

SOME NZEMA PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES PORTRAYED IN THEIR PROVERBS

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Abstract

This paper looks into some philosophical issues portrayed in Nzema proverbs. The paper discusses the Nzema conceptualisation of divinity, death, the afterlife, human relations, cause and effect, and hard work. The paper argues that proverbs are crucial as they are an embodiment of Nzema traditional beliefs and preservers of desirable human conduct in Nzema society. These philosophies serve as the basis of the Nzema belief system on which many of their socio-cultural norms are grounded. Twenty-one proverbs were purposively collected from both primary and secondary sources. While primary data was taken from natural conversations on given topics and during arbitration, secondary data on the other hand was sourced from literature on Nzema proverbs. The paper first considers the existence of God and other spirits from the perspective of the Nzema as reflected in their proverbs and their bearing on Nzema religious beliefs. It is shown that the Nzema had grounded beliefs about a Supreme Being ‘God’ long before the arrival of Christian missionaries. The paper also highlights some important virtues that need to be pursued in order to be accepted in the Nzema society. These virtues, when followed, yield beneficial results to the individual.

Key words: *beliefs, Nzema, proverbs, philosophy, tradition.*

1 Introduction

Proverbs, as part of folklore, are found in almost all cultures worldwide. They have similar roles and functions and often have the same contexts of use. Adamo (2015) for instance, asserts that proverbs since the ancient times of Israel and Africa have served the same functions such as to advise, reproach, warn, and encourage amongst many others. Obeng (1996; cited in Amfo, Houphouet, Dordoye & Thompson, 2018:10-11) indicates that interlocutors use proverbs in discourse for varying purposes. One of such purposes is to say something gently or in an implicit way. Proverbs therefore serve as a medium through which unpleasant and face-threatening societal issues are presented. With regard to the context of use, proverbs are not used or said anyhow. Proverbs are said subject to specific situations and happenings that call for them. This position is shown in a popular maxim among the Nzema that says: *Betedale a bengal elale* ‘You cannot have a dream when you are not asleep’. Among the Nzema, this proverb implies that for every occurrence, there is a condition. Consequently, proverbs are used subject to conditions that require them. For instance, the Nzema proverb *Kakula bɔ enlonkoe na ɔmbɔ enwɔnra* ‘A child breaks the shell of a snail, but not the shell of a tortoise’ is essentially cited when a speaker wants to admonish a subordinate who does not operate within his or her limit. This is in consonance with Yankah’s (1989) observation that proverbs are essentially useful when employed within an appropriate context of communication.

All traditional philosophical statements such as proverbs are crafted basically on the beliefs of society and people’s lived experiences. Therefore, in order to understand a proverb, one needs to understand the cultural belief from which the proverb stems. According to Borestine (1999), the centre of proverb usage is the understanding of the indirect speech intended to be communicated.

In order to decode the intended message in a given proverb the hearer must have an idea about the beliefs that are associated with the metaphor or symbol conveyed in the proverbs. This is to say that beliefs are the vehicle that carry proverbs. Some of these beliefs include The Supreme Being, lesser gods, death, cause and effect, afterlife, human relationships and hard work. These themes are some of the many issues that have been viewed over the years as tools of social norms and embodiments of Nzema culture and traditions. For instance, for one to decode the message in the proverb *Kakula bɔ enlonkoε na ɔmbɔ enwɔnra* ‘The child breaks a snail but not a tortoise’, one should be familiar with the imagery/symbolism of ‘snail’ and ‘tortoise’, their characteristics, beliefs about them and how they relate to real life. The proverb means that it is not proper for one to do or say anything that is above his/her ability. Indeed, it is easy to break the shell of a snail than that of a tortoise. Thus, if one has no background knowledge of this fact, and the fact that tortoises are bigger than snails, understanding the proverb will present a difficulty.

This study therefore examines some philosophical issues in the daily lives of the Nzema as concealed in their proverbs. Beyond this section, the paper is structured as follows: In §1.1, we consider the language name and its speakers while the etymology of the proverb in Nzema is captured in §1.2. In the second main body of the paper, we review literature on various concepts related to the topic in §2 while §3 broaches the methodology used for the study. In §4, we discuss the data collected and conclude the paper in §5.

