



## Articles

# Marriage Is Like a Groundnut, You Must Crack It to See What Is Inside: Examining Romantic Relationship Rules in Akan Proverbs

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## Abstract

Proverbs are a valuable part of African culture. They transmit messages of shared, communal values about different facets of life inter-generationally. In an exploration of one West-African ethnic group, the Akan, the present study investigates messages that proverbs communicate about interpersonal relationships. A total of 79 Akan proverbs that addressed romantic relationships were examined using thematic analysis. The main components of advocated values as captured in the proverbs were identified. The thematic analysis determined that Akan romantic relationships tend to lean towards a “work-it-out” approach as opposed to the “soul mate” approach typical of Western romantic relationship norms. Overall, this study demonstrates that analyzing cultural artifacts such as proverbs can teach us about cultural rules that define relationships.

**Keywords:** marriage, Akan proverbs, cultural beliefs, relationship success

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“Marriage is like a groundnut, you must crack it to see what is inside”  
(You need to experience something before judging it)  
Akan Proverb

The development of an intimate relationship is a fundamental part of the human experience. Indeed, many adults seek to find and keep a relationship partner that they can feel close to, seek comfort in, become distressed with, and have a sense of security/confidence about (Doherty & Feeney, 2004). Sometimes, such developments lead to long-term, committed relationships, such as engagements and marriage. Given that being in a romantic relationship with another person can be beneficial in many ways, it makes sense to understand what makes romantic relationships work. These factors are often shaped by culture (Weisfeld et al., 2011). While romantic relationships have been studied extensively in western cultural contexts, and to some extent in Asian cultures, they have been under-studied in African settings.

The goal of the present study is to examine cultural scripts of romantic relationships encapsulated in proverbs in the Akan, a West African ethnolinguistic group. By doing so, we take a bottom-up approach to identify trends and patterns in the ways in which romantic relationships are represented in Akan proverbs. Rather than rely on

patterns identified by previous studies of romantic relationships in Western cultural settings, we take a culturally grounded, or emic, approach by examining concepts inherent in culturally constructed proverbs and sayings (e.g., [Berry, 1989](#); [Church & Lonner, 1998](#)). This approach shares much with research in cross-cultural psychology on social axioms. Social axioms are “generalized beliefs about oneself, the social and physical environment, or the spiritual world, and are in the form of an assertion about the relationship between two entities concepts” ([Leung et al., 2002](#), p. 289). Social axioms typically describe how one thing relates to another (A is related to B), and represent culturally constructed notions of how the world functions, which help to guide the behaviors of individuals within their culture.

Several studies have used culturally generated axioms to identify how culturally constructed beliefs vary around the world (e.g., [Bond et al., 2004](#); [Leung et al., 2002, 2007](#)). For instance, [Leung et al. \(2002\)](#) gathered social axioms from North America, Hong Kong, and Venezuela, by gathering proverbs and sayings, conducting interviews, content analyses of mass media artifacts, and in the case of Venezuela, a content analysis of a book compiling popular Venezuelan proverbs. The social axioms generated through this process were then sorted into categories representing axioms about individual attributes, orientations to the social works, how people interact with each other, and aspects of the environment which have implications for social behaviors.

In this study we follow much of the same approach, by starting with Akan proverbs and sorting them into categories to develop an understanding of the types of social axioms that underlie West African conceptualizations of romantic relationship. Below, we provide a review of major relationship theories which have been studied from a psychological perspective, typically from a North American perspective, and discuss these theories in relation to findings related to Ghanaian culture and related cross-cultural perspectives. We then conduct a thematic analysis of Akan proverbs related to romantic relationships, discuss the results in relation to Akan culture, and suggest future research directions.

What are important factors that shape successful romantic relationships? What would one see if one were to - borrowing from the imagery of the Akan proverb - crack open a good marriage? Research primarily conducted in western settings has identified many of the following as influential for the success or failure of a romantic relationship between two people: similarity ([Gaunt, 2006](#)), role expectation ([Gaunt, 2006](#)), personality ([Karney & Bradbury, 1995](#)), attachment ([Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980](#); [Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007](#)), values ([Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987](#)), disclosure ([Vangelisti, Reis, & Fitzpatrick, 2002](#)), emotional regulation ([Levenson, Haase, Bloch, Holley, & Seider, 2013](#)), self-verification ([Weger, 2005](#)), and vulnerability to partner imperfection ([Arriaga, Slaughterbeck, Cappelz, & Hmurovic, 2007](#)). These have been explored using indices of relationship success such as relationship/marital satisfaction, relationship quality, and relationship stability.

## Culture and Romantic Relationships

The dearth of psychological studies on the nature and expressions of romantic love in African cultural settings is a reality that one is confronted with in any attempt at literature review. However, limited work has examined how the conceptualization and experience of romantic love may differ across human cultures. Much of this work has demonstrated widespread variation in the experiences and importance of emotional and practical aspects of relationships.

According to [Hegi and Bergner \(2010\)](#), romantic relationships in Western/individualistic cultures, such as the United States, usually begin with passionate love followed by more companionate love, the form of love found

in friendships. Passionate love, defined by [Hatfield and Rapson \(1987\)](#) as the “longing for union” with another, is found particularly in romantic relationships and varies based on cultural experiences and the quality of passionate love. Passionate love can include “appraisals or appreciations, subjective feelings, expressions, patterned physiological processes, action tendencies, and instrumental behaviors” ([Hatfield & Rapson, 1993](#)).

On the contrary, non-Western cultures like China are proposed to value companionate love as opposed to passionate love ([Fiske, 2010](#)). There have not been many studies on African culture and their value of passionate vs. companionate love, but [D’Hondt and Vandewiele \(1983\)](#) suggest that Africans likely value both of these forms of love. They conducted a study with West African (Senegal) college students to explore their attitudes towards love, finding that not only did the students find passionate love important, but that they also valued and trusted their parents regarding marriage choice. Thus, passionate and companionate love do not necessarily exist in opposition with each other.

