



Research article

A cultural-conceptual analysis of plant-related proverbs in Nzema

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ABSTRACT

Proverbs are wise sayings that are built from socio-cultural experiences, including natural phenomena and objects such as plants, animals, rivers, among others. This paper focuses on plant-proverbs in Nzema, and how the imagery of plants provides basis for conceptualising human behavioural principles in the Nzema society. In this paper, twenty plant-related proverbs are examined, highlighting their advisory contents in relation to crucial themes such as generosity, hard-work and perseverance, justice and fairness, carefulness, patience, cooperation, and avoidance of litigation among others. The paper shows that many didactics are concealed in Nzema proverbs that incorporate plants like pawpaw, orange, sugarcane, pepper, coconut, banana, palm fruits, and trees in general. Thus, the Nzema dwell on plant imagery in proverbs to convey various advisory messages to mitigate vices and to straighten the conduct of members within the culture. Data were obtained from primary and secondary sources. The paper relies on Cultural Conceptualisations (SHARIFIAN 2011, 2017) as the theoretical underpinning.

KEY WORDS: Nzema, proverbs, plant, imagery, cultural-conceptualisations



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1. Introduction

People who share a history, experience, belief and a geographical background develop a culture (WU 2019). The Nzema people, who are located in the Western Region of Ghana, speak a language that is also referred to as Nzema (ANNAN 1980, KWAW 2008). Nzema belongs to the Niger-Congo Kwa languages family. Besides its dominant speakers in the South-west part of the Western Region of Ghana, it is also spoken in some parts of La Côte d'Ivoire (KWESI 1992). According to the STATISTICAL SERVICE OF GHANA (2021), Nzema has a population of 342, 090 people. The Nzema area is predominantly agrarian; most of the Nzema population are farmers who engage in subsistence farming. Some of the people also depend on fishing for a livelihood since the Nzema land stretches along the coast.

The Nzema traditional worldview can be identified in some of the manifestations of oral literary genres, such as riddles, folktales, myths, and proverbs (KWESI 2007), most prominent one being their proverbs. The proverbs are crafted from socio-cultural experiences and from the features of creatures like plants, animals, rocks, rivers, and mountains among others (QUARM and KWESI 1998). Since farming is the primary occupation among the Nzema, most of their traditional proverbs incorporate the imagery of plant life in which many virtues and didactics are concealed.

Although some existing studies on Nzema proverbs (e.g., QUARM and KWESI 1998, NYAME and TOMEKYIN 2018, YAKUB 2019, YAKUB and OSEI 2020, YAKUB et al. 2021) are recognised, little attention has been paid to the exploration of plant imagery in proverbs. Thus, from a cultural-conceptual perspective, this paper looks at the mental relationship between plant behaviours and human characteristics as portrayed in Nzema proverbs. The paper aims to highlight the advisory significance of plant-related proverbs, and how the imagery of plants provides basis for conceptualising human behavioural principles in the Nzema society. To achieve this goal, our analysis focuses on proverbs that relate to pepper, coconut, pawpaw, lemon/orange, sugarcane, banana/plantain, palm fruits, specifically and trees in general. We examine how the Nzema rely on the attribution of these plants to offer advice to members on crucial virtues like generosity, hard-work and perseverance, justice and fairness, carefulness, patience, cooperation, and avoidance of litigation among others.

Two studies that examined plant-imagery in proverbs, and which are most relevant to our study are POP (2011) and PAREEK and TRIVEDI (2014). POP (2011) explored plant-related proverbs in English and Vietnamese and their teaching implications. The study, though somewhat limited in scope, tried to proportionately provide some general knowledge of plant metaphors in

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proverbs and their implications in communicative activities in both languages. The author reported that some similarities exist in the metaphoric expressions of plants based on similar concepts and experiences of people from both English speakers and Vietnamese speakers. For instance, the English proverb *every rose has its thorn*, has an equivalent expression in Vietnamese, which states: *hongnao ma chang co gai* (POP 2011: 9). These proverbs imply that 'no one is perfect', which is used to communicate an important fact about human nature.

PAREEK and TRIVEDI (2014) also examined common folk proverbs in relation to environment and plants in Rajasthan, India. The study sought to uncover how the people shared their lives with the flora and fauna available in their environment as reflected in their proverbial sayings. The authors obtained data through interviews with local villagers and tribal people of some villages. The study showed that some proverbs are invented and created in relation to plants in general. The study concluded that folk proverbs in Rajasthan are wisely 'coined' by deploying features of plants which tend to transmit information and project ideas that influence attitudes and behaviours of the Rajasthan people, as well as to provide entertainment. The current contribution provides further insights and deepens our understanding of the Nzema philosophical issues and worldview via proverbs. The study expands the frontiers of previous works by uncovering the symbolic-figurative functions of plants as concealed in proverbs among the Nzema.

Beyond the introductory section, the remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 deals with the concept and functions of proverbs. Section 3 highlights the methodology employed in carrying out the study. It looks at the sources, procedures and methods of data elicitation and how data were categorised for analysis. The section further provides an overview of the theoretical framework adopted for the study. Section 4 presents the data for analysis and discussion. Finally, we provide concluding remarks in Section 5.