1.1 Nzema as a people and language

Nzema is a Kwa (Niger-Congo) language spoken mainly in the south-western part of the Western Region of Ghana and some parts of La Côte d’Ivoire, both in West Africa. The speakers and their geographical area are also known as Nzema. It consists of five dialects namely; *Dwɔmɔlɔ* (Nzema West), *Ɛlɛmgbɛlɛ* (Nzema Central), *Ɛvalɔε*, *Egila* and *Adwɔmɔlɔ* (Nzema East) (Annan, 1980). Nzema is also categorised under Atlantic-Congo, Nyo, Proto-Tano, Tano and Central Bia language groups (Simons & Charles, 2018). Nzema land is bordered to the west by La Côte d’Ivoire, to the east by the Ahanta, to the north by the Aowin (or Anyi) and Wassa and to the south by the Gulf of Guinea. Some of the Nzema speaking communities in Ivory Coast include: Apolonu, Maama, Agyɛkɛ, Mouah (Mowa), Ngyeme, Noi (Noe), Akpanye, Anzeasawu, Manvea (Mafia), Bassam, Kakusuazo, Kpɔkɛti, Poso (Border town), Nzɔbɛnu, Mgbɔsɛya and Eboko. Their traditional capital is Bassam (also known as Grand Bassam) (see Nyame, 2019).

According to the Ghana Statistical Service (2021), the population of the Nzema (in Ghana) totals 342,090. Traditionally, most of the Nzema people engage in subsistence agriculture whilst many also engage in trading to support their livelihoods.

1.2 Source and etymology of *ɛrɛlɛ* (Nzema proverb)

Although there is a universal understanding and a shared sense of what constitutes a proverb, tracing back its origin has proved to be a difficult task, and so its origin remains ambiguous (Ahmed, 2005). Traditional proverbs have stemmed from various sources; usually connected with individuals’ experiences, observations, or general facts from natural and/or different surroundings. That is to say, a proverb is first uttered by an individual and with time it becomes part of the traditions of the community. Subsequently, people use these utterances on similar occasions and transmit them from generation to generation until they become part of their heritage.

As Finnegan (1970) indicates, the figurative quality of proverbs as especially one of their noticeable features is their allusive wording, which usually come in metaphoric form and makes the proverb symbolic. The same is true for the source of the Nzema name *ɛrɛlɛ* ‘proverb’. While

the singular for proverb is *erele*, the plural is *mrere* with /m/ indicating plurality. *Erele* ‘proverb’ is believed to have metamorphosed from *arele* which means ‘palm tree or palm fruit’.

According to Nyame and Tomekyin (2018), the idiom, *bu erele* ‘to cite a proverb’ literally means *bu* ‘to cut’ *arele* ‘a palm tree’¹. Nyame and Tomekyin (ibid) relate the difficulty in revealing the figurative meaning of proverbs to the difficulty in cutting and uprooting palm trees. By this, one must not rely on the surface meaning of proverbs but strive to unearth their figurative meaning in order to understand them. History has it that the early people of Nzema found numerous usefulness of the palm tree as for instance obtaining wine from the fresh trees, preparing soup out of the fruits, making brooms out of the leaves, making palm kernel oil from the nuts, using the fronds for ceiling their homes and fencing of gardens or yards and getting an edible type of mushrooms from the decomposing trees, among others.

The Nzema then attribute the countless moral lessons, wisdoms, truths, advices and other significant matters that can be deduced from some of their wise sayings to that of the palm tree. Subsequently, *arele* ‘palm tree’ gradually, metaphorically resulted in *erele* ‘proverb’ since they both share a similar feature of possessing several benefits. Therefore *arele* ‘palm tree’ and *erele* ‘proverb’ exist as different words in the language, with the initial vowel /a/ alternating with /e/ to mean a proverb (see also Yakub, 2018).

2 Literature review

2.1 The concept of proverb

One cannot be considered a good communicator or as being eloquent when s/he speaks without reference or consideration to set cultural norms (Hymes, 1989). By this, Hymes contends that communicative competence goes beyond the understanding of the grammar of the language. He explains that, in order to ensure performance, one must understand certain social norms that regulate the use of language in their social contexts. Since proverbs are an aspect of culture, one needs to be aware of their usage in order to achieve a communicative goal. This and many other reasons have called for the study of proverbs from diverse perspectives. Proverbs, therefore, have received several definitions from different scholars.

