

The 50 Most Important Akan Proverbs

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Why are Akan proverbs important?

Akan proverbs are more than wise sayings. They have a wide range of uses and show, principally, that the user is wise and properly educated in the customs of the Akan people. The ability to use language enriched with proverbs is considered sage and is the hallmark of great public speaking.

I present fifty important Akan proverbs. I have adjudged them important for being popular, versatile, and demonstrative of Akan philosophy and thought. The meanings and remarks are derived from my own research and experience.

Each proverb appears under a heading. Interestingly, it seems better to make the anglicized spellings of the proverbs, rather than their correct Twi spellings, the headings because of the inconvenience with typing the Twi letters 'ɛ' (pronounced like the 'e' in 'get') and 'ɔ' (pronounced like the 'o' in 'orange') on our keyboards when conducting searches on the web in Twi.

Below are the fifty sayings with their literal and figurative meanings as well as other remarks in English.

I. Okoto nwo anomaa

Twi orthography: Okoto nwo anomaa

Literally: A crab does not give birth to a bird.

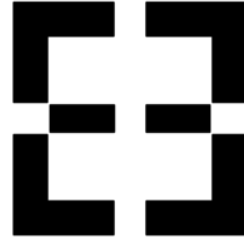
This used to acknowledge the resemblance between a child and his parent. The resemblance could be in physical features or character. It is similar to the English saying, "The apple does not fall far from the tree."

2. Woforo dua pa a na yepia wo

Twi orthography: Woforo dua pa a na yepia wo

Literally: It is when you climb a good tree that we push you.

We the society and the elders in it can only support a good cause, not a bad one. Hence, if you want our support, you should do good things with which all can publicly identify and support. *Woforo Dua Pa A* is an Adinkra symbol with for this proverb.



3. Ti koro nko agyina

Literally: One head (person) does not hold council.

One person discussing an issue with himself cannot be said to have held a meeting. We need a group of people to hold a meeting. This proverb is similar to the English one that says “two heads are better than one.”

The Adinkra symbol Kuronti ne Akwamu admonishes the involvement of the various arms of the state in decision-making because “Ti koro nko agyina,” to wit, “One person does not constitute a council.”

4. Abofra bo nnwa na ommo akyekyedee

Literally: A child breaks a snail, not a tortoise.

A child breaks the shell of a snail and not that of a tortoise. The shell of a snail is easier to break than that of a tortoise. Thus, children should do things that pertain to children and not things that pertain to adults.

In Akan culture, it is a taboo for a child to challenge adults in any endeavour. Hence, children should take care when engaging with adults lest their actions be misunderstood.

5. Obanyansofoo yebu no be, yennka no asem

Literally: The wise is spoken to in proverbs, not plain language.

There seems to be great reluctance to being direct in Akan culture, especially in speech. It is not clear why this is so but in many instances where the uninitiated may not see the need, it is the preferred mode of address.

This proverb is also used to indicate that one is expected to learn from his circumstances and the experiences of others.

It is also used to mean that we don't need to belabour a point for the wise to understand. A few words of exhortation should be fine. In that sense, it is similar to the English proverb, "A word to the wise is enough" and the Latin phrase, "Verbum sat sapienti est."

6. Hu m'ani so ma me nti na atwe mmienu nam

The anglicised spelling of this proverb is the same as the correct Twi spelling.

Literally: It is because of 'blow the dust off my eyes' that two antelopes walk together.

This proverb is also sometimes rendered "Hwe me so mma minni bi nti na atwe mmienu nam," which literally means, "It is because of 'watch over me while I eat' that two antelopes walk together."

It is good to do things in a group. It is good to have a partner. The benefit of having a supporter with you is enough to see you through. This idea of collaboration rather than competition runs through a number of wise sayings in Twi and it is deeply engraved in the culture, creating a strong disincentive for independence and isolation.

7. Aboa bi beka wo a, na ofiri wo ntoma mu

Literally: If an animal will bite you, it will be from your cloth.

