

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language, Ecology, and Cultural Wisdom: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Akan and Ga Environmental Proverbs

Vera Gyamera¹

¹Department of English, University of Media Arts and Communication, – Institute of Languages, Ghana

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9000-8246>

Email : vgyamera@unimac.edu.gh

Lilian Amghortso Glover-Quartey²

²Department of English, University of Media Arts and Communication – Institute of Languages, Ghana

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6101-4919>

Email: laglover-quartey@unimac.edu.gh

Eva Ama Enu³

³Department of English, University of Media Arts and Communication – Institute of Languages, Ghana

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7715-4554>

Email: eaenu@unimac.edu.gh

Article History

Received 2025-07-19

Revised 2025-10-15

Accepted 2025-11-20

Published 2025-12-31

Keywords

Akan and Ga Proverbs

Environmental Sustainability

Ecosemiotics

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

Sociolinguistics

Abstract

Language plays a crucial role in shaping how humans perceive the environment and respond to ecological challenges. As modern societies become increasingly detached from natural ecosystems, indigenous ecological knowledge embedded in oral traditions remains underutilized in sustainability discourse. This study investigates how language represents and transmits ecological knowledge through Akan and Ga proverbs of Ghana. Grounded in ecosemiotics, ecolinguistics, and sociolinguistics, the study examines proverbs as oral encoding systems that document environmental

How to cite

Gyamera, V., Glover-Quartey, L. A. & Enu, E.A. (2025). Language, Ecology, and Cultural Wisdom: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Akan and Ga Environmental Proverbs. *Journal of Innovations in Art & Culture for Nature Conservation and Environmental Sustainability*, 3(2): 518-536.

Copyright © 2025 The Author(s)



observations, natural cycles, and stewardship responsibilities. Using a qualitative interpretive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and a library-based compilation of approximately 150 proverbs. Analysis employed thematic analysis and Conceptual Metaphor Theory to identify patterns of human–nature interaction and the cognitive strategies used to conceptualize ecological systems. The findings show that Akan and Ga proverbs rely on metaphor, analogy, personification, and anthropomorphism to communicate ecological principles and moral guidance. Four major themes emerged: biodiversity, where animal behavior signals ecosystem health; land stewardship, emphasizing communal ownership and intergenerational responsibility; water ethics, highlighting water’s social and life-sustaining value; and seasonal awareness, reflecting indigenous understanding of climate patterns. The study concludes that these proverbs function as ecostories and moral archives linking traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary environmental science.

Introduction

Environmental degradation is increasing at alarming rates worldwide and will require significant changes in how we interact with the earth. While advances in science and technology have helped identify potential solutions to environmental problems, the value of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices has received relatively little attention as a resource for mitigating those same issues. The indigenous knowledge systems of local communities have evolved over many years of living in harmony with their environment and contain the necessary ecological understanding and sustainable practices needed to address the various ecological crises facing the world today. This study examines the rich oral traditions of the Akan and Ga peoples of Ghana and focuses on their environmental proverbs to examine the role of language in representing ecological wisdom.

Eco-linguistics, a developing area of academic research, posits that language represents more than simply describing the environment; it influences how we understand, interact with, and react to the environment (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001; Stibbe, 2015). Proverbs represent one example of how language embodies cultural knowledge in a concise manner. Proverbs represent a type of cultural knowledge based on the observations and experiences of previous generations and offer ethical guidance (Mieder, 2004). Like other West African countries, Ghana's rich cultural heritage is accompanied by a wide range of ecosystems, but it still faces serious environmental threats from deforestation, water pollution, soil erosion, and climate change (EPA Ghana, 2020). To effectively address these issues, we need approaches that integrate scientific rigor with cultural grounding. Indigenous environmental knowledge systems, along with the use of proverbs as culturally rich communication tools, offer valuable insights into promoting environmental stewardship that genuinely resonates with local values, beliefs, and practices. Proverbs serve as a "memory bank" of cultural heritage and ecological wisdom among the Akan and Ga people. Historically, these proverbs have played a crucial role in Akan and Ga societies by teaching moral lessons, encouraging social responsibility, and sharing important environmental information. For instance, Akan farmers have traditionally used proverbs to highlight the significance of soil conservation and crop rotation, while Ga fishing communities have relied on proverb-based wisdom to set and uphold fishing regulations, safeguard marine life, and restore ecological balance. This way, proverbs have enabled vital environmental lessons to be passed down through generations. In modern-day Ghana, where issues such as deforestation, mining-related pollution, water scarcity, and coastal erosion pose serious challenges, these traditional knowledge systems have become even more important. By understanding how proverbs encapsulate ecological knowledge, we can enhance the development of education programs that are environmentally relevant and culturally sensitive conservation strategies. This study revolves around three interconnected research questions that explore the ecological knowledge in Akan and Ga proverbs and their significance in today's environmental discussions. The general objective of the project was to explore how indigenous ecological epistemologies have been expressed in Akan and Ga proverbs and to assess the potential of using them to support the development of future-oriented, locally grounded strategies for promoting environmental sustainability and education. The specific research questions were:

1. How do Akan and Ga proverbs convey environmental and ecological knowledge?
2. What thematic patterns can be identified in these proverbs concerning biodiversity, land use, water resources, and seasonal awareness?
3. How can these oral traditions inform the development of modern environmental education programs and conservation initiatives?

