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Beyond Entertainment, What Advice and Sociocultural Values do Nzema Riddles Convey?

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ABSTRACT. Across languages and cultures, the indigenous cultural knowledge and advisory messages entrenched in proverbs, for instance, have been extensively explored. However, the important role riddles play in imparting cultural values and behavioural principles in children and adults, especially among the Nzema, is seemingly neglected. Particularly, the absence of an investigation of Nzema riddles results in the lack of understanding of an important aspect of the Nzema oral tradition, and how the riddle genre is used to teach morality. This necessitates the present study to fill a crucial gap. Drawing on the cultural-linguistics framework, this article presents a qualitative analysis of twenty Nzema folk riddles collected from oral and written sources. The findings demonstrate that, like proverbs and folktales, significant cultural values and philosophies are also ingrained in riddles. I argue that, as in other African cultures, Nzema riddles are not merely a means of entertaining people and testing one's cogitative capacity. Rather, they are based largely on the conceptualisations of plant and animal lives, including other entities within the ecosystem to teach sociocultural values and virtues such as patience, hard work, cooperation, tolerance, transparency and fairness, good leadership, and taking precautions. Some Nzema riddles also advise people against incest and defilement.

KEYWORDS: Nzema, cultural values, oral literature, riddles, advisory messages, morality.

Kokią išmintį ir sociokultūrinės vertybės perteikia Nzema mįslės, neskaitant pramoginės jų vertės?

SANTRAUKA. Prigimtinės kultūros žinios bei išmintis, aptinkamos, be kita ko, įvairių tautų ir kultūrų patarlėse, jau gana plačiai ištirtos. Tačiau, regis, pamiršamas svarbus mįslių vaidmuo perteikiant kultūrinės vertybes ir elgesio taisykles vaikams bei suaugusiesiems, ypač Nzema

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kultūroje. Visų pirma, Nzema mįslių tyrimų stygius lemia, kad lieka nesuprasta svarbi šios tautos žodinės tradicijos dalis bei tai, kaip mįslių žanras pasitelkiamas moralinėms nuostatomis diegti. Tad šiuo straipsniu siekiama užpildyti esminę spragą. Remiantis kalbos ir kultūros tyrimais, čia pateikiama kokybinė dvidešimties Nzema mįslių, surinktų iš žodinių ir rašytinių šaltinių, analizė. Rezultatai liudija, kad mįslėse, kaip ir patarlėse bei pasakose, slypi reikšmingos kultūrinės vertybės ir filosofija. Mano įsitikinimu, Nzema, kaip ir kitų Afrikos tautų, mįslės skirtos ne vien žmonėms linksminti ir jų protiniams gebėjimams išbandyti. Iš esmės jas grindžia augalų ir gyvūnų bei kitų ekosistemos subjektų gyvenimo samprata, jomis siekiama mokyti tokių socialinių ir kultūrinių vertybių bei dorybių kaip kantrybė, darbštumas, bendradarbiavimas, pakantumas, skaidrumas ir sąžiningumas, sumanus vadovavimas ir atsargumas. Kai kurios Nzema mįslės moko vengti kraujomaišos ir seksualinės prievartos.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Nzema, kultūrinės vertybės, žodinė literatūra, mįslės, pamokymai, moralė.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘Nzema’ refers to an ethnic group numbering 342,090 (Ghana Statistical Service 2021), who are located in the south-west part of the Western Region of Ghana, West Africa. Their language is also called Nzema, a Kwa (Niger-Congo) language. The Nzemaland is bordered to the west by Ivory Coast, to the east by the Ahanta people, to the north by the Aowin (or Anyi) and the Wassa people, and to the south by the Gulf of Guinea (Kwesi 1992). Politically, the Nzema people cover three districts in Ghana, namely; *Dwomlo* (Nzema West), *Elembele* (Nzema Central) and *Evaloe-Adwomlo-Egila* (Nzema East; Kwaw 2008). They are predominantly farmers who engage in subsistence agriculture, including fishing and trading to supplement their livelihood (Yakub 2024). Some of the Nzema men engage in hunting as a source of food and income. The people may not be strongly described as herders as only a few may be noted for rearing animals such as cattle, pigs, goats and sheep. The Nzema participate in the House of Chiefs, a system of chieftaincy that is well recognised by the central government, and the jurisdictions of the paramount chiefs and their sub-chiefs are highly respected. The Nzema practice Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. As one might expect, the Nzema partly demonstrate their traditional belief systems through some of their cultural practices, such as making libation at marriage and child-naming ceremonies, funerals, and during their *Kundum*¹ festival celebration (Anderson et al. 2024). The Nzema cultural features described above, especially their farming activities and encounter with both wild and domestic animals, to a reasonable extent, reflect in their riddles (or folklore in general). This aligns with Quarm and Kwesi’s observation that most Nzema traditions and worldviews can be accentuated through their verbal art forms like proverbs, riddles, folktales, fables, traditional

1 *Kundum* is a major festival of the Ahanta and Nzema people. Among the Nzema, it is celebrated annually from September to November, moving from one community to another.

songs, and short stories (Quarm, Kwesi 1998: 10). Largely, through these oral literary genres, cultural values and mores are instilled in members of the Nzema society (Kwesi 2007; Yakub 2023).

