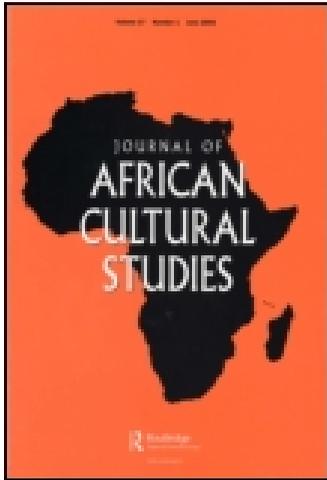


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Kasena women's critique of gender roles and gender justice through proverbial jesting

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This article analyzes proverbs used by Kasena women from northern Ghana in their effort to critique gendered perceptions of justice in their society. This critique takes place within the socially approved medium of the joking relationship that pertains between a Kasena woman and her husband's kin. The joking relationship permits joking partners to give their views free reign and therefore provides a safe avenue for women to express their own attitudes and values pertaining to justice. They subvert and contradict Kasem proverbs in order to protest the use of gender as a basis for defining women's roles and rights in the home and in marriage. However, gender justice, as it can be gleaned from the proverbs the women deploy, is not limited to demanding freedom from traditional dependencies and addressing gender inequities. It is broadened to include calls for the recognition of women's self worth and of their contribution to culture – a conception of justice that has been the subject of recent debates on the definition of justice which have moved the focus from issues of distribution to questions of recognition.

Keywords: proverbs; subversion; gender justice; joking relationships; Ghana

Tono konto ni Kasena kaana memanga mo, Ghana banga tiina kateri dem wone. Kaana bam mange memanga yam se ba bere ba sam tiina na bongge te baara de kaana seeni to mo. Ba mae Kasena kaane de o banna kweera sena mo ba jange de memanga ba di bongga. Bongga dim na ye te to, ko pae se balo na kweere daane to wae ba ngoona ba bobonga taam, delo ba yaa na baa wane bat a to. Konto nwaane me pea se kaana bam wae ba tea baara yaa na gyege se ba taa ke kaana lamyirane te to. Kaana bam leri memanga yam mo, ba gya ya ba tulimi, se ba bere we noono na ye kaane, ko wo mange se ba taa ke o ne baaro gare o to, songo de baro-zure wone. Kaana de baara sena yam ban a bere ba memanga yam ne to, dae yalo na tea yizura sena yirane, ko foge ko dae fanga kikea seeni to. Memanga yam yadonna bere ko na mange se noona taa nige kaana tei ye ba bongga ba sige kaana na ke kolo ba wole logo kom to mo – yanto bobonga yam mo noona badonna de gyege ba lara, ye ba bere we kem manga doe ka ke komara komara; be ngwaane, se n'nii n'dong n'nige, de ye kem manga mo.

The dog says it is only fair play if one falls and the other falls too. – Kasem proverb

This article focuses on Kasena women's critique of traditional gendered attitudes to justice that serve to define women's roles and rights in the home and in marriage. This critique takes place in the traditional setting of the Kasena community in northern Ghana. Within this context, the women take advantage of a socially sanctioned medium, the joking relationship that pertains between a Kasena woman and her husband's kin, to subvert and contradict existing Kasem proverbs or create new ones. It is a phenomenon that I have described in my recent book, *Throwing Stones in Jest* (Yitah 2011), as a 'proverbial revolt'. In the book I explore the levels of consciousness that different Kasena women demonstrate in this revolt

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(from a simple awareness of gender distinctions, to a sensitivity to and a critique of images of women in existing proverbs, etc.). In this article, however, I focus on questions of gender justice that the women raise in their 'proverbial' jesting. Specifically, I examine the gender inequities which the women foreground in their joking conversations to pave the way for the recognition they think they deserve. The joking relationship itself is not new, but joking with proverbs is a recent phenomenon because the Kasena have always believed that the proverb is sacrosanct and that such behaviour will offend the ancestors who created these sayings. Also, though some of the social issues the women raise may not be entirely new, they use their joking to re-form Kasem proverbs and to redefine the arena of proverb performance. In this newly imagined space, women are not the butt of jokes from men but participants in joking.