By addressing these research questions, this study will add valuable insights to the fields of eco-linguistics, indigenous knowledge, oral literature, and environmental sustainability. It emphasizes that language and culture are not just passive reflections of human experiences; they actively foster ecological awareness. Ultimately, this research showcases the enduring significance of traditional wisdom in tackling contemporary environmental issues and serves as a link between scientific approaches and community-driven conservation efforts

Literature review

This section critically reviews how African oral literature, specifically proverbs, represents indigenous ecological knowledge and how they may be used to promote environmental sustainability. By examining perspectives from eco-linguistics, sociolinguistics and traditional wisdom. African oral traditions represent a rich source of collective wisdom important for the survival of individuals, social groups and ecosystems. Proverbs provide a compelling way of passing down these lessons (Yankah, 1989.) Proverbs are an important means of collecting and retaining ecological knowledge and may serve as an additional mechanism for collecting or retaining data related to wildlife preservation, water conservation, and sustainable farming practices (Scarlat & Petrişor, 2021). Proverbs can be used to store ecological information and thus serve as a method for recalling it. Therefore, they provide a method of recalling information about wildlife protection, water conservation and sustainable agriculture (Finnegan, 2012). In Ghana, Blackling et al. (1975) have identified how Ga oral literature provides a framework for relating the natural environment and the experiences of fishermen and farmers daily. Adom (2016; 2019) has also identified that the original purpose of Asante proverbs was to reflect empirical observations of the natural world and that these proverbs served as "ancient vehicles" for moral education regarding biodiversity.

Eco-Linguistics and the Semiotics of Nature

Eco-linguistics is concerned with understanding the relationship between language and ecological awareness and is based upon the premise that language creates human perceptions of the natural world (Stibbe, 2015). Proverbs represent a type of semiotic system that can draw on the natural world (animals, rivers, etc.) as signifiers for communicating how people should live sustainably (Fill & Penz, 2017). An example of an Akan proverb that demonstrates this is Nyame na epra aboa a onni dua ho ma no ("God drives away insects from the tailless animal"), which uses animal imagery to promote a biocentric view and help people understand other living things (Adom, 2016). Because of their metaphorical nature, proverbs allow people to describe complex ecological interactions simply, and thereby create easy-to-understand

descriptions of those interactions that can be widely disseminated among many people (Mieder, 2004). Thus, proverbs provide one way to communicate knowledge about the environment to all members of a community (not merely the educated or literate), and they also help ensure that such knowledge will continue to be transmitted over time between generations.

Reviewing the empirical work of Adom (2016) it is clear that proverbs create a "moral ecology" a space of stewardship of the earth and its resources, where the biological behaviors of animals or plants serve as a metaphor for what it means to be a good steward of nature. As an example, Adom (2016) stated that the metaphors of the sacredness of certain groves were not simply religious but provided cognitive frames that kept those groves from being cut down; this provides evidence for the purpose of the current study to show how Akan and Ga proverbs take the complexity of biological observation and make them culturally relevant knowledge.

Moral Regulation and Environmental Ethics

Proverbs can also serve as a form of moral regulation by teaching people how to behave towards the natural world and by promoting environmental stewardship. In Akan and Ga cultures, the connection between moral behavior in the physical world and one's fate in the afterlife can serve as a type of "invisible policing force" that prevents the degradation of the environment (Adom, 2016). Many proverbs highlight the connection between humans and the natural world and encourage people to behave in a reciprocal manner towards nature. Maxims such as *kwaɛ a agyɛ wɔ no yenfre no kwaewa* ("Do not be ungrateful to the forest that has saved you") and *Adidi daa ye sene adidi preko* ("It is better to eat little by little than to eat everything at once") illustrate the importance of gratitude and sustainability when interacting with nature (Adom, 2019).

The empirical work of Adom (2016) on Akan proverbs in Ghana also illustrated how proverbs can be viewed as environmental archives using flora and fauna as source domains to illustrate complex ecological realities, including moral ones. The study by Adom confirms that, proverbs acts as an ethical compass for people who wish to become environmentally active, using ecological knowledge from the animal kingdom to criticize what one believes to be a "ghastly way that the people of Ghana feel about their biological world."

In this sense, proverbs serve as metaphorical mirrors, when a community is looking at the natural behavior of a "tailless animal" or a "bagworm," the community is forced to see itself as having responsibilities and seeing the effects of its responsibility or lack thereof to the rest of the ecosystem.