In most African societies, riddling is performed after the day's activities, when the moon shines. Riddles and riddle performance used to be very active and popular in Nzema society. In the old days, both adults and children often gathered under the moonlight in front of their houses to entertain themselves, teach moral lessons and provide some sort of education through riddling and storytelling. In doing so, many virtues were instilled in members of society, including the sense of respect and social justice, sense of responsibility, hard work, patience, veracity, faithfulness, tolerance, unity and cooperation, resilience, among others. In contemporary times, however, this practice is almost non-existent due to factors such as westernisation, urbanisation, modernisation, and education (Bonyah 2007). It may sadden one to learn that riddles are just passively remembered as relics from earlier times. Gleaning from the above observation, one may safely point out that many social transmission processes are gradually being discontinued. As many aspects of the Nzema oral tradition stand the risk of extinction in the near future without any documentation and record, this serves as a key motivation for the present study. Further, while the indigenous cultural knowledge and behavioural principles imbued in oral genres, such as proverbs, have been thoroughly examined across languages and cultures, the same cannot be said of riddles, as the literature suggests (Chinedu et al. 2021). There is the need, therefore, to enrich the literature by providing further studies that inform a people's worldview and philosophy. Addressing this gap is important to unearthing Nzema cultural beliefs, highlighting how their moral values and uprightness is conveyed in their riddles. The specific objectives of the study are to: (1) explore the plant and animal imageries that feature in Nzema riddles and (2) examine the cultural values and advisory significance of the selected riddles. To achieve these objectives, the cultural-linguistics framework is considered useful and adopted for data analysis. This framework is relevant to provide adequate description and explanation of the imagery and metaphoric correlations in riddles based on the Nzema cultural ideologies.

THE GENRE OF RIDDLES

Riddles are oral art forms that are prevalent in almost every society (Agyekum 2007). According to Onu and Ebere (2019), a riddle is a popular genre of oral literature that appeals to people of all ages, gender and status. They add that a riddle is a literary genre that employs figurative language to evoke rich imagery and requires indigenous thinking before an accurate response could be given. Onu

and Ebere's use of 'indigenous thinking' in defining riddles suggests that the hearers who provide responses to the questions (propositions) need to incorporate cultural knowledge and experience as part of their reasoning in an attempt to give the answers (ibid.: 384), and this is of great interest and importance to the present study. A riddle is considered a verbal puzzle in which a statement is posed in the challenge and another statement is given in response either to the hidden meaning or the form of the challenge (Okpehwo 1992: 239). Chinedu et al. (2021) mention that riddles are puzzle-like because there are always efforts in a riddle to give an appropriate answer to a given question. Chukwuma (1994) states that the main feature of a riddle is ambiguity; it is ambiguous because the question presents a description that suggests multiple answers, out of which only one is the ideal answer. Through riddles, the perceptions, beliefs and worldviews of a people are conveyed, as in other oral art forms such as proverbs and folktales (Chinedu et al. 2021: 72).

Yet, studies of riddles to unpack such cultural ideologies are scant. Bonyah (2007), for instance, just provides us with a collection of Nzema riddles giving the various questions and their respective responses remaining silent on the interpretations of the riddles. In other words, the cultural perceptions, the values and the advisory messages contained in the riddles are not clearly explicated in Bonyah's work. The only work that focused on cultural perceptions conveyed in riddles, to the best of my knowledge, was done by Chinedu et al. (2021). Drawing on the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the authors discussed twelve purposely selected Igbo riddles on women. The findings indicated that women are conceptualised as plants, animals and celestial bodies. As plants, they are represented using flowering plants such as maize, palm tree and African star apple. In the riddles analysed, plants are used to communicate reproductive ability, beauty, tenderness and the marriageable status of Igbo women. As animals, Igbo women are seen as millipedes indicating women's beauty and gait. Igbo women are also portrayed as the moon, which shows the radiation of their beauty. Chinedu et al.'s work closely relates to the present study in terms of data collection procedures and theoretical approaches. The conceptual perspective they adopt in examining the representation of women in Igbo riddles, provides an immense assistance to the discussion of how the Nzema cultural values are codified and perpetuated through plant and animal imageries in Nzema riddles.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