During joking, the husbands' female kin assume the role of male joking partners (in fact, though female, such kin are treated as nominal husbands). The joking relationship is characterized by what Radcliffe-Brown (1940) terms 'permitted disrespect' (103) and by licence (see also Yitah (2006, 236)). It permits joking partners to give their views free reign and therefore allows women to express their own attitudes and values pertaining to justice. Joking also allows boundary crossing (both socially and linguistically) and cultural transgression and thus serves as an experimental field for personal expression that permits the individual to traverse existing boundaries, explore other worlds, and try out new identities. As a literary scholar working on gender identity, I am interested in the verbal combat in which Kasena women are engaged and through which they wrest a meaning of their own by altering and criticizing existing proverbs. But I am also aware that in order to achieve such freedom of meaning the women traverse traditional gender boundaries, and therefore I interpret the gendered nature of the social imaginary of these women, how they imagine the Kasena world and their place in it, and how their creativity and innovation in the use of proverbs helps to construct this world. In the new world that Kasena women create for themselves justice is not limited to demanding freedom from traditional dependencies and addressing gender inequities. It is broadened to include calls for the recognition of their self worth and of their contribution to culture – a conception of justice that has been the subject of recent debates on the definition of justice which have moved the focus from issues of distribution to questions of recognition.

As far as Kasem proverbs and their social functions are concerned, perceptions about gender roles and identity and the structures that engender them are located in the world view of the ancestors (*diim tiina*, or 'yesterday's people') who, through their proverbs, provide contemporary society (*zem tiina*, or 'today's people') with a normative sphere within which appropriate roles and behaviour are defined. The Kasena are not the only Africans who believe that proverbs are the wisdom of the ancestors, and that they therefore encapsulate unchallengeable 'truths'. African oral literature in general, and the African proverb in particular, has been largely insulated against criticism because it is perceived as an authentic culture which must not be altered. For instance, feminist scholar and activist Wanjira Muthoni tells of the reception, in her native Kenya, of her re-telling of traditional oral narratives and her creation of new stories following traditional oral narrative structures. Although the stories were received very, very well by teachers, she says, a lot of male readers and even some women have looked on her work with disfavour because they see oral literature as 'a sacred field which [she] should not interfere with' (Arndt 2000, 716).

This view of oral literature accounts in large part for its perceived unassailable position and for the important role that it plays in the socialization of women and men. The belief that proverbs are created by the ancestors who are always right and therefore must not be contradicted also ensures that the sexist ideology and discriminatory rhetoric in these wise sayings are not questioned. In the process, the fact that the depiction of women's roles and lives in *diim*

tiina's proverbs is often at variance with *zem tina* women's lived experiences is also ignored. For instance, women currently dominate trade in the big cities of the south, particularly in Kumasi and Accra, which in the 1960s and 1970s involved mainly men. To cite another example, while a few decades ago women would silently suffer domestic violence and abuse from their husbands or male relatives for fear of being victimized, they now demonstrate awareness and courage by reporting such acts to the police. Such changes are often expressed in the saying 'Times have changed, and everything has changed with them.'

My research on Kasena women's use of proverbs (Yitah 2006, 2009) indicates that times, indeed, have changed in the highly gendered space of proverb performance, where women appropriate the silent spaces and silencing gestures in proverb use by their male joking partners in order to reinterpret ideas about female personhood and to speak a role that they improvise for themselves. Yet, the use of proverbs in this undermining way has not always been common practice among the Kasena. Albert Awedoba, who is the only other scholar to have published on Kasena proverbs, has this to say about the position occupied by these wise sayings:

The truth of the proverb is . . . of an order that cannot be challenged. Kasena seem by their attitudes to accept tacitly that it is unseemly to call into question the proverb and its tenets. To do so would appear to amount to a challenging of the wise ancestors, an exercise not only in arrogance, but also in itself a sacrilege (Awedoba 2000, 34).

Thus, while the joking relationship permits subversive activities of various kinds, the deeply internalized notions about proverbs that Awedoba describes, have for a long time kept these wise sayings out of the realm of jesting.

Yet it is such notions about the proverb and its power to regulate gender-based rights and roles that the women challenge through their deconstruction of proverbs. It is plausible to interpret this behaviour as a conscious effort on the part of the women to make proverbs reveal the reality of their lives rather than the ideals of traditional patriarchal society. Through the women's joking behaviour proverbs, which act like regulative instruments of society, become the very means for deregulating power relations. Women deploy proverbs as though they are metaphorical laws intended to re-order gender relations and the personal and social implications of such relations, albeit fashioned in the most unexpected circumstance (play/performance) and in the most indirect language (metaphor and symbol). In metaphorical terms, their 'legal imagination' is a powerful lens for scrutinizing gendered forms of injustice, their 'artistic legislation' a formidable weapon for asserting women's worth and articulating their rights and freedom of choice in matters ranging from marriage, child birth and motherhood to income generation and household chores.