For instance, Finnegan (1970) proffers that, in many African societies, proverbs are so important that the lack of knowledge of how to interpret them causes a low level of comprehension in many interactional events in those societies. Finnegan (ibid), describes proverbs as a saying in more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it. This can imply that proverbs are pithy constructions that carry a lot of didactics and wisdom. In the view of Yankah (1989), there cannot be a use of proverb without context. This means that the interpretations of proverbs will be worthless without considering the contexts in which they are uttered.

Mwihia (2005) also sees proverbs as short sayings with a lot of meanings that summarise a cultural context, event, happening or experience. That is to say, proverbs teach, warn, and advise individuals or the entire community on how to interact with people with regard to situations such as their past experiences and beliefs and which are used especially with reference to a given context. He explains further that the acceptability of the meaning of a particular proverb is based on the society’s belief associated with the metaphorical expression embedded in the proverb.

¹ Both *pe* and *bu* mean ‘cut’ in English. However, while *pe* is used to refer ‘to cutting non-heavy items particularly with a cutlass’, *bu* is on the other hand used to refer ‘to cutting heavy things (such as the palm tree, the raffia plant or the coconut plant) with an axe’. It is therefore semantically incorrect to say *pe arele* rather than *bu arele* in Nzema.

Goshkheteliani (2011) avers that proverbs contain the practical wisdoms of a culture that it has accumulated over the centuries. The author maintains that proverbs serve and portray the beliefs and spiritual values in those languages they belong to and these are created and transferred from generation to generation, displaying moral qualities with the obligatory instruction that the person considers to be valuable. Dzobo (1997) points out that, for instance, the Akan proverb which states that 'God pounds fufu for the one-handed person' is a theological statement of the Akan belief about God's provision, love, kindness and generosity in dealing with humankind. With this belief, people live their life relying on God's mercies in helpless situations.

Costandius (2007) mentions that proverbs deal with symbolic and figurative-metaphorical language. It is therefore clear that the metaphors and symbols used can only be understood by conceptualising the abstract ideas used. As Vigbedor, Gbadegbe, Adja-Koadade & Agra (2016) illustrate with an Ewe proverb that says: *Ge me tu na xo na aqaba o* 'The beard cannot say much to the eyelashes about the past', the beard and the eyelashes form part of the facial features of humankind, but the latter is visible during childbirth whereas the former develops later. Therefore, the eyelash is said to symbolise the elderly; as being wise and experienced than the beard which symbolises the young ones with little knowledge and wisdom about the world. Conceptualising these objects in the proverbs is fundamental to their interpretation to achieve a better understanding in discourse interactions. Diabah and Amfo (2018:181) also see proverbs as the representation of the collective wisdom of the societies which use them. They add that proverbs exist across all cultures and societies, and are considered a universal phenomenon, which permeate communication across societies (see also Diabah and Amfo, 2014:4).

From our standpoint, therefore, proverbs can be said to be brief popular sayings that give advice about how people should live or that express a belief that is generally thought to be true. It is also evident that proverbs are expressions that are used to direct people as to how they should live in conformity with beliefs that are perceived to be true based on a people's shared experience. It can also be said of proverbs that they are witty utterances that are crafted based on the beliefs of a people and their views of a socially acceptable way of life, such as to appreciate kindness, honesty, and goodness, which are transferred to younger ones by word of mouth from generation to generation.

2.2 Belief

In every human society, there exists a degree of social acceptance of certain ideas or elements, without proof of truth, which manifest themselves in their daily activities. This, Ramya (2012) refers to as a belief. He explains belief as trust in the existence of supernatural powers and day-to-day inexplicable experiences that enable people to accept things other than the material visible world. According to the American English dictionary (2012), belief is the mental acceptance of a claim as true based on one's own reasoning or considered evidence. Beliefs can therefore be considered as claims based on people's experiences and feelings which are accepted as truth and are used to guide the living to achieve a homogeneous life.

Belief appears to have credence in almost all cultures. Ramya (2012) reports that there are four initial beliefs in the Nyishi traditional religion: the belief in impersonal (mystical) powers, the belief in spiritual beings, belief in divinities and the belief in the Supreme Being. The Shona also believe that their Supreme Being (Mwari) is the overseer of the happenings in this world (Masaka, 2013). People's destinies are believed to manifest based on the will of God and this is what is found in their folklore. Most of these beliefs can be found in oral forms such as proverbs, as is, for

instance, couched in Nzema proverbs. This paper thus attempts to explore some Nzema beliefs and philosophical principles as portrayed in their proverbs.