2. Proverbs and functions

Proverbs are among the most widely used pieces of oral artistry, especially in Africa (HUSSEIN 2005). FINNEGAN (2012) describes proverbs as succinct expressions that serve as a rich source of imagery from which listeners can make more elaborate interpretations. Proverbs are sayings marked by 'shortness, sense and salt' which is distinguished by the popularly acceptance of truth tersely expressed in it (FINNEGAN 2012). OKPEHWO (1992) observes that, when people make speeches, they frequently resort to proverbs in order to add some wit or spice to their statements. This shows that a proverb serves as a rhetoric

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device for the embellishment of speech (AGYEKUM 2012, MALEDO 2015). In the view of OKPEWHO (1992), a proverb is a piece of folk wisdom, expressed with terseness and charm. This implies that proverbs deal with some sort of economy in the choice of words for their constructions and that, they appeal to literary aesthetics in their expressions. As an oral genre, the proverb forms part of the cultural heritage of any given society which portrays everyday happenings among people of a given society (YAKUB 2019: 176). This observation corroborates BELFATMI'S (2013) position that proverbs reflect all characteristics of particular cultural group; concerning their customs, traditions, beliefs, habits, democracy, and gender among others.

In addition to previous scholarship, other views have been put forward on the concept of proverb(s), highlighting most of its didactic functions and figurative metaphoric implications. MIEDER (2004: 24), for instance, perceives a proverb as "a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphoric, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation". This definition encompasses key elements that are prevalent in proverbs belonging to many languages and cultures. For example, FINNEGAN (2012) avers that proverbs abound in allusive and figurative implications. This position buttresses Mieder's observation; implying that proverbs have basic meanings from which further elaborations and metaphoric interpretations are made. From our perspective, proverbs can be described as concise figurative statements which mirror societal norms and philosophical principles of a people, used to make critical comments on essential issues. They are based on folk wisdom and observations, and are highly symbolic, which are transferred from older to younger generations.

Proverbs serve varied functions, especially in African traditional rhetoric. ANYACHEBELU (2019) notes that proverbs are not just mere utterances for entertainment or amusement; rather, they carry enormous authority and meanings with them. Hence, "proverbs are seen as rules of life, tools for sanctions, satire, praise, education and discipline" (see ANYACHEBELU 2019: 1). AGYEKUM (2012) proffers that proverbs function as salt in the soup, without which the soup does not acquire its maximum deliciousness. This suggests that proverbs are a rhetorical device which can 'spice' human communication. However, the communicative role of proverbs transcends the embellishment of language use. Proverbs perform other crucial functions including persuading, admonishing, rebuking and advising people to do what societies embrace and to refrain from immorality (OLUDARE 2017).

For instance, in reminding someone to desist from excessive friendship, the Akan (Fante) of Ghana employ a famous maxim related to the crab, which says:

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anyenko dodow ntsi na koto ennya tsir ‘excessive friendship made the crab headless’ (OWU-EWIE 2019: 37). In this expression, the headlessness of the crab is metaphorically likened to someone who loses a precious property as a result of excessive friendship. Reminding people on the virtue of obedience, the Nzema also say: **akole ande soe-soe a ote kpatu-kpatu** ‘if a fowl turns deaf ears to continuous sacking, it receives a knock and flies continuously’ (QUARM and KWESI, 1998). This proverb is cited to inform an adamant person that failure to heed repeated advice leads to continuous adverse consequences. The proverb teaches that one who does not obey instructions can put him/herself into endless predicaments.

The Nzema also say: **akosea mao doale o nli la lile abebe ezole** ‘the chick that follows its mother feeds on the thighs of a grasshopper’ (YAKUB 2019: 187). This proverb calls for the need for people to heed advice and obey orders from authorities. The chick, following its mother (the hen), refers to not only a child, but implies that everyone must obey instructions from elders or authorities. The ‘thighs of the grasshopper’ on which the chick feeds for following its mother also represents the benefits that an obedient person is likely to gain. This proverb advocates the necessities of obedience. In section 4 of this paper, we provide into details, similar conceptual analysis of Nzema proverbs that deal with plant-imagery.

3. Data collection and methodology

Data for this qualitative study were obtained from primary and secondary sources. From the secondary source, we consulted a number of published works (literary texts in Nzema), such as *Nzema Mrele nee be Ngilenu* by QUARM and KWESI (1998). This is a compilation of some proverbs in Nzema. We found this material relevant because it contained most Nzema traditional proverbs, authored by competent native speakers and scholars. The other works that were consulted, both prose and drama, are KWAW (2012) and SOBOH-BLAY (2013) respectively. These books contained interesting story lines with profound incorporation of proverbs. While reading these materials, we focused on proverbial structures and wrote them down in a data collection notebook. In this endeavour, we made thorough scrutiny in search of proverbs concerning various kinds of plants and/or fruits. From this source, about thirty Nzema proverbs were hand-recorded.