By taking advantage of the joking relationship to subvert power relations and to exercise their freedom in gender matters, Kasena women appear to partake of the 'internally driven and aggressively democratic politics' which, according to Mikell, 'characterizes contemporary African feminism' (1997, 419), and to force their male counterparts and the rest of Kasena society to rethink gender 'from the ground up' (Plaskow 2007, 216). Mikell observes that 'legal notions readjust and change as emerging social relationships require' and that women have 'the implicit potential. . . to sketch the outlines of new relationships' in their own interest (1997, 410). The legal notions in question, says Mikell, serve to rectify 'inequities in conjugality and domestic relations, particularly in defining women's rights within marriage' (1997, 411). While Mikell may be referring to legal instruments, Kasena women state their case without recourse to rights talk. Since discrimination against women occurs in customary norms and social conventions, conceptions of gender justice must evolve out of dialogue with cultural contexts. This makes women's scrutiny of indigenous cultural norms a very effective means for addressing 'the unequal status of women relative to men and providing women access to the repertoire of valued roles and statuses within society' (Mikell 1997, 420).

The material used here was recorded between June 2000 and December 2005, although my first encounter with the ‘proverbial’ behaviour examined here dates back to 1994 when I was collecting Kasem proverbs for an undergraduate project on oral literature. The recording was done mainly in the form of diary notes but on some occasions cassette recorders were also used. Where necessary, the women were interviewed for purposes of clarification. The Kasena women engaged in this ‘proverbial revolt’ are women of varying ages (ranging from the late teens to the mid-50s) and of minimal or no literacy. This situation however is changing now with more girls staying in school (Mensch et al. 1999, 97). The women live in and around Nogsenia village, a largely rural area that surrounds central Navrongo, the small district capital, where they earn livelihoods through subsistence farming and petty trading. However, their access to the radio and television, the cinema, concerts and women’s organizations, such as the 31st December Women’s Movement, is often overlooked by scholars who have worked on the Kasena. For example, Alex Nazzar et al. (1995, 310), in their article on developing a culturally appropriate family planning programme for the people of Navrongo, claimed that Kasena women were effectively isolated from new ideas and institutions. My observation reveals that with the availability of the radio and television these women who previously were stifled by convention are now in tune with changing trends, especially those that affect their individual rights and roles in society. Their participation in this activity indicates their level of gender consciousness.

This consciousness enables women to merge cultural desire, that is, the individual wish for articulation and recognition, mentioned above, with cultural justice, that is, the claims of a particular social group (in this case, women) for gender equity in particular aspects of conjugal and community life. The activity thus reveals the connection between the cultural dimension of power relations and the political dimension of cultural activity. It brings to mind the strategies of ideological resistance used by subordinate groups to resist oppression that James Scott describes in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990). In particular, the women’s ‘proverbial jesting’ could be accounted for in Scott’s analysis of indirect forms of protest in folktales, songs, jokes and theatre in *Arts of Resistance*. Certainly, it resonates with the statement by Graham Furniss and Elizabeth Gunner, in their introduction to *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature* (1995, 12), that oral genres constitute a field in which ‘the relations between the powerful and the dominated in a variety of spheres are seen to be acted out, ideological assertion being met by a variety of forms of “resistance”’.

Kasena society has always been patrilineal, which means that the man’s place has always been assumed to be with his father, through whom he will ‘theoretically trace [his] descent and determine [his] rights to hold traditional office and inheritance’ (Owusu-Sarpong 2000, 75–6). In her review of Awedoba’s anthropological work on Kasem proverbs, Christiane Owusu-Sarpong refers to this system as the Kasena ‘proverbial representation of patrilinealism’ (2000, 75). The woman’s place, unlike the man’s, is neither with her father nor with her husband – hence the proverbial image of a Kasena woman as potentially or actually ‘a dog of two houses’. The image refers to her place both as a daughter in her father’s house, which she must leave upon marrying, and as a wife in her husband’s house where she is expected to live thereafter, but where she is also faced with constant reminders, not always in jest, that her father’s house is ‘where she comes from’. In her ambiguous place in traditional Kasena society, the woman has no rights to political office or inheritance, although she is expected to fulfill productive, reproductive and cultural roles in whichever social unit she finds herself. Within marriage, the woman is regarded as a minor to be kept under male control and to be punished if she acts contrary to male expectations. These cultural systems and practices form

the moral and legal foundations of traditional justice in Kasena society. Justice is thus gendered because of the role of structured social regulation and sanctions.

