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Ecocriticism and environmental knowledge of Asante oral traditional poetry

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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this work I have offered a literary perspective that texts of traditional oral literature contain traditional environmental knowledge and concepts which in times past inspired and can still guide the search for solutions to environmental problems today. The work has thus highlighted an otherwise obscure but significant connection between literature, traditional environmental knowledge, and economic development with the aim of helping raise environmental consciousness. If this gleaning of environmental significance from otherwise familiar socio-political texts has seemed defamiliarizing, the reason is as René Lemarchand has observed concerns the nature of multidisciplinary research:

> Although historians, political scientists, and anthropologists all claim the mantle of science, their interpretation of kingship will necessarily reflect the teleological basis of their respective disciplines. At times the divergences are so wide as to impel one to wonder whether they are really talking about the same thing. Turning from the picture of Ashanti bureaucracy drawn by a historian like I. Wilks to the description offered by a political scientist such as David Apter is like moving from one political universe to another. Yet both are presumably dealing with the same society at roughly the same point in history. Even within the same discipline different theoretical twist may result in totally different versions of the same phenomena: at the hands of some anthropologists Frazer's Golden Bough has become little more than a "gilded twig", and what some have tended to elevate to the status of a "sacred cow" others would regard as a cow *tout court*.[1]

I have shown, and that is my driving thesis, that what these traditional Asante proverb-poems say about flora, fauna, and landscape gives us an idea of how that community managed its environment for sustainable development. I have dissected the linguistic

[1] René Lemarchand, "Introduction", in René Lemarchand (ed.), *African Kingship in Perspective*, London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd., 1977, p.6.

components and literary themes by means of literary and linguistic insight in order to support the central themes of human-nature co-existence, which I say is the guiding philosophy of the ensemble of texts that I examine in this work. I begun by saying that those ideas or knowledge of the local communities, which must be prioritised for environmental consciousness-raising and for the eventual effective economic and social development, are embedded in the oral traditional literary works of those communities. I have, therefore, presented a collection of such texts from traditional Asante drum poetry and analysed them to show that they contained ideas that depict how and why the traditional Asante handled their changing environment. With this cultural context in mind, I examined the thematic features in relation to the beliefs and social activities of the Asante community, bearing in mind that: "Essentially, while the elements may be examined individually using intertextual analysis, they, in the end, must not be extracted from the culture from which they originate: a culture infused with religion and spirituality."[2]

Consequently, I concluded that even where they seem to be responding to or contending foreign colonial influences on the environment these texts remain local narratives that mediate the normative, institutional, sentimental, and ethical undercurrents that sustain the environmental values of Asante community. In showing the proverb-poems for what they are, I underlined that they constitute part and parcel of oral tradition and are as such a repository of cultural knowledge. I then defended them against the notions and claims of scholars, who tended to depict oral African literature as obscurantist, anachronistic,

[2] Laura M. Dennis, "Teaching the Goddess and the Junkie: An intertextual Analysis of African American Dance and Music", in *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, Vol. 21 Issue 1, Apr2004, p7, pp13, p.11.

static, and backward. After establishing how and why African oral traditions are dynamic and capable of feeding into developmental efforts, I explained that the particular ones I examine here are rejoinders to both local and foreign/colonial environmental practices which the traditional Asante poets considered as unacceptable and abusive to nature or to human interest or both. Using the approach of Ecocriticism and the notion of structuralism, I depicted the contents of these proverb-poems as revealing an ideological position of human co-existence with nature in a community where drum poetry had a function of instructing, entertaining, and cautioning. I have explained accordingly that these contents specifically present nature as kin to humans, they ascribe to nature a value which transcends any ascribed to it on account of its usefulness to humans, they personify nature and blend the respective interests of humans and nature in a paradox of the dialectic of co-existence between the two species. Upon probing into the scope of this paradox, I also discovered that the aesthetics of the proverb-poems replicate or share a similar triadic structure with this predilection for co-existence. This is in the sense that both the linguistic elements of the narratives and the thematic content thereof can be described as constituting a synthesis or a triadic entity formed from the dialectical resolution of two initially opposing elements.