The primary data involved a means of participant and nonparticipant observations. We attended some traditional gatherings and ceremonies such as marriage, funeral and arbitration to gather additional data, since these

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gatherings usually involved elders who used proverbs profusely in their communication. Having assembled about fifty proverbs in all, we purposively selected proverbs concerning trees and plants/crops/fruits such as coconut, oil palm, plantain, banana, orange, sugarcane, and pawpaw among others, out of the lot. Through semi-structured interviews, we crosschecked the data and sought clarifications from four native Nzema scholars who are traditional leaders and also competent in the use of proverbs. These informants comprised two males and two females, aged between sixty to seventy-five years who have had formal education up to the tertiary level. During the interviews, we interrogated the ethno-pragmatic interpretations of the selected proverbs in relation to the Nzema cultural conceptualisations. Introspections based on native speakers' intuitions are also significantly brought to bear on this study. Overall, twenty plant-related proverbs are used for the analysis. We categorised the proverbs based on 'connecting threads', in terms of themes and what they seek to communicate in common. The discussion focused on the symbolic functions and how plants imagery in the proverbs serves as basis to conceptualise and portray the Nzema traditional life.

The paper adopts the theoretical assumptions of Worldview Metaphors, also referred to as Cultural Conceptual Metaphors (SHARIFIAN 2017). This approach is a facet of Cultural Linguistics, a sub-branch of linguistics which explores the relationship between language, culture and conceptualisations. SHARIFIAN (2011) proposed and advanced the concept of Cultural Linguistics in a multidisciplinary perspective, using the term '*Cultural Conceptualisations*'; which he believes enables the members of a cultural group to think in one mind (see also SHARIFIAN 2003). AGYEKUM (2015: 90) seems to buttress Sharifian's position as he opines that, "conceptual metaphors are both universal and culture-specific". This suggests that a particular cultural group has the mandate and prerogative to institute their conceptual mappings which they can best conceive. In other words, the values, beliefs, experiences and the worldview of a people can determine the way they perceive their body and environment in terms of imagery and metaphoric realisations (SHARIFIAN 2005). Cultural linguistics is responsible for exploring features of language that have cultural basis (SHARIFIAN 2011, 2017). The framework employs three analytical tools such as 'cultural schema', 'cultural category' and 'cultural-conceptual' metaphor, which deals with culture-specific conceptions. The imageries that are contained in plant-proverbs among the Nzema are said to be culturally established. In this paper, therefore, we adopt '*Cultural Conceptual Metaphor*', one of the tenets of Cultural Conceptualisations and Language framework. The theory can fully help to describe and understand

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the Nzema's culturally constructed perceptions and conceptions as depicted in their traditional proverbs related to plants.

4. Data and discussion

This section presents and discusses the data. We present the proverbs as in the Nzema language and provide appropriate literally glossing in English for analysis. The discussion throws light on the relevant themes (cultural values) that emerged.

4.1 Generosity (the need to be supportive in a society)

As part of their traditional philosophies, the Nzema frown at selfishness and personal interest. They cherish people who are kind and supportive, especially those who assist the poor and vulnerable in the society. People who are capable in one way or the other, but refuse to assist others to rise and make progress in life are not accorded much respect. The Nzema often rely on proverbs which incorporate the 'natural behaviour' and imagery of trees to advocate the virtue of generosity and the need for the rich to support the poor, as highlighted in examples 1 and 2:

- (1) Nyema dua baka nwo na ye-a-dwu anwuma
Creeping plant wind tree around CONJ 3SG-EMPH-reach top
'A tree supports a creeping plant before it can grow upright.'
- (2) E nli ara de aduoba zo a e-n-li amunli
2SG mother ward sit guava top PART 2SG-NEG-eat unripe fruit
'If your maternal sibling climbs a guava tree, you should not eat the unripe fruits.'

In example (1), we can base our knowledge on the physical behaviour of creeping plants which erect upwards by 'moving' round a tree to arrive at the Nzema cultural belief that a 'wealthy person needs to assist an indigent or a vulnerable person in the society'. Based on Nzema cultural metaphors, in (1) **baka** 'tree' corresponds to a 'strong' and prosperous person, whereas **nyema** 'creeping plant' represents an incapable (vulnerable) or poor person in the society. Usually, any creeping plant cannot erect until it gets the opportunity to grow around a straighten plant (tree). Figuratively, we conceptualise that a vulnerable and less privileged person needs to be assisted by a stronger and wealthy person in order to also attain a convenient level in the hierarchy of life, for example, in terms of financial strength and education (knowledge). In (2), climbing, and for that matter sitting on a guava tree (with ripe fruits on top), symbolises someone who finds him/herself in any wealthy situation. One of our elderly informants pointed out that the proverb basically teaches one to be

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responsible and take good care of his/her family members when one establishes well in an occupation and subsequently gets promoted. It implies that other people should have the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from one's prosperity. Another informant observed that the proverb in (2) rightly incorporates the phrase **ɛ nli ara**, 'your maternal sibling' to best achieve its communicative goal, because the Nzema practise a matrilineal system of inheritance (see also IBRAHIM et al. 2022: 35).