The pre-existing cultural models discussed above constitute the law, the instrument of order out of which women's ideas about justice grow. The most obvious aspects of gender justice that can be gleaned from my interaction with the women are fairness and the absence of oppression from men. Pogenyanga Yitah, who is my aunt and the president of the Nogsenia *Dezemdaane* Women's Union, an organization to which most of the women cited in this study belong, articulates succinctly their collective drive for movement and freedom:

We women are trying to say that we deserve to be treated fairly in society. By fair treatment I mean that like men we women should be treated as adults, free to voice our feelings and do what we think is appropriate or beneficial to us and to our families without any oppression from men.¹

Their idea of fairness is also supported by the proverb cited at the beginning of this article, which they very often quote: 'The dog says that it is only fair play if one falls and the other falls too.' In the Kasena perception of the dog's philosophy of fair play, for one partner to remain standing after the other has fallen constitutes a refusal to play by the rules. Such an act may be construed as condescension on the part of the non-compliant one, or worse, as a threat to the fallen one. This proverb is often deployed to warn a male joking partner against taking undue advantage of his female counterpart. Consider, for instance, the following joking session which took place at a funeral between a woman and a male elder of her husband's clan just as the woman was about to leave for her home:

Woman: **A maa viira, am'yei we mo wo ta m'we a koga ne.**

I am going ahead, and I know you'll follow soon.

Man: **Ta ne we m'maa viira se m'bobo saɲem, ko dae we m'maa viira kora.**

Tell me you're going ahead to begin cooking my dinner, don't just say you're leaving.

Woman: **Mo yaa na pea ne kolo a na wo vo a saɲe to, a yaa wo ta konto.**

I would have said so if you had given me what I need to be able to cook.

Man: **Ve m'saɲe kolo fii mo na gyege to se m'yage nyinyonaa. Mimina tage we o pwoa na maɲe ya ba daga, o wo bere o baro.**

Go and cook with the little that you have and stop complaining. *The female ant says that no matter how small her groin is, she will still show it to her husband.*

Woman: **Amo ye sure we mimina tage konto ye o gyeeli we o baro de wo ke kolo na maɲe se o ke to mo. Se kukura tage we to se n'doɲ to mo kweera. Amo na saɲe, ko maɲe se mo pa wodiu mo.**

I am sure the female ant said that on the assumption that her husband would reciprocate her gesture. After all, *it is the dog who says it is fair play only when you fall and your partner falls too.* If I have to cook, it is only fair that you should provide the food.

Man: **A na kwaane se a ke m' zula ye m'lage se m'bire m'yeno, am'wo fii m' mo se m' ke m' fii m' tetoɲ. Mo ba gyege se m'iyegi vona de amo.**

Well, if I'm trying to be nice and you want to show me how much you know, I will have to compel you to do your duty by me. You must not rub shoulders with me.

Woman: **Mimina pwoa na maɲe ya muri, gyiɲa deo yirane baa wane ya ka kaɲe.**

The female ant's groin may be small, but it takes more than a strong hand to expose it.

Man: **Se be daa mo wo woli da se ko kaɲe ya?**

What else does it take?

Woman: **Ni yoɲo.**

A kind mouth.

The last statement adds humour to the exchange, which, like all the other joking sessions, was carried out in a mock-serious tone. Such good humour is in keeping with the function of joking relationships as a safe context for psychological release. Yet in this particular case the woman is seeking more than psychological release: she is expressing her disapproval of the powerless position in which her partner has attempted to place her while also sanctioning his 'unkind' pronouncements. The saying, 'the dog who says it is fair play only when you fall and your partner falls too', underscores the principle of fairness on which the joking relationship itself operates, but beyond that the discourse situation articulates women's resistance to the gender injustices that sustain oppressive patriarchal structures. The man in this encounter cites an existing proverb to support his conservative view that a wife must satisfy her husband's needs and desires unconditionally. In doing so, he deliberately ignores the principle of fairness, a 'regulative' idea (Benhabib 1995, 21) encapsulated in the first proverb that his female counterpart deploys, to which she draws his attention. Through her use of the proverb, the woman demonstrates that part of the problem with gender justice is male disregard for even the few existing traditional principles of equal treatment in favour of an ideology that supports male privilege – a point that Gwendolyn Mikell also makes when she says that Ghanaian women felt they had to object to men's failure to do what was 'traditionally required' of them (1997, 19).