It is likely that the people who will harm you are those close to you. In fact, it is those who are closest to you who can hurt you the most because they know how best to do it.

This proverb can be used to counsel someone who has been hurt by a close associate, even a relative. In that case, the import of the proverb will be that the one who has been hurt should let things go since, after all, it is those who are close to him who could hurt him.

However, it could also be used to admonish one to be wary of his close associates because they were the very ones who are likely to hurt him, rather than some supposed enemies.

8. Anomaa antu a, obua da

The anglicised spelling of this proverb is the same as the correct Twi spelling.

Literally: If a bird does not fly, it goes to bed hungry.

You must take action if you want to make a living. It could also be understood as “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” for the bird takes a risk by flying, yet, it needs to do that before it can have any hope of getting food to eat.

Jerry John Rawlings, a former president of Ghana, once created humor by quoting this proverb as “Anoma anntu a, ogyina ho,” meaning “If a bird does not fly, it remains standing.”

9. Obi nnim obrempon ahyease

Literally: Nobody knows the beginning of a great man.

The beginnings of greatness are unpredictable. Hence, we should not despise small beginnings or condemn people when they are starting and seem to be struggling.

10. Agya bi wu a, agya bi te ase

The anglicised orthography of this proverb is the same as the correct Twi orthography.

Literally: When one father dies, another father lives.

The raising of children is a communal activity in Akan societies. With such an arrangement, a child could have many fathers, where a father is an older male who takes some responsibility for raising the child. In such a situation, if one’s biological father dies or is absent, there are many others to individually or collectively play his role.

The proverb is also used when a substitute is found for something valuable or someone important.

The musician Nana Kwame Ampadu has a song in which he sings “Agya bi wu a agya bi te ase yede daadaa nwisiaa,” to wit, “When one father dies, another lives: that is used to deceive orphans.” It is a more cynical interpretation of this proverb which suggests that though there might be a general theoretical expectation for others to step in to father orphans, nobody actually gets around to doing it, leaving the orphans to fend for themselves. The orphan, therefore, sad and unfortunate as his situation might be, should not despair but strive to make it in spite of the odds.

11. Aninguase mfata Okanni ba

Literally: Disgrace does not befit the child of an Akan.

It could also be interpreted as “Disgrace does not befit an Akan.” Further, it could also be interpreted as “Disgrace does not befit man,” where “Okanni ba” is just a substitute for mankind.

Honour is a very important virtue in Akan culture and all must be done to preserve it. Anything that could bring aninguase (shame, disgrace) rather than animuonyam (glory, honour) should be avoided like the plague. In fact, there is a proverb, Feree ne aninguasee dee fanyinam owuo, that says that it is better to die than to be ashamed and disgraced.

12. Obi nkyere akwadaa Nyame

Literally: Nobody teaches a child God.

God is everywhere and we can know him through his creation which even children can see. Hence, even children don't need anybody to point out that there is a creator (obooadee) who is the Supreme Being.

This is a pervasive Akan world view that is so strongly held that it is the rare Akan who does not believe in God. Saying that even children do not need anybody to tell them that God exists suggests that it is foolish for an adult to claim He doesn't.

13. Agoro beso a, efiri anopa

Twi spelling: Agoro beso a, efiri anopa

Literally: If the festival (or carnival or party) will be entertaining, it starts from the morning.

Just as we can tell how nice a party will be from its very beginning, we can tell how successful a venture will be from its beginning.

14. Kwaterekwa se obema wo ntoma a tie ne din

Literally: If a naked man promises you a cloth, listen to his name.

A man cannot give what he does not have. If the naked man had any clothes, he would wear them first before giving away his extras.

15. Obi akonnodee ne odompo nsono

Twi spelling: Obi akonnodee ne odompo nsono

Literally: Someone's delicacy is the intestines of an odompo.

