CHILDREN, MORALITY AND ABUSIVE WORDS: THE GHANAIAN PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

In almost every Traditional-Akan society in Ghana, generally one observes and listens to growing-up child say words such as 'mummy or daddy'. Addition to these words is some few names of familiar people that the child struggles to mention accurately. How surprising it may look or sound, the successive words the child may speak are those words that are abusive upon hearing. However, one may want to understand the where and why children use abusive words as part of their choice of diction. Secondly, can we say whether these children comprehend the ethical/moral implications of the use of these words in their world of life? By joining this ethical/moral discourse, this paper seeks to find out the source(s), children's understanding of abusive words by paying particular attention to words like 'aboa', 'kwasia' and 'wo maame'. The paper concludes by suggesting some pragmatic measures that parents, teachers and guardians in Ghana can adopt to make sure that children do not become acquainted to the use of abusive words in the society.

Keywords: Child, Morality, Abusive words, Ghana, Akan.

Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies that have investigated into the reasons, the source, understanding, and the ethical implications of the use of abusive words by children in the Ghanaian context especially, among children growing up in Traditional Akan communities in Ghana.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is very difficult for one to comprehend where the world is tilting towards today. This difficulty to some degree can be attributed to the way things continue to recur and how drastic certain values and ethical systems have gone down the drain with a lost in its face value. In Ghana

and some parts of the world today, without fear of exaggeration one can posit that technological advancement has largely ruined their ethical systems.

Children and the youth of today seem to have no sense of attitudinal remorse for the actions they take in the society. Nevertheless, they show disrespect to the elderly in society coupled with the use of abusive words. At present, the question of how Ghanaians must revive and sustain the dying-out ethical systems of society needs to be addressed.

This is because the future of Ghanaian ethical systems looks bleak. In this vein, what role must the Ghanaian-Traditional-Akan society play in the formation and sustenance of the moral foundations of children? That is to say, how must children and the youth behave, address the elderly and their fellow colleagues, what must children watch, and listen to?

In fact, there was the need for this study because I had earlier on stated elsewhere in an article that in view of the current trends of life, rapid growth of technology and by taking inspirations from the past and present, the future of Ghanaian-Traditional-Akan ethics looks bleak[1]. More so, the rapid rate at which morality in many Ghanaian traditional societies is fading out with the ushering in of a paradigm where children disregard elders and parents on one side of the coin and parents and guardians being unable to control the moral behaviours of their wards have become problematic.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The Scope of the Study

The study was conducted in five communities situated in the University of Cape Coast, in the Central Region of Ghana. The participants belonged to the traditional Akan group of people. The traditional Akan are the people who hold on to the African indigenous religion bequeathed to them by their forebears. This group has however gone through the influence of western culture since the first time the western missionaries landed on the west coast of Africa..."[2]. According to the Ghana's 2010 population and housing census, the Akan represent (47.5%) of the total population of Ghana. They are in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions; greater parts of the Western and Eastern regions; the whole of Central region except the Efutu and Awutu around Winneba; and a small area in the Northern part of the Volta region. They include the Asante, Bono, Denkyira, Tufu, Assin, Wassaw, Sefwi, Akwamu, Akwapim, Akyem and Adansi. The main languages they speak are Twi and Fante[3].

3. METHODS

The study was a quantitative study, using mixed methods in the collection of data. Fifty (50) children[4] were purposively sampled from five different communities[5] in Cape Coast, Ghana. The

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[1] Anderson (2013).

[2] Appiah-Sekyere and Awuah-Nyamekye (2012).

[3] Ghana Statistical Service (2012. 2010).

[4] The fifty sampled children included thirty girls and twenty boys.

age of the sampled children was between two and five years. The indigenous language, *Fante*, was the medium of communication. The children were asked questions that had to do with; the source, the circumstance, the people they address and their understanding of the *abusive words*[6] they speak.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Ghana today, it is popularly said that there is no 'child'. Calling someone a "child" is rather making reference to a 'miniature adult'. This is because in this current dispensation in the light of the Ghanaian context, children know almost everything that adults do and do not know. It is no surprise to reckon that children are well versed in issues surrounding the world of sexual intercourse, 'adult' gestures, secret information, insults and the like. There is reason to posit that notwithstanding their fore knowledge about some of the things mentioned above, the fact remains however that they lack experience and maturity in dealing with such sensitive issues. In looking at the term a child, the paper refers to the *Ghana: Act No. 560 of 1998, Children's Act*, a child is a person below the age of eighteen years[7]. Additionally, in *Article 1* of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child it is stated that "For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier"[8]. In the context of this paper, a child refers to any human being (male or female) between the ages of two and five years who can speak a particular dialect of his or her ethnic orientation.