3 Methodology

The study adopts an ethnographic approach to proverbs, their provenance and use. An ethnographic study is meant for the study of a particular people and how they live their normal life which includes their way of conversation, thus language usage. Data was collected from two different sources: primary and secondary. The primary data was gathered between December 2020 and April 2021 from five native speakers through conversations in relation to given topics for discussion. The ages of the consultants ranged between forty and sixty. The conversations were audio-recorded and later transferred onto a computer. The recordings were then transcribed and the examples used were assigned their various inter-linear glosses and translated. Some of the data was also gathered during arbitration at the Abusua Kpanyinli's (clan head) palace at Salman in the Elemgbele District of Nzema. We sought the consent of the clan head and recorded the proceedings for our research. In addition to the above-mentioned sources, we also relied on the competencies of two of the authors who are native speakers to come up with some of the examples. These native speakers are lecturers who speak and teach Nzema at the Faculty of Ghanaian languages, University of Education, Winneba. For the secondary source, a collection of Nzema proverbs by Kwesi and Quarm (1998) entitled *Nzema Mrele nee be Ngilenu* was consulted. Additionally, some Nzema literary texts (both drama and novels), such as Soboh-Blay (1972) and Blay (1997), which contain many proverbial usages in them were read and a few proverbs extracted. Overall, we collected thirty-eight (38) proverbs from everyday settings, and from documented sources, out of which twenty-one (21) were purposively considered for the analysis in this study. We categorised the data based on common messages that they convey, and took up the discussions under the relevant themes that emerged. Our knowledge and experience in Nzema and Akan proverbs were significantly brought to bear on this study.

4 Data discussion

We present and discuss the data in this section. The proverbs are categorised based on the various relevant philosophical issues and ideologies of the Nzema. These socio-cultural philosophies which guide social conduct are highlighted based on Nzema beliefs and conceptualisations about divinity, death, afterlife, cause and effect, hard-work, and human relations.

4.1 Belief in divinity

4.1.1 The Supreme Being

Just as many ethnic groups such as the Shona in Zimbabwe, the Akan in Ghana and the Nyishi in India believe in the Supreme Being, who they refer to as *Mwari*, *Onyame* and *Nyokum* respectively, so do the Nzema. The Nzema refer to God as *Nyamenle* which is comprised of two morphological components namely *nya* 'leaves/herbs' and *menle* 'owner'. Thus, *Nyamenle* means the 'owner of herbs'. They hold the view that blessings are from *Nyamenle* 'God' or *mɔwuamra* 'the ancestors'. This shows that the Nzema had held the concept of a supreme being 'God' long before the advent of Christian missionaries in Ghana. This is evident in some of their traditional proverbs through which many virtues and cultural values are communicated. Consider the following in (1-4):

1. *Bε-n-nriandi Nyamenle bo.*
2PL-NEG-run God under
'One cannot run away from God.'
(Whoever does evil deeds shall surely be seen and punished)

The omnipresence and omniscience of God are celebrated in this proverb. The Nzema trust that God is all present, and supervises with an 'eagle eye' such that nobody can run or hide from him. In essence, wrong doers cannot escape without being reprimanded. The negative marker *n* in the construction emphasises the impossibility of hiding crimes from God. The proverb therefore warns people to refrain from uncouth practices in the society since *Nyamenle* 'God' knows all deeds of mankind and provides appropriate punishment or reward. The proverb that follows emboldens the poor and vulnerable to be confident in life, thus:

2. *Nyamenle a kposa akɔle alee a.*
God FOC chew fowl food PART
'It is God who chews food for the fowl.'
(God cares for the needy)

In proverb (2), the poor and vulnerable are likened to the toothless fowl. When the fowl feeds, the disintegration and digestion of the food substances take place in its gizzard through natural means. Since the fowl has no teeth, yet is able to feed conveniently, the helpless person is also advised not to despair in adversity. The significance of the proverb is to entreat the poor to do their best and trust that God is capable of tackling the most herculean of tasks. The focus marker *a* in the proverb points to the fact that God is the only one who never fails in supporting the vulnerable. Here, *Nyamenle* 'God' is seen as caring and as the sole 'entity' who helps the needy. This boosts the confidence of the Nzema and prevents them from capitalising on their situation to indulge in social vices. Proverb (3) below also highlights the indiscriminate nature of God.

