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## The Quest for Climatic Sanity: Re-Reading of Akan Creation Myth

Samuel Kwesi Nkansah

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### Abstract

The process of creation with its attendant questions of understanding the world has been the bane of the quest for knowledge to understand natural hazards. The recent climatic hazards confronting mankind are blamed on climate change. One literary genre that seeks to explain the causes of natural hazards, including climate change, is the creation myth. All cultures of humankind have specific myths they harness as basic answers to mind-boggling questions on natural occurrences.

This paper sets out to examine how the Akan creation myth is employed to address issues of climate change as well as the direction given to ensure the sustainability of development. In achieving this, five Akan creation myths are analysed through the lens of the formalistic approach to literary appreciation. The study reveals that Akan creation myths provide meaning to basic issues in natural occurrences and also provide means to protect the climate against unhealthy

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practices, failure of which spells doom in offsetting developmental agenda. The research has implications for the scholarship of both oral literature and climate change.

## **Introduction**

Most natural occurrences are explained scientifically, without recourse to the indigenous knowledge base of the people. One such occurrence is climate change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change defines it as “a change in climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time period” (UNFCCC, 2005). Climate change has assumed such a serious and global attention; it has taken a centre stage in local, national and international discourses. Since this became a global issue, all approaches to it have been scientific. One of such projects is Verlag et al’s. (1992) *Climate Change - A Threat to Global Development: Acting Now to Safeguard the Future - First Report* submitted by the 12<sup>th</sup> German Bundestag’s Enquete Commission on Protecting the Earth’s Atmosphere. In this project, the commission identifies causes of climate change as, among others, deforestation, agriculture and emission of gases into the atmosphere. Watson, et al. (1998), in a report on a UN commissioned project on Climatic Change, spells out the extent to which the various regional locations of the world would be adversely affected by climate change. The report indicates that Africa is prone to recurrent drought, high population growth and pressure on the forest reserve. In addition, Africa is particularly threatened to suffer in human health, tourism and wildlife, agriculture and, water and food supply, among others, as fallout of the climate change (pp. 18-21).

The fundamental objective of the aforementioned research activities is to find the most effective solution to the problem of climate change. Though diverse scientific theories have been propounded to explain the changes in the climatic condition and the occurrences of natural disasters with man’s failure to adhere to basic directives of survival, very little attempt has been made to draw on indigenous knowledge of the people to address the causes and effects of climate change.

Culturally, natural phenomena such as climate change have traditional approaches of explanation which are effective among the particular people. This knowledge is based on the

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inherited poetics of the people, for people are composed of what they remember; and our world is better explained in our experiences.

To the African in general, and the Akan, in particular, the myth is one of the mediums through which natural occurrences are explained. Myths represent one of the explanatory modes of assigning reasons for natural occurrences as well as their attendant consequences.

### **Aim of the Study**

This study seeks to draw on the complementary endeavour that exists between belief and the artistic expression of the people, and also the hegemony of belief as a source of literary creativity among the Akans, a major ethnic group in Ghana. The present study tries to establish the metaphorical interpretation of Akan creation myth as a symbolic interpretation of the causes of change in climatic conditions. The paper draws inferences from Akan injunctions (taboos – which regulate the people’s life; thus, protecting the environment) to strengthen the literary implications of the myths. This paper thus reads the Akan creation myth from a literary perspective; falling on formalistic tools to assign literary meanings to the myths to demonstrate how they explain causes and effects of climate change.

To accomplish the task set in this study, the paper sketches the conceptual terrain by first discussing myth as a literary concept, followed by a discussion of the formalistic approach to anchor the paper on literary theory. Next, I describe the methodology, which involves a discussion of the research design, research site and data source. This is then followed by the analysis and discussion of the data, which highlights the literal interpretations usually assigned the myth and the literary interpretation, which is the focus of this study. The paper ends with the findings and implications.

### **Conceptual Framework**

All over the world, myths have been extensively employed to explain happenings such as creation. Middleton (1967) defines myth as a statement about society and man’s place in it and in the surrounding universe. Among Ghanaians, there are stories about the origin of death, the gift of fire, the great flood, the organisation of societies and other institutions and customs. Creation

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myth has therefore been seen as the window through which events of life derive their essence and justification. Sarpong (1974) describes myths as

stories that relate to creation, divine or supernatural beings, their family descent, activities and adventures, whether they are supposed to have caused the world, or created mankind. Thus, the myth is a symbolic projection of a people's hopes, values, fears, and aspirations (p.125).