Presumably, the odompo's guts are widely considered undesirable, yet, that is what somebody enjoys eating. So we can't condemn someone for his preference. This is similar to the English proverb "One man's meat is another man's poison" and perhaps "Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder."

16. Wamma wo yonko anntwa anko a, wonntwa nnuru

Literally: If you don't let your friend cross and reach (his destination), you will also not cross and reach yours.

You must help your neighbour achieve his goals so you can also achieve yours. This could mean that if you help your friend achieve his goals, he will also help you achieve yours.

I have heard this proverb being quoted as "Se wamma wo yonko anntwo nkron a, wonntwa du," meaning "If you don't let your friend cut (or get) nine, you will not cut (or get) ten." These two sayings sound so similar that you could even be misled about which one is correct. They also express the same idea. The latter is saying that you must help your friend achieve a lesser goal before you can achieve a greater goal.

17. Yesoma onyansofoo, enye anamontenten

Twi spelling: Yesoma onyansafoɔ, ɛnye anamontenten

Literally: We send a wise person, not one with long legs.

The person with long legs may be able to reach his destination faster, but because there is more to communicating a message than just sending the words, it is better to send a wise person who might be slower.

18. Aboa a onni dua no, Nyame na opra ne ho

Literally: For the animal who does not have a tail, it is God who sweeps his body.

God helps the vulnerable. Even when someone is impoverished, he is not completely dejected because God cares for everybody.

19. Biribi annkoka papa a, anka papa annye kyerede

Twi spelling: Biribi annkɔka papa a, anka papa annye kyeredɛ

Literally: If something had not touched the papa (dried palm frond?) it wouldn't have made a sound.

There is a cause for every effect. You may complain about the dry frond is making noise but it will also complain that you are troubling it. This is similar to "there is no smoke without fire."

20. Boofre a eye de na abaa da asee

Twi spelling: Boɔfre a ɛye de na abaa da asee

Literally: It is the pawpaw (papaya) that is sweet that has a stick under it.

The sweet papaya has a stick under it because everybody who reaches it wants to pluck a fruit.

21. Praye, se woyi baako a na ebu: wokabomu a emmu

Twi spelling: Prayɛ, sɛ woyi baako a na ebu; wokabomu a emmu

Literally: When you remove one broomstick it breaks but when you put them together they do not break.

This is similar to the English proverb, "In unity lies strength." This principle is so essential for maintaining a stable society when it is vulnerable to attacks from neighbouring tribes. Perhaps, that is where the understanding that it is important to stick together emanated from.

22. Nsateaa nyinaa nnye pe

Twi spelling: Nsateaa nyinaa nnye pe

Literally: All fingers are not the same.

Some fingers are bigger than others. Some fingers are longer than others. In the same way, people are not the same. Some are weak; some are strong. Some are rich; some are poor. Each one is capable of doing things that others cannot do.

The spirit of this proverb is captured in part by the Adinkra symbol Mako which is derived from the proverb, "Mako nyinaa mpatu mmere."

23. Obi nnim a, obi kyere

Twi spelling: Obi nnim a, obi kyere

Literally: If someone does not know, someone teaches.

There is no shame in not knowing. We should share knowledge to improve one another. Failure to do so results in a backward and ignorant society.

The Adinkra symbol Nea Onnim shares some aspects of the philosophical meaning of this proverb.

24. Abofra hunu ne nsa hohoro a one mpanyinfoo didi

Literally: When a child learns how to wash his hands, he eats with adults.

Children are immature and need to learn a lot before they can be admitted to the table of men. This idea of knowing how to wash your hands is open to wide interpretation. In particular, it can be used to endorse underhanded practices such as bribery. I have heard the phrase "come and wash your

hands” being used to mean come and perform the appropriate unsanctioned rites before even what you may be legitimately entitled to can be given to you or done for you.

25. Yewo wo to esie so a, wonnkye tenten ye

Literally: If you are born unto a mound, it does not take you long to grow tall.

Early advantages in life tend to persist. For example, one born into a rich family is more likely to be rich even later in life than one born into a small family.