I argue that attempts such as syllabus reformulation to incorporate ecological issues in the curricula of formal education, should incorporate notions and attitudes which were so central to environmental management. Here, I realized the sentimental, emotional, and ethical poverty of a set of institutional, legal, and governmental approaches with which the state of Ghana (and implicitly present-day Asante) has tried to deal with the quest for

environmental revival. I should say that my intension in pointing to this lacuna was neither to castigate those efforts nor reject all international contribution as totally inimical to the environmental effort in the post-colony. I, therefore, do not "…advocate opting out of globally defined agendas for sustainable development in favour of local self-determination, in forms of development grounded on communal values, subsistence perspectives and indigenous knowledge, with women's knowledge and perspectives – ecofeminism – frequently seen as key"[3]

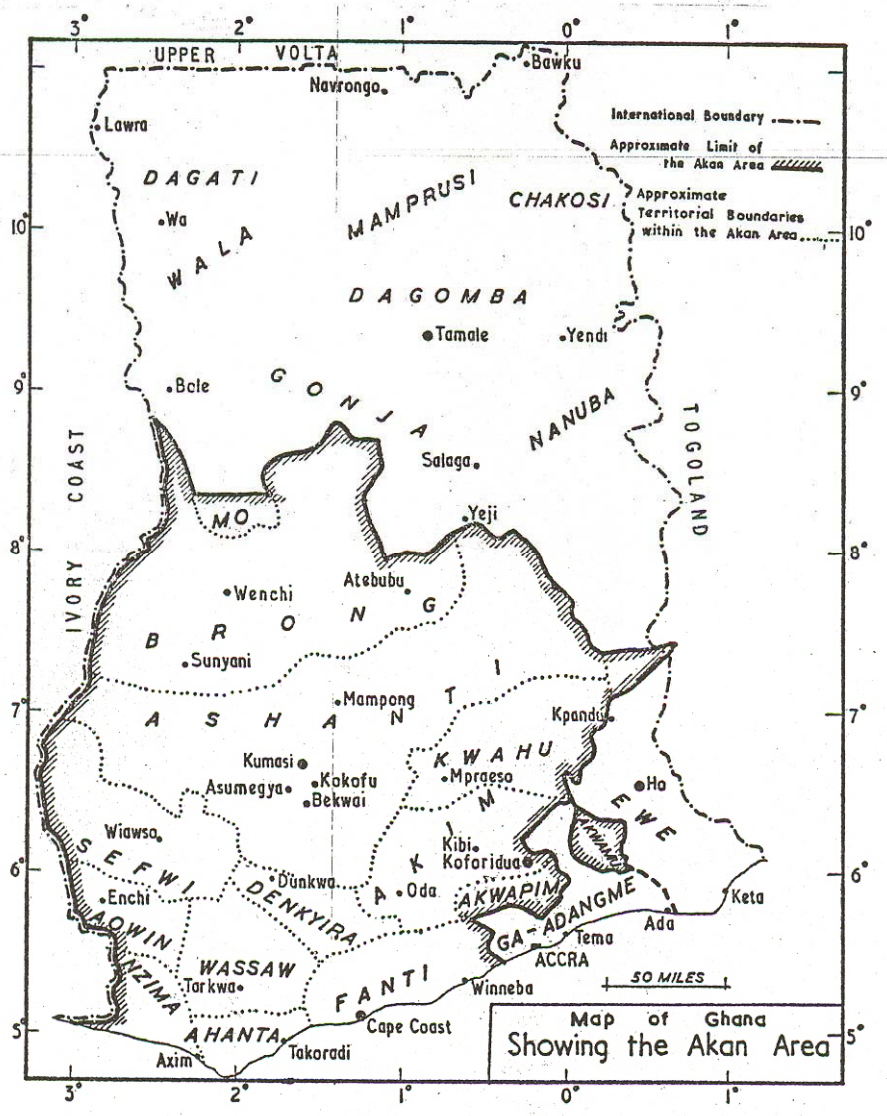
This explains why, without presenting Asante environmental practices in idyllic terms, or advocating a wholesale return to old environmental practices and the beliefs that nurtured them, I have recognized the importance of the deployment of the metaphor of 'Nature-as-humans' as central to any literary endeavour to halt current environmental degradation. In this I concurred that: "…it is necessary to point at the cognitive function of metaphors because they so often have been regarded just as style, a nice way of putting things. Metaphors are much more than that, though. They are vital in the creation of theology. They are used as arguments by the prophets."[4] Thus, I observed that the rendition of nature presented in these proverb-poems is simultaneously expressive and constructive of the environmental reality of traditional and colonial Asante. This mechanism as well as the mythical, sentimental, and ethical components thereof, I concluded, can be imitated to raise environmental consciousness and to enhance current attitudes to flora, fauna, and landscape for the eventual objectives of environmental health.