Sociolinguistic Views on the Role of Proverbs in Community Governance

Hymes (2003) emphasizes from a sociolinguistic perspective that the role of proverbs in defining community identity and influencing community behavior (Hymes, 2003). The ecological proverbs of Akan and Ga communities serve as guidelines for how community members should interact with sacred environments and their surroundings, thereby promoting social cohesion based on shared values. While the Akan and Ga ecological proverbs have been successful in the past, as demonstrated in areas such as Kumawu and Akropong (Nketia, as cited in Blackings et al., 1975), they are losing relevance currently due to the adverse effects of modernization and foreign cultural influences (Adom, 2019). The erosion of these traditional moral frameworks has been linked to the current biodiversity loss in Ghana (Dei, 1993; Konadu-Agyemang & Panford, 2006; Kimmerer, 2013). There is now a growing consensus among researchers concerning the need to integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into modern sustainability approaches (Dei, 1993; Konadu-Agyemang & Panford, 2006; Kimmerer, 2013). Proverbs can serve as a bridge between local knowledge and scientific understanding of the environment. Therefore, their inclusion in educational and policy-making activities could provide culturally grounded strategies for adapting to climate change and conserving biodiversity. While there has been research into the sociological and linguistic characteristics of Ghanaian proverbs (e.g. Kropp Dakubu et al., 2007), there has been limited research into the eco-linguistic characteristics of these proverbs. This study aims to address this gap and advocate for the re-emergence of these "wise sayings" to create a uniquely African ecological consciousness.

Theoretical underpinning of the study

This study is built on an integrated framework that combines eco-linguistics, eco-semiotics, and the sociolinguistics of proverbs. This approach will clarify how Akan and Ga proverbs encode, preserve, and share environmental knowledge. Language does not merely mirror the physical world; it creates it, according to Halliday (1990). Therefore, proverbs, which represent highly condensed lexicogrammatical spaces for expressing a culture's "meaning potential," are considered to be among the strongest forms of cultural expression. Proverbs make use of the Ideational Metafunction to portray nature as an active agent in the domain of human morality, rather than as a passive "it" (Halliday, 1990).

Eco-linguistics serves as the cornerstone of this perspective, illustrating that language does more than mirror ecological realities; it actively influences how one perceives, assess, and engage with the natural world. As Fill and Mühlhäusler (2001) argue, linguistic structures and discursive patterns influence environmental awareness by foregrounding certain relationships between humans and nature while backgrounding others. In a similar vein, Stibbe (2015) highlights how language shapes our ecological worldviews by weaving in stories, values, and assumptions about

nature that influence human behavior. Stibbe (2015), notes that Ecolinguistics builds upon sociolinguistics and moves beyond examining the social function of language to examine the structural features of language that encode environmental information. Ecolinguistics relates the language used to describe the environment to the actual ecosystem. Proverbs are defined as “ecostories” that identify how humans characterize their relationships with nature as masters, partners, or dependents (Zhao, 2012). An ecosstory highlighting dependence, for example, establishes an ecologically based story about the relationship between humans and nature and uses metaphor to establish this relationship.

Cognitive mapping approach of metaphors developed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) adapted for ecological use through Stibbe suggests that metaphors are not merely poetic devices or ways to express ideas, but rather cognitive maps. The application of Cognitive Ecolinguistics to study the way Proverbs transform Environmental Observations into Cultural Knowledge has been done using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Vicente (2020), states that Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) asserts that non-literal language is an essential component in both our comprehension and representation of human experience.

Eco-semiotics takes this linguistic perspective further by exploring how natural elements serve as meaningful signs in cultural communication. This symbolic representation of ecological knowledge resonates with findings from studies on African oral traditions, which reveal that proverbs act as teaching tools that connect environmental observations to ethical behavior and sustainability (Thulla et al., 2024). In a similar vein, Stibbe (2015) shows that language constructs ecological worldviews by embedding stories, values, and assumptions about nature that guide human behaviour. Within this perspective, proverbs are understood as condensed ecological narratives that encode observations about natural cycles, environmental risks, and expectations of stewardship, thereby shaping habitual ways of thinking and acting toward the environment. In Akan and Ga societies, such proverbs serve as culturally authoritative repositories of ecological wisdom, promoting restraint, responsibility, and sustainable living.

Eco-semiotics extends this linguistic focus by examining how natural elements function as meaningful signs within cultural communication. From an eco-semiotic standpoint, elements such as the vulture, the river, the sea tide, or the baobab tree are not treated as neutral physical objects but as symbols that carry layered moral, practical, and ecological meanings developed through sustained interaction with the environment. These signs are stabilised through repeated cultural use and embedded in proverbial expressions that communicate complex ecological relationships in simple, memorable forms. In Akan and Ga proverbs, natural elements therefore operate as semiotic resources through which communities interpret environmental experience and transform it into moral direction and social guidance. This symbolic encoding of ecological

knowledge aligns with findings in African oral tradition studies, which demonstrate that proverbs function as instructional tools that link environmental observation to ethical conduct and sustainability (Thulla et al., 2024).

