CHAPTER 2

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE PROVERB-POEMS

2:1 Introduction

David Couzens Hoy has noted that “part and whole are related in a circular way: in order to understand the whole, it is necessary to understand the parts, while to understand the parts it is necessary to have some comprehension of the whole.” On this premise I first present the beliefs and practices of the culture to which the poets of my selected texts belonged, and on which the poets seem to have modeled the form and content of the proverb-poems I analyze here. I will assimilate the rationale of the presentation of this chapter to the exposition of the Asante version of “cosmovision”, a notion which L. Jan Slikkerveer portrays in these terms:

Cosmovision refers specifically to the way in which the members of a particular culture perceive their world, cosmos or universe. It represents the view of the world as a living being, its totality including not only natural elements such as plants, animals and humans, but also spiritual elements such as spirits, ancestors and future generations. In this view, nature does not belong to humans, but humans to nature. As the concept of cosmovision includes the relationship between humans, nature and the spiritual world, it describes the principles, roles and processes of the forces of nature, often intertwined with local belief systems.

The above citation indicates that the nature and the conduct of physical activities are fashioned by the beliefs the people hold about the objects of their surroundings. However, in consonance with the objectives of this thesis, I do not sidetrack into the

86 The debate has been about whether it is socio-cultural organization which dictates and models cosmological beliefs or the other way round. For a vivid discussion of the issues consult: J. Bronowski, The Ascent of Man, London: Futura Publications, 1981, p. 287.
elaborate chicken and egg riddle about the nature of the causal relations between physical activities (ritual) on one hand and beliefs (literature/myth) on the other since it is not part of the central scope of this thesis as such. In studying these proverb-poems I arrived at the conclusion that there is a central message of co-existence (between humans and Nature) embedded in these proverb-poems; and that this message contained in the proverb-poems is consistent with the cosmovision and socio-cultural structures of the traditional Asante community.

This is the reason why I find it appropriate to present, in this chapter, aspects of the belief system and rituals, economic activity, and other factors which are directly pertinent to the formulation and policing of Asante attitude towards flora, fauna, and landscape as constructed by the poets of these proverb-poems. More specifically, I address the issues of 1) history of Asante, 2) their marking and demarcating of Nature, and 3) the ascription of spirits to Nature. Since all these Nature-related social constructs took place within the framework of a specific environmental history and political organization, I think that the explanation of the texts associated with these beliefs and practices will be clearer if one first described the origin or history of the Asante community, as well as their environmental history.

2 : 2 An Overview of Asante

The contemporary history of present-day Ghana is intertwined with that of the Akan state of Asante, which, at the tail end of the 17th century emerged as a new political entity to dislodge and replace the Akan empires of Akwamu and Denkyira. Until the British declared it a Protectorate in 1906 Asante was an African Empire that dominated the
political, economic, and military life in that part of the West African Gulf of Guinea (then
dubbed the Gold Coast) and its surroundings. At the height of its power in the 19th
century Asante was an Empire whose realm Robert. B. Edgerton describes as follows:

At the start of the nineteenth century, when Asante and British interests first
collided, the Asante Empire was at its height. Incomparably the most powerful state
in West Africa, it ruled over more than three million people throughout what is now
Ghana (then called the Gold Coast). This was more than half as many people as
there were in the United States at that time and more than one quarter as many as
the population of Britain, which was only eleven million in 1801. In area the
empire was larger than England, Wales, and Scotland combined or, from an
American perspective, the state of Wyoming. From south to north it stretched for
over four hundred miles, and it dominated nearly five hundred miles of coastline.87

Historians and ethnologists have traced the remote and immediate background inspiration
and the skills that went into the emergence of Asante to a series of ancient Akan nations
that existed across the Western Sudan and the forest of the Gulf of Guinea.88 Eva L. R.
Meyerowitz notes for instance that: “According to oral tradition, the people who founded
the great Akan States in Ghana (the Gold Coast), such as Bono, Asante, Akyerekyere,
Twifo-Heman, and its daughter states Akwamu and Domaa, formerly lived along the
Niger Bend in the region lying roughly between Djenne and Timbuktu.89 As part of the
evidence of this Western Sudanese connection of the Akan, Historians and Ethnologists
have pointed to the fact that just as the Asante of today, the royalties of the 9th and 13th
century Western Sudanese empires of Ghana and Mali practiced the matrilineal system of
inheritance, and that their kings and rulers adorned themselves with gold in a manner
akin to that of Akan rulers of present-day Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Togo. It is equally

87 Robert B. Edgerton, *The Fall of the Asante Empire: The Hundred-Year War for Africa’s Gold Coast*,
88 For a chronological list of some of these Akan kingdoms and the names of their kings and queens from
1000 A.D. to 1750 A.D. see pages 130-142 of the book of Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Akan Traditions of
89 Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana: Their Ancient Beliefs*, London: Faber and Faber Limited,
1958, p. 17.
reasonable to indicate that the tradition of commerce and the network of trade by which the ancient West African empires and earlier Akan states thrived were continued and have immensely contributed to the formation of Akans states in the regions that now constitute present-day Ghana.

From the middle of the 15th century the gains from trading and state formation were accelerated by the advent of European traders at the Atlantic coast. By the 16th century the most dominant of these states were Akwamu and Denkyira which vied for both political and commercial supremacy. During the 17th century Denkyira had under its imperial sway several Akan states including the Asante chiefdoms such as Bekwai, Dwaben, Kokofu, Nsuta, Mampong and Kwaaman. At the tail end of the 17th century a new ruler of Kwaaman called Osei Tutu united the various states of Bekwai, Bekwai, Dwaben, Kokofu, Nsuta, Mampong and Kwaaman into a political and military confederacy under his leadership. Through a series of wars and astute diplomacy and a network of marriages, Osei Tutu expanded the confederacy by bringing into it other neighbouring states. In 1698 he launched a war against the imperial overlordship of Denkyira and eventually overthrew it in November 1701. Fynn explains in this regard that:

On his return home, Osei Tutu concerned himself mainly with talking the chiefs of Mampong, Kokofu, Kumawu, Dwaben, Bekwai and Nsuta into a political union of their states under his own leadership. He must have pointed out to the chiefs that his purpose was to create and maintain stable conditions for the growth of a civil society capable of meeting the new economic demands arising out of the development of the trans-Atlantic trade. Again, he must have informed the chiefs of his own experience at the courts of both Denkyira and Akwamu.90

Meyerowitz adds that “…to make the confederacy of small states permanent, Okomfo Anokye, [the adviser of Osei Tutu] created the Golden Stool as a symbol of unity, embedding in it the spirit or soul of Asante…” For most of the 18th century the successors of Osei Tutu, especially his immediate successor, Opoku Ware, consolidated the Asante Union and expanded it into an empire by integrating into it several territories and peoples. Ivor Wilks notes in this regard that:

It will be appropriate that the concept of ‘Asante proper’, as used by such writers as Freeman and Christaller, was a complex one. Within it was included not only the home country inhabited by the Asante in the pre-imperial period, but also those acquired territories the incorporation of which into Asante system was far advanced. It will follow, then, that a certain indeterminacy may exist as to just which territories were to be accounted within the metropolitan region.

Throughout the 19th century Asante interests collided with the trading self-interest and imperial/colonial intentions of the British government and its traders at the Atlantic coast. British policy of undermining Asante authority in the Gold Coast resulted in several military confrontation between Asante and British forces, the bulk of which were drawn from peoples and lands where the British held sway such as the Yoruba, the Hausa, and Indians. The years in which wars were fought included 1824, 1826, 1873, 1879 and 1900. The British also helped exacerbate internal descent within Asante such as the succession dispute which led to a war of secession that lasted from 1883 to 1887 over the conflicting claims to legitimacy of Kwasi Prempeh and Yaw Atweneboana to the Asantehene throne. Following the partition of Africa for European commercial and political interest at the Berlin Conference of 1884, Britain stepped up its military

campaigns against Asante. In 1900 the Asantehene, Prempeh I (also known as Kwaku Dua III) with an entourage of a hundred and twenty people including a legendary woman warrior, Yaa Asantewaa, were encircled by British forces in the midst of a durbar in Kumase. The group was taken to Sierra Leone and then deported to the Indian Ocean island of Seychelles. The Asantehene, Nana Prempeh I, returned from Seychelles in 1924 and the British recognized him only as the King of Kumasi. Upon his death in 1935 his successor Nana Osei Agyeman Prempeh II restored the Asante Union as a political entity with British recognition.

During the era of Africa’s fight for juridical political independence in the years following the Second World War, the Asante, with inspiration from their time tested political organization of confederacy formed the United Party in 1954 to pressed for a government based on large regional, if not federal autonomy in the future independent Ghana. They, however, had to settle for a Regional Assembly system which though stipulated in the Independence Constitution of 1957, was also immediately abolished by the first Independence Parliament dominated by Kwame Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party. Though devoid of the fullness of its ancient and legendary pomp and pageantry, Asante political authority under the Asantehene today retains its network of traditional administrative responsibility especially in matters of land administration, national mobilization, education, and economic development. The present King, the young and energetic Nana Osei Tutu II, is particularly known as an ardent initiator, organizer, and supervisor of an efficient educational scheme which grants scholarships to young people to study at various levels in educational institutions both home and abroad.
2 : 3  A Myth of Environmental Import

It is significant to note that the nature of the environmental concerns with which the Asante had to grapple was determined by the fact that: “The nature of the forest environment was the basic fact of Asante life, and the ultimate infrastructure and technological constraint on it. The core of the polity was situated in an ecological niche that was inimical and resistant, difficult to manage and ultimately hostile.” The need to manage such a hostile environment must have reflected and/or constructed the beliefs, myths, rituals, and practices which informed the manner in which the Asante related to flora, fauna, and landscape. Such beliefs can be found in literary formulations such as the following:

Long ago a man and a woman came down from heaven, while another man and woman came out of the ground. The Lord of Heaven also sent a python, the non-poisonous snake, which made its home in a river. In the beginning men and women had no children, they had no desire for one another and did not know the process of procreation and birth. It was the Python who taught them. He asked the men and women if they had any children, and on being told that they had none, the Python said he would make the women conceive. He told the couples to stand facing each other, then he went into the river and came out with his mouth full of water. This he sprayed on their bellies, saying "Kus, kus" (words that are still used in clan rituals). Then the Python told the couples to go home and lie together, and the women conceived and bore children. These children took the spirit of the river where the Python lived as their clan spirit. Members of that clan hold the python as taboo; they must never kill it, and if they find a python that has died or been killed by someone else, they put white clay on it and bury it human fashion.