The creation myth as a symbolic narrative of a culture, tradition or a people, describes their earliest beginnings, how the world they know began and how they first came into it. The creation myth speaks to deeply meaningful questions held by the society that shares them, revealing their central worldview and the framework for the identity of the culture and individual in a universal context.

The myth, primarily imagistic, is strikingly responsive on resonant points to produce emotive power. According to Sproul (1979), myths organise the way we perceive facts and understand ourselves and the world (p.1). In establishing the relationship between literature and myth, Barbour (1979) opines that on the epistemological level, myths, metaphor and models have the same structure because they all impart knowledge in another sphere where the use of univocal language may be incapable of expressing. This nature of the myth is amenable to literature and thus capable of literary scrutiny; it can reveal in-depth meaning to bear on our understanding of the causes of climate change.

The analysis of myths as a means of explaining climate change is thus anchored on a literary theory that allows for the emergence of internal relatedness and logic. Examining the myth as a literary material to reveal its literariness, I choose the formalistic theory, which I consider the best option for the analysis. The approach emphasises close reading of a literary text, taking into consideration sensitivity to the words of the text and all its connotative values, implications, associations and suggestions. It allows for multiple meanings which offer guidelines

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to what the text says. The formalistic approach identifies structures, patterns and interrelationships which reveal words and phrases, related metaphors and symbolisms. Grammatical patterns, choices of words and the use of related metaphors, symbols, myths, images, and allusions are also central to this theory. It operates on the conviction that when all the words, phrases, metaphors, images and symbolisms are explained in terms of each other and the whole, any literary text will display its own internal logic (Guerin et al., 1992). As the focus of this research is to ascertain possible interpretations of the selected Akan creation myths through the use of tropes such as metaphor and symbolism, a close reading of the text is imperative. As Blamires (1991) puts it, “for the formalists, the proper province of criticism is the literariness of the text,” (p.19); thus, the formalist approach lends itself to this study.

The formalist approach leads to the identification and utilisation of tropes in the given literary texts; myths. The myths under discussion exemplify metaphor which is the centrality of the creative art. Lakoff (1993) postulates that

general conceptual metaphors are not the unique creation of individual poets but are rather part of the way members of a culture have of conceptualising their experience. Poets, as members of cultures, naturally make use of these basic conceptual metaphors to communicate with other members, their audience (9).

The thrust of Lakoff’s work is that metaphors are primarily conceptual, and indeed they are central to the development of thought. According to him, "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." Non-metaphorical thought is, for Lakoff (1993), only possible when we talk about purely physical reality. Leech (1973:151) explains Metaphor as hinging on the transfer of meaning where figurative meaning ‘F’ is derived from the literal ‘L’ in having the sense like ‘L’ or perhaps it is of ‘L’. ‘F’= like ‘L’. The myth as a concept of communication is fundamentally thought in metaphor where the myth transfers a meaning in association with reality. The myths are therefore examined in the light of the above explanation.

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## Methodology

### *The Research Design and Site*

This research is a library sourced based. The myths are collected from written texts and analysed. The analysis is done on the texts and conclusions drawn. It is a qualitative research since it does not involve analysing statistics but gives detailed description and explanation of the phenomena studied.

The research focuses on the Akans of Ghana as the research locale. The Akans are the largest ethnic group in Ghana, totalling well over half the population of Ghana and occupying five administrative regions of the country. According to Amenumey (2008), the Akans presently occupy the middle belt of Ghana and extend west to La Cote d'Ivoire. The generic group comprises Asante, Mfantse, Ahanta, Adanse, Twifo, Bono, Agona, Assin, Denkyira, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwawu, Sehwi, Awowin, Ahanta, Akuapem and Nzema. The Akans speak dialects of a common language also called Akan, which is enriched by local varieties of vocabulary, expression and idiom. The two main varieties are Twi and Mfantse. Mfantse is spoken in the coastal part of the country while Twi is spoken in the hinterland. In addition to this, there are four other inter-related dialects which differ significantly from Twi and Mfantse. These are Nzema, Ahanta, Awowin and Sehwi, all spoken in the Western Region of Ghana. Apart from a common parent language, Buah (1998) indicates that the homogeneity of the Akans is linked with the common social and political institutions and practices. "Throughout the Akan society there are seven or eight maternal clans called *abusua* and seven paternal groupings, called *ntoro*. An Akan by birth belongs to the maternal clan, but inherits the *ntoro* or *kra* (the animating spirit) of the father. Military-wise, the Akan man joins his father's '*asafo*'" (a traditional military grouping) (Buah, 1998, p. 9). Besides this, the Akans share common religious beliefs, a common calendar, and chieftaincy and matrilineal inheritance systems.