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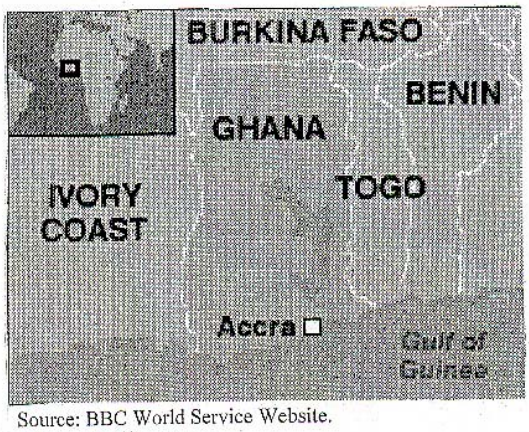
[3] Melissa A Leach, "Culture and Sustainability", in Lourdes Arizpe (ed.), *Culture, Creativity and Markets: World Culture Report 1998*, Paris: UNESCO Publications, 1998, p. 102-103.
[4] Kirsten Nielsen, "From Oracle to Canon: The Role of Metaphor" SJOT: *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, vol. 17, Issue 1, June 2003, p. 22 - 34, p.25.

I have supported the logic and feasibility of this metaphoric and mythical dimension mainly within the framework and precepts of the literary enterprise of Ecocriticism, which commits to the defence of nature through literary action. I have equally referred to the capacity of current Asante community for imitation and adaptation to say that the type of action that will emerge to salvage environmental degradation or reverse it should blend local knowledge with expertise from outside. Its role should be not just to reflect, but also to shape and cherish a literary action geared towards the promotion of the local environmentally positive attitudes and practices with which the communities can identify and will be willing to blend with foreign ones.

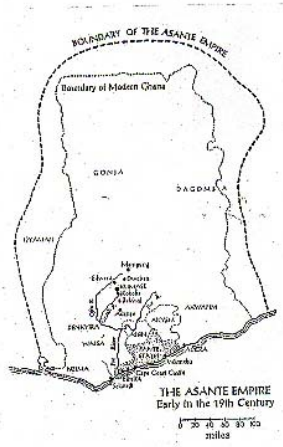
What I am proposing, in brief, is that researchers, policy makers, and workers who deal directly with the environment must explore the current beliefs systems of respective communities to inspire and institute the admiration of nature, the consideration for nature, the appeal to its divine origin and inscrutable purpose, to deepen perceptions of kinship relations with Nature, in order to enhance the culminating predilection for co-existence with it. These values can be all the more effective if current governmental, legal, and institutional efforts are joined with a media-coordinated literary action which undertakes a critique of environmental anthropocentrism by a broad social action of conservation which will enhance environmental health, economic well being, and ever-higher standards of living.



Source : J. H. Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., !963, p.2



Source: BBC World Service Website.
Africa, Country Profile.



Source: 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. 8.