In this text an emotional bond is woven between humans and Nature. I infer that in addition to the accompanying spiritual observance the supposed veracity of a

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95 <http://www.cybercomm.net/~grandpa/africanmyths.html#ashanti>
mythological story (like the myth above) consists in its capacity to eventually articulate the rationale for practical behaviour. The mythical narrative is a form of verbalization of both a wish and an experience constructed to explain preferences in human conduct. Again, I should add that different lessons of sociology, politics, economics, and gender can be drawn from this narrative. However, for the purposes of the ecological focus of this thesis, I limit the deduction to the implications that this narrative has for the attitudes of humans toward flora, fauna, and landscape. It is obvious that the enduring worth of this Asante account of the origins of procreation does not reside in any claim to historical authenticity or “scientific” veracity. Rather, one must consider it as a metaphorical/ allegorical construct that seeks to explain the respect which the Asante had for Nature - (represented metonymically in this myth by heaven, the ground, python, river, water, and white clay) - and for which they maintained a commitment to the welfare of other species of life. Moreover, since mythology is part of literature the meaning of each of these proverb-poems must be sought in its significance as metonymy and synecdoche. The perception created by these images of Nature becomes capable of fostering the kind of sentiments of loyalty and kin on the basis of which the poets communicate their critique, appeal, mockery, and advice on the environmental matters to the community in the hope that a better custody of Nature will avert droughts and the environmental degradation. Jacques Chevrier expresses this rapprochement between myth and reality when he notes that a myth is given the status of a quasi-reality. He notes:

Évoquer la présence du mythe dans la littérature africaine – qu’elle appartienne au registre de l’oralité ou de l’écriture -, c’est, d’une certaine manière, formuler une tautologie, puisque, à l’origine, un mythe est d’abord récit, donc littérature. Quintessence du verbe créateur, le mythe
I should add that the veracity in question is not as authentic as Chevrier puts it. Rather, it consists in the impetus the myth offers in the form of engendering a quest of seeking to link two different realms of reality by means of what de George and de Georges call: “…two typical operations: dissection and articulation.” For example, when one dissects the above Asante narrative, one realizes that the reverence the Asante had for the Lord of Heaven is reflected in the image of the python he sent. Consequently, the python and its abode become a synecdoche representing the bioregion of animals, plants and landscape. In gratitude, humans are expected to esteem and avoid hostility toward the python/Nature who is even exalted to the status of kindred with humans, since burial is a kindred obligation in Asante. Certainly, the myths unified the nation but one cannot conclude from that fact alone that the abundance of shared beliefs and customs among its various groups meant that Asante was definable from one respect or perceptions only; stuck, as it were, with one idea shared by all and sundry without any room for disagreement, divergence, critique or dissent from the position of authorities and official ideologies or thinkers.

I must, therefore, underline that in evoking the existence of attachment to Nature, divergence, and critique in traditional Asante to explain the existence of ecological perception, I am not denying that there existed among these people a set of conventions and shared values through which meaning and consensus were possible. I am only saying

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in line with Kwame Anthony Appiah that there are two levels or perspectives from which Asanteness can be perceived. He notes: “So it is easy for us to move between thinking of Asante as a collectivity - the Asante people - and thinking of being-Asante as an identity, the one that the members of the collectivity share.”98

For the above reasons I have decided to derive environmental meaning from these proverb-poems by considering Asante as a community rather than as a tribe or an ethnic group. It is from this same angle that I argue the feasibility of the integration of the environmental ideas of traditional community into a contemporary setting. This is because once one conceives of these ideas as derived from the town and communities; the emphasis is on the environmental, climatic factors rather than on the blood, linguistic and shared mythologies per se. In my opinion this definition of Asante enhances the prospect that in the cause of adapting the ideas to present needs, other people who settle in Asante territory will be urged to adapt to the vagaries of conservationist programmes in accordance with any social change that might have occurred in Asante. This adaptation would be on the grounds that what is at stake is not ethnic issues of common ancestry and language, but an environmental action imposed by the one climate and environmental condition which both ‘natives’ and ‘settlers’ together share. The settler would, then, not find it difficult to identify with the practices recommended by ecological expediency. In this way a Zulu, for instance, who does not share the Asante myth of origins, dietary abstinence, and attachment to the porcupine or allegiance to the Golden Stool but who, nonetheless, lives in an Asante community will have to acknowledge the environmental

practices on which Asante conservation ethos are based by considering them not as customs or rituals exclusive to the Asante but as a practice dictated by the peculiar nature of the climate and soil of the land on which s/he and the people live.

The appropriateness of the notion of community is further endorsed by the fact that even within the Asante community practices which impact conservation vary often from one region to another or from one village to another. The antelope, for instance, may be a taboo in one village but not in the next village, as Falconer indicates in a fieldwork she undertook in 1989. Thus, my notion of Asante as a community serves the purposes of explaining environmental practice that enhance human-Nature co-existence in Asante. It is significant in this regard to underline that the drum poetry, of which the proverb-poems I study form an integral part, was instrumental in maintaining the cohesion of this Asante community.

2 : 4 Taboo, Demarcation, Reverence

The suitability of these proverb-poems for the deciphering of environmental knowledge is additionally conferred by the fact that they contain beliefs, practices, and the management skills of Asante. These beliefs and practices were influenced by the climatic conditions and geographical location of Asante. Noting that: “There is an obvious connection between certain social phenomena and the environment”, Peter Kwasi Sarpong presents the geographical features, climate, and crops of Asante thus:
There are broadly two wet seasons with the peaks in May-June and October. The periods December-February and July-September are much drier than the rest of the year. The mean annual rainfall is about 58 inches and the maximum and minimum temperatures are 86 and 70°F. The most important highland is the Mampong scarp, which rises to about 2,500 feet above sea level. The Tano is the biggest and longest river, with second in importance, the Offin River. Lake Bosomtwe is a nationally famous geographical feature of the area, as it is the only natural lake in Ghana worthy the name.

The Ashanti are a predominantly agricultural people. They clear the forest and grow food crops during the December-February drought; …Magic exists to help crops to grow or to cause the rain to fall. Tales are often told about the bleak forest and the monstrous creatures it contains.99

These features accord with the account given by Bowdich during his visit to Kumasi in 1817. He listed a range of animals, crops, and plants that were found in the Asante territory. In the preceding section I referred to the nature of political organization in Asante. I should indicate at this stage that typical of the role of environmental significance conferred on traditional authority by these climatic and geographical conditions is the official attention paid to the Earth or the land. This role went beyond the judicial one that consisted in the enforcement of the payment of fines by those who violated laws related to the observance of taboos associated with the land.

Thus, though the traditional Asante did not consider the earth as a deity, they considered it as having a spirit or power to be propitiated with sacrifices. Rattray noted that every Thursday was a holiday of a sort, especially for those who worked on the land. It was considered the natal day of the Earth. The Earth was personified as *Asase Yaa*, (Yaa being the automatic first name of every girl born on a Thursday). It was believed that being on good terms with the spirit of the Earth was essential for the prosperity of the

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entire nation.\textsuperscript{100} The poet-drummer’s proverb-poem addressed to the Earth on State \textit{Adae} ceremonies is part of the quest to appease it. Again, a sacrifice of mashed yam and a fowl was also offered to the Earth at the beginning of the planting season. The sacrifice was repeated to express appreciation on account of a good year’s harvest. It can be inferred from these beliefs and their mediating rituals that Nature was a subject of great concern to political authority which enforced a range of customs and taboos in traditional Asante. The general effect was conserving of Nature.

Another practice which occasioned the well-being of Nature in Asante is seen in an elaborate arrangement of dietary prohibitions based on patrilineal descent. This is the \textit{N\underline{c}n} system. To illustrate this point I have borrowed and modified a chart drawn by McCaskie\textsuperscript{101} in which he provided the animal totem, the salutation, and the holiday associated with each of the nine \textit{N\underline{c}n} of the traditional Asante.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|l|}
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\textbf{1} & \\ \\
\textbf{Name: Bosommuru} & \\ \\
\textbf{Taboos:} & Òkwakuo (Mona Monkey); Nantwie (ox, cow); Òkraman (domestic dog), Odompo (wild dog), AsÒkwa (a species of a bird); Aburo (maize, Indian corn: not to be eaten on Tuesdays), Nsafufuo (palm wine: not to be drunk on Tuesdays). \\
\textbf{Totems:} & Enini (python), Akura (mouse). \\
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\textsuperscript{101} My modification in italics.
2 Name: **Bosompra**

Taboo: Ńkwakuo (Mona Monkey); Akokɔ fufuo (white fowl), Ńsebɔ (leopard); Tamiriwa (a species of large edible snail); Ńwansan (bush buck); Akyekyedeɛ (tortoise); Aboa funu (carcass of any beast found dead); Afaseɛ (water yam).

**Totem:** Akokɔ fufu (white fowl).

3 Name: **Bosomtwe**

Taboo: Ńkwakuo (Mona Monkey); Tamiriwa (a species of large edible snail); Ńwansan (bush buck); akyekyedeɛ (tortoise); Odompo (wild dog).

**Totem:** Ńsebɔ (leopard).

4 Name: **Bosommmram**

Taboo: Nantwie (Ox, cow); Ëdɛŋkyɛm (crocodile); Nsafufu (palm wine but no other liquor).

**Totem:** Ńkwakuo (Mona Monkey).

5 Name: **Bosommketea**

Taboo: Odompo (wild dog); Ëkraman (domestic dog); Abruburo (dove).

**Totem:** Odompo (wild dog).

6 Name: **Bosomakɛm**

Taboo: Ëdɛŋkyɛm (crocodile); Tweneboa (a species of tree); Nantwie (ox, cow); Tamiriwa (a species of large edible snail); Akyekyedeɛ (tortoise).
Totem: Ńdɛŋkyɛm (crocodile).

7 Name: **Bosomdwerebeɛ**

Taboo: Ńwansane (bush buck); Ńkankane (civet); Tamiriwa (a species of large edible snail); Nsafufuo (palm wine: not to be drunk on ‘Sundays’); Akyekyedeɛ (tortoise).

**Totem:** Ńsebɔ (leopard).

8 Name: **Bosomafi**

Taboo: Afaseɛ (water yam); Adowa (royal antelope); Odompo (wild dog); Ńkraman (domestic dog); Aburuburu (dove).

**Totem:** Kwaagyadu/Kontromfi (baboon).

9 Name: **Bosompon**

Taboo: Ńdenkyɛm (crocodile); Mmrebia (a species of small mushroom; usually found on a dead palm tree); Onyina (silk cotton tree); Afaseɛ (water yam).

**Totem:** (unspecified).

The point I am making is that when the consumption of certain species, say the millet plant or the antelope, was prohibited to specific patrilineal groups, the result was that the amount of these species consumed was less than what would have been consumed if its consumption were open to all members of the community. This restriction, therefore, has a conservation effect, no matter how little, on the species. Since every group, and hence every individual, has a prohibition, the cumulative effect was that a sizeable measure of
species diversity was guaranteed to ensure that a particular species was not easily extinct on account of the fact that it tasted good, or was easily accessible or not difficult to cook. The same effect was produced by observance of the Dabone - literally: ‘bad day’ - (during which hunting, fishing, hoeing, drawing water from the river were forbidden etc).  

It is important to note that the traditional Asante perception of natural waters equally had a role which enhanced the conservation of Nature. This can be inferred from a practice which Dupuis observed near the River Pra in 1817. He noted: “A little fetische house, which overlooks the river, invited our steps to the grateful shade of a cachou tree. Indeed, it is usual for the northern travelers to visit this spot, and make oblation to the river God, to whom the house is consecrated, before they presume to plunge into his stream.” Such reverence included the total prohibition of dumping refuse into rivers, creeks, and stream as well as the prohibition of fishing in some of them. The enormity of the environmental effect of this practice can be inferred from the fact that it was observed by the population of Asante and was adhered to as it was equally a mark of one’s identity or belongingness, not only to the patrilineal group but also, to Asante and by extension to the Akan people. Again, it was held that violation of such prohibitions were to be serious since forces of Nature such as rivers were said to have a power of bliss or doom to both the individual and the community.