26. Ayonkogoro nti na okoto anya tiri

Literally: It is because of friend-play that the crab does not have a head.

This proverb is sometimes rendered as “Ayonko dodoo nti na okoto anya tiri,” meaning it is because of many friends that the crab did not get (or does not have) a head. This proverb speaks to the disadvantages of having many friends. The belief is that a multitude of friends could lead you astray or distract you from worthy pursuits.

27. Wo nsa akyi beye wo de a ente se wo nsa yam

Literally: If you will find the back of your hand sweet, it is not as sweet at the palm of your hand.

You may enjoy life elsewhere but home is home. The palm of your hand is softer than the back of your hand. Hence, it is better to enjoy it than the back of your hand.

28. Etua wo yonko ho a etua dua mu

Literally: If it is in the body of your neighbour, it is in a tree.

Sometimes we are able to empathize with one another. However, it is more common for people not to genuinely care about others because they do not feel what they feel. This proverb is used when something that happened to one person happens to another person. When you experience the same

thing another person experienced, you have a better appreciation for it and demand the sympathy you were unable to offer to your neighbour when he was in the same situation.

29. Obi fom kum a, yenfom nnwa

Literally: If someone kills by mistake, we do not dissect by mistake.

In Akan culture, it is a taboo to kill or eat some animals. If that is the case for an animal, then after someone kills it by mistake, we should not worsen the mistake by dissecting or eating that animal. In this sense, this proverb is similar to the English proverb, "Two wrongs do not make a right."

30. Wohu se wo yonko abodwese rehye a na wasa nsuo asi wo dee ho

Literally: If you see your neighbour's beard burning, fetch water by yours.

One is supposed to learn from the experiences and circumstances of others.

31. Tootoote tootoote, yerenom nsa na yerefa adwen

Literally: Little by little, little by little, as we drink we make plans.

We can transact serious business while relaxing (over drinks).

Also, even in a seemingly light moment, we can slowly make progress on other more important issues.

32. Dua a enya wo a ebewo w'ani no, yetu asee; yensensene ano

Literally: One does not sharpen the stick that would like to pierce his eye. Instead, he uproots it.

This speaks to the attitude or practice of getting rid of potential dangers early, rather than encouraging them to grow.

33. Obaa to tuo a etwere barima dan mu

Literally: When a woman buys a gun, it lies in a man's room.

In Akan culture, women usually have a lower status in society than men. Thus, if a woman is married and she acquires property, it is as if she has done it on behalf of her husband.

Another (less popular) interpretation of this proverb describes the relationship between the owner of a thing and the user or operator of that thing. Even if you are wealthy enough to buy an equipment or gadget, the one who operates it has more say in how it is used because he has the know-how and you don't.

34. Baanu so a emmia

Literally: When two carry, it does not hurt.

The load is lighter when two persons carry it—two are better than one.

35. Nyansapo wosane no badwemma

Literally: Wise knots are loosened by wise men.

This could also be interpreted as "Knots tied by wise men are loosened by wise men." Not anybody can handle any matter. Delicate matters require the attention of wise men to untangle.

This proverb is the motto of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana.

36. Ahunu-bi-pen nti na aserewa regyegye ne ba agoro a na wayi n'ani ato nkyen

Literally: It is because of "I have seen some before" that when the aserewa is entertaining its young it looks away.

Ahunu-bi-pen is the state of having seen something before. It connotes learning by first-hand experience. This proverb says that the aserewa (a small bird) has had a bad experience by looking on while entertaining its

young so it has decided not to do that again. It has decided to look away because of that experience.

37. Abaa a yede bo Takyi no yede bebo Baa

Literally: The stick that is used to hit Takyi is also used to hit Baa.

38. Yetu wo fo na wantie a, woko Anteade

Literally: If you do not heed advice, you go to Anteade (the town for those who don't heed advice)

39. Abe bi rebewu a na eso

Twi orthography: Abɛ bi rebewu a na ɛso

Literally: It is when some palm trees are about to die that they give good wine

40. Hwimhwim adee ko srosro

Literally: What comes easily goes easily.