The conceptual perspective adopted for this research is 'cultural metaphors', also known as 'worldview metaphors', a cognitive-based approach to language studies popularised by Sharifian (2011, 2017) in his cultural-linguistics framework. Before

I proceed to provide some orientation on Sharifian's view of cultural metaphors, it is pertinent to highlight briefly Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) CMT. Metaphor and metaphoric concepts are considered important and pervasive in human daily experiences and discourses. In the conceptual metaphor tradition, metaphor is not merely seen as a figure of speech used to embellish language use, but also as a matter of cognition and thought (Lakoff 1993; Steen 2011). Lakoff and Johnson maintain that the essence of metaphor is understanding one thing conceptually in terms of another (Lakoff, Johnson 1980: 5). A fundamental notion of the cognitive theory of metaphor is the direction of 'mapping' from concrete to abstract. Conceptual metaphors typically structure more abstract concepts (target) in terms of more concrete/physical (source) concepts, whereby we are able to understand unfamiliar concepts better (Kövecses 2002). Lakoff uses the metaphoric correlation between journey and love, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, to aid our understanding of CMT (Lakoff 1993: 224). Lakoff presents LOVE as abstract (target domain) and JOURNEY as concrete (source domain). Here, we can construe LOVERS as TRAVELLERS, and the LOVE RELATIONSHIP as a VEHICLE. Lakoff observes that travellers in the same vehicle have a common destination, and lovers also have common life goals that they intend to reach (achieve). Challenges encountered by travellers are likened to difficulties in a love relationship (ibid.: 223).

As Sharifian points out, cultural-linguistics explores features of language that have a cultural basis. His central assumption is that people's beliefs and perceptions about the world and environment are often unique, and are culturally constructed (2017). Sharifian shows the close relationship between 'cultural metaphor' and the popularly known CMT. He argues that

[...] very much like conceptual metaphors, cultural metaphors involve a form of conceptualisation across different domains known as the source domain and the target domain. In more technical terms, we can say that cultural (and conceptual) metaphors are a form of 'cross-domain conceptualisation' (ibid.: 18).

Although the Lakoffian view of conceptual metaphor relates very well to Sharifian's notion of cultural metaphors in terms of cognitive conceptualisations and cross-domain mappings, Sharifian rather highlights an important aspect of cultural metaphors as being fundamentally linked to cultural-internal perceptions and worldviews. These cultural metaphors are cultural conceptualisations that are part of the speaker's world. They are real and indisputable beliefs about the world and life (see ibid.: 21).

A striking example of metaphoric mapping which aids our understanding of cultural conceptual metaphor is found in the work of Chinedu et al. (2021).

The authors describe how WOMEN (in Igbo riddles) are construed as the MAIZE PLANT, as illustrated in the following example:

Proposition: “*Gwa m agboghọ toro n’afọ laa n’afọ*”

(Tell me the maiden that grew up in a year and died in a year)

Answer: “*Ọka*”

(maize)

In the above riddle, women are conceptualised as a maize plant. The maize plant is a flowering plant that produces seeds or fruits. It is also a seasonal plant, usually planted during the rainy season. The stalk of the maize plant is tender and not deeply rooted. This feature can be mapped onto women, who are referred to as tender and weak. Its flowering ability can be likened to the reproductive nature of women, who are charged with the responsibility of bearing children. The life cycle of the maize, its stalk and corncob, can be mapped onto women. The maize stalk when tender looks greenish; after some months, it dries up and loses its greenish look. For the corncob, at the initial stage, after reproduction, the female pollen inflorescence develops into a young cob. The cob grows and produces succulent and fleshy seeds that contain a milky juice. After a while, the seeds and the cobs dry up to become tough and hard. The above explanation is evident in the life stages of a woman. As a young girl, she is tender and lovely. From being a young girl, she grows into a reproductive maiden, with clear changes and development in her physiological makeup such as the breasts, hips, posture and pubic hairs. After this stage, she declines and becomes unproductive after reaching menopause (Chinedu et al. 2021: 81).