Cross-cultural investigations have identified ways in which culture may influence which types of love are valued. [Landis and O’Shea \(2000\)](#) explored the factor dimensionality and cultural relativity of passionate love in a large study of university students from nine samples—from North America, Europe, the Middle East, and a Pacific Island. Their results revealed that passionate love is multidimensional and varies across cultures and, in some instances, by gender. They showed that masculine cultures tend to have more self-centered, physical relationships, as the nature of longing for someone is focused on security of the relationship and commitment to one another. In contrast, for more traditional societies, romantic love is less valued. Their study also noted a difference in structure for passionate love in urban vs. rural environments, with an increase in individualism—and thereby an increase in uncertainty about stability in a relationship—in urban areas. Some ethnographic writers (e.g., [Coppinger & Rosenblatt, 1968](#)) have contended that in so-called collectivist cultures, romantic love plays little role in relationship cohesion, especially in marriages. Instead, instrumental factors such as material support and more practical survival resources were assumed to be crucial for the stability and flourishing of romantic love.<sup>1</sup>

These differences in the conceptualization of romantic love vs. practical factors as the primary foundation for relationships may parallel findings from work related to implicit theories of romantic relationships. Implicit theories about romantic relationships such as the soulmate theory and the “work-it-out” theory ([Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002](#)) have been found to shape responses to conflict in romantic relationships. According to the soulmate theory, it is believed that only one or a few people are meant to be with another person and can have a satisfying relationship. In contrast, the work-it-out theory proposes that effort is the key to building successful relationships and that there are many people with whom one can have a satisfying relationship with. Soulmate theorists tend to be more likely to be passive about conflicts in their relationship while work-it-out theorists tend to confront problems. Ghanaians, particularly those in more rural environments, tend to place more value on kin relationships, such as with parents, than on romantic relationships ([Salter & Adams, 2012](#)), potentially reflecting the notion of the irreplaceability of kin and the replaceability of romantic relationships, supporting the notion that the soulmate theory of relationships may be less prevalent in West African settings.

The indication of culturally divergent theories is that relationships are socially constructed realities that take the shape of the cultural grounding of experience in particular settings ([Goodwin, 1999](#)). So although in such collectivist settings one may not usually see the Western version of expressions of romantic love (e.g. cuddling and kissing in public spaces, daily verbal expressions of affection to a romantic partner, exchange of symbolic

presents such as on Valentine's Day or birthdays, etc.), there are other socially constructed ways of demonstrating one's passionate love for a spouse or partner in other cultural contexts. A recent study by [Goodwin et al. \(2012\)](#), found that on the one hand that respondents from individualist cultures (in Europe) were more likely to place importance on their caring and romantic passion characteristics. On the other hand, respondents from traditional cultures (including Ghana) emphasized characteristics reminiscent of maturity and confidence.

The ways in which the conceptualization of social relationships vary according to the social structure of a given society is a major focus of work by Adams and his colleagues in Ghanaian society ([Adams, 2005](#); [Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004](#); [Adams & Plaut, 2003](#)). According to this work, both the nature of relationship and the conceptualization of intimacy are culturally bound phenomena. In North American cultures, relationships are generally viewed as being personally selected, and individuals generally tend to have a larger network of friends. In contrast, Ghanaians in these studies tended to have fewer friends, and express more distrust toward them. Furthermore, in North American cultures interpersonal relationships are generally afforded by the environment, rather than via personal choice ([Adams & Plaut, 2003](#)). As a result, the nature and perception of relationships varies in North American and Ghanaian settings: Ghanaians tend to be wary of enemies in their network of friends ([Adams, 2005](#)), have less need for intense intimacy in close relationships ([Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004](#); [Adams & Plaut, 2003](#)) and as individuals may be heavily influenced by family and kin in the choice of partner/spouse, insistence on personal preferences in physical attractiveness is less paramount in West African cultural settings ([Plaut, Adams, & Anderson, 2009](#)).

Like research on the grounding of personal relationship conducted by Adams and colleagues, research on relational mobility ([Oishi, Schug, Yuki, & Axt, 2015](#); [Yuki & Schug, 2012](#)) has shown that the ease at which individuals within a given society can enter into new relationships and depart from old relationships has profound implication for the nature of relationships in society. For instance, just as previous research has shown that Ghanaians tend to promote cautious intimacy and enemyship in relationships (e.g., [Adams, 2005](#)), similar patterns are observed in East Asian settings, and have been linked to perceptions of relational mobility ([Li, Adams, Kurtiş, & Hamamura, 2015](#)). Cultures with high relational mobility put more emphasis on signaling intense intimacy through disclosure of personal information ([Schug, Yuki, & Maddux, 2010](#); [Kito, Yuki, & Thomson, 2017](#); see also [Shaw, 2000](#) for a similar West African perspective), which can serve to increase commitment and help individuals retain relationships in the absence of strong relational ties. [Yamada, Kito, & Yuki \(2017\)](#) show that increases in relational mobility impact the degree to which passion is valued in relationships, as passion is more predictive of relational commitment in mobile societies compared to societies where relational ties are more robust in general.

