he is arguing that the meaning of a word, a sentence, or any texts cannot be derived from only the superficial and literal sense. To Grice, meaning does not always correspond to the form or device in which the ideas are expressed. For example, a statement may be made to imply a meaning that is the direct opposite of its literal meaning, as in the case of the irony; or Nature may be given human attributes as in the metaphor ‘the hands of the wind’. For this reason I consider Grice’s position useful for the evaluation of the figures of speech such as metaphor, irony, metonymy, synecdoche, prosopopeia and personification, which abound in my selected texts and which I think have ecological essence embedded in them. For example, there are features such as the attribution of speech to Nature, seeing Nature as kin, referring to Nature by means of metonymy etc. I consider these features as attempts by the poets to communicate by means other than the \textit{ordinary} in order to give a message that invariably seeks to subvert \textit{ordinary} thought and practices. This deviation creates the kind of surprise which awakens the curiosity of the audience, and triggers the hearer’s/audience’s inquiry for deeper/ecological meaning and subsequent response. This aesthetic trait of the proverb-poems provokes, as I demonstrate, a psychological dimension that is culturally/conventionally comprehensible and acceptable to the audience. This leads to curious ambiguities that have permitted me to see, not only the social but, also the ecological dimension in them.

Since I see that the texts I analyse can be generally categorized as emphasising human relations with Nature, I consider their communicative significance of conveying ecological message to be similar to the following observation of P. Y. Seitel:

Communicative acts are defined as indigenous named categories of communicative behaviour. These categories of behaviour may be realised in social interaction by several different kinds of speech and in some cases through non-verbal channels [...] We reserve the term speech act to designate the use of a specific genre or a kind of speech. Both communicative act and speech act refer to indigenous categories.83

Working from this lead of Seitel’s, I explore the culture-specific or ethnological basis of the use and function of metaphor as an instrument of communication among the Asante - a people or a group which shares common symbols or images. Thus, despite the obvious lacuna in the systematisation of the methodology of Seitel, the view remains useful for my analysis of these proverb-poems as elements of social interaction. I approach the analysis in this manner because I hold that it is this (social) human-to-human interaction that the poets have transposed unto the Asante human-Nature relationship. This transposition does not limit the role of Nature in these texts to one of metaphoric expression. Rather, it highlights Nature and confers on Nature the consideration usually reserved for humans.

In ending the above discussion I should say that this chapter must be considered as a preparation towards an analysis which illustrates the power of literature to represent as well as transform society for environmental/economic development. The survey has presented literature as revealing a philosophical and aesthetic knowledge that propels beliefs and practices. The cosmovision contained in the literary texts of the proverb-

poems is introduced as dynamic and welcoming to progressive change in society. Consequently, the second chapter deals with the roles played by socio-economic activity and the artistic rendition of society in *traditional Asante society* and *present Asante society* respectively. The environmental sustainability achieved in the former is seen as inseparable from the manner in which Nature was poetically constructed; while the latter is shown as a society whose current quest for environmental human development can be helped with inspiration from and emulation of the manner in which the Asante managed flora, fauna, and landscape through literary artistic constructs of Nature. The next chapter, the second presents the proverb-poems in their socio-political context while the third proceeds to present the essence of the approach of Ecocriticism by which I analyze the texts themselves. Chapter four then analyzes the proverb-poems, showing them to be containing a predilection for human co-existence with Nature. The fifth chapter deals with the manner in which the ecocritical endeavour resembles the objectives of development.