3. *Saa Nyamenle kyε a bε-n-ve.*
COND God share PART 2PL-NEG-rush over
'If God distributes items, one needs not to scramble.'
(People must not rush over anything in life)

This proverb teaches the virtue of patience and frowns upon greed. The proverb portrays *Nyamenle* 'God' as merciful and impartial, and as catering for all manner of persons in the sharing of His bountiful blessings and mercies. The use of the conditional marker *saa* 'if' drives home the socio-cultural belief that one needs not to struggle when God supplies items (blessings). Nzema society detests inhabitants who are envious of wealthy people and who try to equalise them through undesirable means. Therefore, they dwell on the import of this proverb to advise people to desist from unnecessary haste in life, especially by attempting to find dubious ways to becoming rich overnight.

4. *Saa ε-kola wɔ konle ko a Nyamenle ε-n-go*
 COND 2SG-can your fight fight PART God EMPH-NEG-fight
ε-m-maa wɔ.
 PART-NEG-give you
 ‘If you think you are capable, God does not fight your opponent for you.’
 (In every circumstance there is the need to rely on God/superior person)

In (4), the need for one to surrender his/her challenges to be handled by a superior is highlighted. The Nzema believe that when one is faced with a challenge, it is better to seek assistance from the experienced such as the elderly and members in governance than to fight his/her troubles all alone. Resolving one’s problems alone sometimes breeds chaos which can disrupt the peace and development of society. The Nzema therefore appreciate people who channel their grievances to the elders to seek justice, usually through arbitration. In this proverb, *Nyamenle* ‘God’, the source of wisdom and discernment is represented by the elders who are knowledgeable and capable of reprimanding offenders to ensure peace and order in the society. Thus, people are entreated not to react impulsively, but to always control their tempers when they are confronted, and to leave matters of misunderstanding for the elders to handle appropriately. This ensures peace and societal co-existence. The Nzema conceptualisation that conflict resolution is the preserve of the elderly people in society is thus conveniently conveyed in this proverb (4).

4.1.2 The lesser gods

The Nzema also trust the existence of other deities such as ghosts, witches and gods, amongst others. From the Nzema traditional perspective, any bad omen that befalls someone is attributable to the work of evil spirits such as *nyene* ‘witches’ and *mbɔnsam* ‘demons’. Their belief about certain occurrences in the spiritual realm of these lesser gods, serves as an avenue to instil discipline in members of the society. This manifests in their proverbial expressions such as in (5) and (6), which specifically deploy *nwɔmenle* ‘ghost’ as a key element.

5. *Nwɔmenle alee bε-di ye mɔwɔamra.*
 Ghost food 2PL-eat 2SG ancestors
 ‘It is the ancestors who eat food that is meant for the ghosts.’
 (It is only a seer who can understand issues of the spirit realm)
6. *Nwɔmenle sua zo bε-kɔ ye nɔɔzo.*
 Ghost town POST 2PL-go 2SG night
 ‘A journey to the land of the ghosts is taken at night’.
 (It takes much preparation to be able to embark on a difficult journey)

Basically, in (5), we are told that, in line with Nzema tradition, there is a kind of food that is meant for only the dead. Sometimes, in the performance of some traditional rituals, food is served on a crossroad as a feast for the unseen (ghosts) which are not supposed to be eaten by mortals (the living). Even though the Nzema believe in the afterlife, there has been no concrete evidence to that effect. Therefore, it is only the dead that can justify such a belief. *Alee* ‘food’ used in the proverb represents matters of the unseen which can only be understood by seers. The proverb stands to inculcate the virtue of being content with what one possesses. It also highlights the essence of self-satisfaction and frowns on greed. Once you are alive, according to the import of proverb (5), you

are not to venture a meal that is usually consumed by the dead. The implication is that we should not go beyond our bounds, in an attempt to take what does not belong to us. The Nzema also believe that ghosts undertake their activities at night, as portrayed in (6). According to the Nzema, when it is daybreak for the living, the ghosts rather see such time as deep night, and that is the appropriate time for the living to have any engagement with them. *Sua zo* ‘town’ in the proverb represents a task to be undertaken. Indeed, one can only visit the land of the dead when one dies. That is why according to the proverb, the only way a mortal can visit the land of the dead is when it is night; the time most mortals go to sleep and at which time the dead wander. The proverb hints at proper time management and informs us, essentially, not to do things randomly without considering time as a paramount factor.