The second proverb the woman uses moves us from fair play to questions of recognition. The proverb is a subversion of the one deployed by her male joking partner. In it she deploys existing cultural signifiers to assert her subjectivity (which is being suffocated by his view of a wife) and to make way for his recognition of her worth. This more nuanced idea of justice is in line with recent views of justice. Political conservatives and radicals alike tend to subscribe to the kind of system that Wai Chee Dimock, in her study, *Residues of Justice*, refers to as a 'radical order' with 'a uniform scale of measurement' that can be maintained through acts of 'judicial weighing' (1997, 10). In Winfried Fluck's (2003) summation in 'Fiction and Justice', an article about the ability of fiction to bring together symbolically social justice and what he terms 'individual justice', conservatives and liberals would argue that justice is achieved by applying political and legal rules and procedures, liberal leftists would argue for ensuring equal access to economic and educational opportunities, and political radicals such as Marxists would argue for a redistribution of wealth and public ownership of the means of production. Cultural radicals, by contrast, would argue that it is not just in the measurable domain of economic equality, but also in the unweighable domain of ingrained cultural ideologies such as sexism, racism and homophobia that human relations are shaped (Fluck 2003, 21). The second proverb deployed by the woman in this joking situation articulates her view that she deserves to be treated as a person in her own right, not as a target of her husband's sexism. This argument for a focus on categories such as race and gender also marks a shift in criteria from just distribution to recognition; that is, a reconceptualization in which real justice is not the right application of the rules of the legal system, or the equal distribution of wealth, but the absence of any barriers to the self. As Judith Shklar points out in *The Faces of Injustice* (1990), such reconceptualizations of what constitutes discrimination or victimization have the effect of increasing people's sense of injustice, so that they see all barriers to the self as systemic and unjust. Thus, her second proverb suggests that the woman would be more favourably disposed towards the husband if he eschewed threats to herself and instead used 'a kind mouth'.

In the following proverb exchange the woman draws attention to one barrier to the self: the view that there exists a stable, homogeneous identity for all women and that therefore the words or actions of one can be used to judge all. This perception is clinched in the Kasena saying, 'it

takes one monkey to ruin the reputation of the whole lot', which one man quotes to justify his friend's statement that all women are useless. Here is the context:

Man (to woman): **Gya, kwe yutuṅu m'ba m'pa ne s'agyene s'abugi.**
Please, fetch me a stool to sit on. I'm tired.

Woman: **Mo zem maane we am'wae woṅo a ke a pae mo? Mo diimyiga wo tage we amo ba gyege kuri, ne debam kaana ba gyege kuri na?**

So today you realize that I can do something for you? Did you not tell me the other day that I was useless and that we women were all useless?

2nd Man (Man's friend): **Ta'm guli ba na tage kolo to: kalia dedoa mo choge kali' kogo. Konto nam ke. Diim tiina tage we nii de yela zuura daane ye ba dona daane mo.**

Remember what they say: *It takes only one monkey to ruin the reputation of the whole lot.* But that is now in the past. Yesterday's people (i.e., the ancestors) say that *the mouth and the teeth live together, yet they bite each other.*

Woman: **Ye yela de nii na dune daane, nii mo ni cham. Kogyoro m'ta we amo yira ye luu mo.**

Except that *whenever teeth and mouth bite each other it is the mouth that feels the pain.* You might as well tell me that *my body is made of metal.*

2nd Man: **Oh! Abam zem kaana!**
Oh! You women of today!

It could be argued that the first proverb the man uses merely describes the human tendency to categorize and to generalize. Yet in this case it is cited as grounds for stereotyping and victimization and therefore it instantiates what Edelman terms 'the oppressive ideology of similitude' (1994, 23). Through this proverb the man lumps together and discards the woman and her kind and implicitly calls on her to concur, thus manipulating the wise saying to perpetrate an injustice on women. Then, in order to make light of his action, he suggests that she should consider his action as 'now in the past'. Similarly, his deployment of the second proverb is a strategic move that is intended to 'silence questions and close discussions' on his warped perception of women (Fontaine, 2004, 196) and to maintain the kind of stability that reproduces oppressive power structures. It is such ideological and gendered interpretations of justice that women resist in the subtexts of their proverbs.