To these beliefs and practices which were at the roots of the management of the environment one must add the manner in which the demarcation of Nature ensured attitudes which were conserving of Nature. On that score I would like to follow the lead of Isabel Hofmeyr’s observation that: “… loose pre-colonial sense of boundary does not mean that notions of territory and demarcation were unknown.”104 Among the traditional Asante, the validity of this assertion is endorsed by their demarcation of space into ‘wild’ and ‘cultivated’/‘domesticated’ realms. The former realm belongs to Nature and the latter to humans. This distinction was neither unselective nor accidental. It clarified the distinction between humans and Nature by painting them as belonging to different realms or abodes. The traditional Asante partitioned space in a way M. D. McLead notes as follows:

The village and the bush were strongly opposed in Asante thought. …The town and forest, the realm of the dwelling (efie) and the bush (wura’m), are separated by the edge of the village (kurotia), a symbolic as well as a physically distinct zone. In the past this distinction between the two worlds was given formal physical expression: a small barrier or low stile made of a few thin logs was placed across the end of the village. This barrier (pampim) was not intended to prevent the entrance or egress of people or beast – it was too low for that; it was intended instead as a mystical protection for the village against the dangers and powers that dwelled in the bush, and as such it represented the end of the village, the realm of man, and the beginning of the wild.105

In the demarcation, the two - human and Nature - continued to live side by side as in the domestication of animals and the frequent staying of hunters and medicine-men in the forest,106 for example. Humans continued to make use of the forest as the source

104 Isabel Hofmeyr, We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom, London: Heineman, 1993, p. 73
providing fuel wood, fodder, timber, medicinal plants, and several other products that are indispensable for human sustenance, safety, good health, and peace.

Nonetheless, the conceptual delimitation or dichotomy the traditional Asante made between Nature and humans lessened the rate of human intrusion into Nature and imposed restraint which reduced the abuse/use of its resources. Beasts such as the bear, the antelope, and the leopard were deemed to have the wild as their legitimate realm. The arrangement was indicative of the traditional Asante knowledge of the intricate habitat and behaviour of non-human species. For example, Dupuis noted in 1817 that: “The lion, the tiger, the panther, the leopard, say the Ashantees …are delicate in the selection of their victims…The superior beast of prey seldom remove to any great distance from the place which gave them birth, provided there be opportunities of sustaining life, even at any risk from the wiles of mankind.”

A catalogue of beliefs, practices, and prohibitions regulated the occasional human use of this “realm of the wild”. Such arrangements helped in conserving both species and landscapes. For example, the Asante considered the trees Odii (Okoubaka Aubrevillei) and Odum (Chlorophora (Milicia) excelsa) as well as the creeper, Ahomakyem (Spiropetalum Heterophyllum) among others as having spirits. A plant like sumee (Costus afer) was said to have protective powers and consequently used to cleanse or purify a village struck by disease or epidemic. This point clarifies the ambiguity surrounding the

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108 The Botanical names I give here are as given by R. S. Rattray and Julia Falconer.
fact that while the poet might publicize the forest as a source of medical, nutritional, and aesthetic resources he equally underlines that its capacity as a rampart of evil powers is equally a cause for caution. These mixed or multiple attitudes often involved the virtual deification of Nature. Kyeremateng explains concerning traditional Asante conception of the link between humans, God and Nature: “those of his creation…which appeared to touch the heavens, or the horizon, were given messages or offerings to take to the Sky God. Such messengers included trees, rivers, lakes and seas.”

There was also the activity of tree planting. Dupuis indicated that when he first visited Asante in the year 1817 there existed a practice of planting shade trees along the streets of Asante towns. Apart from functionally serving to provide shade in which stones, stools, and logs were placed for adults to sit and settle disputes, to converse and to play the famous traditional Oware and the Dame board game, these trees had a socio-political significance. Customarily, each chief or king, on his accession, planted large-leafed-trees of the ficus family (called gyedua) in every town of his realm. A tree was also planted after each event of rare significance in which the community participated or was affected. The trees, thus, planted were reckoned as part of the dating objects of the town. A new king or chief inspected them on his installation. An attack on such trees was an offence punishable by a heavy fine. For example, the Methodist Missionary, Freeman, recorded an incident in 1839 during which one of his travel companions ran into trouble for

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110 I must add that this duality and the paradox it occasioned in ecological terms, bears a striking resemblance to a familiar feature of Asante political organization of which Davidson notes that: “Alongside every chief [in Ashanti] was a mankrado or krontihene of whom it was said “every mankrado is opposed to the chief.” Basil Davidson, Which Way Africa: The Search for a New Society, Penguin Books, 1964, p. 112 (Davidson quoting Margaret Field, Search for Security, London: Penguin Books, 1960.
plucking “a few leaves of a tree that brushed his face on the Bantama to Kumasi road”.\textsuperscript{112} McLead notes the significance of trees to the Asante socio-political order by noting that in traditional Asante:

> Shade trees provide a clear reminder of the chief’s power and an indication of the town’s age; as Freeman was told, each indicated a reign. The tree was treated as if it had a quasi-human existence, and if it fell down a brief form of funeral was performed for it.\textsuperscript{113}

The point is that this act of tree planting in addition to the demarcation of the respective realms of humans and Nature went a long way to enhance the judicious use of the resources they constituted. The beliefs about trees intertwined with the conservation of the environment to produce an effect which Adams Leeming notes:

> Through their authoritativeness and the respected characters within them, myths establish a culture's customs, rituals, religious tenets, laws, social structures, power hierarchies, territorial claims, arts and crafts, holidays and other recurring events, and technical tips for hunting, warfare, and other endeavors.\textsuperscript{114}

As an integral part of accepted opinion, this mythologizing of trees served as the prop that effect/affect a wide spectrum of the daily activities of Asante. Generally, they became pivotal factors of official/State perceptions.\textsuperscript{115} McCaskie notes concerning the enforcement of myths by the Asante state apparatus, for instance, that: “In its role as hermeneus it [the state] had to work within a vital, pre-existing context of knowledge - one that was the experiential basis of society, and in which its own personnel shared -

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} The creation and maintenance of the Asante Confederacy itself is explained by a myth that galvanized a permanent and collective allegiance to the Golden Stool, (Sikadwa Kofi). It is generally said to have descended from the sky and settled on the laps of Osei Tutu while he was seated with all the heads of the various confederate states. By virtue of this incident he was deemed the divinely selected leader of the Asante Confederation. Likewise, Asante attitude to the environment and the utilization of nature’s resources are sustained by myths, or stories of essentially epistemological import.
while at the same time trying to reserve to itself shaping control over emphasis and
direction.”116 One may thus argue that the texts I study here indicate that by means of
myths political authority in Asante had an elaborate mechanism for the attenuation of any
abuse of the natural environment.

Another typical ceremonial activity that reveals conservation effect is the appeasement of
trees117 which are to be felled for one purpose or another. Traditionally, a chief needing a
talking drum to be carved for his State summoned artists skilled in carving drums. He
would pay them a sizeable amount of gold dust for the dangerous work to which they
were assigned - risking a confrontation with the soul of a tree. He would also give them a
fowl and some rum for the ritual. The tree species Tweneduro (Tweneboa)118 was
subsequently located and appeased on account of its malignant spirit and its capacity to
do harm to the craftsmen. Rattray records that this propitiation ritual begun with the
smashing of a fresh chicken-egg against the trunk of the tree, which was then addressed
in the following words:

Me re be twa wo m’asen wo, gye ‘kesua yi di, ma me ntumi ntwa wo, me
nsen, mma dadie ntwa me, mma me nyare” (Translation: I am going to cut
you down and carve you, receive this egg and eat, let me be able to cut
you and carve you, do not let the iron cut me, do not let me suffer in
health). 119

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116 T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-colonial Asante*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
117 As regards beliefs about spirit of trees in Ashanti it is pertinent to note Rattray’s incisive observation
that: “When we approach the subject of the soul of trees and plants we are often confronted with a
somewhat difficult question. Our difficulty does not consist in determining whether trees and plants in
general have their own particular souls which survives after ‘death’ – the Ashanti think that all these
undoubtedly have such a soul – but whether in certain specific instances it is really the soul of the tree or
plant – the true genius loci – which is being propitiated, or whether a particular tree or plant has become the
shrine, medium, or dwelling place of some external and totally different spiritual agency which has entered
into the plant or tree and become the object of veneration and propitiation” From: R. S. Rattray, *Religion
118 Ibid
119 Ibid., p. 258.
He goes on to record that some of the rum was then poured on the trunk of the tree before it was cut down. The chicken is then slaughtered; and some of its raw meat placed on the stump of the tree. The log is then moved away from the site. An egg and some rum were again offered with the following words: “Ye de wo re ko ‘fie o, ma fie nye yiye”.  
Translation – (“We are going to take you (home) to the village, let the village prosper.”)  
When the log is taken into the village a third offering is made in the following words: “Gye akoko ne nsa yi di, ye de wo aba yi, ma ‘kuro yi nye yiye, mma ye mfa wo nye ayie.” Translation – (Receive this chicken and this drink. While you remain in this town let there be prosperity. Do not let us use you for funerals). Pegs, ropes, supports, and drumsticks for the drum are procured in similar fashion from another tree, Ofema (Microdesmis puberula). A creeper, Obofunu, is used as a rope to pitch the tone of the drum. The other objects needed to complete the drum include the skins of the antelope and the elephant. All these items are deemed to possess the spirits of their mother-organism and have to be propitiated, such that after the drum has been completed it is not ready for use until a final offering of rum and an egg is made to consecrate it.

All these belief-based activities go to illustrate that the traditional Asante distinguished between the material objects of these Nature objects on one hand and their spirits on the other hand. It is significant to note that the dread of possible danger from the spirit of the trees and animals concerned, the monetary cost, and the time involved in the propitiation needed to procuring these objects, dissuaded people from engaging wantonly in activities

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120 Ibid.
121 Ibid., p. 259
122 Ibid.
of felling trees. And the effect was conserving or saving regarding Nature’s lives. This attitude was not limited to land, rivers, and plants but equally extended to animals.

One of the most pertinent of these beliefs is the idea, as Rattray records, that:

…in Ashanti, animals were looked upon either as dangerous or harmless. This may appear a very ordinary classification, but when we find that the buffalo (bush cow), a most savage animal, is placed by the Ashanti in the latter category, and the little adoá, antelope, is in the former, we begin to realize that the Ashanti classification does not take cognizance of physical dangers, but of spiritual.123

It is evident that such beliefs bear striking resemblance to the attitude that hunter and healers, and crop farmers and fisher folks manifest in the course of their professional activities. This produced conservationist effect that reduced the number of animals who fell in harms way. Again, among the same Asante varying prohibitions applied in the geographical domains of different clans and gods, for instance. Falconer has noted in a study in 1992 in some areas of Asante that:

All the deities have particular animal taboos associated with them, and rearing such animals in a deity’s domain is strictly prohibited. For example, for Numafoa in Nanhini dogs and goats are taboo and no one in the village owns either. In Nkwanta the goat, dog and pig are taboo on account of the Mintiminim god. Some animal species are protected by particular gods. For example, the bongo (a large antelope) is protected by the Mintiminim god in Nkwanta and no one may kill it in his domain.124

My point is that though these prohibitions were selective and restricted to some species only, this variation in the treatment of animals on the grounds of domain of deities etc certainly protected these species to some degree, and that the general effect was conserving.