4.2 Unity and togetherness

Cooperation and collectiveness is another virtue that the Nzema highly embrace. For instance, there is a common expression among the Nzema that says, **twea ayile bengua ye sonla ko**, which means 'one person cannot put medication into the nostril of a dog'. This implies that any herculean or dangerous task should not be left on the shoulders of an individual. Other proverbs that capture the imagery of trees to communicate the essence of communalism are exemplified in 3 and 4:

- (3) **Baka ko die anwoma dedee a ɔ-bu**
Tree one receive wind long time PART 3SG-break
'If a single tree serves as windbreak, it easily falls/uproots.'
- (4) **Baka ko kye ɛ-n-gakyi ehoayele**
Tree one alone EMPH-NEG-turn forest
'Single tree cannot become forest.'

In Nzema folk metaphoric conceptualisations, as an informant pointed out, **baka ko** 'single tree' can represent an individual person who is left to perform a task alone as illustrated in examples (3) and (4). Thinking beyond the literal meaning of both proverbs, we can understand that many people are required to work hand-in-hand in order to achieve success in any endeavour. The proverb in (3) highlights the supremacy of collaborative work-done over individualism. It teaches us that one person cannot withstand the challenges, and so should not be left to shoulder the difficulties in performing a herculean task which is meant for a group of people to tackle. Just as a single tree that serves as windbreak easily falls, an individual who is overburdened can also die as a result of fatigue if he/she is made to undertake a difficult task alone. This proverb underscores a universally recognised maxim which says: 'united we stand divided we fall'. The proverb in (4) also creates a mental picture that reminds us that it takes a cluster of many trees; big and small, short and tall to form a forest. This implies that it takes a group of people to collectively constitute a clan/family in order to make meaningful contributions to achieve success. As one of our informants noted, the

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Nzema usually resort to this proverb to indicate that a single person's decision can be an 'ill thought', as compared with any decision made by a multitude of people.

4.3 Vigilance and circumspection

The Nzema also believe in vigilance and the sense of being meticulous, especially in terms of making decisions and choices. People who are impulsive and do things haphazardly are frowned at. Proverb 5 is employed to entreat members to make informed decisions:

- (5) **Be-nea baka ti na be-a-ho ɔ bo ayene**
2SG-look tree top CONJ 2SG-EMPH-go 3SG under firewood
'One must watch on top of a tree before trying to fetch firewood under it.'

In example (5), watching on top of a tree represents the act of assessing a particular situation critically. The proverb at the basic level means that a tree must be examined carefully whether it has 'dried branches' on top before one decides to obtain firewood from under it. If there are 'dried branches', then there is the likelihood that some can drop under the tree. As an informant highlighted, the import of the proverb points to the fact that a particular situation needs to be scrutinised carefully before a final decision or action is taken. In this proverb, a person is reminded on the need to evaluate the success or failure of an endeavour before undertaking it. Concerning their marriage practices, for instance, the Nzema do not randomly choose marriage partners; rather, as a crucial requirement, a man must investigate to ascertain whether or not there is chronic and deadly disease within a particular family before seeking a woman's hand in marriage. Likewise, the woman must find out about the background of the man. This proverb is suitably quoted in discourse to caution people not to be impulsive, but to inquire and assess past and present situations in order to make informed decisions.

4.4 Hard-work and perseverance

Industriousness, among other virtues, is held in high esteem among the Nzema, and so people who entertain indolence are disdained (IBRAHIM et al. 2022). The Nzema live by many adages that encourage members to be hard-working. In talking about the essence of making advanced effort before seeking any external support, for instance, the Nzema say: **saa ekyekye a yee besoa wo a** 'if you tie your load adequately in advance, you can be supported to carry it' (YAKUB and OSEI 2020, IBRAHIM et al. 2022: 34). This witty statement tells us to take initial steps in doing our own work, which could later attract generous persons to come to our

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aid. Another noteworthy Nzema proverb that captures the imagery of a tree to talk about the essence of hard-work is presented in 6 below:

- (6) **Moo fo baka kpale la yee be-pia ye a**
COMP climb tree good CDET FOC 3PL-push 3SG PART
'It is the one who climbs a good tree that is encouraged to go higher.'

This proverb teaches the essence of hard-work and perseverance. In Nzema cultural conceptualisations, 'a good tree', as incorporated in example (6), refers to any tree that bears delicious edible fruits for human and/or animal consumption. Thus, climbing a good tree symbolises an attempt to perform a task that brings a productive outcome such as schooling, going through skilled training or learning a trade. The proverb teaches that people who make attempts to work hard must be motivated to succeed.

4.5 The need to be confident

In traditional Nzema society, people who easily despair in adversity are emboldened to be able to withstand hardships and unpleasant circumstances. The Nzema have culturally established adages that are employed in discourses to serve this purpose among others. One such expressions is **saa edenla ye evinli a enee ongile ke ole fuazinli** 'a dirty clothe must not be necessarily regarded as a rag' (KWESI 2007). The lesson ingrained in this adage is that one must always be self-motivated. It seeks to say that difficulties in life must not 'paralyse' a person's confidence and progress. The proverb in (7) specifically dwells on the image of a bent tree, which yet continues to survive, to admonish people who are not hopeful. The proverb says:

- (7) **Baka kyea a enee o-te-bule**
Tree bent PART then 3SG-NEG-break
'A bent /crooked tree must not be considered as a broken tree.'