Inferring from the above rendition, one sees a detailed description of how the imagery of plant life and attribution, maize especially, is used as the source domain to conceptualise the nature (and life cycle) of a woman as target domain. In the present study, we will see that Nzema riddles are crafted based on the Nzema cultural worldviews, which incorporate the conceptualisation of plant and animal attributions among other creatures. Hence, the cultural conceptual metaphor perspective is considered useful to drive the analysis of data in this study. This framework is relevant to provide adequate description and explanation of the imagery and metaphoric correlations embedded in the riddles, based on the Nzema cultural values and beliefs.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this qualitative study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The secondary data were taken from published material (Bonyah 2007) that is a compilation of Nzema riddles and puzzles. I found Bonyah’s book, entitled

“Nzema agyebɛ nee agyiba bie mɔ” (Some Nzema Riddles and Puzzles) useful to select some of the riddles for this study because the author is a native of Nzema who has taught Nzema language and culture from basic to tertiary level. The book is also well recognised and used for teaching and learning at the primary, second cycle and tertiary levels of education. The primary data were sourced through observations, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. I recorded some of the riddles during my oral literature lectures with 18 second year students who offer Nzema as a major academic programme of study at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. They comprise six females and 12 males, and their ages range between 23 and 28 years. The gender disparity here is as a result of the fact that the class originally constituted such number of male and female students. Having tasked the students to say and write down four riddles each, I further engaged them in a focus group discussion to unravel the Nzema cultural values and behavioural principles that are communicated through the riddles. The discussion allowed for in-depth contributions and elaborations on the various riddles, where participants had the opportunity to resolve issues of diverse opinions. Scholars have argued that, in qualitative studies, researchers may conduct interviews as a follow-up technique for the purpose of further crosschecking information obtained earlier (Creswell 2014; Kasper 2008). In view of this assertion, I further conducted semi-structured interviews with two male ‘key participants’ to crosscheck and authenticate the data obtained. The interviewees were purposively selected based on the fact that they are elderly people whose ages are 76 and 82 years, and are retired Nzema lecturers from the University of Education, Winneba. Their selection was also based on their rich experiences and deep knowledge of Nzema oral literature and cultural values and etiquette. This aligns with the assumption that elderly people, especially in the African context, are considered custodians of cultural values and etiquette who can well transmit them to the succeeding generations through folk stories, proverbs and riddles (see Agyekum 2022; Rababah, Malkawi 2012). I contacted the two key participants at their individual residence during convenient hours for semi-structured interviews. The interviews were mainly targeted at understanding the Nzema cultural metaphors and worldviews concealed in the riddles. I also interrogated them to understand how Nzema cultural values and beliefs are reflected in their riddles. I used a portable audio recorder to record the interviews and focus group discussions, which were later transcribed and translated for analysis. Most of the riddles submitted by my students were also found in Bonyah’s (2007) publication. To avoid redundancy, therefore, I scrutinised the data to remove riddles that were repeated. In all, 35 riddles were assembled from both primary and secondary sources, with 20 riddles found worthy of addressing the current research objectives. The data were categorised and presented based on common themes that

emerged as relevant for the analysis. As a cultural insider, my intuitive knowledge of the Nzema traditional values and ideologies is also brought to bear on this study.

DATA ANALYSIS: RIDDLES AS A MEANS OF INCULCATING INDIGENOUS CULTURAL VALUES

This section aims to unravel the Nzema cultural values and behavioural principles ingrained in the selected riddles. The specific riddles I provide here constitute two parts (the proposition or question and the answer), followed by interpretations of the riddles based on the Nzema cultural conceptualisations. I present a thematic analysis of the data, focusing on certain virtues that are encouraged, and other socially maleficent attitudes that are condemned.

On the virtue of patience

- Riddle 1. Proposition: “*Debie bie wɔ ɛkɛ o, ɔse saa ɛnriandi a ɛbadwu ɛleka mɔɔ ɛkɔ la, yɛɛ ɛkongo noko a ɛbadwu; duzu debie ɔ?*” (There is a certain creature that believes that: whether you run or crawl, you will surely arrive at your destination. What is that creature?)
 Answer: “*ɛnwɔnra; ɛnlonkoɛ*” (tortoise; snail)

In example (1), tortoise/snail is offered as the right answer to the riddle (question). My participants explained that, in Nzema cultural conceptualisations, both tortoise and snail are seen to be slow-moving animals, but they always accomplish their travel goals. In other words, they reach their final destinations despite starting their journeys slowly. This is a crucial life trajectory of these creatures through which people are taught the virtue of patience (avoiding rush in life). In an interview, one of the key participants provided a proverb among the Nzema in consonance with the advisory message in riddle (1): “*ɛlɛne mɔɔ tu hyee la ɔbutu adenle nu*” (the canoe that sails hastily on the river/sea becomes drowned on its way). This witty expression repudiates unnecessary rush in life. It suggests that people who wish to become rich overnight, especially through dubious means, can encounter adverse repercussions such as ending up in police custody or meeting an untimely death.