41. Abofra a omma ne maame nna no, bentoa mpa ne to da

Literally: For the child who does not let his mother sleep, the enema will never depart from his bottom.

42. Nwansena nni hwee koraa oposa ne nsam

Literally: Even if the housefly does not have anything, it rubs its hands together.

43. Nea owo aka no pen no suro sonsono

Literally: The one who has been bitten by a snake before is afraid of a worm.

Though the worm is small and harmless compared with the large and harmful snake, the bitter experience one learns from a snake bite is enough to instill such caution that anything that looks like a snake is feared. This proverb is used when one takes extra precaution because of a previous experience and is similar to the English proverb “Once bitten, twice shy.”

44. Funtumfunafu ne denkyemfunafu, won afuru bo mu nanso woredidi a na woreko efiri se aduane de yete no wo menetwitwie mu

Twi orthography: Funtumfunafu ne denkyemfunafu, won afuru bo mu nanso woredidi a na woreko efiri se aduane de yete no wo menetwitwie mu

Literally: Funtumfunafu and denkyemfunafu (two conjoined crocodiles) have their stomachs joined together yet when they are eating they fight because the sweetness of the food is felt as it passes through the throat.

This proverb has a famous Adinkra symbol associated with it.

45. Owuo atwedee, baakfoo mforo

Twi spelling: Owuo atwedee, baakfoo mforo

Literally: Death’s ladder: It is not climbed by one person

This proverb expresses the inevitability of death for everyone. The implication is for everyone to be humble and live life so as to be considered worthy in the afterlife.

This proverb has an Adinkra symbol, Owuo Atwedee, a black ladder, often with four rungs, associated with it.

46. Efie biara mmaninsem wo mu

Twi orthography: Efie biara mmaninsem wo mu

Literally: In every house, there are those who cause trouble.

This proverb is often quoted wrongly as “Efie biara Mensa wo mu.”

47. Obi abawuo tuatua obi aso

Literally: The death of someone's child annoys another

While a bereaved parent may wail loudly to mourn his or her loss, an unconcerned observer who does not feel the loss may dismiss their wailing as mere noise-making.

This proverb captures the spirit of "He who feels it knows it" in that try as one may to sympathize with another's bereavement, he may never truly appreciate the depth of grief of those closest to the tragedy.

This proverb is also used even in situations which don't involve loss or bereavement. When there is a serious issue at stake but it is hard to convince others who might not feel directly threatened or affected by it to take action, a patron may invoke the proverb to express his despair at their indifference, though expected.

48. Nsuo a edo wo na eko w'ahina mu

Literally: It is the water (river) that loves you that enters your pot.

This may refer to water entering into a pot when one uses it to fetch water from a river or stream. Presumably, if the water does not love you it will not enter your pot.

In reference to lovers, this could mean that if someone loves you he would propose to you or that if someone loves you he will come to you or be involved in your affairs.

49. Wotena dufokyee so di boofre a wo to fo, w'ano nso fo

Literally: If you sit on rotten wood to eat pawpaw (papaya), your bottom gets wet and your mouth also gets wet.

The rotten wood is a comfortable place to sit and the pawpaw is a nice fruit to eat. Hence, this proverb describes two activities that are pleasant to do but it reminds us that they still come at a cost—your bottom gets wet and your mouth also gets wet—so we can't always have all things being rosy.

50. Dua kontonkyikuronkyi na ema yehunu odwomfo

Literally: It is the crooked wood (or stick) that reveals who the true sculptor is.

Any sculptor may be able to work with good wood. But it would take a great sculptor to make something out of crooked and unworkable wood.

This proverb could be used by someone to explain the extent of his accomplishments, especially if he feels he began from a difficult place and had to overcome many setbacks and disadvantages that may not be obvious to others.