The cultural contexts in which relationships occur should have profound implications for axioms related to relationships, which orient people to strategies grounded in their cultural setting. As a result, proverbs reflecting axioms from collectivist settings may not reference expressions of romantic love typical of Western cultural settings. This present study is an attempt to shed light on these indications through the analysis of a set of non-Western proverbs. This study specifically sought to examine Akan proverbs for several reasons. First, previous research on social axioms has focused extensively on East vs West comparisons, which has resulted in minimal data from outside these geographic regions, and in particular there is a lack of focus on African contexts in relationship research in psychology. Second, the study of proverbs as social axioms is particularly well suited to the study of relationships in West African settings. The use of proverbs is highly prevalent in

many African settings (Mbiti, 1970), and several large collections of African proverbs have been compiled. This study uses one such compilation. Furthermore, Akan proverbs in particular were chosen for this study given familiarity of as some members of the research team have familiarity with Akan culture; as well as previous psychology-based work on relationships (e.g. Adams, 2005; Goodwin et al., 2012) and emotions (e.g. Chentsova-Dutton & Dzokoto, 2014) in Ghanaian settings. While certainly not representative of all African or even all West African settings, this Akan case study (a study of the largest Ghanaian collection of proverbs from Ghana's largest ethnolinguistic group) serves as an entry point into the examination of the nuances of relationality in romantic contexts in under-researched settings.

## Methods and Preliminary Findings

Borrowing from corpus-based approaches to proverb research, we started our investigation into Akan relationship proverbs with a relatively large, publicly available, corpus of proverbs. Our proverb source was *Bu Me Be* (Tell Me A Proverb): *Proverbs of the Akan*; a compilation by Appiah, Appiah, and Agyeman-Duah (2007) of seven thousand and fifteen (7,015) Akan proverbs. Classic approaches to proverb categorization by paremiologists (proverb researchers) have dealt with large collections of proverbs (e.g. Dalj, 2003; Permyakov, 1979; Scarborough, 1875). While the specific paremiological approaches have varied somewhat, thematic organization consistently plays a central role in analysis. All paremiologists operate from the assumption that at a meta-level, proverbs are shaped by rules, and the orders and patterns into which proverbs fall can be identified upon careful analysis of collections of proverbs from one or more cultures (Lauhakangas, 2014). Ironically, Lauhakangas observes that thematic organization of proverbs is often hampered by the reality that while divergent categories may be ideal for the purposes of empirical research, proverbs by nature are multi-dimensional and not well-suited for allocation to mutually exclusive categories. Rather, connections of categories to one another may be what is important. We consider the multi-dimensionality of the proverb to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can make for messy categorization processes. On the other hand, multi-dimensionality validates the potential of reorganization of previously categorized proverbs.

While qualitative analysis is useful for a wide variety of sources of information, proverbs are associated with a set of singular considerations because of the nature of the unit of analysis. Structurally, proverbs are longer than single words, but much shorter than stories or interview transcripts. Individual words - as in the case of the analysis of lexica - are analyzed with the word, or its composite morphemes- as the unit of analysis. Longer discourses are broken down into smaller, meaningful units of text and those serve as the unit of analysis. In contrast to both of these, proverbs themselves are the unit of analysis, but lend themselves to elements of lexical, sentence, text, and discourse semantic analysis (Grzybek, 2014). These approaches to semantic analysis generate information about what proverbs mean, which in turn is used as the basis for proverb classification. "Bu Me Be" (Tell me a proverb) consists of the Akan proverbs in Twi (an Akan language), their English literal translations, and, finally, their manifest meanings (interpretations) in English. Introductory chapters and organizational narrative are written in English. Our analysis thus utilized the provided meanings of each proverbs as the foundation of our analysis.

The organizational structure of the published proverb compendium was thematic, but the theme of relationships was not included in the categories. Our first step, therefore, was to identify all proverbs in the compendium relevant to interpersonal relationships. Using individual proverbs as the unit of analysis, the English literal



translations and their manifest meanings of the Akan proverbs were analyzed to meet at least one of the following inclusion criteria:

- i. The literal translation or *manifest meaning* made direct reference to a relational bond (the connection between two people or amongst those in general). For example, the proverb “*Marriage is like a groundnut, you must crack it to see what is inside*” includes the relational bond marriage.
- ii. The literal translation or *manifest meaning* made an indirect reference to a relational aspect (e.g. giving birth to a stubborn child to indicate troublesome relations with others in the proverb *If a woman gives birth to a stubborn child, she hears talk of her vagina (manifest meaning: A very grave insult in Asante refers to your mother's vagina. Hence: if you have troublesome relations, people will curse you.)*
- iii. The *manifest meaning* of the proverb (provided by the authors in English) had relational implications. For example, *The branches of the palm tree do not know who is a citizen of the state* does not directly or indirectly link to relationships. However, its manifest meaning, provided by the authors of the compendium, is *If you are to be victimized it does not make much difference if it is by friend or foe*, which has a relational component.

All proverbs that met these criteria were entered into a spreadsheet that included each original proverb's compendium number, the proverb, and its literal and manifest meanings. Subsequent proverb analysis was conducted thematically, using an adaptation of Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis of qualitative data in Psychology-based studies. Our process involved: reading and re-reading each proverb to obtain a sense of the broad, inherent themes pertaining to interpersonal relationships; generating initial codes from the data; and finally refining our codes and themes during our iterative coding process. We observed that the proverbs addressed four interpersonal relationship types: Romantic Relationships, Friendship/Enmityship, Family, and General Relationships. Three independent raters coded and rated the proverbs based on these general relationship categories. Proverbs that focused on romantic relationships (PFRRs) (79 in total) were further analyzed thematically for purposes of the present study.

Similar to the process used described above, we used thematic analysis to identify patterns related to romantic relationships in our subset of proverbs. While our analysis at this stage was guided by codes generated in the previous stage, we were specifically interested in themes pertaining to behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, etc. pertaining to the formation, maintenance, enhancement, and dissolution/termination of romantic relationships encapsulated in the proverb units of analysis.