In (7), the need to be hopeful and self-confident in life is communicated. The challenges and misfortunes in life which do not make one enjoy 'smooth' or 'straightforward' life is conceptualised as a crooked tree that is not straightened. If a tree becomes crooked but not broken, one should not see it as broken. This implies that people should not give up in life when problems arise. The proverb actually entreats people not to despair in adversity.

4.6 The relevance of family heads and breadwinners

The Nzema believe that apart from parents who fend for their wards, the head of the entire clan, known as **Abusuakpanyinli**, is also supposed to live as a leader,

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breadwinner and ‘protector’ whose absence can make his members insecure. When any mishap befalls such breadwinner, the dependents suffer eventually. Proverb 8 therefore shows the need for every family to have a responsible head/leader, and the fact that members of the family must have regard for the existence of such leader. The proverb reads as follows:

- (8) **Baka kpole bu a n-loma bo asande**
Tree huge fall/break PART PL-bird become scattered
‘When a big tree falls, birds become scattered and frustrated.’

In Nzema cultural metaphors, the fall of a big tree represents the demise of a great leader/parent/breadwinner, whereas birds that become scattered are likened to dependants who become homeless after losing a breadwinner or even when the breadwinner is indisposed. When a big tree falls/uproots, birds are adversely affected because they lose food and shelter. The proverb seeks to communicate that, dependants can go through many calamities in life when they lose a great/supportive leader who also serves as a breadwinner. Since the dependants look up to that leader for most of their conveniences in life, the demise of the leader largely renders them ‘hopeless’; not having maximum assurance of living a comfortable life. The Nzema use this proverb to admonish members to recognise, respect and treat their family heads/breadwinners with care, since the absence of such breadwinners can make the dependants miserable.

4.7 Patience (avoiding rush in life)

A popular adage among the Nzema says: **saa abisa etedwule zo a benli**, which means ‘the *Kundum* festival is never celebrated when the right time is not due’. This expression teaches the need to avoid rush, as no Nzema chief orders his subjects to celebrate the festival until in the month of September or beyond. Many other proverbs in Nzema draw on the nature of plants to stress the virtue of patience, some of which can be seen in (9-11) below:

- (9) **Ɛ sa Ɛ-n-do kane a Ɛ-n-dende Ɛ-n-de**
2SG hand NEG-reach *kane* PART 2SG-NEG-stretch EMPH-NEG-pluck
‘If your hands can’t reach the fruits of *kane*, do not rush to pluck it.’
- (10) **Kukue Ɛ-n-ga anwuma**
Coconut EMPH-NEG-remain top
‘Dried coconut fruits do not remain in the sky.’

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- (11) **Dazia** **ε-n-gulu** **nu** **ε-m-bolo**
Pepper EMPH-NEG-all together EMPH-NEG-ripe
'Pepper fruits (on the same plant) do not ripe simultaneously.'

Kane, as used in the proverb in (9), is a kind of creeping plant which rather bears fruits properly when the farmer provides a stake for the plant to grow up high. When **kane** bears its fruits on top, it becomes difficult for short people to harvest, unlike people who are tall. The proverb in (9) is therefore employed to inform people to desist from unnecessary haste in doing things which they are not capable of doing at a particular point in time. An interesting thing to note from the proverb in (10) is that, coconut fruits do not remain on top of the trees; they fall at the right time especially when they get dried. Here, an informant explained that we can base our conceptions on the physical attribution of the dried coconut fruits which eventually fall from the trees to understand that 'everything has its appropriate time to occur', and so there is no need to rush over achievements in life. The Nzema often cite these proverbs to inform people to be patient; not to expect success to come their ways overnight. The proverb in (11) also highlights the theme of individual difference. It teaches a person that success and blessings rain upon people individually at different moments. Pepper fruits, as deployed in the proverb, represent people who share a common background or relationship; such as belonging to the same family. Naturally, several fruits may be found on a particular pepper plant, however, these fruits may not ripe at the same time for harvesting. Crucially, the proverb makes us aware that even siblings of same parents may not succeed in life at the same time, and so there is the need for people to be patient with regard to achievements in life. The Nzema use this proverb to discourage the attitude of greed and unnecessary anxiousness for prosperity; since greed can compel one to think of dubious means to achieving wealth. Thus, this proverb, to a large extent, reminds us not to envy our colleagues, classmates and co-workers who may first become well-to-do in life.

4.8 Justice and fairness

The Nzema embrace justice and fairness. They think that people who misconduct themselves must be made to bear the repercussions of their own bad deeds and vice versa. A plant-related proverb that underscores this perception among the Nzema is examined in (12):

- (12) **Kekebetele** **n-li** **dazia** **em-maa** **kelene** **anloa** **nu** **en-dwe** **ye**
Lizard NEG-eat pepper NEG-CAUS frog mouth inside NEG-hot 2SG
'When the lizard eats pepper, the frog must not suffer the hotness of the pepper.'