The sociolinguistics of proverbs complements the above approaches by situating ecological meanings within actual social interaction and cultural practice. Sociolinguistic scholarship emphasises that proverbs do not possess fixed meanings in isolation but acquire significance through their use in specific social contexts to regulate behaviour, reinforce communal norms, and articulate collective identity. In Akan and Ga societies, proverbs are strategically deployed in everyday discourse, ritual speech, moral instruction, and conflict resolution, drawing on ecological imagery to guide responsible conduct.

The proverbial language found in Ghanaian communities is rich with culturally embedded meanings that strengthen social bonds and shared values (Mamiya & Brako, 2024). Through their repeated use in society, these proverbs link environmental ethics to broader cultural principles like respect for life, communal responsibility, and accountability to future generations. Together, eco-linguistics, eco-semiotics, and sociolinguistics create a cohesive framework for understanding Akan and Ga proverbs as linguistic, symbolic, and sociocultural phenomena. Eco-linguistics examines how proverbs shape our ecological perceptions and define the relationships between humans and the natural world, while eco-semiotics clarifies how natural elements act as culturally significant signs that convey complex moral and ecological messages.

Sociolinguistics further demonstrates how these meanings are activated, negotiated, and sustained through social interaction, allowing proverbs to regulate behaviour and reinforce shared values within the community. Within this integrated perspective, indigenous environmental knowledge expressed through symbolic language is shown to intersect with broader concerns of sustainability and environmental stewardship in contemporary Ghana (Adom, 2025). The framework, therefore, enables a comprehensive analysis of proverbs as vehicles for environmental knowledge, moral reasoning, and sustainable ecological practice (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001; Stibbe, 2015).

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative research design to explore the environmental meanings embedded in the Akan and Ga proverbs. Qualitative research designs are particularly suitable to analyze oral literature since meaning is generated through the intersection of linguistic form and cultural context, as well as the lived experiences of the individuals who generate and utilize that knowledge.

Data Collection

The study draws purposively on two sources of data: field-based research and published materials, which together ensure both depth and contextual validity in the analysis of Akan and Ga proverbs. The study uses the published materials and fieldwork research proverbs to verify both written texts and spoken words, which aligns with the research goals.

Field-Based Data; Interviews and Participant Observation

The field-based data collection involves interviews and participant observation within selected Akan and Ga communities. The interviews were both structured and semi-structured, and their everyday usage of proverbs was also observed. The study engages cultural custodians, including elderly community members, market women, farmers, and fishermen, who know the environment well, and their knowledge helps explain the meanings of proverbs about nature. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to provide proverbs that reference environmental elements and to explain their meanings, usage contexts, and moral implications.

Participant observation focuses on the spontaneous use of proverbs during community gatherings, market sessions, naming ceremonies, funerals, etc., enabling the study to capture proverbs in their natural communicative settings. Interpretations provided by participants are cross-checked against published sources and further verified through repeated discussions with cultural experts to ensure accuracy.

Library Search

The library search examined books and studies by Appiah et al. (2007), Brookman-Amisshah (1986), Kudadjie (1996), Kropp Dakubu (2007), Ollennu et al. (2024), and Yankah (1989). These sources include collections of proverbs and background information that help find and explain proverbs about animals, plants, land, water, and weather. About 150 proverbs are collected, with about half from Akan and half from Ga. Each refers to nature or how people relate to it.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the proverbs followed a few stages. Initially, all the proverbs were transcribed into their respective original languages and translated into English to preserve the cultural nuances inherent in the expressions. The translated texts are then coded to identify references to environmental elements, ecological relationships, and patterns of human–nature interaction. The study applies Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework to organize the data, identifying recurring patterns and grouping them into thematic categories that reflect key

environmental concerns such as stewardship, risk, sustainability, and moral responsibility. This framework facilitates reader understanding by providing a transparent and replicable process through which meanings are derived from the data: themes emerge inductively from the proverbs, are reviewed for coherence, and are clearly defined to show how individual expressions contribute to broader ecological narratives.

This research used Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which has been popularized in the field of ecolinguistics by Stibbe (2020), to examine the cognitive connection between natural worlds and social ethics. CMT views metaphors as cognitive tools and not simply as language ornaments; they help shape how people understand their environment.