It is a high expression of care and concern with which (semi)-domestic animal like chickens, lizards as well as pests like rats, mice and insects were treated in Asante. The spider, for example, was deemed the mythical originator of farming and was regarded with a lot of respect and wisdom. *Abofosie* is another ceremony of spiritual essence which has conservation effect. *Abofosie* is performed as follows: Any hunter who killed any of the animals believed to be a (*sasaboa*) spirited animal performed a ceremony of propitiation. Such animals were believed to haunt such a hunter who would consequently eat all day without being satisfied, would always feel sleepy, and would eventually swell immensely and then die. The practice was that, upon confirming the death of the game, a hunter would break into the loud lament traditionally expected of one who has just learned of the passing away of father or mother. His companions would cut up the meat and ritually pass the pieces through a split liana.

A day is fixed for the funeral of the animal. During this funeral muskets are fired, drums beaten, and funeral songs sung in addition to a theatrical mock hunt that is acted to depict the various stages of the particular hunt in which the animal was killed. This was an occasion to appease the spirit and to honour the ‘person’ of the animal concerned. The essence of this ceremony can be understood from the comment of Akyeampong that: “Akan funerals celebrate the life of the deceased, and dramatize the affiliations and identities the individual has forged. The more influential the deceased the more vivid and elaborate the dramatization.”

This is why the Asante word for funeral - *Ayie* - is in fact

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an inversion of the word - ‘ayeyie’ -, which means praise. Since to the Asante a funeral is an occasion to “praise” the dead I see in Abofosie an instance in which the Asante are extending the appreciation they have for the dead to the spirit of animals who can do material harm to the hunter. Rattray notes its practical significance thus:

At the national festivals, the adae, which are really in a sense funeral customs, it is the spirit of the tree, the spirit of the fibre, and the spirit of the elephant that go to the making of the composite drums, which are honoured equally with the names of the dead kings, and have pronounced over them the lament for the dead: ‘Dammirifa! Dammirifa Dammirifa’, - (‘Alas! alas! alas!’). 126

These attitudes and their concomitant practices eventually prevent the abuse and possible extinction of Nature. An effect was to cause people to use natural resources more judiciously.

2 : 5 Asante impact on the environment

The high esteem in which the Asante held Nature did not preclude their extensive but judicious use of it for farming, hunting, gathering, carving and mining, which were activities they needed for sustenance.127 Kwame Arhin has noted that in Asante: “The principal sectors of the economy were agriculture, and allied activities, hunting, fishing mining, craft, and trading and marketing.”128 In this regard it is pertinent to note that the nature and extent of the skills that went into the economic activity of the Asante, such as their farming methods, hunting season, fishing methods etc were tailored to fit a regulated model of production. Generally, this model operated with very modest forms of

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technology and had, as such, little adverse impact on the environment. This initial/traditional model underwent change over time such that one can talk of two models of technological practices which produced two different manners of environmental effect. The first practice is the traditional one of shifting cultivation characterized by low-level technology and a corresponding low impact on the landscape, fauna, and flora of the Asante environment. The second practice is the high level of technological application that accompanied the introduction of the cultivation of large cocoa plantations.

This traditional low-level technology of lesser impact is associated with the use of implements such as the hoe, the dibber, the cutlass, the axe, long metal implements used in gold mining\(^\text{129}\), shifting cultivation, intensive food cropping, as well as non-chemical means of pest and weed control. These agricultural methods of low-level environmental impact were also employed in the production of crops such as millet, pineapple, yam and fruits and vegetables. Edgerton notes that: “Originally, Asante farmers practiced shifting

\(^{129}\) Gold mining is one of the major activities that preoccupied the Asante in their commercial and artistic endeavours. According to Robert B. Edgerton:

“The Asante possessed more gold and used more of it as ornaments and symbols of rank than any other West Africa people. Much of the gold lay within metropolitan Asante, but many more rich deposits lay in districts that were tributary to them. The Portuguese were so impressed by the quantity of gold the Asante brought to the coast that they named their principal trading fort at Elmina — “the mine.” From: Robert B. Edgerton, *The Fall of the Asante Empire: The Hundred-Year War for Africa’s Gold Coast*, New York: The Free Press, 1995, p. 38.

The extent of the mining and the methods used had an impact on the environment. These methods include panning in gold bearing rivers, the digging of pits of several yards into the earth, deep shafts and tunnels of several hundred. It is said that: “In peak years as many as forty thousand mines were being worked.” Kimble notes in addition that: “Gold has been exported from the Gold Coast since the discovery of the country in the fifteenth century, though the industry was in the hands of the natives until the later part of the nineteenth century.” From: G. B. Kay, *The Political Economy of Colonialism in Ghana: a Collection of Documents and Statistics 1900-1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 210.
cultivation to exploit the fertile but shallow, easily exhausted forest soil. Fields were cleared by chopping and burning the undergrowth, leaving a layer of ash as fertilizer."\footnote{130}

This model of technology was the bedrock of the daily Asante activities which Robert Edgerton describes as follows: “…village life revolved around the agricultural cycle, as villagers weeded, planted, harvested and carried their crops to market. Men cut down trees and prepared the land for cultivation. …Men also traded, fished, and hunted while women collected the huge snail that played a major part in Asante cuisine.”\footnote{131} McCaskie, thus, explains shifting cultivation as practiced in traditional: “Rural agriculturist practiced a calculated system of both land and crop rotation; the basic Asante \textit{afuo} or farm comprised the \textit{afuwa}, the land currently under crops, and the \textit{mfufuwa}, the ‘non-farm’ or land currently under fallow.”\footnote{132}

Regarding the productivity of these activities Freeman attested in 1817 concerning pre-colonial Asante that:

\begin{quotation}
In these bright and sunny regions nature is also bountiful in its supplies of suitable vegetables and fruits – the yam, cassava, Indian corn, sweet potato, cocoa-bulb, or \textit{Caladium Esculenum} \footnote{sic}, millet, rice, sugar-cane, ginger, tomatoes, onion, ground-nut, orange, lime, plantain, banana, sour-sop, custard apple, and last but not the least, the noble pineapple, all flourish in Ashantee, [Asante] under ordinary cultivation.\footnote{133}
\end{quotation}

The above utilitarian dimension of the pre-colonial Asante land reveals that human needs did not devastate the natural environment but the flourishing of Nature existed alongside cultivation.

\begin{footnotes}
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Bowdich also offers evidence to this low-level environmental technology when he noted in 1817 that in matters of agriculture the Asante “used no implement but the hoe.”\textsuperscript{134} This could be an exaggeration\textsuperscript{135} but I infer from it that their methods were labour intensive and employed a kind of technology that was not capable of wreaking the ecological havoc often witnessed in the use of high technology methods and farming implements such as tractors. Thus, like many communities in the tropical forest zone of Africa, the Asante hardly had the requisite technology to subdue their natural surroundings in any overwhelming manner\textsuperscript{136}.

This reality led a scholar like Peter T. Bauer to contend that Africa knew no abundance of crop production until colonial rule. His claim is, however, rebutted by the attestation of Bowdich and McCaskie. The latter notes in this regard:

The general picture, then, for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is of a mixed rural economy in which fully established subsistence farming was the dominant mode of production. The availability of cultivable land and the productive capacity of agriculturists guaranteed that Asante society … was not subject to cycles of massive deprivation, and cannot remotely be classified as an economy of generalized want and hunger.\textsuperscript{137}

The abundance of food production by the space-consuming methods of shifting cultivation can be said to indicate that the Asante impacted vast expanse of their environment. John Beechem notes equally in 1841 that: “As the traveller from the coast

\textsuperscript{134} T. E. Bowdich, \textit{Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom, and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa}. London, 1819, p. 325.
\textsuperscript{135} Other implements existed besides the hoe (asò). They include: sòsò, akuma, sekan, etc
advances into Ashantee, (As-hânti,) the plantations become more flourishing and extensive; and on approaching the capital, they are seen placed with much regularity in triangular beds, each surround by a small drain, and carefully cleared from weeds”138 But what was the nature of the impact of this agricultural activity and its concomitant commercial pursuits on the ecology? The general impression is that farming implements and methods of cultivation were appropriate to conserving Nature. Colonial ecologists, however, contend that these methods were wasteful of the environment and constantly referred to the need to introduce policies that will “safeguard the interest of the native owners of the forest; thus the lamentable effects of the wholesale destruction without re-afforestation of valuable timber forest….139

The second type of Asante impact on the environment was more profound than the first. It was mainly accompanied by the use of the tractor, the chemical fertilizer, massive logging with chain-saw, and the above all large-scale cultivation of the cash crop, cocoa.140 The impact of cocoa cultivation on the Asante environment can be deduced from the 1916-1917 report of the Governor of the Gold Coast (later Ghana) which stated inter alia:

140 The creation of battle fields in these thick forests also accounted for some of the deforestation. J. R. McNeill noted, for instance that: “Thickly forested landscapes lent themselves to guerrilla tactics, and militated against the use of formal infantry maneuvers, not to mention reliance upon artillery and cavalry, which were difficult to deploy in such terrain. On one occasion in 1741, West African armies of Akyem and Asante assigned some 10,000 men the task of cutting trees to make space for a full-scale battle (won by Asante). More often, dense secondary-growth forest with its tangled undergrowth prevented large armies fighting decisive battles, so West African warfare was a matter of smaller units mounting ambushes along narrow forest paths.” From: J. R. McNeill, “Woods and Warfare in World History”, in Environmental History, July 2004, Vol. 9 Issue 3, pp. 388-411.
Enormous areas of forest land have everywhere been cut down for cocoa and when one considers that it is undoubtedly due to the huge extent of forest and its concomitant humidity more than to anything else that cocoa can be successfully grown in this country, since we have the lowest rainfall in any cocoa-growing country in the world, it seems to me of vital importance that regulations restricting destruction of forest should be introduced before it is too late.\textsuperscript{141}

It must, however, be said that the blessings of these two levels of technological know-how were mixed: while the employment of modest implements retarded development and the creation and accumulation of wealth and capital, the use of high intensity technology often led to the degradation of the environment,\textsuperscript{142} the expansion of trade and the production of wealth notwithstanding.

This dual nature of Asante impact on the environment is analogous to a context which William Beinart captures thus:

\textit{It is also likely that some of the most likely impacts have been, historically, when natural and anthropogenic causes reinforce each other, and when elements of local practice are combined with new techniques and scientific advances. It may be a mistake to pose natural and anthropogenic factors, or global and local factors, as opposing influences in analyses of environmental [construction] degradation.}\textsuperscript{143}

The idea that that modest technology employed in the Asante environment must have left the forest almost intact is still a subject of debate. E.A. Boateng notes that:

\textit{Until the creation of forest reserves by the government in the late 1920’s, there was indiscriminate exploitation of the forests and a great deal of unnecessary destruction for the creation of farms. Even, so the rate of}

\textsuperscript{142} G. B. Kay notes Further that: “The real problem, however, of the cocoa industry in the future is how far the soil has been depleted of the necessary mineral content by the very heavy crops …. Not only is there danger to this crop from the impoverishment of the soil, but also from the deforestation which has become serious in certain parts of the colony.” From: G. B. Kay, \textit{The Political Economy of Colonialism in Ghana: A collection of documents and Statistics 1900-1960}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 206.
destruction was alarming. Between 1947 and 1957 agriculture destroyed about 600 square miles of forest annually, and today out of the 25,000 or 30,000 square miles originally forming the closed forest zone only 10,610 square miles of true forest remain. This is made up of 5850 square miles of forest reserves and only 4760 square miles of unreserved forest.¹⁴⁴

Some, however, reject the exactitude of Boateng’s contention. T. F. Chipp, for instance, notes that: “Large part of western Asante remained virgin forest until the emergence of the cocoa industries in the twentieth century.”¹⁴⁵ This abundance of primal forest existed along side a system that sustained alimentary security and self-sufficiency, rather endorsing the idea that though traditional Asante believed that trees and animals have spirits, these rules of hunting, farming and the harvest of natural resources did not prevent them from undertaken activities of both light and heavy environmental impact whenever it was necessary.