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In this example, 'eating pepper' is likened to 'doing something that can lead a person into trouble'. Here, the Nzema conceptualise 'hotness of the pepper' that may be experienced in the mouth as adverse consequences of a person's undesirable behaviour. Lizard is a reptile that lives on land. Frog/toad, on the other hand, is an amphibian that survives both in water and on land. This distinction, at least, points out that the two entities are not entirely the same. Therefore, the repercussions of one's wrongdoing or mismanagement in life should not be borne by the other. This teaches justice and fairness, which the Nzema society rightly cherishes. Upon further interrogation, an informant explained the implications of this proverb as follows: "the proverb does not necessarily say we should not share each other's concern. Instead, it reminds us not to extend one's punishment to affect other innocent people". The following proverb in (13) particularly talks against discrimination. It projects the Nzema philosophy of 'equal treatment', such as:

- (13) **E-kisa konwo a anree kisa bana**
2SG-stake banana PART then stake plantain
'If you provide a stake to support the banana, provide same to support the plantain.'

This proverb basically says that a farmer who provides a stake to support banana (to prevent it from falling), must also provide a stake to support plantain, since both can provide food for the farmer. In this proverb, banana and plantain represent people who share common features, such as people who share a close family relationship. A man's son and his nephew represent banana and plantain respectively, according to Nzema cultural metaphors. Among the Nzema, as an informant emphasised, a man's nieces and nephews (his sister's children in this case) are considered equally precious as his own sons and daughters. Every Nzema man is therefore expected to take good care of his own children including his nieces and nephews. He must not abandon the nieces and nephews and look after his children only, since he does not know who will become prosperous in future to take care of him at his old age. This is also because the Nzema practise matrilineal inheritance. In essence, matters concerning one's nephews and nieces are not undermined and taken for granted. Essentially, the proverb in (13) advises people against discrimination. The proverb tells us to be just, and to give equal treatment to persons of similar status.

4.9 Against litigation

The Nzema believe in tolerance and peaceful co-existence as key to promoting socio-cultural and economic growth and development. This is evidenced in a common expression among the people, which says: **edweke biala enle eke moo**

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befa nrenlande bepe nu a; enloanle ala a befa beka a ‘there is no case that demands a cutlass to cut it; it is the mouth that is used to settle it’. This maxim seeks to communicate that ‘simple misunderstandings’ should be settled with ease. To this end, prolonged litigation among members in the society is highly detested. A noteworthy Nzema proverb that also advises people against litigation uses the imagery of banana fruits, such as follows:

- (14) **Be-di konwo a be-n-gyia dadee**
2SG-eat banana PART 2SG-NEG-need knife
‘Whoever eats banana fruit does not demand a sharp instrument (knife) to cut it.’

In this wise expression, banana is actually symbolic. The import of the proverb transcends the notion of eating banana that is depicted at the literal/basic level. Conceptually, the act of eating banana (which is very soft), is likened to having a ‘minor’ case (dispute) to settle. According to an informant, the sharp instrument (knife) used in the proverb can represent the law court, which is the most powerful organisation to resolve disputes. Unlike sugarcane, for example, banana (fruit) is very soft and easy to chew; therefore, whoever eats banana may not necessarily require a sharp instrument to cut it into pieces. This implies that we should not prolong matters that could be easily settled (see also YAKUB 2022a). The proverb tells us that, if a problem or misunderstanding between people is not so serious and difficult to deal with, just as in the case of eating banana, we should be able to ‘cool our tempers’ and settle the matter amicably. Among the Nzema, whenever there is confrontation between two parties, some elders (sometimes including the chief of the community) are made to sit and invite the two parties for arbitration (conflict resolution). This is done for peace to be restored. Thus, the proverb entreats us not to be litigants. We should not ‘drag’ a minor case until it reaches the law court.

4.10 Decent living

Living a decent life is very key to being appreciated in a society. People who behave satisfactorily, such as providing support to make others happy, can always have friends around them. The Nzema welcome this behaviour, which is concealed in a plant-related proverb that says:

- (15) **Kpakpa mɔɔ so ma feleko la baka e-m-kpa ɔ bo**
Pawpaw COMP bear fruit sweet CDET tree EMPH-NEG-leave 3SG under
‘There is always a plucking stick under a pawpaw tree that bears delicious fruits.’

In (15), pawpaw tree that bears delicious fruits for people to enjoy is likened to a person (donor) who provides gifts (services) for people to be pleased. The stick

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which is always found under the pawpaw tree also means that people regularly visit the pawpaw in search of its sweet fruits. This implies that beneficiaries appreciate and associate with benevolent donors. In other words, since a 'plucking stick' always exists under the pawpaw that produces sweet fruits, a person who is kind and behaves, always has people to socialise with him/her. This proverb stresses the benefits of generosity, indicating that people who 'give of' for others to enjoy are cherished.

4.11 Unpredictability of human intentions

Another Nzema proverb that uses the imagery of human head and pawpaw, touches on unpredictability of intentions. The proverb is presented as follows:

- (16) Etile ε-n-le ke kpakpa
Head EMPH-NEG-be like pawpaw
'The human head is not like pawpaw.'

