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Suro Nipa (Fear Humans): A Cultural Analysis of A. E. Asiamah's Akan Language Novel, Suro Nipa

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Abstract---The current article examines *suro nipa*, a popular maxim of the Akan people of Ghana, against the backdrop of a fictional tale told in the popular Akan novel written by A. E. Asiamah titled *Suro Nipa*. In this book, an ambitious young man named Kwabena Anson who owned a flourishing retail business was driven by an arrant desire for instant fabulous wealth to engage in a fiendish act. He sought the assistance of a money-making spiritualist who requested him to spiritually sacrifice the life of a beloved relative for great wealth. He sacrificed his most beloved uncle, Kofi Asomani. For the ritual, Kofi Asomani was spiritually slain by Kwabena Anson who then became fantastically affluent through the money ritual. Throughout the story, Kwabena Anson's demeanor did not change, giving any clues about the abhorrent act he had committed. Many people were flabbergasted about his instant, fantastic wealth. In the end, Anson inadvertently consumed pork, violating the money ritual's biggest taboo. He became violently ill and confessed his misdeeds before dying a wretched death. No one in Kwabena Anson's social circles ever suspected that Anson's newfound wealth was attributable to blood sacrifice and that he had spiritually caused his uncle's abrupt or untimely death. This shocking story confirmed many people's perception of human nature as vile, devilish and fiendish, and therefore, needing to be feared.

Keywords---Akan novel, aphorism, fictional tale, popular maxim, Suro Nipa

Introduction

A very popular Akan maxim is *suro nipa*. The phrase literally translates into "fear humans." Some have translated the aphorism as "fear mankind," "fear people," "fear humankind" and "fear human beings." The aphorism *suro nipa* is more like a cautionary statement importuning the person to whom the statement is directed to be wary of human beings in general. Oftentimes, there is an appendage or addendum to this statement, making the full statement *suro nipa na gyae saman* (fear humans rather than ghosts or apparitions). When thus stated, it is also a statement of warning, asking the person to whom it is addressed to be fearful of humans, not of ghosts or apparitions. This statement implies that there is no violence, duplicity, or betrayal in the paranormal domain while human beings in the living world may face insidious or duplicitous behavior in normal everyday life.

A cursory review of Akan language epithets, maxims, and proverbs reveals several related sayings that also contain reproving, advisory, or cautionary tales about human beings. These sayings portray human beings as so evil that one should fear or be cautious about them. Here are a few: (a) *Suro nipa dasani* (fear human beings); (b) *suro nipa yiye* (fear human beings very well); (c) *suro nipa na gyae saman* (fear human beings, and not ghosts/apparitions; be more fearful of humans than ghosts); (d) *onipa nnye* (humans are evil); (e) *onipa ye bad* (human beings are bad, profoundly wicked, and immoral); (f) *Okukuseku, suro nipa na gyae saman na onipa ho ye hu*; (*Okukuseku*, fear humans instead of ghosts because humans are petrifying); (g) *onipa ho ye hu* (human beings are terrifying); (h) *onipa a mppe se ne yonko ye yie no, onno nso nye yie* (he who does not wish another person well, does not prosper in life); (i) *onipa nni aye* (human beings are ungrateful); (j) *onipa nnye koraa* (human beings are not good at all).

As will be amply demonstrated below, the phrase, aphorism, or maxim *suro nipa* is repeatedly heard mentioned, or sung in popular local Ghanaian songs and is a popular aphorism in Ghanaian literary discourse and everyday conversation. This phrase is also the title of A. E. Asiamah's immensely popular Akan language novel, *Suro Nipa*.

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Why do Akans feel that human beings should be feared or dreaded? The purpose of the current article is to provide a sociological and cultural analysis of the novel, to understand the suitability or appropriateness of the book's title, as well as lessons that can be gleaned from the fictional tale contained in the novel (Marsh et al., 2003; Barnes, 2012; Chown, 2008).

Popularity of the statement Suro Nipa

The popularity of the statement *suro nipa* in Akan society is indisputable. This section of the article describes the manifold instances when the term *suro nipa* is used or is expressed. From this, we will see how the maxim is used in different contexts. Indeed, anyone familiar with Ghanaian society and the private commercial transport system will acknowledge that *suro nipa* is a common inscription on several public transportation vehicles plying Ghanaian roads. Many taxis and buses are emblazoned with the inscription. Several private commercial establishments, including eateries, known as chop bars, and drinking spots bear the maxim. Many barbershops and hairdressing salons bear the same inscription.