4.2 Belief in death

The Nzema conceptualisation of death is also concealed in their proverbial expressions through which certain behavioural principles are re-echoed. A few examples under this category are:

7. *Ewule ε-n-ze fakye.*
 Death EMPH-NEG-know forgiveness
 ‘Death does not know forgiveness.’
 (Death does not spare anybody)

8. *Eleka biala be-wu a be-da.*
 Place INDEF 2PL-die PART 2PL-sleep
 ‘Whichever place one dies it is the same place s/he sleeps.’
 (There is no part of the land that rejects the corpse)

In (7), the mercilessness of death is depicted. It is personified as having the ability to deal with all mankind. Traditionally, the Nzema believe that wrong doers are paid off by death, and so the concept of death is highly associated with fear. The proverb incorporates the negative marker *n* and the emphatic particle *ε* to stress the inevitability of death. Thus, the Nzema use this witty statement to inform people to be righteous, lest death snatches them away unexpectedly. Crucially, the proverb seeks to make people aware of the adverse consequences of wrong doing, so as to mitigate negative behaviours in society such as gossip, backbiting, dishonesty, and theft *inter alia*, which can attract death. The communicative content of proverb (8) is twofold. On the one hand, a wanderer who does not intend to return home forever can use this proverb to motivate her/himself that if s/he does not return home, wherever s/he dies, s/he shall surely be buried there. Significantly, however, the proverb tries to say that one can settle anywhere to do any kind of job (provided it is socio-culturally permissible) in order to achieve success. Ironically, ‘death’, unlike in (7) is used to represent every form of toil which everyone must engage in. The proverb conveys a motivational message that advocates mobility to promote wellbeing. In proverb (9) which follows, death is presented as a ladder that must be climbed by everyone, as in:

9. *Ewule kpolike sonla ko ε-n-vo*
 Death ladder human one EMPH-NEG-climb
 ‘Death’s ladder is not climbed by one person alone.’
 (Everybody will die)

According to the Nzema, death is like a ladder that every mortal would eventually ascend. This proverb is therefore used to admonish people not to plan or cause other people's death, since their own death awaits them. The proverb, in effect, highlights the inevitability of death and therefore is used to admonish those who tend to be jubilant over the death of their fellow mortals. The belief is that death falls randomly on people and so when one dies everyone is expected to sympathise with the bereaved and not to be happy. More importantly, the proverb cautions people to be mindful of their deeds in society, recognising that they would surely encounter death someday.

4.3 Belief in afterlife (reincarnation)

The Nzema belief in the afterlife is another source of proverbial sayings to advise people on the need to live a pleasant life. They hold the notion that the dead continue to live even beyond the grave, and may wish to have many of such dead people in their own spiritual world. There is therefore the need for the living to live in harmony, to love one another and to do well to multiply in order to build a comfortable, cohesive traditional society. This is imbued in proverb (10) which reads:

10. *Ebolɔ amra se be-kponde be nwo dɔɔnwo na file zo amra.*
Grave people say 2PL-want 2PL self many then dry.land POST people
'Even the dead (those in the cemetery) wish to be many, let alone the living.'
(We all yearn for more even if we have enough)

According to Nzema tradition, when one dies, s/he crosses a river before getting to the ancestral world. Therefore, the dead are conceptualised as leaving behind the 'dry land' of the living. It is believed that those in the land of the dead live in harmony, since none has ever heard of them fighting or going to court. The proverb therefore teaches the essence of love, unity, tolerance and respect for one another. It reminds us to refrain from hatred and individualism. The Nzema cherish communalism, which takes many people to come together to undertake a particular task in order to achieve success. Therefore, certain practices, such as murder and cursing, which can reduce numerical strength and manpower are disdained; hence the proverb in (10).