Following the organization of the proverbs into thematic categories, each proverb was analyzed using a sociolinguistic lens to focus on the metaphor, anthropomorphism, direct observation of the environment, framing of moral aspects and cultural context of the environmental knowledge contained in the proverbs. The sociolinguistic analysis of the proverbs demonstrated how environmental knowledge is encoded linguistically and reinforced socially. A comparative analysis of the proverbs from both linguistic traditions demonstrated similar ecological philosophies as well as unique ecological views of the environment from each culture.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations played a significant role throughout the research process. Participants provided informed consent before participating in the study and prior to providing any information about their use of proverbs. Anonymity was preserved by referring to the proverbs as community-based knowledge rather than ascribing them to individual participants. Although the research methodology yielded extensive, culturally relevant data, this study has some limitations. There is a degree of subjectivity to interpreting proverbs, although efforts were made to validate the findings with cultural experts. Additionally, the corpus of proverbs examined in this study does not include all the Akan and Ga proverbs, and the study did not empirically assess whether or not the proverbs would be used in current conservation or education settings. These limitations present opportunities for additional research.

Results

The investigation of Akan and Ga proverbs reveals a richly developed linguistic and cultural framework through which ecological knowledge is passed on from generation to generation. Proverbs play an important role in this transmission mechanism because they convey environmental knowledge in a variety of ways, such as metaphorically, analogically, by personification, empirically, and in terms of moral considerations. Together, these proverbs

portray a worldview in which the survival of individuals, biodiversity, land, water, and the rhythm of the seasons are intimately connected, and therefore comprise a comprehensive indigenous ecological knowledge system that continues to have relevance in today's environmental discourses.

A primary method of expressing environmental knowledge in the examined proverbs is through metaphor and analogy. Metaphors based on flora, fauna, and environmental processes allow ecologists' complex environmental observations to be translated into understandable cultural knowledge in both the Akan and Ga traditions. For instance, the Akan proverb "Ekwan tenten na ɛma yɛhu aboa a ne ho yɛ dɛ" (It is a long journey that reveals a sweet animal) uses the image of finding unfamiliar species after travelling over long distances to convey the necessity of observing biodiversity over extended periods. Similarly, the Ga proverb "Ganyobi ni ɛɔɔɔ kpakpa ji ɛɔɔɔ ni hiɛ" (The good seed is the one that lasts) draws on agricultural knowledge of seed quality and adaptability to express an ecological principle: choosing seeds that remain environmentally fit over the long term. These metaphors are not simply ornamental language, but rather cognitive tools that assist communities in interpreting ecological systems through culturally meaningful images

Personification and anthropomorphism further enhance the expression of environmental knowledge in these proverbs. For example, the Akan proverb "Asase yɛ nsamanfoɔ, atasefoɔ, ne mmerewa dɛɛ" (The land belongs to the dead, the living, and those yet to be born) portrays the land as a living entity with moral and intergenerational obligations. The personification of the land as a living entity conveys more than mere symbolic meaning; it represents a moral ecology that connects land management decisions to ethical responsibility, stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility. Similar sentiments are expressed in the Ga proverb "Shikpon ni kɔɔ lɛ kɛ wɔ" (The earth that gives life carries us), in which nature is portrayed as a caring, life-giving entity. By portraying land and water as agents that act upon human lives, these proverbs illustrate a reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment, where environmental stewardship is embedded within social and moral obligations

Proverbs based on direct empirical observation constitute another significant source of indigenous ecological knowledge. For example, the Akan proverb "Nsuo koro nnma dua baa koro nyini" (One stream does not make one tree grow) expresses observed relationships between water and life, demonstrating the necessity of having multiple sources of ecological input to sustain life. The Ga proverb "Nsu ni hiɛ kɔɔ kɛ wɔ" (Water that flows carries life with it) illustrates hydrological knowledge of the importance of clean, flowing water, demonstrating its life-sustaining qualities while implicitly cautioning against stagnation and pollution. These

statements exemplify a deep empirical understanding of ecological processes developed over centuries of interaction with the natural environment.

Beyond providing descriptions of ecological processes, both Akan and Ga proverbs in the data have consistently situated environmental knowledge within moral and ethical frameworks. Environmental behavior is depicted as being intrinsically connected to social responsibility and spiritual accountability in these proverbs. For example, the Akan warning "Bonsam kyere obi kwan na onno nso onya bi" (The devil shows someone a path only to gain something himself) can be used to criticize destructive environmental practices, such as overexploiting resources that promise short-term benefits while causing long-term harm. Likewise, the Ga proverb "Gbomɔ ke fɔŋ kwraa eŋɔɔ shika" (A person who does evil will never find fortune) equates environmental destruction with moral decay and eventual downfall. "Gbomɔ ke fɔŋ kwraa eŋɔɔ shika" Batafo bi enye ake "Awo, meni yɔɔ ehie kpɔɔɔkpɔɔ le?" ekeɛ Le ake "wɔɔ se le ona MɔɔɔMɔɔ!" (The young wild hog asked his mother, "Mamma, what are the warts in thy face?" She replied, "by and by thou wilt have seen it already) Ke oshi mnne le, eko yaa omama mli: (If thou pound palm nuts, some will stain thy cloth). Efo tso egbee eno: (He cut a tree and fell over it himself). These proverbs warn against environmental exploitation and degradation, and the consequences that follow. These moral frameworks provide a means of communicating ecological caution and sustainability ethics within community values and expectations.