Indeed, the nature and magnitude of the Asante impact on the environment may be gauged by the fact that environmental historians who have studied Asante have indicated that it was a place in which human activity was enormous, producing wealth and resources which sustained commercial activities of diverse types on trade routes connecting large areas of the continent of Africa and of the Middle East. The extent of the vibrant activities by which Asante impacted their environment by putting their natural resources to use has been observed by Dickson, for example, in these words:

Ashanti thus became the great heart that pumped life along the major commercial arteries that led southward to the coastal ports or northward to and beyond Northern Ghana. To regularize trade in the Ashanti provinces in Southern Ghana, Brong Ahafo, and Northern Ghana, and to ensure a

steady flow of revenue there from to the court treasury, the king of Ashanti stationed trade officials, toll gatherers, and administrators in several major settlements, including those at important crossroads. Elmina, Cape Coast, and Accra on the coast were the most important seats of Ashanti traders and diplomatic officials; in the interior the Akwapim town of Mamfe, situated at the junction of major trade routes from Ashanti and Akim to the coast, was one of many such settlements in Southern Ghana with Ashanti officials.\footnote{Kwamina B. Dickson, \textit{A Historical Geography of Ghana}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 35.}

\section*{2 : 6 Colonial impact on the environment}

The set of policies put in place by colonial authorities to regulate and control the use of natural resources had widespread and profound effects on the colonized African communities. These effects and the attitude that African communities expressed towards them feature in the contents of literary works of these communities. The link between these proverb-poems and these colonial policies of environmental control is clarified or justified by the fact that the exact dates of composition of these texts are hardly determinable, and that without denying their likely ancientness one might well associate them with colonial influence or rather go as far as locating them squarely in the colonial era. Indeed, poets and literary figures who have taken up this theme of the impact of colonial policy on the African and colonial environment include Aimé Césaire, who in his work, \textit{Discours Sur le Colonialisme}, draws a balance sheet in which he debates the merits and demerits of Colonialism. Césaire compares and contrasts the economic, social, and political outcomes of the European colonization of Africa. The portions where he pertinently raises environmental concerns include the following:

\begin{quote}
On m'en donne plein la vue de tonnage de coton ou de cacao exportés; d'hectares d'oliviers ou de vignes plantées.
Moi, je parle d'économies naturelles, d'économies harmonieuses et viables, d'économies à la mesure de l'homme indigène désorganisées, de cultures
\end{quote}
vivrières détruites, de sous-alimentation installée, de développement agricole orienté selon le seul bénéfice des métropoles, de rafles, de produits, de rafles de matières premières.\textsuperscript{147}

One can deduce from this perspective of Césaire that colonial environmental policy had some positive aspects which, in his opinion, were mediocre compared to the general demerits of the colonial enterprise. Césaire’s commentary serves the additional purpose of underlining the magnitude of colonial environmental policy and the widespread\textsuperscript{148} nature of the reaction it produced among the colonized. The extent of the impact and the reaction thereof (which I argue might be reflected in the concerns raised in the proverb-poems) can also be understood by grasping the psyche that propelled the European colonial enterprise. In this regard the following opinion expressed by Stephen Greenblatt on the European presence in the New World is largely applicable to the African context:

\begin{quote}
The Europeans who ventured to the New World in the first decades after Columbus’s discovery shared a complex, well-developed, and above all, mobile technology of power: writing, navigational instruments, ships, war-horses, attack dogs, effective armor, and highly lethal weapons, including gunpowder. Their culture was characterized by immense confidence in its own centrality, by a political organization based on practices of command and submission, by a willingness to use coercive violence on both strangers and fellow countrymen, and by a religious ideology centered on the endlessly proliferated representation of a tortured and murdered god of love.\textsuperscript{149}
\end{quote}

I would like to reiterate that it is this centrality and the possession of the technology to enforce the beliefs thereof which constitute the fountain head of all the merits and


\textsuperscript{148} It is significant to note the observation of Grove that: “Increasingly, then, while the process of expansion continued to serve the purpose of capital and the European market, it also began to promote a longer-term project. This consisted, after about 1700, in the search for the normative location for social Utopias and the simultaneous formulation of an environmental critique. In other words, the attempt to reconcile the human ecological impact with the laws of nature manifested itself both in environmentalism and in searches for better and more ‘natural’ (or even revolutionary) social dispensations.” From: Richard H. Grove, Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, tropical island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1800, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 481.

demerits of the colonial enterprise. The impact made by the combination of the attitude of centrality and the relative technological modesty of the colonized were seen in the economic, social, political, and environmental spheres.\textsuperscript{150} For the purposes of this thesis I limit the discussion to the environmental aspects of the impact, and specifically the impact of colonial land policy in general especially the policy of enclosure and the introduction of scientific investigation.

The two innovations of enclosure system or the virtual abolishing of common ownership and scientific inquiry into the functioning of the environment are typical of the colonial enterprise. Their implementation was at the heart of colonial environmental policy which was generally founded on several factors including an European quest for external resources for European development,\textsuperscript{151} a scientific mode of environmental inquiry usually at variance with the epistemology of the indigenous knowledge found in the colonies, the commoditization of land through a reform of the local land tenure system, the introduction of enclosures and the privatization of hitherto commonly owned natural resources/property. Others are the influx of chemical fertilizers, the advent of a massive wage labour system, and the introduction of a wide variety of food and cash crops. It must equally be said that the overall effects of these policies cut across diverse areas such

\textsuperscript{150} There was, however, no solid unanimity on this issue of the best way to ensure ‘European’ interests. This is because, as Grove notes: “The articulation of a threat of social breakdown on top of climatic or economic disaster was an effective political weapon in these cases. Colonial environmental policies arose, therefore, between 1650 and 1850, as a product of highly structured tensions between colonial periphery and metropolitan centre and between the insecure colonial state and the climatic environmentalism of the new scientific conservation elites.” From: Richard H. Grove, Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, tropical island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1800, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 485.

as mining, soil management, monoculture plantations, forest and game reserves, afforestation and other forms of the enrichment of vegetation.

At the centre of the colonial environmental policy was the enclosure system which proposed a virtual commoditization of land. The tenure of land was to be vested in the state. In Ghana attempts to introduce this practice and the structures thereof in the nineteenth century was opposed by the Aborigines Rights Protection Society (ARPS) for the main reason that it sought to dispossess the people of their lands. The major effect of the abolishing of common ownership of natural resources under the implementation of colonial environmental policy was to have encouraged the colonized to move into towns and work as wage labourers. George Monbiot has contested the position of Hardin by pointing out that policies inspired by such a principle ignite a painful and precocious urbanization. Monbiot explained at length that:

These changes in the ownership of land lie at the heart of our environmental crisis. Traditional rural communities use their commons to supply most of their needs: food, fuel, fabrics, medicine and housing. To keep themselves alive they have to maintain a diversity of habitats: woods, grazing lands, fields, ponds, marshes and scrub. Within these habitats they need to protect a wide range of species: different types of grazing, a mixture of crops, trees for fruits, fibres, medicine or building. The land is all they possess, so they have to look after it well. But when the commons are privatized they pass into the hands of people whose priority is to make money. The most efficient means of making it is to select the most profitable product and concentrate on producing that.

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152 The colonial administrative policy of indirect rule, however, had an impact of a similar kind. Amanor comments that: "Native administration proved to be highly unpopular among the peasantry, and in many areas youth and commoners organized, frequently through the precolonial commoner associations (asafos), to oppose the arbitrary rule of chiefs, and frequently attempted to destool (dethrone) them." From: Kojo Sebastian Amanor, Night Harvesters, Forest Hoods and Saboteurs: Struggles over land Expropriation in Ghana, in Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, Reclaiming the land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America, London and New York: Zed Books, 2005, p. 103.

Nonetheless, one must equally point to the fact that the merits to which Césaire points cannot be separated from the context of these negative effects. It is significant to note that these effects were tributary to or part of a system which equally has the remarkable merit of advancing scientific inquiry into environmental issues of the colony. Critics have rightly underlined that: “Attempts to draw a line between scientific and indigenous knowledges on the basis of method, epistemology, context-dependence, or content …have produced little that is persuasive.”\(^{154}\) Nonetheless, the fact still remains that it is the botanical gardens and laboratories of the colonial environmental policy that dissipated a lot of the superstitious practices of colonies by ensuring that: “…the instrumental logic of development is that particularized knowledges be tested and validated using the criteria deemed appropriate by science.”\(^{155}\) It is significant to underline that this duality of critique and appreciation, of demerits and merits which characterize the economic, social, and political realms of the colonial enterprise find reflections in the content of these proverb-poems.

2 : 7 **Colonial Discourse on Environmentalism**

The policies by which colonial authorities sought to control the use of environmental resources were inspired by specific ways of thinking and talking about the environment. This discourse (or ways of thinking) and the effects of the policies they advocated equally led to ways of perceiving the general methods and effects of these policies. This

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discourse covers several spheres of the colonial experience. For example, they reflect the rigour and scope of human intervention in nature. They equally express the mutually beneficial advantages that were expected to accrue to both Europe and Africa from the implementation of the colonial environmental policy. Other spheres covered by this discourse are the prioritization of the conservation of nature as a *sine qua non* to development, the manner in which conflicting political and economic interest between locals and colonialists were couched and resolved, as well as the rendition of the conflict between the interests of the colonial elite on one hand and that of the colonial government on the other. Thus, to a large extent the discourse of colonial environmental policy encapsulated the cardinal issues in the socio-political nature of the struggle between natives and colonialist for control and possession of land and its resources in the colony. It is, therefore, no wonder that a careful analysis of these proverb-poems reveals them as speaking to the concerns implicit in the discourse that informs the conceptualization and implementation of colonial environmental policy. I address how some three dimensions of this wide discourse relate to the content of the proverb-poems I discuss in this thesis. These are the discourses of moderation and preservation, the imbalance in the sharing of the benefits of science and technology and development between the colonies and the Metropolis, and the colonial designation of native/traditional environmental management as abusive of nature and wasteful of resources.

The principle of intervening in nature with moderation was fundamental to the discourse of colonial environmental policy. Certainly, the colonized environment was seen as
needing rectification from local environmental practices such as bush burning and shifting cultivation which were said to be abusive of the environment and hence capable of triggering the exhaustion of resources. Nonetheless, the precepts and methods of colonial environmental policy hinged on a discourse of moderation whose progression and formulation David Lowenthal has located within the antecedents of:

...transitions from early ignorance to eighteenth-century hubris, to nineteenth-century fears about resource exhaustion and unwanted side-effects, to twentieth-century reforms felt sufficient to rectify abuses. Although technology has accelerated environmental change, most human impacts are now adjudged purposeful and beneficial, the heedless exploitation of the past giving way to rational, conservation minded manipulation.156

This idea that the environment should be manipulated to achieve a conservation resulting from a balanced and measured exploitation of environmental resources resemble the predilection for species diversity found in the admonition for the conservation of the antelope, the lizard, and the bear found in the proverb-poems.