Our analysis yielded the following categories: *Material Support* (being able to financially support one's romantic partner), *Relational Support* (being able to carry out marital duties and take care of one's romantic partner), *Negativity* (exploitation, mistrust, suspicion, conflict, and any tension that may arise in the relationship), and *Emotional Support* (showing feelings of love and concern for one's romantic partner). An example proverb that fell under the Material Support subcategory was *Marriage, we leave it reluctantly*. Likewise, the proverb *A woman knows when her husband is hungry (lit. her husband's stomach's hunger)* describes the subcategory of Relational Support. An example proverb for Relationship Problems was *No matter how beautiful a woman is, if she is always divorcing (lit. stops marriage) she has no respect*. An example proverb for Emotional Support was *The old fire-brand's end is not difficult to light*. There was an additional miscellaneous category, which contained proverbs that addressed romantic relationships but did not fit into any of the pre-existing categories and did not have a common thematic thread. Proverbs illustrative of each category are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*Akan Proverb Subcategories for Romantic Relationships*

Frequency (%)	Subcategory	Proverb Examples
13 (14%)	Material Support	Marriage, we leave it reluctantly. (You have to think carefully before breaking up a profitable relationship). Women love (to be) where [possessions are]/[money is].
38 (42%)	Relational Support	A woman knows when her husband is hungry ( <i>lit.</i> her husband's stomach's hunger). If the short palm tree wants long life, it grows beside the odum tree. (If you have a protector you prosper).
25 (27%)	Relationship Problems	If you want to get rid of your wife you say: "I am demanding a piredwan worth of pacification" (Piredwan: large quantity of gold dust. If you want something to happen, you make the alternative unrealistic). A bad marriage spoils a good woman (Women suffer most when a marriage breaks down)
10 (11%)	Emotional Support	(Even) if a woman [carves a drum]/[makes a shield], she keeps it in a man's room. (Whatever a woman may do she needs a man). We do not use sympathy as an excuse for sexual relationships. (Sympathy is one thing and sexual relationships another. Don't confuse them.)
5 (6%)	Other	If one of the little people falls into a hole, you use ripe bananas to entice him out. (The little people are supposed to be very fond of sweet things like tiger nuts, bananas, and sweet drinks. Hence: If you want to attract someone who is shy, you use what you know they like best to do so.)

In terms of relative distribution, 13 proverbs (14%) referred to Material Support, 38 (42%) proverbs focused on Relational Support, 25 (27%) proverbs addressed Relationship Problems, 10 (11%) proverbs centered on Emotional Support, and 5 (6%) proverbs did not fall into any of these categories and were classified as Other.

## Results and Discussion

### General Qualities

Emblematic of the many gender roles that exist in traditional Akan communities, many of the PFRRs specifically focused on one of the parties in the relationship - a specific gender - even in proverbs that acknowledged both parties (e.g. *A woman knows when her husband is hungry*). In other words, some of the proverbs were specifically about/for women in the context of a romantic relationship (as illustrated above) while others were addressed to/about the opposite sex. These gender distinctions sometimes (but not always) carried over to the manifest meaning. In other words, if a proverb mentioned a woman, the manifest meaning of the proverb would either be restricted to women or would be generalizable to both relationship partners. As such the relationship proverbs collectively contained messages for one or more relationship parties.

Consistent with the prevalence of marriages in the traditional Akan community, the focus of the proverbs were heterosexual romantic relationships. Some PFRRs specifically mentioned marriage (e.g. *Marriage is like a groundnut, you must crack it to see what is inside*), while others expressly addressed a heterosexual marriage partner (e.g. husband, wife). Some others were more general (*True love is not based on wealth*).

PFRRs that specifically mentioned marriage appeared to communicate a general philosophy of the nature of committed romantic relationships. The case of Marriage *is like a groundnut, you must crack it to see what is inside*, is a clever use of simile. Groundnuts (peanuts) are encased in an opaque shell. It is thus impossible to tell the size and nature of the contents (the nuts) from the outside. It is only by cracking the outer shell that one can tell whether the contained nuts are good or bad, big or small, fully formed or immature. Likewise, one can generally only get an accurate picture of the true nature of a romantic relationship after removal of its shell - the veneer of the public representation of the relationship to the world - to reveal its inner workings and dynamics. Thus, the proverb is a reminder that it is impossible to accurately determine from a distance the true nature and qualities of the union: such information can only be obtained by examining the relationship from the inside. The proverb also speaks to the “stuff” the relationship is made of: as in, whether or not the relationship can survive adversity.

The focus on partners by some of the proverbs is consistent with [Permyakov's \(1979\)](#) assertion that proverb attributes often occur in opposition pairs, and that in cases where the proverb only highlights one member of the pair, the other is alluded to. In addition though, [Permyakov \(1979\)](#) sees proverbial phrases as signs of situational context and relative to particular objects. [Gyekye \(1996\)](#) highlights the perceived importance of the institution of marriage in his argument that in Akan society marriage “is a requirement of society, an obligation every man and woman must fulfil, a drama of life in which every man and woman must participate” (p. 76), and a rite of passage that “elevates a man into respectable social status” (p. 77). A similar sentiment was put forward by [Tetteh \(1967\)](#) 30 years prior. This culturally-driven apparent compulsoriness is a function of the perception of marriage as crucial to the extension of the bloodline which is key to the maintenance of the kinship system - the backbone of Akan society. Research indicates that this expectation still persists in contemporary Akan society ([Dinan, 1983](#); [Sossou, 2003](#); [Vidrovitch, 1997](#)) despite the transition to an economic climate where women are increasingly an important part of the full-time workforce ([Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014](#)).

## Material Support

The roles and content of many of the proverbs that specifically addressed women in our data was symbolic of the status of women in traditional Akan domiciles, which include being responsible for child bearing, child rearing, and running the household. Elements of these positions remain despite degrees of social change ([Ardayfio-Schandorf & Sam, 2006](#); [Heaton & Darkwah 2011](#)), highlighting the contemporary relevance of our findings to romantic relationships within this particular and similar cultural contexts. [Gyekye \(1996\)](#) summarizes traditional Akan expectations for a woman's role in marriage as follows: “the woman's primary role in marriage is to bear children” (p. 82). Also, [Gyekye \(1996\)](#) observes that wives were expected to be largely financially dependent on their husbands (p. 82). Yet, [Clark \(1995\)](#) and [Darkwah \(2002\)](#) observe that married women in Ghana from varied socioeconomic backgrounds have long engaged in some form of income-generating activity outside the home to supplement male partner contributions to household income and/or have access to personal funds.