The study revealed certain thematic patterns from the examination of specific Akan and Ga proverbs related to biodiversity, land, water, and seasonal cycles. Proverbs related to biodiversity reflect a detailed recognition of species behavior, ecological dependency, and habitat integrity. For example, Ga proverb Keji oshwie kooloo ni ohaaa le tsomɔhe le, etuɔ eyiɔ onɔ (If you strip the land naked, it will strip you naked); Miyeee mileloo ni fee sɛɛ le, mikɛɛ ake koo le shishi ewo duɔ- (I will not eat a game and later say the forest is dark). This portrays animals as guides, guardians, and indicators of ecosystem health.

Proverbs related to land emphasize the sacredness of land, its fertility, and communal ownership, and articulate an ethic of stewardship and sustainable utilization of land. The Akan proverb "Se wopira asase no nnyegyee mu a, ebesi wo so" (If you till the land without letting it rest, it will turn on you) articulates the principles of soil conservation, fallowing, and rotating crops that are foundational to sustainable agriculture. Ga proverbs also emphasize the land as a shared, indiscriminate entity that receives all, dead and alive, thereby emphasizing its communal nature and the need to preserve its integrity. The examined proverbs illustrate a land ethic that is not based on individual ownership, but on responsibility, reciprocity, and continuity.

Water and rivers are other prominent eco-cultural themes in the studied proverbs. Akan and Ga proverbs depict water as life-giving, cleansing, and socially unifying, while also illustrating the

risks and limits associated with water. For example, clear water reflects one's image or calling people together emphasize the collective benefits of purity and access, whereas warnings about the deceptive beauty of water surfaces highlight an awareness of hydrological risk. These proverbs articulate knowledge regarding water conservation, pollution, the behavior of rivers, and the social norms governing water usage. For example, Ga proverbs: Koo ni ehere bo le, otseee le koo sha, (One does not spoil the water one drinks); Korle yaaa nsho (The Kole (River) flows into the sea), Nu hieye Feo shi ehii mli wo (the face of water is beautiful, but it is not good to sleep on it); Ake naji enyo susu faa (we do not measure the depth of a river with two legs); Kâji nu nâ lâ, etsôô enaamôhe. (When it rains, the rainwater itself reveals safe spots.) These illustrate the life-giving aspects of water and its potential to unite people within the community, while cautioning against hydrological risks.

The proverbs also represented awareness of seasonal cycles and climate patterns, which constitute another key area of ecological knowledge. For example, Akan sayings such as "Akete nni awow bere mu" (Palm fruit does not ripen in the cold season) articulate specific knowledge about crop cycles and temporal environmental conditions. In Ga tradition, Adu le akâ hómô ko yâ ni baaba wôsâ ko, no hewô ni kâji eye nii lâ ekâ eko toô ekpaii amlî lâ. (The monkey knows that famine will break out someday, and for that reason, it reserves some food in its cheek while eating) Anuu nu atoo Aharabata. (One does not drink water in anticipation of the Harmattan drought.)

Proverbs that anticipate droughts or prepare for adversity by storing supplies reflect an intimate understanding of climatic patterns and adaptive strategies. These proverbs express phenomenological knowledge necessary for planning agricultural activities, conserving resources, and mitigating environmental risk.

Discussion

The research results clearly show that Akan and Ga proverbs are much more than just beautiful expressions; they are also ecological expressions that contain Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK). The interpretation of the data aligns with the theory of eco-linguistics, which states that language does not just reflect how we see the world around us, but influences or molds how we understand it (Stibbe, 2015; Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). Therefore, when using metaphors and analogies to explain ecological issues, proverbs support Mieder's (2004) view that metaphors serve to transform complex ecological issues into understandable forms that can be widely transmitted.

Furthermore, the themes that emerged from the data, Biodiversity, Land, Water, and Seasonal Cycles, are consistent with previous work by Adom (2016, 2019), who has shown that Akan Proverbs were based on actual experiences observing natural phenomena and were used as "vehicles" for instructing individuals on morality in regards to biodiversity. In addition, the Ga Proverbs that focus on Water Ethics and Community Land Management, support Nketia's (oral literature of the Ga people) findings that Ga oral literature is a vehicle for connecting ecological observation to an individual's everyday life.

Additionally, the results of our study support Dei's (1993) call to include Indigenous Knowledge Systems into sustainability models and highlight the potential value of traditional oral literature in addressing today's environmental problems. The moral values found in many of the proverbs (relating ecological preservation to spiritual accountability) support Adom's (2016) concept of "invisible policing forces" in Akan Culture, which relates moral behavior towards nature with consequences for the afterlife. The above findings support the sociolinguistic perspective that proverbs serve as prescriptive guides for community governance (Hymes, 2003) and promote social cohesion through shared ecological values.