An internet search revealed that *Suro Nipa* is the title and subject of several popular Akan language songs in Ghana. In each of these songs, there is a recurrent description of humans as evil, fearful, spiteful, covetous, and backstabbing. Humans are also described as untrustworthy, unworthy and ungrateful: (1) *Suro Nipa na Gyae Saman* is the title of the popular Akan song by Paapa Yankson; (2) *Suro Nipa Yiye* is the title and subject of a popular Akan language song by Cutlass Dance Band; (3) *Suro Nipa* is the title and theme of a song by Nana Kaizer; (4) *Suro Nipa* is the title and subject of a popular 2015 highlife song by the famous Ghanaian highlife artiste, Nana Acheampong; (5) *Suro Nipa* is the title and subject of a popular 2017 highlife/hiplife song by Kwaku Manu and Odehyieba; (6) *Suro Nipa* is the title and subject of a popular 2018 hiplife song by Patapaa and Nicholas Melody; (7) *Suro Nipa* is the title and subject of a popular 2019 highlife song by K.O.G. and the Zongo Brigade; (8) *Suro Nipa* is the title and subject of the popular 2019 song *Suro Nipa* by Kwanterere; (9) *Suro Nipa* is the title of a popular highlife song by Yaw Ansah; (10) *Suro Nipa* is the title and subject of a popular reggae song by Caskeysonit and Jah Lead. (11) *Suro Nipa* is the title of a popular highlife song by KK's No.2 Band. (12) *Suro Nipa* is the title of a popular 2019 hiplife song by Irrange; (13) *Suro Nipa* is the title and subject of a 2020 song by Goddess Ginger; (14) D J Pakororich and Boggy Wenzday have a 2020 song called *Nipa Nye, Suro Nipa Na Gyae Saman*. There are many more that are not presented here.

In Paapa Yankson's song *Suro Nipa*, the lyricist contends that humans are more terrifying or frightening than ghosts or apparitions. According to the lyrics of the song, the ghost lies calmly, silently, and quietly in the cemetery, preoccupied with his or her current fate, mulling over how to obtain a spot in heaven. Conversely, the human creature in the living world is consistently scheming about how to take advantage of his or her fellow human beings, to wreck another person's life to his or her personal advantage. The lyricist proceeds to provide justification for the statement *suro nipa*. According to the lyricist, the human individual will act cordially with you in your presence but gossip about you and maligns you in your absence. If you leave your door unlocked, if you leave your money unattended to, or leave the door to your house open, a ghost will not come and take your prized possessions, but a fellow human being will steal them. A thief is a human being; a fraudster is a human being; a gossiper is a human being; a ghost is none of those. This confirms that a human being should be feared more than a ghost.

Suro Nipa has been the subject or theme of several television talk shows and other programs in Ghana. In 2020, Amammer TV had a television talk show titled *Suro Nipa* that was hosted by Asuo Kwame (*Suro Nipa*, Amammer TV, 2020). In 2020, the *Okukuseku* program had a show featuring Nana Asuo Afram Gyebi (Akoraba) that was called *Suro Nipa*. The wickedness of human beings was central to many of the stories that the guest shared on the show. *Suro Nipa* is also the title and subject of several Akan language movies and dramatizations. A 2016 Akan movie by King Jesus Productions is titled *Suro Nipa*, as was a 2018 Akan language movie. The common thread in all of these movies is that human beings are treacherous. It must be added too, that *Suro Nipa* is the inscription on several items of clothing such as shirts, hoodies, sweatshirts, as well as the fabric for making shirts and blouses.

A puzzling question is: What is the basis for this Akan saying that conceptualizes humans as evil or scary, one to be feared or to be cautious about? Why is one frequently importuned to be circumspect in dealing with a human being? What kind of lessons underlie this statement? What prompts the use of such phraseology?

Akans of Ghana

A. E. Asiamah's book, *Suro Nipa*, is written in Twi, the Akan *lingua franca*. Akans are numerically the dominant ethnic group in Ghana, comprising about 47.5% of the country's population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Akans

are a matrilineal people, tracing ancestry through the maternal line. Succession and inheritance of property is also through the maternal line. Akan lingua franca is Twi. Twi language is filled with numerous epithets, proverbs, and maxims. Akans believe in animism. By this is meant that they believe their unseen world or environment is populated by spirits, deities, gods, and ghosts. Such spirits, some of which are malevolent and some of which are benevolent, are believed to have the capacity to affect the lives of humans, blessing them when they comply with social norms, and cursing or afflicting them with disease, illness, and misfortune when they deviate from major or significant societal norms. Traditional Akan religion is ancestor veneration. Akans believe that upon death, the spirit of the deceased journeys to *asamando*, the land of the dead, where it resides with the spirits of his or her ancestral forebears. The soul will reside there until it is reincarnated and reborn into the same matrilineage. The ancestral spirits are believed to maintain strong interest in the lives of their living brethren. People who perform good works are blessed, rewarded with good health, longevity, and material wealth. Those who live transgressive or deviant lives are punished with misfortune, including accidents, illnesses, and economic difficulties (Adinkrah, 2015; Sarpong, 1974).