In her introduction to *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1998), Judith Fetterly contends that the American canon 'perforce[s]' a male identity, that it neither 'leaves women alone nor allows them to participate'. Although it may seem odd, particularly to Africanists, to invoke a Western feminist text in support of a traditional African verbal practice, there are parallels. 'In such fiction', Fetterly continues, 'the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded' (1998, 991). If we substitute 'listener' for 'reader', it is possible to argue that Kasena females, who are typically the butt of misogynist jests in traditional joking situations, are 'co-opted' into such performances and yet 'explicitly excluded' from them. However, not all Kasena women accept this position. Some, like the women whose proverb use is discussed in this article, position themselves strategically as listeners, often also defying age and class considerations, to undermine dominant views of gender relations. These women's interruptive performance testifies to Fetterly's argument that it is the responsibility of the reader to resist the circumstances that threaten to co-opt her, to alter the situation 'from a closed conversation to an active dialogue' (1998, 996).

Accordingly, the woman provides a reasoned counter-argument to the man's claim about the long-suffering metaphorical mouth that silently endures bites from a tormenting companion, teeth, in the name of peaceful co-existence. There would be less biting, she intimates, if the teeth suffered some of the pain. The second proverb she quotes is a subversion of an existing

one: 'the other person's body is made of metal'. The saying typically refers to a person who is insensitive to the needs or suffering of another, usually the speaker. In the woman's usage, however, the 'metal body' is attributed, not to 'another', but to herself. She uses this reflexive image to indict her male partner for assaulting her personality, and to resist his attempt to rationalize and naturalize an oppressive patriarchal power structure.

In the next exchange, a similar criticism of male power takes place, with the woman consigning all men to the status of common cow dung collectors.

Man (to woman in her yard): **Yage kolo mo na kea to, se'm mo naa m'ba m'pae ne.**
Stop what you're doing and bring me some water to drink.

Woman: **Mo yieri naa korro wom gyei na?**
Don't you know where the water pot is?

Man: **Mo yeiri we dam ba di gao na?**
Don't you know that *power does not eat grass?* (Implying: power is fed not with grass, but by its being exercised over others.)

Woman: **Anto, zem de dem, dam dira wo twe nabennu se de ne. Taa taa tera, ye ko koga ne, gao tete lage se bayage ko mo se ko kwi.**
Well, today *power wielders will collect cow dung for a change.*² Nothing lasts forever, and besides, even grass needs a chance to grow.

The man cites a proverb that describes his use of power and control, thus lending credence to Jeylan Wolyie Hussein's statement that 'African proverbs are obviously discursive habits in the patriarchal system created and recreated to reinforce the myth of male superiority' and 'to reinforce the secondary position of women' (2009, 98). In an article which discusses how gendered ideology is 'discursively framed' in some sexist proverbs from Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan, Wolyie Hussein asserts that 'cultural stereotypes about man and manhood form the base for the discursive construction and reconstruction of gender' (2009, 96). Interestingly, Kasena husbands and their female kin (who act as nominal husbands) tend to cite existing proverbs which in their view depict maleness in a positive light; proverbs which the wives tend to undermine. I would argue, however, that the wives are not so much concerned with manhood or womanhood, as they are with personhood. Hence their preoccupation with issues they consider as barriers to the self. Refusing to participate in a patriarchal discourse that seeks to validate her male partner's claim to superiority, the woman in this joking exchange instead deploys a counter-proverb that mimics, absorbs and transforms the original proverb to present an alternative way of conceptualizing gender relations. She does not dispute the main premise of the original proverb, which is that male power is wielded over females who are often regarded as minors; rather, she imitates and subverts it in order to make the point that male power must confront inevitable change in favour of the subordinated. Power may not eat grass, she counters, but for a change the power wielders will be reduced to ordinary collectors of cow dung, and those trampled like grass underfoot will be free to grow. It is in this capacity of some women to use proverbs for verbal mimicry, their ability to cite social practice without themselves being that social practice, or at least being some other form of social practice (a subversion in fact), which indicates their potential as critique.