As described in the introduction, existing research on how romantic relationships are construed in West African settings has suggested that West African women often place emphasis on the instrumental aspect of romantic relationships, particularly prior to marriage. For instance, studies examining attitudes toward premarital romantic relationships in Ghanaian women suggest that women often consider the ability for their lover to



provide material support as a major criterion for initiating or maintaining romantic relationships (Ankomah, 1996, 1999; Dinan, 1983). While this type of sexual exchange is observed across a number of cultures (e.g., Meston & Buss, 2007), these studies suggest that beliefs regarding the provision of material support by men to women in the context of premarital relationships may be particularly salient in West African contexts. This material exchange may be apparent even in conjugal relations, consistent with the notion of a “food-sex-nexus” (Clark, 1995; Oppong, 1980) whereby the man is expected to provide food to the woman, who reciprocates by taking care of the man in the household domain. As noted by Bochow (2012), this type of reciprocal relationship is represented in the Twi (A dialect of Akan) phrase *hwe no yie*, which indicates that one is “taking care” of one’s partner by living up to relational obligations.

Consistent with the cultural expectation that husbands should be financially responsible for their partners, material support was a prevalent theme in the collection of PFRRs. Financial dependence of women on men in the context of romantic relationships was highlighted by proverbs such as *If a young man sells meat, he will be in debt to a young woman*. According to the authors of the proverb compendium, the manifest meaning of this proverb is *Money that comes to a man, goes out to a woman*. This then captures the traditional expectation of the direction of flow of financial resources within the context of a romantic relationship. It alludes to the assumption of the provision of material support, the expectation that when a man engages in a romantic relationship with a woman, he will take care of his partner’s financial needs/provide financial support to her as well.

The cultural expectation for financial support in the context of romantic relationships in Ghana has been discussed by Ankomah (1996) and Duncan (2010). For example, Duncan states:

Writers such as Boni (2001: 24), Danquah (1928), Fortes (1950: 280) and Rattray (1929: 25) suggest that the various stages of a marriage ceremony serve as indicators measuring the reciprocal services expected of a man by his wife. The final stage, involving the payment of *etiri aseda* (thank-offering for the giving of the head), usually signalled that the man had become the recognized husband of the woman. At this stage, a husband could exercise both reproductive and sexual rights over his wife, who for her part acquired the right to be maintained, clothed and housed. (p. 303).

We observed that some proverbs in this category reveal the dark side of this social expectation. Proverbs such as *Marriage, we leave it reluctantly* illustrate the danger that the financial benefits associated with being in a financial relationship may be a barrier to leaving the relationship even when the beneficiary wants to do so. Similarly, *Women love (to be) where [possessions are]/[money is]*, and analogous proverbs highlight that demonstrated access to desired financial resources can be a romantic relationship driver, with a discounting of other potential partner characteristics. That said, the proverbs also communicated that money is not everything, through maxims such as *If a woman doesn’t love you, it doesn’t help if you splash money out on her*, and *True love is not based on wealth*.

In sum, a subset of PFRRs communicated cultural expectations of material support. The general thematic trend of proverbs in this category was financial support of the wife by her spouse. Some proverbs addressed the downsides to this focus on financial support, revealing the double-edged sword nature of this cultural expectation. This message is consistent with Akan traditional marriage ceremony related rituals, as well as early research (e.g. Coppinger & Rosenblatt, 1968) highlighting the importance of instrumentality and practical

support in romantic relationships in collectivistic settings. However, the data also revealed additional categories of relationship values which are discussed below.

## Relational and Emotional Support

While material support was a common theme, *Relational support* - non-monetary behaviors by one partner for the benefit of the other partner in the relationship - was the most predominant theme among the proverbs. In accordance with gender-specific roles assigned to romantic partners, many of the proverbs that fit this bill addressed the female half of the dyad. Essentially, such proverbs appeared to emphasize the expectations of a woman's relational support towards her husband. This theme is illustrated by proverbs such as *A woman knows when her husband is hungry/her husband's stomach's hunger* (manifest meaning: *It is a wife who best knows her husband's needs*). Such proverbs convey expectations of caretaking, which includes running the household. Such representations of caretaking are consistent with what Overall, Fletcher, and Simpson (2010) deemed Nurturant Support (demonstration of care to one's romantic partner). It must be noted that proverbs addressing caretaking of children (which plays an important role in the lives of Akan women) were excluded from our PFRRs because they did not directly address romantic relationships.

Expressions of care were not restricted to instrumental tasks such as feeding spouses, but also espoused via the provision of *Emotional support* through encouragement and reassurance, as illustrated by proverbs such as *A woman lies behind a man* (manifest meaning: *A man may take first place, but it is the woman who backs him up*), and *"If a woman loves you and a stick lies on your shoulder she says "It is a double-barrelled gun"*. This is consistent with the notion of Action-Facilitating Support (offering of information or advice to assist romantic partner). While material support was indeed an important characteristic of the PFRRs, the proverbs also clearly and prominently communicated a value of Nurturant and Emotional forms of Support within the context of Akan romantic relationships. The proverb *"If a marriage has no support it spoils,"* for instance, communicates the message that a marriage cannot exist in a vacuum. These proverbs illustrate the importance of both Action Facilitating and Nurturant Support, which are both found to be strongly associated with high relationship quality (Overall et al., 2010), in Akan culture.