4.4 Belief in cause and effect

As part of their traditional philosophies which guide social norms, the Nzema have a great belief in cause and possible effect, which is reflected in a common saying that *Mɔɔ sonla kelua la yee ɔbu a*, meaning 'You reap what you sow'. This conceptualisation positions members of the Nzema society well, and also cautions them to be mindful of all endeavours as espoused in the following proverbs:

11. *Me-di me-di nee me-ne me-ne a lua a.*
1SG-eat 1SG-eat CONJ 1SG-defecate 1SG-defaecate PART move PART
'Continuous eating results in continuous defaecation.'
(Evil befalls those who do evil)
12. *Kakula kpale di dikyene.*
Child good eat gift
'A good child receives precious gifts.'
(Every good person is rewarded with precious gifts)

13. *Kakula nwu ɔ sa anwo wowo a ɔ nee m-gbanyinli di alee.*
 Child know 2SG hand POST wash PART 2SG CONJ PL-elder eat food
 ‘If a child cleans his/her hands properly, s/he dines with elderly.’
 (A well-behaved person is made to sit in the company of the elderly)

Proverb (11) emphasises the adverse consequences that could befall one for any wrongdoing. The semantic imports of the reduplicated morphemes *medi-medi* ‘continuous eating’ and *mene-mene* ‘continuous defaecation’ actually drive home the idiomatic interpretation of the proverb as ‘going through series of difficulties as a result of continuous evil/bad deeds.’ Indeed, when we eat, the food breaks down, gets absorbed into the body and eventually gets ejected through the rectum and anus as faeces. The proverb therefore warns people who make initial mistakes, whether consciously or unconsciously, not to repeat same, since they can incur endless adverse effects.

However, (12) and (13) remind us to maintain a positive attitude in order to be rewarded accordingly. The advisory content of these proverbs (12 and 13) go beyond the basic sense. That is, everyone should behave well as society demands.

4.5 Belief in hard work

The Nzema value building a strong and well-defined society through industriousness. They hold the belief that indolence leads to a distorted and ‘unhealthy’ society since, in such a situation, people do not work hard to become self-reliant. They also think about preparing properly for ‘retirement’ and the need for one to utilise his/her energy profitably while still young or strong in order to avoid any further hard work at old age. This conceptualisation has motivated many wise sayings in Nzema culture, one of which says: *Saa wɔanza enrinli bile zo a esoa egyene zo*, meaning ‘If you fail to carry your load on black hair, you would carry it on grey hair’ (see also Yakub and Osei, 2020: 24). In addition to this are the following proverbs (14-17) which evoke the essence of hard work and perseverance:

14. *Dabodabo se so! ɛ-so na ɛ-nyia ye a di.*
 Duck say peck! 2SG-peck CONJ 2SG-get 3SG PART eat
 ‘The duck said, Peck/Search! If you peck/search and get, eat it.’
 (The industrious person enjoys from his hard work)
15. *Mgbovonle sonla edweke a le ke boboduma la adenle nu.*
 Lazy person comment PART is that tiger sleep way in
 ‘It is only a lazy person who claims there is a tiger on the way.’
 (The lazy person always gives excuses in order not to work)
16. *Saa wɔ avule zonle a ɛ-ye ɔ muala.*
 COND your farm many PART 2SG-do 3SG all
 ‘If you have numerous farms, you work on all of them.’
 (No matter the number and size of one’s business one should manage them well)
17. *Saa ɛ-kyekye a yeɛ be-soa wɔ a.*
 COND 2SG-tie PART CONJ 3PL-carry you PART
 ‘If you tie your load, then they help you to carry it.’
 (One can only be assisted when s/he takes initiative)

In (14), we are informed to learn from the duck which stretches its neck in search of food. The persona ‘duck’, stretching its neck in search of food, is linked to an active individual who does not rely on others but struggles to make ends meet. The proverb thus implies that one should not be idle, but should search and later enjoy the outcome. Proverb (15) frowns on the habit of finding unnecessary excuses to shun duties and responsibilities. The proverb empowers people to learn to overcome any obstacles in life, and to be focused in pursuing their responsibilities. In every endeavour, there are obstacles that are like ‘tigers’ which need to be faced. The fear of overcoming such difficulties can render one indolent. The proverb thus says it is only a lazy person who ‘paralyses’ his/her own confidence in the course of taking an action. As the Nzema are mostly peasant farmers, proverb (16) encourages hard work by attending to all manner of works one is supposed to do. In (17), the essence of taking a personal initiative before seeking any external support is emphasised. Thus, ‘tying’ and ‘carrying’ in the proverb imply making a personal effort in doing something before expecting assistance. The proverb tells us to take initial steps in doing our own work, which could later attract generous persons to come to our aid.