Announcing winds of change in gender relations appears to be quite a frequent practice among Kasena women, as can be seen in the following joking conversation which took place in a drinking bar at the Navrongo market. It is common to find both men and women drinking pito, a local alcoholic drink made from sorghum, particularly on market days when most people take a break from farm work to socialize at the marketplace. During pito drinking it is typical for trusted friends and family members to drink from the same calabash, as the first woman

invites the second to do. The joking session occurred between two co-wives and their husband's kinsman:

1st Woman (to 2nd Woman, her co-wife): **Gyone sana banto m'nyo m'daare m'pae ne.**
Take this pito and drink some of it.

2nd Woman: **Aawo, amo mane a nyo; a daa ba laga.**
No, thanks. I've already had some and I don't want to drink anymore.

Man: **Gyone sana bam m'nyo se m'yage fia kalo m'na ke to.**
Take the pito and drink it and stop what you're doing.

1st Woman: **O we o nyoge a mane, mo laga m'fii o mo se o daa nyo na?**
She says she has had enough. Are you going to force her to drink more?

Man: **A wane a fii o lanyirane. Mo yeiri we dederro chini wae vio na?**
Of course, I can force her to drink. Don't you know that *the powerful person's arrow can overpower the wind*?

2nd Woman: **Dedelo, mo yeiri we vio na pipiri, dederro chini de gyege se de gugoli mo de toge ko na yooe me to.**
Well, perhaps you're not aware, but *when the wind changes direction, the strong person's arrow must reckon and move along with it.*

Man: **Ko yooe yem ne mo tento?**
What direction is it going now?

1st Woman: **Ko maa vea 'lore m'ti seeni' mo.**
It is moving towards 'find out for yourself'.

The proverb, 'it is the powerful person's arrow that can overpower the wind', is typically quoted to indicate that a person with clout or might can accomplish what an ordinary person would consider an uphill task. The proverb raises gender issues, because traditionally the bow and arrow is a male weapon, and because when the proverb is cited the powerful person is invariably male while the wind is female. As is typical of such joking conversations, the man cites this existing proverb to support his claim to power over the unwilling woman. As Kwesi Yankah has observed in his work on Akan proverbs in Ghana, such use of existing proverbs is based on assumed shared norms:

With shared beliefs, norms and values existing among the discourse interactants, it then becomes possible for the proverb user to rely on the eternal verity of the proverb and imply as follows: 'Well, if you all accept the point of this proverb, you may as well support the view I am advocating, for it is predicated on a truth you accept' (1989, 43).

It is such assumed shared norms that women attempt to overturn through their use of proverbs. The counter-proverb the woman deploys indicates that while she accepts the 'truth' about the arrow in the wind on which the original proverb is based, she does not agree with the man's interpretation of the proverb, that a man can compel a woman to do his bidding. Some ethnographers have observed that women may appear to be passive actors, but through female strategies, such as role-bargaining and financial machinations, women exercise indirect power by using the marital role to manipulate situations to their advantage (Pellow 1977; Lamphere 1974; Van Allen 1972). If we grant this view, then the woman's deliberate creation of ambiguity by neglecting to indicate whether the wind has changed direction or to specify the nature of its new trajectory could be interpreted as an instance of the indirect means that these scholars have suggested. Such an interpretation, however, would ignore the woman's refusal to define herself based on existing categories of power (see also Yitah 2009, 81). For it is precisely the idea of a fixed

wind direction, and by implication a stable male dominant position, that the woman rejects in her counter-proverb. Nothing lasts forever, she suggests, and in this era of gender awareness men must learn to work with women rather than continue to seek control over them.

The woman's proverbial critique draws attention to the vistas of power that the realm of African verbal art opens up to women for challenging society's own dominant paradigms of power through an engagement with its oral texts. A greater access to the life experiences of African women would reveal that oral expression, and in particular imaginative play, with its propensity for accommodating irreducible complexities and for reasoning via images, is a readily available rhetorical space of which women avail themselves in their search for a framework that encompasses the incongruities of their lives. What this woman demonstrates in the joking session cited above is that status and power are best perceived as the outcome of inter-subjectively negotiated practices and ideologies. Until her joking partner understands this point, his claim to power will be in vain. Another instance of such critical thinking occurs in the next proverb exchange, in which the woman deploys two proverbs to counter the one cited by her male partner:

Man: (to woman weeding her backyard vegetable garden): **Ye yoleje m'teja kaduga kanto varem nwaane; tiga na yii amo wo taa gyege ka tetoŋ.**

Don't wear out your waist weeding this farm; I'll need it when night falls.