There is relativism in the understanding of the terms "abuse" and "abusive words" both culturally and socially. This is because words, human actions and ideologies differ in cultures and societies. In other words, what is culturally or socially acceptable in one cultural tradition might be frowned upon in another culture or society. In defining abusive words, Jay (2009) writes, abusive words, also known as *offensive words* comprise, but are not limited to, categories of obscenity, indecency, profanity, racial insults, taboos, and scatology[9]. For the sake of this paper, abusive words are those words that humiliate, subjugate and render a person useless in his/her totality of being. Such words in their nature can be used to demean one's personality, culture, race, family or state of being in the society. Amongst the Traditional Akan people of Ghana, victims of verbal abuse are normally abused by a range of words that are associated with the victim's family relatives, physical appearance, psychological state, job status and marital status to mention but a few.

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[5] The five communities were; Apewosika, Kokwaado, Kwaprow, Amamoma and Kwesipra, all in the University of Cape Coast environs in the Central Region of Ghana.

[6] The Akan words such as "aboa" literary means an animal, "kwasia" literary means 'a fool', and "wo maame" literary means 'your useless mother'.

[7] Ghana: Act No. 560 of (1998).

[8] Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2014).

[9] Jay (2009).

Another complex term is morality. Its Latin rendition is "*mores*", meaning *customs or manners*[10]. The term "morality" can be used either descriptively or normatively. When "morality" is used simply to refer to a code of conduct put forward by any actual group, including a society, whether it is distinguished from etiquette, law, and religion, then it is being used in a descriptive sense. Morality is used in the descriptive sense when it refers to important attitudes of individuals. For example, inasmuch as one can refer to the morality of the Greeks, so one can refer to the morality of a particular person. The normative sense of "morality" refers to a universal guide to behaviour that, in plausible specified conditions, all rational persons would put forward for governing the behaviour of all moral agents.[11]

It must be established that morality can be applied in many aspects. Some of the aspects are religion, morality and nature, individual morality, and social morality. Religious morality refers to a human being in relationship to a supernatural being or beings. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, for example, the first three of the Ten Commandments pertain to this kind of morality. "Morality and nature" refers to a human being in relationship to nature. Individual morality refers to individuals in relation to themselves and to an individual code of morality that may or may not be sanctioned by any society or religion. Social morality concerns a human being in relation to other human beings.[12]

For Wiredu (1992), "morality in the strictest sense is universal and essential to human culture. Morality for him is, simply, the observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interests of the individual to those of others in society. He adds that morality does not just refer to the conformity to the requirements of the harmony of interests, but also that conformity to those requirements which is inspired by an imaginative and sympathetic identification with the interests of others even at the cost of a possible curtailment of one's own interests"[13]. Gyekye (1996) seems to share similar view with Wiredu (1992).

Gyekye (1996) writes that morality is "a set of social rules and norms intended to guide the conduct of people in a society. He explains that the rules and norms emerge from and are anchored in people's beliefs about right and wrong conduct and good and bad character. For him, morality is social, arising out of the relations between individuals; if there were no such a thing as human society, there would be no such thing as morality. It is in this same vein that Gyekye (1996) posits that because morality is essentially a social phenomenon, it can emerge only in a human society in which there is an overriding concern for harmonious and cooperative living consideration for the interest of others and hence, a sense of duty to others, are intrinsic to the meaning and practice of morality"[14]. Anderson (2013) defines morality as the hermeneutic of human act and its quality that

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[10]Perle (2004).

[11] The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2012).

[12]See Fagothey (1959).

[13] Wiredu (1992).

[14] Gyekye (1996).

can be judged right or wrong in the light of a standardised set of codes[15]. In the context of this paper, the term morality implies the ethical implications or imports of the abusive words used by children (between the age group of two and five years).