The emergence of the Akan group is variously presented. Boahen (1975) traces their origins to parts of the Middle-East, North-West Africa, and the Nile-Chad region while Apter (1972) tries

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to relate the Akan group to the ancient western Sudanese kingdom of Ancient Ghana, which had a highly developed culture. The Akans migrated southwards to their present location after a series of attack on them by the Berbers in 1076 (Apter, 1972, p.22). With the deep-seated belief in God in placing, directing and influencing the location of men, the Akan tradition has it that Odomankoma (the Creator) started the creation of the world at Adanse in present day Ashanti Region of Ghana. To the Akan, this is their original home from where they dispersed in various directions.

### *Data Source*

#### *The Akan Myth*

Myths are of varied length and serve different purposes. Some myths are lengthy while others are relatively short. Myths that recount the origin of life are of considerable length whereas those that seek to explain concepts or phenomena are relatively short. The Akan creation myths selected for this research focus on explaining occurrences in simple and brief narratives.

The first myth recounts that the sky, which was the seat of *Nyame* (translated as God), served as food for man. *Nyame*, however, directed that no one should take more than one could eat at a time. An old lady persistently gathered several buckets full of the food and any time she did, it got rotten and the stench was so unbearable that *Nyame* had no option than to move farther from the stench. Another myth has it that an old woman, while making her fufu outside her hut, kept on knocking *Nyame* with her pestle. This hurt Him and, as she persisted, He was forced to go higher out of her reach. Besides, the smoke from the cooking got into His eyes so that He had to go farther away.

The Akans have a third myth, which reveals that *Nyame* used to be so close to men and made a convenient towel as a sheath. Contrary to *Nyame's* expectation, the people used to wipe their dirty fingers on Him and this naturally angered Him so He withdrew from men and moved higher up. Once again, *Nyame* was angered when an old woman, anxious to make a good soup, used to cut off a bit of Him at each mealtime, and *Nyame*, being pained at this treatment, went higher.

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Finally, the fifth myth intimates that in the beginning of days, *Nyame* and man lived close together and *Nyame* lay on top of Mother Earth, *Asaase Yaa*. Thus, there was so little space to move about. Finally, man annoyed the divinity, who, in disgust, went away and rose up to the present place where one can admire him but not reach Him.

## **Analysis and Discussion of the Data**

### ***Literal Interpretation***

Akans believe that the myth presents a message in a symbolic narrative; it endeavours to assign meanings to the myth to reflect their hopes, values, fears, and aspirations. Akans believe that the success of one's life and harmonious existence of nature and man depends on one's relationship with *Nyame*. This is so prominent among them and it informs the contents of the myths assembled in this study. The ensuing paragraphs discuss the literal interpretation of the myths assembled.

The five myths, mentioned earlier, have *Nyame* (the Creator) as the main character in orchestrating a move into creating a cordial relationship with His creation. Firstly, the Creator's effort in drawing closer to His creation is preceded by placing at the doorsteps of man facilities that promise a life free of lack, toil, or any form of hardship. *Nyame* offers His place of abode, the "sky", as a source food for mankind (myth one). The restriction was that man should take what he would need at a time. However, a recipient of this generous offer could not satisfy the condition but flouted it by taking more food than needed. The disobedience results in producing an unbearable stench which inconveniences the neighbours and particularly, *Nyame*. *Nyame's* disgust towards filth and pollution of all sort, finds expression in His withdrawal from the stench and consequently, man.

Soup is an indispensable accompaniment that Akans cherish since it goes with almost all staple food types. The preparation of any type of soup – palm nut, groundnut or light soup - goes with careful selection of relevant ingredients to make the soup delicious. The Akan proverb "too many fish in a soup does not spoil the soup" finds meaning in this scenario. The soup does not

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only make good eating but determines the quality of the cook. Any cook would therefore go all length to ensure that she obtains compliments from all those who would eat the soup and in achieving this goes to the extent of slashing part of *Nyame* to prepare the soup. The effort of the old lady in myth four situates the old lady's conduct in this context. *Nyame* therefore moves higher up to escape the continuous infliction of pain.

Fufu is a common food among the Akans. Depending on one's economic status and taste, it is usually prepared with one or a combination of cassava, plantain, yam and cocoyam. The food item is boiled and pounded in a mortar with a pestle. In most cases two people prepare it, with one directing the pounding and controlling the blend and smoothness of the food items. Though the pestle in most cases is not very tall, when lifted very high it could hit the roof of an average height kitchen. It is during this process that *Nyame* is hit with the pestle, compelling Him to relocate His abode higher.