Woman: **Tiga na yii, be mo m'laga m'ke amo? Amo wo tage mo we a daa ba nii mo a nige na?**

What are you going to do to me at night? Have I not told you that I no longer regard you as a person worthy of my attention?

Man: **M'bam mo zaŋe de amo se'm nwoona, am'yei we de baa daane ye de zuri, konto nwaane am'wo chege a ni. Gweero we o kore geere mo se o ba kore choŋa dedoro.**

You're just talking this way because you're angry with me, but I know you'll get over it soon so I'll wait. *Hyena says he's only concerned when there is no likelihood of finding prey, but (once assured of food) it does not matter how long he has to travel to find it.*

Woman: **Mo wo nige kwio na tage kolo to na? O we o na nige toom loni, gyana daa baa toge o momwa. Ko zige zem, am'daa baa twe mo, beŋwaane mo lage kolo m'na wo na am'teeni to yirane mo se ko dae am'na lage kolo s'a pa a tete to. Konto nwaane mo kukura we to se m'doŋ to mo kweera.**

Have you not heard what the alligator said? He said that *once he learns about death, no blood will ever pass through his nose again*. From now on I'll keep away from you because you only think of what you can get from me and not what I want for myself. That is why *the dog says it is only fair play if one falls and the other falls too*.

In this context, as in others, the ability of the proverb to lend itself to plurisignification, a process that prevents one identity from being privileged all the time and that therefore makes it possible to negotiate with the authorized or dominant identity, is called into play. Although both the woman and her male joking partner quote existing proverbs, her deployment of the proverbs ensures that her male joking partner's perception of gender does not hold sway in the conversation and thus demonstrates 'the way in which dialogically produced consciousness is inevitably and fundamentally ideological' (Slinn 1999, 70). The man cites a proverb that closely corresponds to his ideology: the kind of ideology that Gayatri Spivak, speaking about the 'Othering' of subaltern women in India by both 'brown men' and white men during the British Raj, says is 'keeping the male dominant' (1988, 82). His proverb suggests that he is guaranteed to have his way with his woman and that it is just a matter of time before he does. His funny and friendly tone is in tune with the general good cheer that characterizes the joking relationship between wife and husband's kin, but it does little to detract the woman from her intended goal. She reads in his egocentric and

misogynist boast a refusal to recognize her individual needs and warns him of her intention to distance herself from such lack of fair play, as indicated by the second proverb she cites.

The corpus of proverbs discussed reveals women's tacit awareness that the notion of gender is bound up with and partly defined by inequality, and that in order to provide greater rights for women and to mitigate the hierarchical aspects of role stratification there is the need to soften rigid distinctions between women and men. Because the women in this study constitute a minority (on account of their general lack of power relative to their husbands), especially a minority that has suffered severe discrimination, their justice claims can be authorized much more convincingly and with more moral authority than would be the case for the privileged male majority who have wielded power over them. Individually, Kasena women seek recognition by challenging the cultural dynamics that are implicated in existing proverbs, thus debunking the argument that mass culture is highly formulaic and standardized and therefore does not seem to provide any opening for a search for individual justice (Fluck 2003, 31). Proverbs are deemed to be standardized because they have a static quality, or as Ruth Finnegan terms it, a 'relative fixity' (1976, 393). Therefore the women, by undermining this rigid structure in their 'proverbial' jesting, are propelling this traditional genre into a dynamic space that it did not previously occupy in Kasem culture. These women have demonstrated that they can bring some balance to their male partners' ways of thinking by adding unique insights, and that freedom from externally imposed regulation of gender roles and rights would allow each individual to achieve self-realization. The counter-proverbs they deploy depict gender as a subjectivity in formation and reveal a creative and innovative epistemological struggle through which gender categories can be created and transformed.

Notes

1. Personal conversation, December 27, 2008.
2. In Kasem culture where cows are an important source of wealth and the method of rearing them is free-range, cow dung is so common that it is taken for granted. Thus, although cow dung serves some useful purposes (it is the preferred means for breeding termites to feed chickens and a fastening agent for plastering houses), collecting it is considered a casual activity that does not deserve much thought or attention. This perception often seeps into everyday speech, so that it is typical for a visitor who feels ignored to say, 'I didn't come here to collect cow dung', meaning 'I deserve some regard or attention'.

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