Suro Nipa by A. E. Asiamah

Suro Nipa was authored by Asiamah (1978). The book was originally published in 1978 by the Bureau of Ghana Languages. To understand the author's choice of title for the book, one needs to become familiar with the contents of the book. The book is primarily about the life of a young man named Kwabena Anson. Following his completion of elementary school in his natal village, Kwabena Anson migrated to Accra, the nation's capital, in search of employment and greener pastures. He obtained a job as a typist in the government civil service. According to the narrative, Kwabena Anson worked for many years without seeing any financial improvement in his life. He started making comparisons between his life and that of former elementary school classmates. He felt sad and despondent about his wretched life. He was so distressed that he contemplated suicide on multiple occasions.

Subsequently, Kwabena Anson left the civil service employment and established a private retail business with the financial assistance of his mother and a wealthy uncle called Kofi Asomani. Upon their advice, and with the assistance of his parents, Anson also got married to a woman named Asantewaa. Within three years of establishing the business venture and getting married, Anson had a booming business and had two children with his wife. Through his own reckless spending on friends and alcohol abuse, Anson's business began to decline. Anson would not listen to his wife's advice to stay away from his friends and alcohol and to focus on his business. Low and declining sales caused his business to stumble even more. Kwabena Anson turned even more toward his friendships and excessive alcohol consumption which caused his business to falter even more. Though still better off than most people, Anson was despondent over the fact that unlike some of his business colleagues, he could not afford to purchase a Mercedes Benz sedan car for his personal use. To boost his financial situation and elevate himself economically and socially, Kwabena Anson sought the counsel of an old friend who was a wealthy businessman in Accra. His name was Kissi. Kissi owned several retail shops and a successful transport enterprise in Accra. Kissi attributed his wealth to mystical or spiritual assistance he had acquired from a spiritualist. Kissi informed Kwabena Anson that he had offered his own uncle, one Kwame Adu, to be ritually sacrificed before attaining such marvelous wealth. Kwabena Anson decided he would seek similar spiritual assistance so he would become wealthy. Kissi offered to take Kwabena Anson to go and see the spiritualist (Brackett, 2000; McGlone & Tofighbakhsh, 1999).

Kwabena Anson was informed that the money ritual for obtaining wealth required the sacrifice of a human being with whom one shared a lineage. The person sacrificed would have to be someone with whom Kwabena Anson shared great mutual love—that is, someone Kwabena Anson loved dearly and someone who simultaneously loved Kwabena Anson dearly. Before they departed from Accra to go and see the spiritualist, Anson had already decided on whom he would sacrifice in the money ritual—his uncle Kofi Asomani. At the spiritualist's fetish shrine located several miles away, Kofi Asomani's spirit was invoked and Kwabena Anson complied with the spiritualist's directive to stab his uncle's image with a knife that he had been provided. The uncle would then go on to die. Kwabena Anson became tremendously wealthy a few months later (Băiaș, 2015; Meulenberg & de Beaufort, 2014).

The story described in the book strongly confirms or affirms the Akan maxim *suro nipa's* assessment, discernment, and perceptions about human nature as diabolical. Indeed, there are several important events described in the book that would confound or flabbergast the reader, causing them to believe in the cautionary maxim: *suro nipa*. First, Kwabena Anson was dearly loved by his uncle (Kofi Asomani) and Kwabena Anson claimed to have mutual love for his uncle. The uncle had even included Anson in his final will, stating that of all his nephews, he wanted Kwabena Anson to be the successor to his estate in the event of his death. How could Kwabena Anson spiritually cause the death of an uncle who dearly loved him? Second, a week following his return from the

spiritualist who performed the money ritual and where Anson spiritually murdered his uncle, the same uncle, Kofi Asomani visited Kwabena Anson in the city, unbeknownst to the former about what the latter had done to him in the spiritual realm. The uncle spent a week with Anson. They wine and dined together and commiserated about life. Yet, Kwabena Anson did not act in any manner that would betray his treachery toward his uncle Asomani and of the latter's impending death.