This proverb captures what CAESAR et al. (2022) describe as 'opposing metaphoric link' between pawpaw and the human head to drive home such point that the head is not easily divisible. Although the human head and pawpaw may have some resemblance, for instance, in terms of shape (roundness), some other characteristics make the two entities different. For example, pawpaw is a soft edible fruit that one can easily cut (open) to know what it contains. The human head, on the other hand, is not easily opened unless one decides to brutalise or kill another person (CAESAR et al. 2022). The Nzema use this witty expression to imply that a person cannot determine what others' intentions are, whether they have positive or negative mindset. The proverb thus reminds us to take precautions in life, and to beware of humans, since one is unable to detect any dubious plans that other people may harbour in their head.

4.12 Child upbringing

The Nzema frown at children who challenge the physical strength and intelligence of adults. Like in other diverse cultures, the Nzema child is not supposed to compete with the elderly (see YAKUB 2022b: 191). He/she is expected to be brought up to exhibit virtues of humility, obedience, respect and to operate within his/her boundaries. Children who lack these virtues usually have their parents to be blamed. A proverb that underscores the Nzema advocacy for proper child upbringing is indicated in (17):

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- (17) **Kakula tu besea na ɔ-n-du betenle**
Child uproot small palm tree CONJ 3SG-NEG-uproot big palm tree
'A child must uproot young palm tree, but not to uproot a mature palm tree.'

Unlike mature palm trees, young palm trees have tiny roots which are not deeply grounded in the soil, making it easier for children (who have less physical strength) to uproot. In this proverb, 'children uprooting young palm tree' and 'not to uproot mature palm tree' communicates the fact that they should not get involved in matters beyond their capabilities, and should not intrude into adult conversations uninvited. In Nzema cultural context, a 'cultured' and properly trained child is expected to engage in issues concerning his/her peers, usually when it comes to matters of jokes (YAKUB 2022b). The advisory content of the proverb in (17) is parallel to what the Nzema say: **kakula bɔ enlonkoɛ na ɔmbo enwɔnra** 'a child must be responsible for breaking the shell of a snail, but not the shell of a tortoise' (see IBRAHIM et al. 2022: 25). The proverb offers advice to parents to desist from assigning herculean duties to children to perform.

4.13 Neglect and disregard for the needy/vulnerable

Sometimes, people abandon their relatives who are poor and less privileged. Some parents also deliberately reject their children and make them fend for themselves until the children become responsible adults. When such children become prosperous and responsible, however, the parents seek support from them. The Nzema frown at this attitude, and so they employ the proverb in (18) to rebuke people (parents) who have such behaviour. The proverb reads as follows:

- (18) **Arele le amunli a be-m-bikye nwo ɔ-bolo a be-di**
Palm fruit COP unripe PART 2SG-NEG-near self 3SG-ripe PART 3PL-eat
'Unripe palm fruit is often rejected, but when it ripens, consumers rush over it.'

This proverb points at the fact that poor and less privileged people are marginalised and discriminated against. However, when such people become prosperous in life, their relatives among other people in the society turn to value and respect them; seeking their support at all times. In this witty statement, 'unripe palm fruit' and 'ripened palm fruit' conceptually represent needy/vulnerable person and wealthy person respectively. Consumers, who are said to rush over the ripened palm fruits, also represent relatives (parents) who seek support from the vulnerable people/children who become successful. The import of the proverb in (18), as an informant reported, is analogous to what the Nzema say: **ɛle bie a beze wɔ** 'if you become wealthy, people begin to recognise

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you and accord you respect indeed'. This proverb admonishes people who neglect others who are afflicted by poverty.

4.14 Temporality of life

The Nzema recognise that circumstances in life are not static. Sometimes, there is happiness, while other times come with various predicaments. With this in mind, the Nzema depend on the following proverbs ((19) and (20)) to advise people on the need to prepare for future inconveniences and how to adjust to such unpleasant situations. The proverbs say:

- (19) **Akenla** **ε-n-ye** **fe** **ε-n-dwula**
sugarcane EMPH-NEG-make sweet EMPH-NEG-finish
'Sugarcane does not maintain its sweetness to the end.'
- (20) **Akutue** **le** **ye** **kenle** **yeε** **domunli** **le** **ye** **kenle**
Orange POSS 3SG day CONJ lemon POSS 3SG day
'Orange has its day and lemon has its day.'

Proverbs (19) and (20) communicate that 'no condition is permanent'. In (19), the 'sweetness of sugarcane' is said to be temporal because the sugar content reduces as and when the consumer chews it close to the part that bears the leaves. This proverb implicates that the journey of life is not always enjoyable. Also, in example (20), we find that a lemon contains sour (bitter) juice, while an orange mostly has sweet juice. In Nzema cultural metaphors, lemon is likened to unpleasant situation, while orange represents a comfortable (enjoyable) situation (see also YAKUB and WIAFE-AKENTEN, forthcoming). Both proverbs underscore the Nzema perception that, in life, there are times for conveniences and other times where calamities can befall people. Through these proverbs, people are told to utilise their resources profitably in good times, since the situation can change for the worst.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on the Cultural Conceptualisations framework, the paper examined the advisory content of plant-related proverbs in Nzema, and how the imagery of plants provides basis for conceptualising human behavioural characteristics and principles in the Nzema society. It is shown that the Nzema 'craft' many proverbs from their immediate environmental greenery, and from their agricultural activities. The paper argued that many didactics are concealed in Nzema proverbs that incorporate plants like pepper, coconut, banana/plantain, orange/lemon, pawpaw, sugarcane, palm fruits, and trees in general; in relation to virtues such as generosity, hard-work and perseverance, justice and fairness,

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carefulness, patience, cooperation, and avoidance of litigation among others. These proverbs reflect and justify aspects of Nzema socio-cultural philosophies. Hence, the Nzema dwell on plant-related proverbs to convey various advisory messages to mitigate vices and to straighten the conduct of members within the cultural milieu.