It is equally significant to note that this discourse of moderation and preservation of nature ignited a counter-discourse which sought to point out that the manipulation of nature implied in the discourse of moderation and preservation: “may be destroying wise and durable native systems of living with the land.”157 From this alert of possible negative effects of colonial environmental policy developed a discourse covering the issue of the nature of development occasioned by this policy. This discourse prioritized

the issues concerning the sharing of the practical benefits of colonial environmental policy between the colony on one hand and the Metropolis on the other. On this issue, researchers such as Wolfgang Sachs articulated a discourse of an imbalanced economic development. Sachs notes:

In the history of progress, time, space and social class have been the major dimensions along which costs have been shifted out of sight and out of mind. …the rise of Western nations was greatly facilitated by their power to concentrate the social and environmental costs of resource mobilization in geographically remote areas. Large distances protected the centres from feeling the bitter effects of mining, monoculture and deforestation, effects that were experienced mainly by colonized peoples around the world.158

Such discourse which points to the unfulfilled promises of development in the colonies underlined that the colonies lost out on the benefits of scientific and technological research in the colonies.159 Paul Cloke, Chris Philo and David Sadler, for instance, asserted: “the rise of geography from 1870 to 1918 firmly in the context of the geographical expansion of the colonial powers and their pressing need for maps and surveys to underpin and codify white rule. The context and status of geography in this period clearly reflected its relation to a dominant, aggressively expansionist, political conception.”160 Critics went further to indicate that the colonial state maintained a policy consistent with its discourse of political expansion. Groves depicts part of the underpinning practice of this discourse of white rule and colonial state control of

159 Sachs notes again that: “Any achievements brought to the last corner of the globe by the gradual integration of the world have shrunk into insignificance in the face of the bitter consequences that have come along with it. … By and large, the unification of the world seemed to have been governed by some kind of magnetic law according to which the advantages concentrate in the North and the disadvantages in the South.” From: Wolfgang Sachs, Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development, London/New York: Zed Books, 1999, p. 71-72.
environmental policy as a conflict between the state on one hand and individual colonial officials on the other when he notes, for instance, that: “Early colonial conservation policies were almost always perceived as being a legitimate concern of the state rather than of the individual. Moreover, they often resulted in governments attempting to restrict the activities of private capital or its direct and indirect agents in the prior, and longer-term, interests of the state.”

It is significant to note that both colonizers and natives recognized that the central thrust of the discourse of environmental moderation or development and the place of the individual and private capital boiled down to the questions of political and socio-economic control. It is significant to note, in this regard, the observation of Jane Carruthers that:

From the outset, however, despite the abundance of fauna which they found in the African interior, people from Europe blamed Africans for ruthless extermination. Imperial antagonism for African hunting was based on the ideology that to subsist on game (as Africans did) or to sell it (as Boer settlers did) was ‘less civilized’ than to kill for amusement. There was also distaste for ‘cruel’ African methods of hunting. But by the end of the nineteenth century the principal reason had become quite clear: ‘the destruction of game by the natives …enabled a large number of natives to live by this means who would otherwise have to maintain themselves by labour Wildlife conservation thus played a role in creating a proletariat in the industrializing Transvaal.’

Thus, colonial environmental policy was regarded as a tool for the implementation of policies of widespread socio-political ramifications. From the discourse that native environmental management was destructive of nature came the recommendation that

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colonial state control was needed to rescue the environment of the colonized from total degradation. In the Gold Coast, for instance, a Timber Protection Ordinance that required natives to seek permission for the exploitation of forests for timber, fuel, and other produce was flouted by an association called the Aborigines Rights Protection Society (ARPS). Likewise a forest bill introduced into the Legislative Council in October 1910 was rejected for seeking to give the colonial Governor the right to create forest reserves in ‘Waste lands, i.e. lands unoccupied and uncultivated’. The basic argument advanced by the opponents to these ordinances was that the ordinances were instruments intended to disorganize the native societies for the economic and political advantage of the colonial government. One of the leaders of the A.R.P.S., J.E Casely Hayford noted in this regard that: “…it is inconceivable in the native mind that any jurisdiction can exist without land, or without the right and power of active management of such land. Take away the control of the lands by the Amanhin and Ahinfu and you have practically destroyed the whole fabric of native institutions.” Eventual compromise between colonial policy and local concerns resulted in the gradual establishment of game reserves and agricultural extension services. The activities of these institutions influenced local thought and practices to an extent that they can be said to have eventually fed into the reflection of local poets on environmental issues.

2 : 8  The Current Environmental Problems of Asante

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The current environmental problems of Asante\(^{164}\) which I argue must be tackled with literary insight are diverse. Their resolution should contribute to addressing the broader contemporary problems of Ghana some of which Jeffrey D. Sachs presents as follows:

Like other African countries, Ghana has been unable to diversify its export base beyond a narrow range of primary commodities, mainly cocoa beans. It lacks the domestic resources needed to finance critical investments in health, education, roads, power, and other infrastructure. It fell into sharp debt and financial crisis in the early 1980s and since then the government has been hard pressed to pay its monthly bills, much less to expand the levels of public investment.\(^{165}\)

The specific environmental problems related to the above global picture range from issues that come under the rubric of atmosphere, biodiversity, forest resources, fresh water, environmental and human health, land resources, and coastal zone and marine environment. Pertinent to the forest of Ghana in which Asante is situated is the insightful observation of Wilson Tamakloe that: “Ghana’s rich biodiversity is gradually being depleted due to a variety of factors. Prominent among them are poaching, habitat loss, deforestation, etc. It is indisputable that there is a pressing need to domesticate the Biodiversity Convention.”\(^{166}\) He goes on to note concerning forest resources that:

It is estimated that over 90 percent of Ghana’s high forest have been logged since the late 1940s. The rate of deforestation is 5 percent in off-reserves and 2 percent in on-reserves. The off-reserves have been seriously degraded and fragmented to less than 5 percent of the forested area 83,489km\(^2\). The current deforestation rate is about 22,000 hectares (ha) per annum. Ghana, therefore, may face future export deficits and there is the likelihood that the country’s forestry sector will die out.\(^{167}\)

\(^{164}\) Rather than conducting a fresh environmental research on the state of the environment in Asante, I have opted to cite recent research findings on that issue. Separate statistics on Asante forest are identified with that of the wider forest of Ghana as a whole. For that reason I will refer to the problems of the forest of Asante and that of Ghana in an almost interchangeable manner.


\(^{167}\) ibid.
This situation is compounded by additional difficulties which Kojo Sebastian Amanor puts as follows:

By pandering to narrow elite interest and the export trade in timber, the Forestry Service has alienated rural people from forestry policy and lost its moral authority to manage timber resources for posterity and the ‘national interest’. The destruction of timber trees within the forest becomes an act of defiance against the export trade in timber which has come to plague the lives of forest-edge communities and is a symbolic assertion of rights to land.168

And concerning water, Tamakloe has noted that: “Inadequate industrial and domestic wastewater management has resulted in the pollution of most surface water resources in the country. Prominent among these are the rivers that flow through urban areas.”169 Jodi Jacobson equally indicates how in Ghana: “…the expansion of cash-cropping and production for export has not been accompanied by the trickle down of benefits to the poor, especially poor/women, while at the same time it has led to water pollution, soil erosion, destruction of firewood resources, and loss of genetic diversity of plants and animal stock.”170 The urgency presented by the environmental situation in present-day Asante can be equally deduced from the observation of environmental historians that: “In Ghana, less than half the forest zone remained by 1950s, and today the rate of deforestation is about 75,000ha per annum.”171 In Asante this task is urgent when we

come to realize that “Livelihoods, however, depend heavily on natural resources, so conservation is necessary. The dilemma is to devise policies that are effective. Some decentralization of policy-making might improve matters, but care will be needed to avoid pitfalls.”

In view of the above reality, I have not underestimated the manner in which the knowledge contained in these proverb-poems can feed into a search for solutions to environmental problems. I concur with Posey that:

> We are faced with some serious multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural dilemmas. Some of these are methodological, as well as philosophical and political. How can indigenous concepts be used as ‘criteria and indicators’ in the development of baseline studies of biodiversity? … How can spiritual and cultural values be incorporated into planning and policy decisions?

I wish to indicate that these problems associated with logging, mining, and water have far-reaching implications for degradation regarding flora, fauna, and landscape since these are altered and depreciated in various ways.

Certainly, these problems have not been left unattended by the government and the communities. Strenuous efforts have been deployed to solve them. At the governmental level one can cite the inclusion of environmental components in the curricula of educational institutions. There are also attempts by communities to tackle issues of closed forest decreased from 4.79 million ha in 1937/38 to 1.72 million ha in 1980 (64.1%), while open forest and woodland diminished from 11.11 million ha to 6.98 million ha (37.2%) in 43 years.” See p. 107.


environmental degradation. For example, in an article entitled “Ghanaians say gold mining companies are destroying their land”, Edward Ameyibor attests to the action of the people of Tarkwa “to protest against the increasing environmental degradation in the region.”\textsuperscript{174} This protest, I argue, is done in the context of pre-existing environmental perspectives or values of these societies. It attests to a situation where technology and mechanization have “…successfully transform[ed] nature on a vast scale, but so far with unpleasant as well as unpredictable consequences.”\textsuperscript{175}

The concerns and efforts made by central authority to resolve these issues can be additionally enhanced by the exploration of conceptual and empirical connection between literary, environmental, and developmental issues. This is because of the general environmental function of literature, which Fitter states as follows:

Perception of landscape can never be disinterested: it is always libidinal: has always a structuring, desiring agenda of needs and hopes and wariness, conscious or otherwise. Human needs in and from landscape are many: we may seek material security or provision, the psychological reassurance of environmental integration or dominance, the cognitive pleasure of recognition, verification and understanding, or aesthetic gratification from the comely and perennial.\textsuperscript{176}

In order to indicate the manner in which the traditional Asante managed their “human needs in and from landscape”, my analysis of these proverb-poems has grafted environmental facts on literary inquiry. The analysis is equally indicative of the manner

in which Asante oral literature transcended its social and cultural context to express universal themes about the environment.

These proverb-poems reflect the microcosm of the religious and moral beliefs, the public attraction, the dramatization qualities, as well as the rhetorical strategies that evoked, sustained, policed, and enforced public discussion of the co-existence between humans and nature in Asante. I consider that they provided the version of a contemporary role of the verbal art, a role which John A. Hannigan observes in these terms:

… a potential environmental problem must be dramatised in highly symbolic and visual terms. Ozone depletion was not a candidate for widespread public concern until the decline in its concentration was graphically depicted as a hole over the Antarctic. The wanton practices of the major forestry companies only became a matter of international outrage when Greenpeace and other environmental groups began to exhibit dramatic photographs of the ‘clear-cuts’ on the Vancouver Island while labelling the area ‘Brazil of the North’. Images such as this provide a kind of cognitive short cut compressing a complex argument into one which is easily comprehensible and ethically stimulating.177

This is what these proverb-poems did in traditional Asante to raise, sustain, and police environmental consciousness. For this reason, I think that the forms, ideas, and values they embody can be infused with modern concerns and practices to make them once again contribute to the present search for remedies for contemporary environmental degradation and to salvage indigenous environmental knowledge.