Lastly, the practical application of the findings to incorporate proverbs into school curricula and conservation programs supports the views expressed by Battiste et al. (2002), who advocate for culturally grounded theories, and by Berkes et al. (2000), who support traditional ecological knowledge as adaptive strategies. The electronic documentation of proverbs through digital means addresses concerns about the loss of traditional knowledge during modernization (Adom, 2019).

Conclusions

The results of this study show that Akan and Ga proverbs together form a holistic ecology worldview within which nature is lively, interrelated, morally organized, and ultimately embedded in social life. They represent both repositories and conduits of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK), and function to guide behavior, shape perceptions, and sustain environmental knowledge of ecological processes. Their linguistic richness and thematic coherence illustrate that these oral traditions are not only literary artefacts, but functioning ecological texts with pedagogical, ethical, and scientific value that is still significant for contemporary discussions of environmental sustainability. Future research could investigate how these proverbs function in contemporary communicative practices, explore their pedagogical impact in environmental education settings, or extend comparative analyses to other Ghanaian or West African traditions to trace regional patterns of indigenous environmental knowledge.

To valorize the importance of proverbs for the sustainability of ecology and cultural wisdom, the study advises curriculum designers, teachers, policymakers and different stakeholders to:

1. Integrate Akan and Ga ecological proverbs into environmental education curricula at basic, secondary, and tertiary levels to strengthen cultural relevance and promote ethical ecological awareness.
2. Promote community storytelling and oral Performance sessions in schools, cultural centres, and local communities to help reinforce the transfer of indigenous ecological knowledge, as well as create intergenerational dialogue.
3. Collaborate with policymakers, traditional authorities, and conservation organisations to incorporate indigenous ecological wisdom into environmental campaigns, land-use planning, and natural resource management initiatives.
4. Digitally document and curate Akan and Ga ecological proverbs through audio-visual archives, community-based digital platforms, and linguistic repositories to preserve endangered oral forms and safeguard their ecological insights for future generations.

References

- Adom, D. (2016). The philosophical Epistemologies of Asante Proverbs in Ghana's Biodiversity Conservation. *Journal of Environment and Earth Science*, 6(7), 129-136.
- Adom, D. (2019). The place and voice of local people, culture, and traditions: A catalyst for ecotourism development in rural communities in Ghana. *Scientific African*, 6, e00184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sciaf.2019.e00184>
- Adom, D. (2025). Digging Deeper: Why Constitutional Recognition of Nature's Rights is Key to Solving Ghana's Environmental Crisis. *Journal of Innovations in Art and Culture for Nature Conservation and Environmental Sustainability*, 3(1), 499-510. <https://doi.org/10.60129/jinces.v3i1.00525>
- Appiah, P., Appiah, A., & Agyeman-Duah, I. (2007). *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akan*. Sub-Saharan Publishers
- Brookman-Amisshah, J. (1986). Akan proverbs about death. *Anthropos*, 75-85.
- Battiste, M., Apamuwek Institute, Henderson, J. Y., Kynoch, B., Findlay, L. M., & Billingham, J. (2002). Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education: A Literature Review with Recommendations. In *National Working Group on Education [Report]*. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). [https://easywebdesignsolutions.com/georgemartell/email41/docs/4Marie-Battisteikp_e\(2\).pdf](https://easywebdesignsolutions.com/georgemartell/email41/docs/4Marie-Battisteikp_e(2).pdf)

- Berkes, F., Colding, J., & Folke, C. (2000). Rediscovery Of Traditional Ecological Knowledge as Adaptive Management. *Ecological Applications*, 10(5), 1251–1262. [https://doi.org/10.1890/1051-0761\(2000\)010](https://doi.org/10.1890/1051-0761(2000)010)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cowley, S., Wei, L., & Hua, Z. (2023). Ecolinguistics in practice. In *Ecolinguistics in practice* (pp. 374–385). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003082637-32>
- Dei, G. J. (1993). Sustainable development in the African context: Revisiting some theoretical and methodological issues. *Africa Development: A Quarterly Journal of CODESRIA*, 18(2), 97–110. <http://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=112356184&DB=p>
- Ehondor, B. (n.d.). *The concept of proverbs as a theoretical category in communication in Africa*.
- Fill, A., & Mühlhäusler, P. (2001). *The ecolinguistics reader: language, ecology, and environment*. http://bvbr.bib-bvb.de/8991/F?func=service&doc_library=BVB01&local_base=BVB01&doc_number=009234255&sequence=000002&line_number=0001&func
- Fill, A., & Penz, H. (2017). *The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687391>
- Finnegan, R. H. (2012). Oral Literature in Africa. In *World oral literature series*. <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0025>
- Halliday, R. J. (1990). New Ways of Meaning: The Challenge to Applied Linguistics (1990) First published in Journal of Applied Linguistics 6 (Ninth World Congress of Applied Linguistics Special Issue). Greek Applied Linguistics Association, 1990, pp. 7–36. In *Continuum eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474211932.ch-006>
- Hymes, D. (2003). *Ethnography, linguistics, narrative inequality*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203211816>
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). Braiding sweetgrass: indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants. *Choice Reviews Online*, 51(10), 51–5594. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.51-5594>
- Konadu-Agyemang, K., & Panford, M. K. (2006). *Africa's development in the twenty-first century: Pertinent Socio-economic and Development Issues*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Kropp Dakubu, M. E., Hellan, L., & Beermann, D. (2007). Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar. In S. Müller (Ed.), *Verb sequencing constraints in Ga: Serial verb constructions and the extended verb complex*. CSLI Publications.
- Kudadjie, J. N. (1996). *Ga and Dangme Proverbs*. Legon: Asempa Publishers.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). The metaphorical structure of the human conceptual system. *Cognitive Science*, 4(2), 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0402_4
- Mieder, W. (2004). *Proverbs: a Handbook*.