4.1. Abusive Words: Their Sources and Children's Ethical/Moral Understanding

Every good and bad behaviour has its source. The source of these behaviours may emanate from a remote or a very close point. However, in our case, many sources were identified. The personal interviews revealed that the school teachers, parents, guardians, peers and some 'local Ghanaian movies'[16] shown on different television channels are the major sources. A total number of thirty children posited that their parents are the source of the abusive words they say to people. They maintained that at home, their parents yelled at them and were referred to as either 'aboa' or 'kwasia' anytime they accidentally poured water on the floor, made themselves dirty in the sand or made noise at home when their parents were asleep. Thirty-five children indicated their teachers as the source. The children claimed that they were mostly referred to as 'aboa' or 'kwasia' whenever they disturbed in class, scored less marks in their mathematics or French class exercises. Twenty children attributed the source to their peers. According to the children, their peers usually used such words against their friends who interrupted in their affairs whenever they were entertaining themselves. A total number of forty-two children posited that the local Ghanaian movies that are telecasted on the television was where they learnt and became conversant with the abusive words. Majority of the children mentioned the names of some of the characters in the movies that used those words. However, for the sake of research ethics, those names have I withheld.

One wonders why abusive words would become part of the parlance of children between the ages of two, five years and above. Nevertheless, for some people in the Ghanaian-traditional-Akan society they become astound and speechless upon hearing children use these words. Others do not tolerate such behaviours. For this reason, they chastise the children by spanking, caning or giving them severe head knocks.

However, the question is, is it the case that these children really understand the ethical/moral implications of the use of *'aboa', 'kwasia'* and *'wo maame'* in particular reference to their victims? In the paragraphs that follow, I present the outcome of the views collected from the children. The study revealed that each of the children interviewed reports of using such words like 'aboa', 'kwasia', 'wo maame' to address their colleagues and older persons in the society. This is because for them, the words are part of the 'normal' parlance they are expected to speak when they feel hindered by their peers and older persons from satisfying their desires. They maintained that they see nothing abusive and wrong with the words. For them, because their teachers, parents, older people and colleagues use them as a means to check and to register their displeasure in relation to

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[15] Anderson (2013).

[16]The term local Ghanaian movies are those movies that are solely characterised by the use Akan dialect, specifically Asante Twi or Fante.

These movies are generally featured by characters that are fond of raining insults/abusive words to their counterparts and elderly person.

certain conducts, they (children) find those words not abusive but rather powerful words that help them to control the over empowering party.

4.2. Ghanaian Akan Society: The Way Forward

According to Anderson (2013), the future of Ghanaian-Traditional-Akan ethics is bleak. He maintains this position in view of his observations in connection with the past and the present state of Akan ethics[17]. However, if children of today are surrounded by abusive words emanating from their teachers, parents, peers and the television programmes and videos they watch at this tender age, wherein the future lies?Nevertheless, the point I maintain is that children build trust, develop confidence and learn almost everything consciously and unconsciously from people around them. Such people may be adults, colleagues, parents or teachers. In this regard, parents, teachers, peers and older people in the society must note that they have both positive and negative influences on the moral upbringing of children today and in the future. In this perspective, Norman Bull (1969) is right to have maintained that "by far the greatest influence upon the child's moral development is the home"[18]. For these reasons, care must be taken in view of the message teachers, parents, guardians, elderly persons, media houses and movie industries carry across and the visuals we project to the little ones so that we do not get them corrupted. Otherwise, it would be very difficult to make them who we expect them to be.

5. CONCLUSION

It is very difficult to understand the way and manner children do their things sometimes. In this perspective, passing negative judgments about most of their deeds may not merit those deeds. In this case, elderly people in the society must critically observe and guide children in what they do and say. The paper concludes by maintaining that there will be the need for Ghanaians to revisit the ethical systems that used to be highly espoused in the past and try to revive and reshape them to address the issues of today. In this perspective, Ackah (1988) reminds Ghanaians:

"The growth of the cities has produced an urban society cut off from, and forgetful of, the traditions of their forebears. Rural life itself has started to decay with the drift of the young to the cities in search of work and wealth. Foreign influence has penetrated to some degree even to the most remote villages through improved transport facilities and the radio network. Unless careful and painstaking studies of Akan traditional beliefs and practices are undertaken at once, much wisdom of the past will be lost forever"[19].

Inferring from Ackah (1988) is a great sense of truth in view of current trends of development in this milieu. This is because it is plausible that the children of this dispensation are likely to discard the current ethical traditions. Secondly, there is reason to posit that these children will not see the need to revisit the old traditions that served as the moral foundations of the Ghanaian-

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[17]Anderson (2013).

[18]Bull (1969).

[19]Ackah (1988).

traditional Akan society. When this eventually happens, there will be reason to believe that there will be a dispensation that will usher in a kind of philosophy that will bury the entire Ghanaian-traditional-Akan ethical systems of which they will be difficult to be revived.

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