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Appendix

PROVERBS	LITERAL TRANSLATION	FIGURATIVE MEANING
1) Proverbs concerning trees in general		
i. Nyema dua baka nwo zo na yeadwu anwuma.	'A tree supports a creeping plant before the creeping plant can grow upright.'	<i>A capable (wealthy) person must assist the vulnerable (poor) to be prosperous in the society.</i>
ii. Ɛ nli ara de aduoba zo a enli amunli.	'If your maternal sibling climbs a guava tree, you should not eat unripe fruits.'	<i>Whoever secures any profitable job must let his/her relatives enjoy.</i>
iii. Baka ko die anwoma dedee a obu.	'A single tree that serves as windbreak easily falls/uproots.'	<i>People should not overburden a single person in performing any herculean task.</i>
iv. Baka ko kye engakyi ehoayele.	'Single tree cannot become a forest.'	<i>People must unite and cooperate to form a formidable family.</i>
v. Moo fo baka kpale la yee bepia ye a.	'It is the one who climbs a good tree that is encouraged to go higher.'	<i>Whoever attempts to do any hard-work must be encouraged</i>
vi. Benea baka ti zo na beaho o bo ayene.	'Look on top of a tree before fetching firewood under it.'	<i>One must consider a situation before he/she makes any decision (look before you leap).</i>
vii. Baka kyee a enee otebule.	'A bent /crooked tree must not be considered a broken tree.'	<i>One must not consider challenges in life as absolute failure of life</i>
viii. Baka kpole bu a nloma bo asande.	'When a big tree falls, birds become scattered and frustrated.'	<i>When a breadwinner passes on, dependants become miserable.</i>
2) Proverbs concerning palm tree/fruit		
i. Kakula tu besea na ondu betenle.	'A child must uproot young palm tree, but not matured palm tree.'	<i>A child must not compete with the elderly (cut your coat according to your size).</i>
ii. Arele le amunli a nloma embikye nwole na obolo a yee bedi a.	'Unripe palm fruits are often rejected; when they ripen, consumers rush over them.'	<i>The poor are often relegated, but when they become wealthy, people seek support from them.</i>

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3) Proverbs concerning banana/plantain

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|-----|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| i. | Bēdi konwo a bengyia dadee. | ‘Whoever eats banana fruit does not demand a sharp instrument (knife) to cut it.’ | <i>A less difficult issue/case must be settled easily without proceeding to court</i> |
| ii. | Ekisa konwo a anrēe kisa bana. | ‘If you provide a stake to support banana, provide same to support plantain.’ | <i>One must give equal treatment to members of the same family.</i> |

4) Proverb concerning coconut

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|----|---------------------------|--|---|
| i. | Kukue enga anwuma. | ‘Dried coconut fruits do not remain in the sky (they will surely fall).’ | <i>Everything happens at its rightful time.</i> |
|----|---------------------------|--|---|

5) Proverbs concerning pawpaw

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|-----|--|---|--|
| i. | Kpakpa mōo so ma feleko la baka emkpa o bo. | ‘A plucking stick always exists under a pawpaw tree that bears delicious fruits.’ | <i>Whoever lives a decent/satisfactory life always has people to associate with him/her.</i> |
| ii. | Etile enle ke kpakpa | ‘The human head cannot be opened like pawpaw.’ | <i>A person’s intentions are not easily detected.</i> |

6) Proverbs concerning pepper

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|-----|--|--|--|
| i. | Dazia engulu nu embolo. | ‘Pepper fruits (found on the same plant) do not ripe simultaneously.’ | <i>People (even twins) may not become successful in life at the same time.</i> |
| ii. | Kekebetele enli dazia emmaa kelene anloa anu endwe ye | ‘When the lizard eats pepper, the frog must not suffer the hotness of the pepper.’ | <i>One must not suffer the repercussions of other’s misconduct.</i> |

7) Proverb concerning sugarcane

- | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| i. | Akenla enye fe endwula. | ‘Sugarcane does not maintain its sweetness till the end.’ | <i>No condition is permanent.</i> |
|----|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|

8) Proverb concerning kane

- | | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| i. | Ɛ sa endo kane a endende ende. | ‘If your hands cannot reach the fruits of kane, do not rush/struggle to pluck it.’ | <i>One must not rush in life.</i> |
|----|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|

9) Proverb concerning orange/lemon

- | | | | |
|----|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| i. | Akutue le ye kenle yee domunli le ye kenle. | ‘Orange has its day and lemon has its day.’ | <i>No condition is permanent.</i> |
|----|--|---|-----------------------------------|