An overlapping category of proverbs specifically addressed the concept of love. This subcategory of proverbs typically started with the word "love" (or derivative thereof), and had a theme of love-in-action. Collectively, they communicate Akan expectations of what love *is and does* (e.g. *Love does not listen to rumors; Love forgives shortcomings; Love is pure*), as well as what love *is not or does not do* (e.g. *Love does not go for water and does not go for firewood, but it eats; A lover does not listen to argument*). While the idea of passionate love was not explicitly addressed, the notion of devotion was present in proverbs such as *Love is death* and *Love is ill with stubbornness*.

## Relationship Problems

The third major theme in the subset of proverbs analyzed was a focus on relationship problems which could obviously pose threats to relationship satisfaction, quality and stability. Many of such proverbs placed the root of relationship problems on specific characteristics of one partner. For example, a proverb that addressed unfaithfulness in a romantic relationship states: *It is the woman whose husband is absent that we have sex with*. It is important to note that while the literal meaning has to do with romantic relationships, the meaning can extend to non-relationship contexts as well, due to the proverb's manifest meaning of *When the cat's away, the*

*mice will play*. While the absent husband was the focus of the previous proverb, women were the protagonist in several proverbs such as *A stubborn woman causes trouble* and *If a too-clever woman gets married she does not succeed* (manifest meaning: *Men do not like their womenfolk to be cleverer than them*). Inherent in such proverbs are negative connotations towards women, specifically due to having ‘negative’/undesirable personality traits (stubbornness, cleverness, etc.). This indicates that, overall, the ideal Akan woman in the context of a romantic relationship is non-disruptive and non-threatening to the male ego.

Arguably, Akan romantic relationships tend to lean more towards the ‘work-it-out’ theory, seen through the proverbs *No one marries his bad wife in vain* (manifest meaning: If you choose to be with someone, however bad, you have a good reason for it) and *If your wife is no good, it does not mean that you sleep alone* (manifest meaning: Any wife is better than none). Therefore, putting effort into building and maintaining the relationship is critical to making it successful. There appears to be an emphasis that one should stick it out through the good and the bad with one’s spouse/partner, as recognized through the proverbs.

Conflict management is important for the maintenance of romantic relationships (Vangelisti, Reis, & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Akan values relating to conflict management in the context of marriage suggest that partners are at the very least in part responsible for refraining from behavior that could potentially elicit conflict. When conflict does occur, however, messages (categorized elsewhere) such as *Love forgives shortcomings* suggest approaches to conflict resolution.

## General Discussion

The present study explored patterns of representation of romantic relationship dynamics and associated traditional values in Akan proverbs. African Studies research asserts that Akan women are expected to contribute to the relationship by bearing children and running the household, and men in turn are expected to financially provide for their spouses. For instance, Lambrecht (2016) found that in many farming communities, women had access to less land than men because men were assumed to be responsible for a family’s main income stream. However, our thematic analysis of PFRRs suggests that the blueprint of the Akan romantic relationship may not be as simple as a ‘food-sex-nexus’ (Clark, 1995; Oppong, 1980). On the one hand, it is apparent that each partner invests something tangible—in this case, financial stability and giving birth to potential successors—into the relationship, which supports the ideas established in Social Exchange and Interdependence theories stating that the satisfaction of a romantic relationship is met only if the gain/rewards of the relationship between two people are more attractive than the costs. This aspect is seen through proverbs such as *The profit from marriage is birth* and *If a wife goes away, a child stays*, which translates to *You may lose your original investment and still get to keep the proceeds*. On the other hand, Tsikata and Darkwah (2014) suggest that financial independence has become an indicator of perceived female empowerment in Ghana “so that if a man won’t give her money” (p. 85), a woman has the capability of taking care of herself and family members. However, such a perspective does not necessarily discount spousal support - at least, from some—illustrated by the view that “An empowered woman is one who is well educated, has work and is married to a rich man” (p. 85).

In line with the apparent decline in the primacy of a financial investment, the proverbs indicate that in addition to instrumental support, emotional and relational support feature prominently in romantic relationships. This is an

important indication that runs contrary to the positions of some writers (e.g. [Coppinger & Rosenblatt, 1968](#)) that relational factors such as love and emotional connection are relatively unimportant in African (marital) relationships where material/instrumental factors are more existentially crucial. The importance of multiple types of support is showcased in Efu [Sutherland's \(1975\)](#) *The Marriage of Anansewa*, an Akan play in which the protagonist, Ananse, schemingly orchestrates a bevy of suitors for his daughter Anansewa. Ananse makes his final decision about whom his daughter gets to marry on the basis of not only displays of wealth, but also a demonstration of care.

The fact that the proverbs address demonstrations of care, rather than demonstrations of (passionate) love speaks to how the notion of 'love' is expressed, displayed, understood, and modelled in Akan culture. One proverb puts it this way: *Marriage is good, but to love is hard work*. While love can be expressed as committed devotion (illustrated by proverbs *such as love is death*), the typical representation of love is the work involved in carrying love out: "*True love is not based on wealth*"; "*If a person loves you, (s)he loves you with all your nonsense*"; "*Love forgives shortcomings*"; "*Love does not listen to rumors*". Thus the traditional Akan 'doing' of love is not a public performance designed to convey the depth of one's affectations, such as Romeo's poetic expressions of love for Juliet, for instance. In fact, the Akan tradition seems to project a model of *loving - a doing state*, in marked contrast to a Western model of *being in love - an affective state*. While we by no means suggest that a person subscribing to the model of Akan love lacks the ability to be in love, fall in love, or suffer heartbreak from a long-lost love, we argue that in the Akan context, the more salient aspects of articulating and perhaps even experiencing romantic love falls along the dimensions of providing care.