- New Zealand Psychological Society. (n.d.). Retrieved December 16, 2025, from <https://www.psychology.org.nz/>
- Nyamekye, K. (2014). *Managing the environmental crisis in Ghana: The Role of African Traditional Religion and Culture with special reference to the Berekum Traditional Area*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Obeng, S. G. (1996). The proverb as a mitigating and politeness strategy in Akan discourse. *IUScholarWorks (Indiana University)*, 38(3), 521–549. <http://hdl.handle.net/2022/3165>
- Ollenu, Y., Obeng, P., & Donkor, M. T. (2024). A syntactic analysis of the Book of Proverbs in Ga. *Journal of The Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, 27(1-2), 97-116
- Scarlat, C., & Petrișor, A. (2021). Old proverbs for a future sustainable development: An environmental management perspective. *Present Environment and Sustainable Development*, 15(1), 93–107. <https://doi.org/10.15551/pesd2021151008>
- Stibbe, A. (2015). *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*. Routledge.
- Stibbe, A. (2020). *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live by* (2nd edn.). In *Research Repository (University of Gloucestershire)*. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3854-9854>
- Thulla, P. F. Y., Moriba, S., & Thulla, J. E. (2024). Sustainability of the structural and semantic parallels in African Proverbs and Riddles: A case of Temne Proverbial and Riddling Sessions. *Journal of Innovations in Art and Culture for Nature Conservation and Environmental Sustainability*, 2(2), 355–371. <https://doi.org/10.60129/jinces.v2i2.00424>
- Vicente, P. N. (2020). Conceptual Metaphor Theory. *The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483375519.n145>
- Yankah, K. (1989). Proverbs: the aesthetics of traditional communication. *Research in African Literatures*, 20(3), 325–346. <https://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=058275487>
- Zhao, W. (2012). An Analysis of Social Proverbs from the Perspective of Cultural Semiotics. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(10). <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.10.2073-2080>

Funding: The authors did not receive any financial assistance during their research.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Disclaimer Statement:

This work is not part of a thesis submitted to a university for the award of any degree.

Author Bio Note:

1. Dr. Vera Gyamera is a Lecturer in English at the University of Media, Arts and Communication, Ghana. She holds a PhD in Education, Society and Quality of Life (Plurilingualism and Education) from the University of Lleida, Spain, an MPhil in Linguistics, and a BA in Linguistics with English from the University of Ghana, Legon. Her research interests span multidisciplinary areas, including multilingual education, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, oral literature, language and gender, and environmental sustainability. She has participated in academic conferences and professional training programmes across Europe and Africa. Her recent publications examine indigenous ecological knowledge, the influence of effective communication on conflict resolution in an ecocycle society, language attitudes, and the intersections of language, gender, and power.
2. Lilian Amghortso Glover-Quartey is a second-year PhD student in the English department at the University of Ghana, Legon and an Assistant Lecturer in English department at the University of Media, Arts and Communication. Her research interests include Language and Literary studies, African Literature, and language learning, acquisition and teaching, with a particular focus on how literature and its forms can be used in the broader sense of lifestyle improvement and climate change.
3. Mrs Eva Ama Enu is an accomplished educator and researcher with over twenty years of teaching experience. She holds a Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language from the University of Ghana and a Bachelor of Arts in French and English from the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Currently, she is currently an English lecturer at the University of Media, Arts and Communication, where she inspires students through language and literature. Her research specialization lies in the literary arts, reflecting my

passion for exploring cultural and thematic dimensions of texts. She remains dedicated to advancing knowledge and nurturing future scholars.

Authorship and Level of Contribution

Author – VG: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Project administration, Resources.

Author- LAGQ : Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology

Author- EAE: Writing – review & editing