Unity and cooperation

- Riddle 2. Proposition: “*Sogyama bie wɔ ɛkɛ, bɛ muala bɛto bɛ alee ko; sogyama boni ɔ?*” (There is a gang of soldiers who prepare their meals together; who are these soldiers?)
 Answer: “*wolɛ*” (a hive of bees)

Riddle 3. Proposition: “*Sogyama ngyikyi bie wɔ ɛkɛ, bɛ muala besosɔ bɛ nwo a bɛpɛ azule a; sogyama boni ɔ?*” (There is a gang of tiny soldiers who always hold one another to be able to cross a river; who are these soldiers?)

Answer: “*nyiene*” (a colony of driver ants)

Riddle 4. Proposition: “*Mediema mraale nsa bie wɔ ɛkɛ o, saa ko ɛnle ɛkɛ a mɔɔ ɛha la ɛngola gyima yɛ; mediema boni ɔ?*” (There are three sisters, if one is absent, the remaining two are unable to function; who are they?)

Answer: “*mokyea*” (the hearthstone or ‘hearthclay’)

Riddles (2), (3) and (4) point to the virtue of cooperation and togetherness. These examples feature the imagery of “*sogyama*” (soldiers) echoing the significance of unity, cooperation and the sense of communalism. In their cultural worldviews, the Nzema construe bees as soldiers in riddle (2), since these creatures usually move in groups and can perform a defensive role by attacking whoever ventures too close to their hive. When it comes to producing honey, the bees do it unanimously, a situation that teaches communalism as a sociocultural value. In riddle (3), a colony of ants is aptly conceptualised as soldiers on the basis that driver ants are united and are always grouped in their habitat (nests), just as soldiers live in their barracks. When it becomes necessary for ants to travel, a single ant does not make any solo movement, just as soldiers go to war in groups. Like soldiers who never run short of ammunition, the ants are always armed with sharp pincers that are used to bully vulnerable creatures such as the worm and other beings that may threaten them. A significant lesson to learn from riddle (3) is the fact that driver ants hold one another in order to cross a river. Of course, if a single ant tries to cross a river, it would be swept away by the flow. However, through unity and collaboration, they are able to cross. This teaches the Nzema people the power of unity and cooperation in accomplishing a herculean task. As observed by the key participants, a proverbial expression whose import aligns with riddle (3) is: “*menli dɔɔnwo zo Nyamenle a bɛ kɔme embu*” (when people come together to carry God, they do so with ease). In this, God is conceptualised as a huge object that an individual might struggle to carry alone. This implies that a difficult task needs several hands to be accomplished effectively and without difficulty. Riddle (4) also talks about the sense of unity and communalism. In traditional Nzema society, women rather use clay to mould a hearthstone. They mould three pieces of clay (vertically) and position them on the ground in the form of a triangular shape, on which the cooking saucepan is placed. In the absence of one of the moulded clay legs, the others cannot keep the saucepan over the fire. This scenario is what is captured in riddle (4) to teach the essence of collective work.

Forgiveness and tolerance

Riddle 5. Proposition: “*Menli bie wɔ ɛkɛ, bɛ muala bɛbɔ bɛlɛte ko; menli boni ɔ?*”
(There is a group of people who always use a single belt; who are they?)

Answer: “*sane*” (a broom)

Riddle 6. Proposition: “*Mediema nwiɔ bie de sua ko anu, saa beko bɔbɔ a bɛdabɛ bɛsiezie bɛ avinli edwekɛ, nwane mɔ ɔ?*” (There are two siblings living in one apartment, whenever they fight, they settle their dispute amicably)

Answer: “*egyele nee ɛtafinlimale*” (the teeth and the tongue)

Riddle 7. Proposition: “*Mediema dɔɔnwo bie gua sua nreteɛ ko anu noko besonu; sua nee mediema boni ɔ?*” (There are many siblings who live harmoniously in a single small room; who are these siblings?)

Answer: “*kpakpa*” (pawpaw seeds in a fruit)

While riddle (5) uses the imagery of a tied broom to communicate the importance of unity, it especially draws attention to the essence of tolerating and understanding one another. Indeed, it takes a group of people who appreciate one another and are not egocentric, to agree to use a single belt. This Nzema riddle, therefore, advises people to live harmoniously without social tension and friction. Conceptually, in riddle (6), the teeth and the tongue are seen as siblings living in one apartment (the mouth). Sometimes, the teeth pinch or bite the tongue, described in the riddle as a “fight” between the two. Notwithstanding such ‘conflict’ between them, they continue to perform their functions peacefully. Through this riddle, the Nzema instil in their members the virtues of forgiveness, tolerance, social cohesion and peaceful co-existence. These virtues promote socio-economic development (Agyekum 2021). During focus group discussions, riddle (7) also emerged as part of the category that points to the importance of tolerating one another in Nzema society. A small pawpaw fruit may contain many seeds, but every seed finds comfort wherever it is positioned. This teaches the Nzema people how and why they should try to endure difficult situations caused by others. As people whose primary occupation is farming, the imagery of the pawpaw, among the natural attributions of other plants, serves as a conceptual basis through which the Nzema people provide advice on tolerance and other crucial virtues (see also Yakub, Owu-Ewie 2023).