The identified representative patterns of romantic relationship dynamics and associated traditional values not only impact how people (and their extended families) choose partners, but also determine how well things are progressing in the course of a developing relationship, and shape how individuals may rate the quality of their romantic relationships. [Atobrah and Adomako Ampofo \(2016\)](#) for instance report that Ghanaian wives diagnosed with cancer commonly acknowledged insufficient emotional support from their spouses during their treatment and recovery phases, but seemingly found the lack of practical support exhibited by their husbands as less of a problem. Indeed, some of the interviewees reported allowing the men to avoid providing practical support by engaging in behaviors such as transporting themselves to the hospital for treatment and check-ups, and moving in with female relatives during difficult recovery periods due to the perception that the men would not be able to assist them. Also, perceived inequities in instrumental and emotional support may serve as sources of jealousy, anger, discontent and conflict in monogamous and - although they have declined - polygamous relationships. In the former case, spouses may experience negative emotions if the levels of support they receive dwarf (in comparison to) what is proffered to extended family members. In the latter case, the frame of reference tends to be co-wives.

In combination with external social factors, the identified romantic relationship values may influence decisions regarding whether to stay in a faltering relationship or leave it when problems arise or persist. [Adjei \(2017\)](#) observes that in addition to anticipated post-divorce social stigma, concerns about instrumental support for a woman and her children often serve as a significant barrier preventing Ghanaian female victims of intimate partner violence from leaving their abusers. Financial support, however, is by no means the only consideration: [Adongo et al. \(2014\)](#) found that a significant deterrent to patronage of vasectomies in Ghana was men's fear that the vasectomies could make them 'weak', and their women would divorce them.

The identified values suggest a perspective from which people outside of the relationship may offer social support (when asked for advice). One specific way in which proverbs are used is to elicit restraint in members of a society to minimize social disruption. Hence, for example, a disgruntled husband complaining about his wife may be reminded of the adage that *If your wife is no good, it does not mean that you sleep alone* (manifest meaning: Any wife is better than none), providing a frame that suggests suppression of his experienced and expressed discontent with his wife. The proverb *“Because of false accusations, we put our foot on marriage squabbles”* (*Deal with family squabbles quickly so that they don't become real fights*), recognizes the importance of addressing conflict in relationships sooner rather than later.

The relationship elements identified in our study have implications for intercultural romantic relationships in which expectations of involved partners may be misaligned. For example, suppose a male subscriber to traditional Akan romantic relationship norms considers himself an excellent spouse on the basis of successfully providing instrumental, emotional, and relational support. If his partner expects grand gestures and frequent displays of passionate love - an expectation he may not fully understand or appreciate - he may be viewed as not being sufficiently invested in his shared romantic relationship. Consequently, the quality and longevity of his marriage may come into question.

It would be reticent not to address, due to social and cultural change, the relevance of proverbs in contemporary Akan society. Gyekye (1987) and Mbiti (1970) argue that proverbs are important windows into African realities from which dominant worldviews and philosophies can be deduced. Also, Yankah (1986, 1989) and several others indicate that the utility of proverbs lies in their brevity and memorability, two qualities that are harnessed to encapsulate and transmit specific cultural values - the same cultural values- across generations. However, given that there have been drastic changes in Akan marriage over time, it is important to distinguish between the traditional and the contemporary. Today, polygamy is rarer, more women have children without marrying their partners, family sizes are declining slightly, the divorce rate has increased slightly, and people exercise a larger degree of agency in choosing their partners (Heaton & Darkwah, 2011). Yet, numerous continuities between the past and the present persist: marriage is still very highly valued, men are still perceived as the major breadwinners, women are still responsible for most of the housework, childless marriages are repulsed, and extended families play important roles in engagement and marriage ceremonies (e.g. Adomako Ampofo et al., 2004; Anyidoho & Adomako Ampofo, 2015; Tsikata, 2009). Also, while Ghanaian women value the notion of female empowerment and have diverse perspectives about what female empowerment means, many of these perspectives are framed in the context of committed relationships (Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014). While the precise extent to which the proverbs accurately capture Akan values in the contemporary world is unclear and should be a subject of future research, it is certain that these proverbs tap into traditional values. It is highly unlikely that modernization would have resulted in a complete jettisoning of an entire cultural framework regarding a particular type of social relationship, as argue cultural researchers (e.g. Dion & Dion, 1996). Indeed, non-western cultural patterns in values relevant to romantic relationships were noted in a Ghanaian sample as recently as 2012 (Goodwin et al., 2012). Given that proverbs are still in use today, it is not unreasonable to assume that some of the cultural values captured in the proverbs are presently subscribed to. Thus, the analysis of PFRRs provides a window into the cultural grounding of romantic relationships in traditional Akan culture. As precursors of modern relationships, their residual influences are relevant to the shaping of romantic relationships in contemporary Akan life.



Tensions between the old and new in love and related matters are dramatized in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Dilemma of a Ghost* (1995) and captured in her novel *Changes: A Love Story* (1993). In the former, Ato (an Akan educated in the US) who returns home with an African American wife finds himself torn between his wife's and extended family's expectations concerning their marriage. In the latter, a love story set in modern Ghana, many of the characters struggle with what they expect from love in their lives. For instance, Oko, a male character whose marriage had recently featured "months of frustrations and misunderstandings" (p. 7) mused over traditional sentiments such as "It's not safe to show a woman you love her... not too much, anyway", and "Showing a woman you love her is like asking her to walk over you" (p. 7) in the first chapter of the book. Yet, all the while, he was acutely aware of the fact that he had always loved his wife. The book wraps up with Esi, the main protagonist and a modern, non-traditional Akan woman, whose partner had given her "things that any other woman would have given part of her life for" concluding that her partner "loved her in his own fashion. What she became certain of was that his fashion of loving had proved quite inadequate for her" (p. 161). The novel highlights Esi's dissatisfaction in the following (abbreviated) dialogue (p. 154):

Esi: Ali, I can't go on like this. ....I said I can't go on like this.

Ali: Esi, you say you can't go on like what?

Esi: Like.. this....This is no marriage.