2 : 9 Genre and Meaning of the Asante Talking Drum

Ruth Finnegan has noted that: “Among the Akan almost every ordinary proverb can be reproduced on drums, and in drum poetry in general there is frequent use of proverbs to

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provide encouragement and incitement. But there are also extended proverbs specifically intended for performance on the drums.” This observation of Finnegan does not only relate the proverb-poem to the talking drum. It equally presents the proverb-poem in its performative role as language accomplishing/effecting an act, in this specific instance she cites the act of encouragement and incitement. Finnegan’s insight helps to highlight the (proverb-poems) drum poetry as a performative genre of environmental significance. To indicate the nature of this performative essence of the drum poem I answer the questions: What is drum poetry? What are the occasions of its performance? What is its status as a performative genre?

Drum poetry, of which the proverb-poems form an integral part, is an oral literary poetic genre performed on the drum. In other words these drum poems were conceived as words and then drummed. It is pertinent to note that in Asante their literary function goes beyond the primary media ones of the communicative and entertaining role which Mushengyzi notes as follows:

The idea of “talking” drums implicitly calls up a notion of transmission of information. Drums that ‘talk’ imply a different purpose from those that are sounded in order to entertain. …They are mainly used as a medium of mass communication to transmit important, urgent messages to a relatively large audience. They may be sounded to summon people for public meetings, to community work, or to announce war or a far reaching calamity, or else the death of an important person such as an elder or chief.179

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Finnegan emphasizes the literary function of the Asante talking drum when she presents drum poetry thus:

One additional model of poetic performance should be mentioned. This is delivery through drums and similar instruments. Though unfamiliar to most western readers, the remarkable form of literature known as ‘drum poetry’ is widespread in the tropical forests of Africa (and sometimes elsewhere). In the ‘drum literature’ of Africa, the instruments do not act as a musical accompaniment to a verbal text, nor do they communicate through a pre-arranged code. Rather, the drum is used to transmit the actual *words* of the poem. Many African languages are highly tonal …Hence the drumming represents the *spoken utterances* in a way intelligible to the listeners, and is heard as actual *words* and groups of words.¹⁸⁰

I would like to explain that in order to produce these “*words*” and “*spoken utterances*” of the texts the drums are set in different pitches or voices. The highly pitched one is classified as *bedee* (female) and the low-pitched one is denoted as *nini* (male). It is equally significant to note that Finnegan considers that these texts “unmistakably fall into the category of highly developed oral literature.”¹⁸¹ This opinion of her’s concurs with the observation of Nketia that: “Although drums are used in Akan society for making a limited number of announcements, they are also vehicles of literature.”¹⁸²

Regarding the occasion of the performance of the talking drum it must be noted that there are both daily and occasional instances for its performance. Each morning the drummer-poet would drum to awaken the community, greet the people and thank God. In addition to this the drums are played during state occasions to recount national achievements and

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 499
the heroic deeds of groups and individuals. The audience in this instance is the general public. Nketia notes in this regard that: “On state occasions poems of special interest are drummed to the chief and the community as a whole. These poems run into many scores of verses and fall into four groups. …First…the drummer announces himself…He then addresses in turn the components of the drum - wood of the drum, the drum pegs, strings, the animal that provides the hide of the drum: the elephant or the duiker. …Next he addresses the earth, God, the witch, the cock and the clockbird, ancestor drummers, and finally the god Tano.” Because of its frequent use and the solemnity of the official occasions at which they are played, the ideas and sayings of the drum texts have trickled into songs, lyrics, and riddles of the community.

In view of the daily nature of the art of drumming in Asante community and the solemnity that surrounds the occasions of its performance I will argue that as literary texts the (proverb-poem) drum poetry inculcates knowledge or perform an act on the audience. I argue this performative status of these texts by following the lead of Jonathan Culler that:

Theorists have long asserted that we must attend to what literary language *does* as much as to what it *says*, and the concept of the performative provides a linguistic and philosophical justification for this idea: there is a class of utterances that above all do something. …The notion of literature as performative contributes to a defence of literature: literature is not frivolous pseudo-statements but takes its place among the *acts of language that transform the world, bringing into being the things that they name*. …In principle at least, the performative breaks the link between meaning and the intention of the speaker, for what act I perform with my words is not determined by my intention but by social and linguistic conventions. (emphasis added).

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183 Ibid p. 95
In drawing on the above insight, I link it to the fact that the drum texts convey messages that solicit reaction/responses from its hearers, and that on all the occasions that the drum poem is performed the drummer has a message or an attitude which s/he is dramatizing by means of both the words s/he utters and the act of beating the drum or the ritual of drumming. My contention is that in those texts the drummer-poet is evoking fauna, flora, and landscape, dramatizing the act of chiding humans for their neglect or abuse of Nature, and urging them to cherish and adore Nature.

I must confess that the detailed analysis of the practical dimension of these texts would necessitate prior extensive ethnographic fieldworks which, though not directly central to the scope and direction of this thesis could, nonetheless, have highlighted the issues of this thesis significantly. Nevertheless, the fact that this thesis is being undertaken in South Africa limits the possibility of this work benefiting from any such considerable supportive ethnographic field inquiry; any work of such scope and scale being possible only on the field in the Asante community of Ghana. This is why I have maintained that these proverb-poems must be studied with a focus on their significance as literary compositions related to environmental and developmental consciousness-raising.

These proverb-poems could be reasonably designated as environmental lyrics in the sense that:

Once seen primarily as a mode of elevated expression, the elegant formulation of cultural values and attitudes, lyric poetry later came to be seen as expression of powerful feeling, dealing at once with everyday life and transcendent values, giving concrete expression to the most inward feelings of the individual subject. This idea still holds sway. Contemporary theorists, though, have come to treat lyric less as expression of the poet’s feelings and more as associative and imaginative work on
language - an experimenting with linguistic connections and formulations that makes poetry a disruption of culture rather than the main repository of its values.\textsuperscript{185}

When viewed in the light of their features of elegant formulation of cultural values and attitudes as well as their direct concern for Nature, these proverb-poems glitter in their role as rejoinders to prevailing environmental attitudes toward Nature of the community. Their function and essence partly resemble those aspects of Romanticism concerning which Marié Heese and Robin Lawton note: “The emphasis was on the individual revolting against social convention; imagination and emotion were more important than reason; nature and physical passion were worshipped; the melancholy and the supernatural were supreme”\textsuperscript{186} (emphasis added).

The above traits of the genre of the proverb-poem talking drum are reinforced by the fact that unlike other forms of artistic performances, drumming has an established institutional status with political authority in Asante. In explaining that these proverb-poems possess a peculiarity and an authenticity derived from their association with political authority I would like to cite the observation of Nketia that:

\begin{quote}
With the exception of village headmen who usually have no drums, every important chief has special music played for him on state occasions. Much of this music is provided by drums kept in his palace and regarded as part of his stool regalia. [For an individual or an undeserving office holder] … to keep a set of these drums for private use meant elevating yourself to the position of a chief. It was regarded as an offence. This ensured that the drums were not misused, the dignity of the dances and the language
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
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associated with them lowered or the marks of chieftaincy and its prestige reduced.\textsuperscript{187}

The association with political authority conferred on the entire content of these texts an authenticity from which the environmental content was safeguarded.

2 : 10 Preferring the Proverb-Poem to Other Genres

Besides these proverb-poems there are \textit{written} texts of Asante literature which equally associated with institutional structures and from which I could equally reread environmental meaning. However, in the recovery of traditional Asante environmental thought, I have preferred to deal with the \textit{oral texts}. The reason for this choice is that because traditional Asante was not a chirographic society I think that the oral texts are more reflective of its thought than any literature that was composed after the introduction of the written word to traditional Asante.

In seeking to discover environmental perceptions of the Asante, my approach has been to select texts that guarantee minimum improvisation and alteration in the composition and the performance. I do not contest the opinion of Coffin that in oral literature “any composition travelling from mouth to mouth, from generation to generation, from country to country is bound to suffer from a certain amount of verbal corruption and degeneration.”\textsuperscript{188} In a sense Coffin’s idea of “verbal corruption and degeneration” presupposes the existence of a lost (maybe hypothetical original) form of the texts. I,


\textsuperscript{188} T. P. Coffin, \textit{The British Traditional Ballad in North America}, Philadelphia: American Folk Society, 1950, p. 3.
therefore, sought for texts in which such corruption and degeneration could be said to be minimal, thus, one which could be as close to the ‘lost original’ as possible. I judged that these proverb-poems are fairly stable/authentic (with lesser variations and versions) on account of the close association that the proverb-poems have with political authority, their source, their poetic nature, the context of their composition and performance, their direct reference to and concern for flora, fauna, and landscape, as well as the fact that each of them constitutes a “holophrase”, which Stanley Frieland defines thus: “A holophrase is a statement expressing an undivided and connected experience of the external world.”\textsuperscript{189} As for Collard, he explicates the nature of the holophrase by explaining that: “A holophrase verbalizes…the way a healthy mind perceives experience and expresses it without separating emotion and reason, feeling and thought, self and non-self.”\textsuperscript{190}

The suitability is reinforced by the ubiquity and prestige associated with proverb-poems, which Nketia describes thus: “Similarly, the use of proverbs is not confined to the poem; they are quoted in many situations – in home, at work, at the court. They are considered a mark of eloquence and wit, and anyone who is able to quote or use proverbs habitually may be regarded as a poet of a sort.”\textsuperscript{191} Thus, the composition and performance of the proverb-poems reach a wider audience, and is practiced by as many people as possible. Since they are specific short catch phrases they can be said to be more dependent on the memorization of pre-prepared texts rather than on composition-in-performance or


\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., p. 96.
improvisation. In saying this I am indicating that retentive memory and accuracy are indispensable in the performance of these shorter texts, and that when texts are longer the tendency is to find numerous versions or/and improvisations in their performance. I would like to add that such improvisations are likely to lead to severe distortions or even to total changes and loss of the essential message of the text. This is the main reason why I think that the terseness of expression, the emphasis of the elements of Nature, and the proverbial nature of the texts I analyse here are the main features which give them relative advantage over genres like tales, dirges, songs, and fables as sources of authentic thought.

This advantage and the preference it has elicited is notwithstanding the fact that the texts I deal with here are recorded, transcribed, and translated from the Akan/Twi, the language of the Asante. It is true that once written these texts lose some of the qualities of their performance such as the acoustics of its rhythm and melody, and the audience to the spectacle. They suffer from the general loss of which Finnegan notes:

> With oral poetry, qualities like emotional atmosphere, dramatic suspense, characterisation, or the effective build-up through repeated units which are identical and monotonous in the verbal texts but not in delivery these can be conveyed not just in the words but in their performance.

It is significant to note that the loss of acoustics, melody and spectacle has implications for the authenticity of the texts. Jan Vansina captures it thus:

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192 By ‘Performance’ I intend the elements: movement, voice and audience response that may go with the piece. These may be determined by the occasion and the subject, and may include stereotype phrases, repetition, singing, intoning, chanting, humming, chorus, interjection, clapping, dancing by audience or performer, variations in speed and pitch of voice, gesticulation, etc, etc.