Third, following his uncle's death, Kwabena Anson displayed a dramatic mourning. No one ever thought that a person who grieved so hard, could have had a hand in the deceased's death. Kwabena Anson's behavior, in this sense, was astounding and points to the treachery and devilishness of some humans. His tears were not genuine. The weeping and wailing was all a performance. Fourth, although Kwabena Anson had a close personal relationship with his wife Asantewaa, he did not share with her any information regarding the fact that he had gone for rituals for money and that the money ritual was the source of his newfound wealth.

How could Kwabena Anson allow greed to push him to commit such a heinous act? Kwabena Anson was not indigent before he embarked on the journey to go and find fabulous wealth. He and his small family were doing very well financially. Anson took the action out of sheer greed, just so that he could afford luxuries and drive a Mercedes Benz car like his friends. Did he lack self-control? Could he not delay gratification?

How could Kwabena Anson sacrifice the life of an uncle who loved him so dearly? How could he deprive another human being of his life just to gain wealth? Kofi Asomani had 6 wives and 12 children. Did Kwabena Anson not consider the welfare of the children he was orphaning? Did he not think of the women who were going to be widowed? Did he not think that Kofi Asomani also cherished life? Kwabena Anson was a psychopath. He placed his quest for wealth above the life of his uncle and the welfare of his uncle's wives and children. He did not care about their welfare. He was insouciant. He was unremorseful (Rosenbaum et al., 200; Nicholas, 2017).

Following the death of his uncle Kwabena Anson was appointed the successor of his uncle and the heir to the man's property. Kwabena Anson succeeded his uncle without any compunction; he also married his deceased uncle's youngest wife by tradition, without hesitation or compunction. In conclusion, it is astounding, astonishing, and startling that Anson, a person of significant financial means, would be so driven by greed and the pursuit of greater wealth as to sacrifice a human life—the life of his beloved uncle—for more money. In the concluding paragraph of the book, two elderly women in the funerary audience expressed flabbergast at Kwabena Anson's behavior. They likened him to a snake, saying that Kwabena Anson was far worse than a snake:

*Mpanyin kaa se: suro nipa a, wommoa. eda a opanyin yi wuie,
hwe esu a ne wofase yi suie. See nso na wo ara na woakum w'adee.
See onipa ho ye hu sene aboa ɔwɔ mpo (p.84).*

Our elders were right when they said human beings should be feared. The day the man (Kofi Asomani) died, look at how hard his nephew mourned. Yet he was the person who had engineered the man's death.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this Akan language novel, the protagonist, Kwabena Anson, sacrificed his uncle (Kofi Asomani) spiritually in a ritual for wealth. When Kofi Asomani died, the spiritual murderer acted in ways that did not draw any attention to him as the perpetrator of the death. Anson later accidentally ate pork and then fell ill. Before his death, he confessed his involvement in his uncle's death. This shocked many people who could not fathom how a man so loved by his uncle could go on to murder him spiritually for wealth. To heighten people's shock, he did not act in any way that could cause anyone to suspect his involvement in his uncle's demise.

The story narrated in the book *Suro Nipa* is an excellent illustration of the Akan maxim that cautions people to be wary of their fellow human beings. While Akans believe in the goodness of man, they also believe in the potential for humans to act wickedly. They have therefore coined the expression *suro nipa* as a cautionary statement to emphasize this potential wickedness and to forewarn people about the wicked nature of human beings and the potential for some people to act treacherously and abhorrently.

The story contained in the book provides a reasonably full illustration of why human beings should be feared through the example of a human being at his worst behavior—killing a beloved maternal uncle for financial gain. Although *Suro Nipa* is a work of fiction and the author emphasizes that point in the preface of the book, disavowing

any similarity the story may have for real persons and places in the society, the story is strikingly similar to many stories I heard growing up in Ghana in the 1960s to 1980s.

The concept *suro nipa* has implications for social living. *Suro nipa* cautions people to be wary in their interactions with others. At present, the statement has permeated every part of Akan society. Given the popularity of the saying and the profusion of the maxim in nearly every realm of Akan life, it is likely that the maxim tends to shape the way people relate to other people. Given that there is fear of betrayal, deceit, and manipulation, people are likely to see the maxim as a truism of the nature of human nature and therefore act accordingly. The maxim will subtly influence how people make decisions about life and how they live their lives. Second, people may be pessimistic about the world (Gendron et al., 2017; Bazimaziki, 2022; Sy, 2020).

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