Ali: What would you consider to be a marriage? (voice full of genuine puzzlement)

Esi: I don't know.... But if this is it, then I am not having any of it.

While Aidoo's play and novel are works of fiction, they highlight the multiplicity of perspectives, some traditional, others not, that are held at a given time by members of the same, modernizing society. The variedly held values about what marriage means, and what one should expect in the context of committed relationships can - as Aidoo illustrates - result in conflict, anguish, and sometimes, relationship dissolution. Due to extended family involvement, such occurrences and their consequences are not simply between the parties within the relationship; but impact a broader audience in Aidoo's books, and in real life (Acheampong & Heaton, 1989; Nave, 2017). Proverbs, and the values they encapsulate should therefore not simply be viewed as indicators of a cultural world that no longer exists, or something that is the exclusive purview of the older generation. Like Esi and Oko, modern members of Akan (and arguably similar) societies actively engage with the so-called 'extinct' value frameworks, and may choose - or alternatively refuse - to display, express, and expect love predominantly in the culturally sanctioned manner (see for example Bingenheimer, Roche, & Blake, 2017; Bowers, 2007; Duodu, 2013; Duodu, 2016). Most likely, modern Akan love and marriage for many may be a hybrid kind - iterations of traditional versions - containing elements of the traditional, merged with elements of western models of expression of affection due to adoption of some globalized influences. As noted by Dion and Dion (1996), in spite of the rapidly penetrating forces of globalization (e.g. in this present context, Western influences on African traditions) there is still a significant persistence of traditional cultural values.

## Limitations

One of the major limitations of qualitative approaches in general is the difficulty of achieving interpretive uniformity, a problem that requires reflexivity. This means the strength of any empirical statement that may be made about qualitative research findings is far less than what may be said for quantitative/experimental approaches. As such, the conclusions drawn from this present analysis should be taken with some caution, particularly with the view that cultural phenomena are dynamic rather than monolithic. Nevertheless, qualitative analysis such as used in this study provides an excellent basis for understanding important themes which may



have particular importance for the Akan and similar cultures. As in previous research that has examined cultural artifacts such as proverbs in order to understand cultural variation in social axioms (e.g., [Leung et al., 2007](#)), future studies should consider incorporating the themes uncovered by thematic analysis in instruments used in qualitative research. By using such a bottom-up approach whereby the development of instruments used in quantitative psychological research are informed by themes generated from the culture of interest, it is possible for researchers to avoid problems of imposed etics (e.g., [Berry, 1989](#)), whereby researchers use methods developed in their own (generally Western) culture in a new culture without examining local perspectives.

Another limitation of this study is the focus on Akan proverbs, which may not necessarily be representative of other populations and cultures within West African cultural settings. Thus, any conclusions presented in this analysis, although potentially generalizable to other ethnolinguistic groups in Ghana, must be taken with caveats. Future studies should seek to examine proverbs from other groups to examine similarities and differences in major themes within and across African and non-African settings.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, analysis of prevalent themes in proverbs indicates that relationship realities in African (Akan) cultural settings tend to pivot on pragmatic processes. These pragmatic processes appear in this particular analysis, under three overarching themes of gender roles, material factors and relational problems. It is evident in the present analysis of the PFRRs that expectations in romantic relationships in the Akan setting are based on gender roles. This is represented mostly in the emphasis on the 'Wife' and 'Husband' in the proverbs. Furthermore, gender roles also appear to influence the other two themes. On the one hand, such role expectations follow the traditional trend where the woman is expected to be the nurturing and caring homemaker who utilizes the material resources provided by the man to make things work in the relationship or home. On the other hand, the man is expected to primarily be the leader, protector and bread-winner in the relationship. He is expected to be the financial support base, despite the woman's contributions in this regard.

Nevertheless, nurturing and moral/emotional support exchange also featured prominently in the representations of romantic relationship. By interpretation, one can probably say that the demonstration of 'emotional intelligence' especially by the Akan wife is evident in the proverbs sampled in this analysis. However, problems in romantic relationship from the PFRRs seem to be attributed more to the woman than the man. References to the woman as the source of disruption are present, as depicted in the analysis. However, given the pragmatic stance, the work-it-out approach also means that practical solutions are usually advised, such as love and forgiveness.

## Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

The conclusions reached in this study (i.e. the prevalence of pragmatic considerations, gender role expectations and the counterintuitive representation of relational-emotional elements in romantic relationships are depicted in Akan proverbs) could inform therapeutic designs aimed at such populations (Ghanaian/Akan). Family and relationship researchers (cf. [Goodwin, 1999](#); [Kagitcibasi, 1996](#)) have usually called for researchers to make such findings available for the beneficial implementation of intervention programmes in particular societies. This is particularly relevant for researchers and experts who come from a Western perspective. Future studies could explore proverbs from other African ethnolinguistic groups to determine if similar thematic

patterns emerge. This would buttress the generalizability of such conclusions as those reached in the present study

## Notes

i) Nevertheless, even earlier anthropological accounts suggest the contrary – that romantic love is experienced and expressed in different ways in these collectivist settings. For example, in her account of romantic love in African (i.e. the Akan in Ghana) traditional contexts, [Oppong \(1980\)](#) made reference to an anthropological monograph published by Brodie Cruickshank in 1853 ([Cruickshank, 1853/1966](#)). Cruickshank recounts the unusual and tragic story of “Adjuah Amissah” of Cape Coast who was actively pursued by a young man eventually deemed inadequate by her relatives. After being rejected, and going through a period of dejection attributed to unrequited love, the unsuccessful suitor committed suicide by shooting himself. His relatives sought vengeance under local law, which resulted in Adjuah Amissah being required to kill herself in the same manner as the person whose death she was deemed responsible for. Although this case is obviously not typical, it simultaneously suggests the existence of romantic love, as well as the negative light in which romantic love may have been historically considered in the culture.

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