Hard work and industriousness

Riddle 8. Proposition: “*Debie bie wɔ ɛkɛ, ɔnlɛ egyakɛ nee ɛsale noko dahuu ɔkpɔɔkpɔa ye sua nyunlu; duzu debie ɔ?*” (There is a certain entity without limbs, but it sweeps its compound every day; what is that entity?)

Answer: “*nyevile*” (the sea)

Riddle 9. Proposition: “*Debie bie wɔ ɛkɛ o, ɔse alee adenle anwa; duzu debie ɔ?*” (There is a certain creature that says: ‘any journey aimed to search for food is never long’; what is that creature?)

Answer: “*kpɔnzɛle*” (the porcupine)

Studies conducted by Ibrahim et al. (2022) and Yakub and Osei (2020) showed that the Nzema people, like other cultures around the world, use proverbs to advise members to embrace hard work and avoid laziness or idleness. Riddles (8) and (9) also underscore these authors’ observation. In Nzema cultural metaphors, the sea, which is seen to be limbless, is likened to a person who is physically challenged. Although the sea has no limbs, its shore always looks tidy. If someone dropped any rubbish on the shore, the sea would carry it away. Here, the Nzema believe that the sea ‘sweeps’ its compound, as the participants unanimously reported. Therefore, riddle (8) encourages people, and especially those who may be physically challenged, not to remain idle, but to work hard to make progress in life in spite of their disabilities. In the Nzema cultural belief, the porcupine is seen as an animal that travels a long distance in search of food. This folk perception is dwelled upon to advise people to be industrious and hardworking, as illustrated in riddle (9).

Advanced preparation

Riddle 10. Proposition: “*Debie bie wɔ ɛkɛ o, ɔse ɔnze eleka mɔɔ ɔbawu yeala a ɔti ɔlua biala a ɔzo ye eleka; duzu debie ɔ?*” (There is a certain creature that believes it does not know where it will encounter its death, so it carries its coffin wherever it goes; what is that creature?)

Answer: “*enwɔnra; enlonkoɛ*” (tortoise; snail)

In the Nzema cultural worldview, the shell of the tortoise or snail is construed as a house or a coffin, which is readily available for its burial at any point in time. Through the didactic message of riddle (10), the Nzema people entreat members to make advanced preparations in life in order to deal with unforeseen circumstances.

The need to adjust to a new situation

Riddle 11. Proposition: “*Duzu debie a finde eleka fofole biala a ɔnea ɔbu bɛ mamulɛ ne bie a?*” (What is it that can appear in diverse forms to suit any new environment?)

Answer: “*bɔmɔnra*” (chameleon)

This riddle motivates people to try to be versatile. According to the Nzema cultural worldview, as pointed out by the research participants, the chameleon is noted for changing its skin colour to match any available colours in its current environment. So, the Nzema also refer to the chameleon as “*akakyibɛdanɛ*” (that which changes colour to suit people’s clothing). In riddle (11), one is discouraged from saying, for instance: “*mame menrɛhola gyima fofolɛ ɛhye yɛ*” (as for me, I cannot do this new job or stay in this new environment). The riddle emboldens people to be innovative and to adapt to a new situation regardless of any challenge, in order to make progress in life.

The need to take precautions in friendships

Riddle 12. Proposition: “*Melɛ agɔnwolɛ bie o, mekɛ biala mɔɔ yɛkɛzoma yɛ sa nu la ɔka me sa; agɔnwolɛ boni ɔ?*” (I have a close friend, but anytime we have a handshake, he/she bites my fingers; who is this friend?)

Answer: “*ɛholɛ*” (crab)

As social beings, the Nzema would like to make friends. However, riddle (12) tells everyone to take precautions when dealing with friends and/or close relatives. In this riddle, a ‘harmful’ friend is conceptualised as a crab. Just as a crab can pinch or bite a person to inflict some pain and discomfort, a friend can torment the life of another friend in diverse ways.

The need for a leader to be responsible

Riddle 13. Proposition: “*Belemgbunli bie wɔ ɛbɔ nu, ɔde ebia zo eza ɔzo yɛ bɔlɛ; belemgbunli boni ɔ?*” (There is a king in the forest who sits on a throne and carries a load (crown); who is this king?)