The maxim, 'cleanliness is next to godliness,' finds expression in myth three where *Nyame* relocates because the clean sheath of the sky is smeared with filth. The stench that emanates from the filth also contributes to his relocation. The final myth presents an analogy of the discomfort that characterises a crowded home where the liberty to move freely is curtailed by lack of space. One is easily offended with unfriendly activities of others. This happens to be the unfortunate plight of *Nyame* in the myth.

The literal meaning of the myths is pitched on the abuse of an opportunity *Nyame* offered man in that *Nyame* on His own volition drew closer and extended a hand of friendship and cordial relationship to man. The activities of man rather put so much strain on God that He decided to move away from the reach of man. The myths under discussion indicate that there are five separate offences which constitute man's overt disregard for explicit directives from *Nyame*. To these, a common punishment is meted to man for all the varied offences. The penalty that man faces is *Nyame*'s withdrawal from humanity with its attendant loss of relationship with *Nyame* and all the benefits 'man' enjoyed while *Nyame* was close. Man has to struggle to fend for himself. The meaning of the myths is clear: *Nyame* wants to be with mankind but the

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disobedience of man precludes *Nyame*. Sarpong (1974) explains that the myths demonstrate that disobedience to *Nyame* is the root of man's sufferings.

These Akan creation myths parallel, and are interpreted in the shadow of the Judeo-Christian myth. The first myth is parallel to the story of Manna in *The Holy Bible*. It is recorded that during the exodus of the Israelites to the 'promised land', God fed them with Manna. The misrelatedness between the Biblical story and the Akan myth is that the former does not record a woman gathering more Manna than she would need (Exodus 16:4-12). Also, the second, third and fourth myths parallel the account of sin in Genesis 3:1-8 and the attendant punishment in verses 9-19. The myths are explications of man's inert inclination to pursue what he purports in his heart without recourse to the effect on others. While the Bible recounts of the characters plucking and eating a forbidden fruit, the myths present this in three different ways. Thus, a woman hit God with her pestle, man wiped his dirty fingers on God and a woman cut part of God to prepare her soup. The fifth myth echoes the harmony that characterised the relationship between God and Earth when there was no man. The advent of man therefore destabilized this peaceful co-existence, leading to its abrogation (Genesis 1:1).

The literal analysis clearly depicts the limited and narrow interpretations usually given to the Myths. The incurability of the religiosity of the African is once again brought to bear (Mbiti, 190). Magesa (1997) observes that "we face this problem of interpretation with African (Akan) myths which contain elements with greatest religious significance for the people" (p.42). This authenticates the literal interpretation of the Akan myths discussed above and gives urgency to a re-reading of the myths to reflect the link that exists between the Akan Myths and the causes of climate change.

### **Literary Interpretation to Reflect Climate Change**

The Akan myth presents us with a metaphorical telescope through which mind-boggling issues of life are concretised and made meaningful. The re-reading of the Akan myth

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metaphorically explains man's predominant role in the climatic alteration and its attendant developmental challenges.

The metaphor of myths is seen in man's activities of survival borne out of greed, which leads to wanton exploration and exploitation of the natural resources, leaving in its trail factors contributing to climate change. Among the Akans, the need to ensure the sanity of the environment and sustainable climate led to the introduction of taboos on land use; where sizeable portions of land were mapped out and excluded from all forms of human activities. Forest reserves were created in the name of ancestral shrines such as Nananompow near Mankessim and Abosompowmu at Twifo Mokwaa, both in Ghana. Communities along water bodies also instituted taboos that prohibited anyone from farming or mining along the water bodies. A day each was set aside for not going to farm or to the river. These, embedded in the superstition of the people, succeeded in protecting the environment and ultimately the climate for centuries until late 1970s, when the wanton exploitation of the natural resources culminated in the emergence of the phenomenon – Climate Change.

The wisdom in the metaphor of the myths is that *Nyame* expects man to judiciously take what is needed at a time and preserve the remainder for future use. The sky as a source of food in the first myth is the metaphor of all natural resources placed at the disposal of man for his benefit. Judicious use of the resources would preserve the resources for the good of humanity. That though everything within man's reach is for his use, the fourth myth postulates the contrary. The metaphor is that just as one could not use every ingredient in preparing a soup, so is it that man must learn not to touch the untouchable. Forest reserves and reserved lands along river bodies preserved the forest and prevented the rivers from drying up. Forbidding washing in the water bodies preserved the sanctity of the water sources for human consumption.