4.6 Belief in human relations

Maintaining a strong family bond, caring for one another and being each other’s keeper is essentially dear to the people of Nzema. This is what has necessitated a common adage among the people, which says: *Abusua nyema bempɛ nu*, ‘The thread that binds members of a family must never be cut’. This pithy statement strongly encourages positive human relationships, as further portrayed in (18-21):

18. *Saa ε nli ara de aduoba zo a ε-n-li aduoba*
 COND 2PL mother child sit guava POST PART EMPH-NEG-eat guava
amunli.
 green
 ‘If your maternal sibling² climbs a guava tree, you do not eat the unripe fruits.’
 (When a family member is in a higher position, those in the family equally enjoy)
19. *Saa enyele nyia ye a enee ebonyile ε-nyia ye.*
 If eye get 3SG PART then nose EMPH-get 3SG
 ‘If the eye gets into trouble, it also affects the nose.’
 (When a family member gets into trouble, those closer to him also suffer.)
20. *Bε-n-du anyale bε-n-gua na bε-n-va*
 3PL-NEG-remove intestines 3PL-NEG-throw CONJ 3PL-NEG-take
nyasoa bε-n-wula nu.
 leaves 3PL-NEG-put POST
 ‘You cannot throw away the intestines and fill the stomach with leaves.’
 (One cannot disown his biological offspring completely and adopt a stranger)

² This proverb specifically employs *ε nli ara*, ‘your maternal sibling’ to drive home its message because the Nzema people practice a matrilineal inheritance system.

21. *ε-kulo kokobevole a ε-kulo ye mgbolaboa.*
 2SG-like leper PART 2SG-like 3SG footwear
 ‘If you love a leper, you must like his/her footwear as well.’
 (If you really love someone, you will love everything about him/her)

In (18), we are told to desist from selfishness. The proverb teaches the virtue of generosity and the essence of providing support for the needy, especially when one has a good job. In this didactic statement, being on top of a ‘guava tree’ is likened to gaining promotions and attaining a higher level in a profession, which normally comes with pecuniary benefits leading to prosperity. Therefore, whoever flourishes in life, according to the pragmatic import of the proverb, is advised not to neglect his/her relatives, but to rather let them have a ‘good taste’ and enjoy as well. Proverb (19) tends to convey a similar message as in (18). *Enyele* ‘eye’ and *ebonyile* ‘nose’ are proximate organs and therefore linked to each other. Usually, when one cries, tears pass into the nose through the lacrimal drainage system. This means that what affects the eye also affects the nose, and vice versa. The proverb thus entreats people to be concerned and to care much about their close relatives and all kinds of people, especially in times of difficulty. In (20), we are further taught to appreciate the fact that positive human relations outweigh other things. Just as one cannot pull out his/her intestines and replace it with trash, so are relations, particularly mothers from whose wombs human beings are naturally made, told to be passionate and considerate in reprimanding their children and other people. In admonishing people to be faithful and to show true love in spite of any unpleasant conditions, the Nzema often deploy the proverb in (21). The proverb also highlights the need to be committed to doing everything, notwithstanding unpleasant circumstances.

Conclusion

The discussions have been on some of the bounteous conceptualisations of the Nzema. We have highlighted the Nzema perception and conceptualisation about divinity, death, reincarnation, human relations, cause and effect, and hard work via their traditional proverbs. Some of the beliefs emphasised the bond between the Nzema and God before the advent of Christianity. This shows that the Nzema already revered a Supreme Deity ‘God’ and had relations with him long before the arrival and inception of contemporary western religions and their doctrines. This also debunks assertions made by some authors that the African continent and its societies are a dark populace with no array of God and divinity in them. The paper also demonstrated some important virtues that need to be pursued in order to be accepted in the Nzema society. These virtues when followed yield beneficial results to the individual. Thus, being conscious on how and when to utilise these proverbs renders one a good orator and culturally upright person since knowledge about the norms and values of the society are mostly encapsulated in their proverbs.

Abbreviations used

1SG	First person singular	EMPH	Emphatic particle
2SG	Second person singular	FOC	Focus marker
3SG	Third person singular	INDEF	Indefinite article
2PL	Second person plural	NEG	Negative marker
3PL	Third person plural	PART	Particle
COND	Conditional marker	POST	Postposition
CONJ	Conjunction		

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