Answer: “*ananse*” (pineapple)

The Nzema people advise members to embrace the sense of responsibility, a crucial virtue that is celebrated in riddle (13). Here, as the key participants

unanimously mentioned, a traditional king or chief is likened to the unharvested pineapple that carries the crown. Conceptually, the crown here rather symbolises ‘a load’ on the king’s head. The participants further noted that the Nzema chieftaincy system more or less deals with reciprocity. As the king’s subjects are expected to obey his instructions and serve his purpose, he must also bear the responsibility of serving the people. This riddle, by extension, advises all those in leadership positions to recognise their duties and perform them diligently.

Reinforcement and effective supervision

Riddle 14. Proposition: “*Duzu debie a εsoa ye na wɔmbɔ ɔ ti avinli a ɔngɔ a?*”

(What is it that refuses to accomplish a task until it receives a knock on the head?)

Answer: “*pelego*” (the nail)

The basic idea contained in this riddle can point negatively to laziness and/or stubbornness. At a deeper level, as my key participants observed, the riddle conveys an advisory message to firm owners and other organisation leaders to employ reinforcement as an effective supervisory mechanism in managing their firms. The participants explained that, for a nail to enter into wood, one must hit it hard using a hammer or any hard object. Therefore, employees, for instance, who feel reluctant to do what is expected of them, must be ‘hit’ by means of strict supervision and reinforcement to accomplish their task.

Against incest and defilement

Riddle 15. Proposition: “*Me ze gyakyile ebia kenlema bie wɔ sua nu. Sua nu sonla biala tenla zo a ɔnye boε kyese alie nwo sonla ala; duzu ebia ɔ?*” (My father left a beautiful chair in the house. No relative in the house was allowed to sit on the chair, but outsiders were allowed to do so; what is that chair?)

Answer: “*adiema raale*” (one’s biological sister)

Riddle 16. Proposition: “*Me nlenyia vale belera kenlema bie ziele εbɔ nu, saa εkɔ-to ye na ɔwula teladeε amunli a εnva, na ɔwula teladeε kɔkɔle a yeε εfa a; belera boni ɔ?*” (My grandfather left a beautiful girl in the forest, when you see her in a green dress, you do not touch her, but whenever she is in a red dress, you will bring her home; who is that girl?)

Answer: “*arele betike*” (a bunch of palm fruit)

Incest, rape and defilement are not only regarded as criminal acts punishable by imprisonment, but also customarily tabooed among the Nzema. Participants mentioned that, when people are seen to indulge in incest, they are made to slaughter a ram to appease the gods, and to ‘cleanse’ the perpetrators and society at large. In riddle (15), one’s biological sister is conceptualised as a beautiful chair in one’s home, but, in this context, the owner of the chair is rather prevented from sitting on it. This riddle teaches the Nzema people to refrain from incest. Furthermore, riddle (16) repudiates defilement. Here, per the Nzema cultural metaphors, a bunch of unripe palm fruit, is construed as an underage girl.² Just as one would not harvest the unripe palm fruit for consumption, one is expected not to have sexual intercourse with an underage girl.

The relevance of childbearing

Riddle 17. Proposition: “*Debie bie wɔ ɛkɛ o, ɔ mra dahuu benra ɔ nwo yia kola na yeawu; duzu debie ɔ?*” (There is a thing that calls her inheritors [offspring] to surround her before she dies; what is that thing?)
Answer: “*bana*” (plantain and its suckers).

To the Nzema people, the primary motive for marriage is procreation, in order that the offspring succeed their parents (Kwaw 2008; Yakub et al. 2025). This cultural conception is echoed in riddle (17). Metaphorically, a plantain tree with its suckers surrounding it, is seen as a parent (mother) with her children beside her, whereas harvesting the plantain is likened to the death of this parent. Once the plantain is harvested, its suckers become the next source of food and income for the farmer, just as among the Nzema, one’s offspring essentially become their successors.

The need to change an undesirable attitude

Riddle 18. Proposition: “*Debie bie wɔ ɛkɛ o, saa ɔle kakula a ɔkeda ɛdanɛ ɛtane bie noko ɔye kpanyinli a ɛnee yekpa ye ɛdanɛ dɛba ne yegua; duzu debie ɔ?*” (There is a thing that wears some ‘bad’ clothing at a young age, when it grows old, it discards the clothing; what is that thing?)
Answer: “*kenlampɔne*” (the bamboo tree)

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2 Conceptually, the palm fruits that is said to be ‘wearing a green dress’ relates to the immaturity of the girl. On the other hand, ‘wearing a red dress’ represents the adolescent stage, where the girl is expected to begin menstruating. At this stage, the Nzema would perform a puberty rite in respect of the girl and then consider her to be grown and ready for marriage.