The metaphor of the myths is seen in man's activities of survival borne out of greed, which leads to wanton exploitation of the natural resources leaving in its trail factors contributing to climate change. Man's activities for survival have resulted in the destruction of protected areas such as forest reserves, leading to deforestation, which is a major contributor of climate change.

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Mining activities, especially illegal mining, are fast destroying the fertile land as well as water bodies. Most water bodies, including River Pra and River Birim (Ghana), in mining areas are gravely polluted with cyanide and other forms of chemicals which have not only made the said water sources unsafe for human consumption, but have also led to the extinction of aquatic creatures. Land degradation, deforestation and pollution of all forms have been the common features of all human activities now. These are the causes of climate change, and concerns of the Akan creation myths.

Today, every effort of life could be associated with industrial and commercial activities which have released gases into the atmosphere, leading to the concentration of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, CFCs, methane, nitrous oxides and ozone forming substances to accelerate global warming. Combustion of large amount of fossil fuel in energy and commercial sector, fumes from private and commercial vehicles, farming methods such as bush burning and application of agro-chemicals pollute the atmosphere, thereby reducing the sanity of the environment and climate. Domestic activities contribute 50% of man-made greenhouse effect. With these harmful gases, the environment becomes unsafe for human habitation as everything in it becomes poisoned. The metaphor of “the stench” alluded to in the first myth and the “smoke” in the second myth are encapsulated in gases that threaten life on planet earth and their effects on the climate. The ultimate effect of these is the discomfort *Nyame* suffered, leading to His withdrawal from the polluted environment. The effect of the gases and chemicals released into the atmosphere is the metaphor of the old woman who kept knocking *Nyame* with her pestle. These gases in the atmosphere contribute to the concentration of greenhouse gases and ozone forming substances to accelerate global warming. This has directly led to the destruction of the ozone layer and has contributed to the intensity of the sun rays, resulting in the melting of ice at the poles, resulting in increase in the volume of the sea level. The result is the Tsunami, hurricane Catharina and other forms of flooding.

“Sky”, as the seat of *Nyame* in the first myth, is symbolic of creative energy, law in nature, consciousness – thinking, enlightenment - wisdom and spiritual vision. *Nyame*, in the myths, is a symbol of knowledge and intelligence that is tapped to effectively and efficiently manage the

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available resources. Earth Mother (*Asaase Yaa*) who is associated with the life principle, symbolizes birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth and abundance. By these associations, Earth, as archetypal image, connotes the sum total of the endowments of the Earth. The fifth myth therefore presents readers with the urgency in applying positive knowledge and intelligence to the exploration of the natural resources at our disposal. The sanity of the climate could be achieved when man applies positive knowledge to the wide utilization of the resources available for his survival. This would lead to sustainable development.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The study has, among other things, established that the myth is one of the means by which Akans communicate their aspirations, values and expectations and a medium of explaining the people's worldview. Literally, the myths have been seen as explaining the causes of the unhealthy relationship between man and God, and the reasons for the difficulties that confront man in life. The literary amenability of the myth positions it for metaphorical interpretations. Consequently, apart from reading the myth mainly to explain the nature of relationship between *Nyame* and man, re-reading the myth through the formalistic approach explains the myth as a medium of understanding artistic models in a manner that ordinary expression could not. Metaphorically, Akan myths as a form of indigenous knowledge, explain the causes of climatic change.

It also concludes that the sustainability of developmental efforts could be achieved when resources are utilized through the best of environmentally healthy practices. For meaningful gains to be achieved in containing the climate change and ensuring sustainable development, the people must be sensitized on the phenomenon through the concepts that they understand better which are encapsulated in genres such as myths and folktales.

The implication of the present research on oral literature is that the growing trends in applying scientific approaches to explaining and addressing natural occurrences eventually excludes a number of the people who are not familiar with scientific terminologies. Oral literary scholars are thus, expected to play the role of drawing from the corpus of oral literature to help

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explain the occurrences. Indigenous knowledge must be one of the mediums of addressing knowledge-based concerns of the people we reflect in our literary scholarship.

It is also imperative that scientific discourses on climate change are premised on the inherited poetics of the societies involved. This advocates a collaborative effort between the sciences and oral literature. Oral literature has a way of addressing issues of scientific concern and this must be accessed to the people's advantage. In this way, development could be appreciated by the people and consciously sustained.

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