The oral historian did not find the piece of writing, but rather created it. He or she recorded a living tradition. The questions now are: what is the relationship of the text to a particular performance of the tradition involved and what is the relationship of that performance to the tradition as a whole? Only when it is clear how the text stands to the performance and the latter to tradition can an analysis of the contents of the message begin. This means that the question of authenticity, originality, authorship, and place and time of composition must be asked at each of these stages. The crucial link is the performance. Only the performance makes the tradition perceptible and at the same time only a performance is the source of the ensuing text.¹⁹⁴

Nonetheless, I perceive the texts I deal with in this work as fairly authentic in view of the factor that they are a particular version recorded and produced for publication by an eminent scholar of Akan verbal arts and African Studies, J. H. Kwabena Nketia, who spurred on by the initial works on Akan music by Bobar (1732), Ellis (1872), Freeman (1917), and Rattray (1929), undertook an extensive fieldwork during which he recorded several works from local practitioners of these verbal arts. In one of the numerous books that resulted from these and other field recordings Nketia indicated that:

The data on which the study is based was collected mainly between 1952 and 1956 when intensive field work was undertaken in chosen centres in Ashanti, Kwahu, Akim, Abuakwa, Akuapem, and Fante. Sound and photographic recordings of drums and drumming were made. A list of tape recordings of Akan music made in the field will be found in Appendix IV. Verbal interpretations of drum rhythms were noted along with the results of interviews with drum makers, drummers, dancers, leaders of bands and others. Observations of occasions of drumming were made and some investigations into the correlation of drumming with dancing were carried out. I also took lessons in drumming from a few drummers and had the opportunity of studying their teaching methods, techniques and attitudes to drumming.¹⁹⁵

His book *Ayan*, from which I have drawn the texts for this thesis, is largely a result of the same fieldwork. In the introduction he assesses the authenticity of the texts by sharing his

conviction that the drum language contained therein are some of the messages drummed by people of old. Nonetheless, Nketia refrains from making any claim that this authenticity is thorough or that the words or texts of this immemorial verbal art form, (and probably the ideas therein, I suppose) have all been transmitted verbatim, from one generation to another. Thus, after admitting that not all drummers master their art, and thus implying that some aspects of the ancient art could have been lost, he nonetheless maintains that: “Akan drummers still strive to maintain the forms of the past, and to acquire the skill and knowledge of those before them…” Thus, I infer from his attenuation/concession of loss that this tendency of the short poem - to be remembered more easily than lengthy ones - may not confer exactitude in their recollection, such that the nature of the composition and the performance are between the pre-composition and an improvisation of a sort.

Nketia’s concerns indicate that ideally, the drummer who captures the environmental beliefs and activities of the people into proverb-poems is engaged in an art in whose performance memorisation and exact recollection of pre-existing texts are valued over improvisation, and “creativity” in performance. Drummers are thus expected to produce what they have heard from their ‘teachers’. Hence, I do understand Nketia to be concurring with the opinion of Gerould that, words and tunes of ballads “could not possibly remain unaltered, considering the fallibility of human memory, which plays as

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many tricks with the unlettered singers of folk-songs as it does with the rest of us.”

His revelation equally reinforced the position of Chadwick that: “on the whole we must regard the free variety, which allows more or less scope for improvisation, as the normal form of oral tradition, and strict memorisation as exceptional.”

However, I must caution that this idea that all types of oral texts suffer mis-recollection in their transfer can be overstretched. It can be exaggerated to mean that all types of texts are susceptible to the same degree of mis-recollection. I am arguing that in view of its terseness and its frequent appearance in everyday discourse, a proverb, a maxim or an adage must be less susceptible to semantic and lexical ‘damage’ than a long tale or fable, for instance. On that score the short proverb-poems I have selected could be fairly deemed not unsusceptible, but only less susceptible than longer genre which, I must admit, also contain environmental message. I say this because of the nature of drum proverbs concerning which Ruth Finnegan notes:

The most important device [of the proverb-poem] is the stereotyped phrases used in drum language. …Some of the drum phrases have a poetic ring already removed in imagery and expression from everyday language.

My point is this: in view of the volatile nature of human memory, I would submit that whatever has been retained of any ‘original’ version of these proverb-poems owes a lot to the poetic or terse nature of these proverb-poems. This quality of terseness offers these texts an advantage over other genres such as tales and long panegyrics that might equally

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contain environmental significance. In making this claim I accordingly concur with Finnegan that:

Many of the recorded cases where memorisation predominates rather than the composition-in-performance characteristic of the Yugoslav model, derive from lyric and shorter forms of poetry. Lengthy epic poetic narrations, lasting over several hours or nights of performance, are naturally likely to fit the model of composition-in-performance given by Parry and Lord. Yet Somali poems, it must be recalled, can extend to several hundreds of lines and involve at least some elements of narration, while the lengthy Mandinka ‘epic’ is partly in ‘poetry’ in its recited and sung portions and arguably has poetic elements even in the more prosaic ‘spoken’ parts.201

Thus, the authenticity that offers a relatively fixed version which makes these poems acceptable for serious literary study is inseparable from the quality of these texts as proverb and poems.

I must add that the proverb-poem enjoys, in this regard, an additional advantage, namely its sentimental nature. Thus, of the three - poetry, theatre, and novel - poetry is said to be the first to emerge and is most closely related to the first human act of religious expression, namely, the funeral. For this reason it is held to be more apt to express the kind of sentiments such as those humans express about awesome Nature. This tendency partly explains why it could be held that African “…tales and other prose narratives in fact generally appear to be markedly less important than the majority of poetic forms, in terms of complexity, of the relatively lesser specialism of their composer, and of the assessment of the people themselves.”202

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201 ibid, p. 78.
Another point why the proverb-poem is more suitable to environmental exploration than longer genre is that though tales and fables, for instance, may equally evoke environmental themes, tales have chiefly connotative significance rather than direct reference to and explicit concern for flora, fauna, and landscape. For example, Nketia notes:

Oral literature has tended to give prominence to persons, interpersonal relationships and attitudes and values derived from our conception of the universe. We do not spend time on the daffodils or the nightingale or on reflections on abstract beauty, the night sky and so on as things in themselves, but only in relation to social experience. Our poetry is full of animals and plants, but these are used because they provide apt metaphors or similes, or compressed ways of stating bits of social experience.203 (emphasis added)

I understand him to be indicating that the mention of animals and plants in African oral literature (including my selected texts) is made for the benefit of “interpersonal relationships” and “relation to social experience”. Nonetheless, this same statement of Nketia has implications for environmental meaning. As far as I am concerned there are two separate things that are being compared whenever a metaphor is used in “relation to social experience”. The first is the life of Nature on one hand, and the second is the life of humans on the other. This work takes primary interest in the implication of the first, namely that: the user of such Nature-metaphor is conversant with the lives of those objects of Nature to which he likens social experience. S/he is by implication making a statement about Nature first and foremost, before going on to find parallels of that statement in the lives of humans. The Nature-metaphor is, therefore, before anything else, a commentary on the lives of these elements of flora, fauna, and landscape. My point is

that this statement, knowledge or conversance with Nature, can be reviewed (beyond/outside its social significance) in its literal meaning to discover what attitude the speaker is expressing toward Nature.

It is important to note that in the drum poetry I deal with here, the poets have a direct concern for Nature, which they address directly. A comment made by Nketia himself will confirm this direct preoccupation of the traditional Asante poet with Nature: commenting on one such poem Nketia notes of the drummer-poet: “He then addresses in turn the components of the drum – the wood of the drum, the drum pegs, strings, the animals that provide the hide of the drum: the elephant or the duiker.”²⁰⁴ Rattray also implicitly expresses this primary concern and consideration for Nature in these proverb-poems by indicating that:

Before the serious business of drumming begins the names of the chiefs, the spirits of the various materials, which have gone towards the making of the composite drum, are each propitiated in turn, and these spirits are summoned to enter for a while that material which was once a portion of their habitation. The drums thus, for a time, become the abode of the spirits of forest trees and of the “mighty elephant”. The deities of earth and of sky are called upon in like manner.²⁰⁵

Thus, one of the cardinal advantages that these proverb-poems have over other genres as suitable texts for environmental analysis is the proof that the consideration offered to the elements of Nature in these texts is direct and does not end even after the material exhaustion/death of those elements. Thus, in addition to the terseness of the proverb-poems and their suitability to memorization, the direct consideration for and resultant attitudes generate and police beliefs and attitudes which feed into the conservation of

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 95.
Nature. Those points make them more suitable than other genres which are longer in length and wordy in performance.

2:11 The Proverb-poems as an Archive

In the sections above I indicate that the proverb-poems contain some of the beliefs and traditions of Asante community accumulated over a long period of time. This is not, however, to purport that these contents qualify as historical records or can be viewed as archival records of beliefs. My reason for advancing this position is that one can hardly specify the exact dates of the composition of these texts. It is significant, therefore, to note that I analyse these texts mainly in their status as folklore. My approach concurs with the observation of Paul Zumthor that:

La complexité de son mode d’existence interdit d’étudier la poésie orale autrement que dans la perspective d’assez longues durées. Encore convient-il d’écarter le préjugé historiciste poussant à la recherche d’une origine ou serait contenus en germe les développements ultérieurs. J’insisterais plutôt sur l’équivocité distatus temporel de l'œuvre, à la fois insituable dans le temps abstrait, mesure externe du devenir, et inconcevable en dehors d’un temps concrètement et intérieurement vécu.206

Thus, though their origins may not be recent they can not be considered as verifiably or unequivocally historical. Their veracity as actual occurrences is equally enfeebled by the fact that they contain elements or projections which reflect the future aspirations or wishes of the communities from which they originate.

More significantly it must be noted, then, that this complexity of status characteristic of oral poetry permeates all forms of oral poetry including the more elaborate forms such as the epic which recounts events in details and is often fed into veritable historicity. What Zumthor says regarding the non-archival status of the epic, I should underline, is

applicable to the historical and archival limitations of the texts I analyze in this work. He notes: « L’épopée n’a rien d’un musée. Il n’y a pas d’histoire a proprement parler, mais une vérité perpétuellement recréée par le chant. »

This difficulty which invalidates any pretensions to ascribing historical status to oral text is equally underlined by Isabel Hofmeyr when she notes that:

…a lot of research has emphasized that many ‘traditional’ societies foster a non-formal and loosely institutionalized view of the past which is extremely difficult to capture, unwittingly burdened as we are in the academy by a more contemporary, highly institutionalized, text-bound, linear and chronological understanding of history.

Another reason why one must be careful not to overstate the artistic function of oral texts is offered by Frank Kermode’s observation that such oral poetic contents are normally undebated private views rather than public ones. He notes: “...good poems about historical crises speak a different language from historical record and historical myth.... They make history strange and they are very private in their handling of public themes.... Which is why the interaction between them and their historical contexts is a subject calling for subtlety and caution.”

Zumthor justifies the need for this caution with an additional reason, namely, that the length of time elapsing between an historical event and its poetic rendition might not necessarily be contemporaneous. To buttress this point he evokes the example the uncertainty surrounding the exact origins of the Mandingo epic on the Emperor of ancient

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208 Isabel Hofmeyr, “We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told”: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom, Johannesburg/London/Portsmouth: Heinemann/Witwatersrand University Press/James Currey, 1994, p. 4.
Mali, Sundiata Keita in these terms: “Le Soundiata de l’épopée mandingue, personage historique, mourut en 1255 : combien de temps fallut-il pour que se forme le poème que chante aujourd’hui encore des griots comme Mamadou Kouyate.”210 Thus, the proverb-poems I analyse here are regarded as devoid of precise historical status and are considered as containing the changing environmental notions of Asante.