Naturally, when the bamboo plant is tender, it wears some covers that induce itching when a person comes into contact with the plant. However, as and when the plant grows, the covers are shed, leaving a 'clean' mature bamboo tree. This Nzema riddle (18), captures the imagery of a bamboo tree shedding its itchy covers as it grows tall and becomes mature, to advise people to desist from any previous misconduct as they become adults in society. The riddle entreats a person to change any negative attitude that can adversely affect people and/or property in Nzema society.

Imperfection in human nature

Riddle 19. Proposition: "*Debie bie wɔ ɛkɛ o, ɔboa menli ɔmaa βetuodua βɛ adokule, na ɔngola ɔndua ye tokule ɛdɛɛ; duzu debie ɔ?*" (There is an entity that helps others to stitch their holes, but a hole remains at its bottom; what is that entity?)

Answer: "*agbuyia*" (needle)

Riddle (19) points to imperfection in human nature and existence. In other words, one would not always gain everything one wishes to acquire, neither would one always be righteous. In this riddle, an imperfect person is perceived as a needle, a tool that stitches other holes, but which is unable to stitch its own hole. The riddle communicates that, in life, a person cannot possess everything; meaning that every individual may be defective in one way or the other. One of the key participants cited a proverb in support of riddle (19): "*saa awie anzi kpakye a, awie gyene a kpomgba maa ye a*" (if a person's back is cut, it is another person who stitches the wound). Hence, as the participant noted, the Nzema people use riddle (19) to offer advice to members on the need to support one another.

On the issue of cause and effect

Riddle 20. Proposition: "*Debie bie wɔ ɛkɛ o, saa ɛsele ɛkile ye a ɔdaye ɔsele ɔkile wɔ, yɛɛ ɛmunla ɛkile ye a ɔmunla ɔkile wɔ; duzu debie ɔ?*" (There is a certain entity, if you smile at him, he would also smile at you, and if you frown at him, he would also frown at you; what is that entity?)

Answer: "*nealeɛ*" (mirror)

The mirror provides a reflection of whatever appears in front of it. Riddle (20), therefore, reminds us that a person is repaid according to their deeds. Participants of the study maintained that this riddle is in line with the Nzema proverb that says: "*mɔɔ ɛkelua la, yɛɛ ɛbu a*" (it is what you sow, that you harvest (you reap what you sow)).

This conveys a cautionary message to the Nzema people to be of good behaviour, for one is either rewarded or punished based on one's actions and inactions.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Drawing on the cultural-linguistics framework, the study has presented a qualitative analysis of some Nzema folk riddles collected from oral and written sources. Regarding its formal features, this study has shown in consonance with Bonyah's illustration that the Nzema riddle is constructed in two parts, the question and the answer, just as riddles are formulated in other cultures. The typical question form of the Nzema riddle is "*debie bie wɔ ɛkɛ o [...] duzu debie ɔ?*" (there is a certain entity [...] what is that entity?) Aside from this popular way, one may render a riddle as: "*me ze/nlenyia kɔ la ɔgyakyile me debie bie [...] duzu ɔ?*" (my father/grandfather left something with me [...] what is it?) or "*debie bie se yemɔ [...] deɛ boni ɔ?*" (there is a creature that says [...] what is that creature?). As noted during the interviews, posing the riddle question in any way apart from the popular form, is dependent on the nature and characteristic features of the entity being described in the question. One of the intriguing findings of this study is that the cultural values and advisory messages ingrained in Nzema riddles could find some equivalence in proverbial expressions as a means of supplement. This interplay revealed that, like proverbs and folktales, significant cultural and philosophical values are also communicated through riddles. Nzema riddles are not merely a means of entertaining people and testing one's cogitative capacity. Rather, they are based largely on the conceptualisations of plant and animal lives, including other entities within the ecosystem, to portray Nzema (and African) values, beliefs and ideologies. In the context of CMT, plant and animal attributions including a number of human body parts, served as the source domain (more realistic experiences) used to conceptualise the cultural values and nuances in the Nzema riddles as the target domain (more abstract ideas). The research shows that Nzema riddles are used to inculcate into both children and adults certain important cultural values and virtues including patience, hard work, cooperation, tolerance, transparency and fairness, good leadership, and taking precautions. Some of the riddles were also seen to be used to advise people against incest and defilement.

This study brings new insights into the perception of Nzema folk riddles. The findings have implications for riddles as an educative oral genre that must be engaged frequently in (our) African sociocultural settings. The study is however not without limitations. There may be, for example, potential translation or elicitation effects and a risk of interpretative overreach. Future researchers could therefore provide morpheme-by-morpheme interlineal glossing and interpretation of the Nzema data.

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