Throwing Stones in Jest: Kasena Women's "Proverbial" Revolt

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"It is the stone thrown in jest that causes injury to the head."—Kasem Proverb

Albert Awedoba's recent seminal work, An Introduction to Kasena Society and Culture Through Their Proverbs (2000a), and his article on "The Social Roles of Riddles, with Reference to Kasena Society" (2000b) stand out as the only publications that examine the Kasena of Northern Ghana through their oral literature. Research on the Kasena has been mainly in the field of anthropology and dates back to the first few decades of the twentieth century. More recently, scholars such as Fred Binka, Philip Adongo, and Alex Nazzar of the Navrongo Health Research Center have published work on health-related issues among the Kasena.² Although proverbs in other African cultures in general and their social functions in particular have been well documented and discussed in folklore scholarship. little attention has been directed toward the interrelationship between proverbs and social change, and, more specifically, how proverbs as a discourse in which females are portrayed based on stereotypical gender roles and perceptions function in modern patriarchal societies in the wake of gender-sensitization.³

¹ See, for instance, Cardinall 1921 and Rattray 1932. Included in this category is research on Kasena funeral rites by others such as Augustine Kututera Abasi and Joseph Atadana. For other representative works by Abasi and Atadana, see Abasi 1993 and 1995 and Atadana 1987.

² See, for example, Adongo, Phillips, and Binka 1998 and Binka, Nazzar, and Phillips 1995.

³ I speak here in particular about the cultures of Northern Ghana, where the stereotypical images of women in proverbs reveal the male orientation that informs such "received wisdom."

This paper looks at how Kasena women from Northern Ghana take advantage of a socially sanctioned medium, the "joking" relationship that exists between an individual and her spouse's siblings, to subvert and contradict Kasem proverbs in an effort to transcend the misogynist images and connotations of these proverbs as well as to critique patriarchal norms. In this socially approved context, the women seem to have embarked on a "proverbial revolt" that finds expression via methods that have not been practiced before. The women's disruptive strategies consist of subverting an existing proverb in a way that questions its "truth," or in employing a proverb that engages and critiques the logic of another proverb. Their "proverbial" behavior can be likened to the situation expressed by the proverb cited at the beginning of this paper: "It is the stone thrown in jest that causes injury to the head." This saying is typically employed as a warning and/or deterrent to a person who engages in an activity that appears harmless but is potentially dangerous. Its application to the phenomenon being explored here lies mainly in the idea it expresses that "joking" behavior can have far-reaching effects. For while it would require more research to determine if, and how far, such "proverbial" jesting can be taken in earnest, participation in this activity is in itself an indication of a deeper level of gender sensitivity, a kind of sensitivity that can serve as a catalyst for, if not a manifestation of, social change. This point is supported by the fact that although both men and women employ proverbs in their "joking," only the women engage in this subversive exercise, a fact that suggests their increasing awareness of their social position, particularly as it is constructed by the "original" proverbs.

The material used here comes from my observation of and participation in a culture in which I grew up. While my first encounter with the "proverbial" behavior examined here dates back a little over a decade (1994), systematic documentation of specific instances did not begin until June 2000. My method has been mainly to note down in diary form the context and content of each joking situation as I observed it and, where necessary, to interview the users for purposes of clarification. Most of the users under discussion are women of minimal or no literacy, although this situation is changing now with more girls staying in school (Mensch, Bagah, et al, 1999:97). They live mainly in and around the Nogsenia village, a largely rural area that surrounds central Navrongo, the small district capital that the Kasena share with a closely related ethnic group, the Nankana. However, Alex Nazzar seems to have taken for granted their access to the radio and television, the cinema, concerts, and women's organizations such as the 31st December Women's Movement when he claimed that they were effectively isolated from new ideas and institutions (Nazzar, Adongon, et al., 1995:310). My own observation reveals that these women are in tune with changing trends, especially those that affect their individual rights and roles in society.

Like proverbs in other African cultures, Kasem proverbs exert a strong moral force and are typically employed didactically and as social correctives; their authoritative force is strongest in proverbs having to do with women (see also Schipper 1991:5). While contemporary Kasena society has been described as occupying a rural, isolated area and maintaining its traditional institutions of marriage and family (Binka, Nazzar, and Phillips 1995:123), the people demonstrate in their daily lives an increasing awareness of individual rights that seems to threaten traditional social organization. This is especially noticeable in husband-wife and parent-child relationships. For instance, whereas in traditional society a man controlled his wife's and children's material and monetary earnings, women and children have for many decades now exercised their right to use their income as they find appropriate. Such changes are often expressed in the saying "times have changed, and everything has changed with them," and they are attributed to a socio-economic upheaval that is caused by "money, media, 'white man's values,' and family planning," among other things (Mensch, Bagah, et al. 1999:103, 106). By examining Kasena women's utilization of proverbs within the specific social context of the joking relationship, I hope to explore how these and other modern influences are manifested in one of the most conservative literary genres in this society; to demonstrate the role that gender plays in proverb use; to take the dying conversation on joking relationships, initiated by Radcliffe-Brown in the 1940s and sustained into the 1970s and '80s by others such as Regnar Johnson, into the literary realm; and to contribute to the scanty scholarship on Kasem oral literature.

It has become common in joking situations to hear Kasena women subvert both the form and meaning of existing proverbs in order to thereby draw attention to gender inequities, to address misogynist perceptions, or to arrogate to themselves certain powers not conferred by traditional society. We are inclined to interpret this emerging trend as a conscious effort on the part of the women to make proverbs reveal the *reality* of their lives rather than the *ideals* of traditional patriarchal society. By so doing the women repudiate traditional patriarchal constructions of their social role as well as articulate their preferred social position. These women, by thus deliberately disrupting the static quality of Kasem proverbs, as well as by subverting and undermining their rigid structure—what Ruth Finnegan terms their "relative fixity" (1976:393), are propelling this traditional genre into a dynamic space

that it did not previously occupy. Their action amounts to what Raji-Oyelade refers to as "a normative rupture in the production [and interpretation] of this traditional verbal genre," and it results in the emergence of "'new' proverbs with new forms, new meanings, and, perhaps, new values" (1999:75).

It is significant that the women do not renounce traditional proverbs in the course of this "rupture"; rather, they interrogate the images of women as espoused by existing proverbs and question whether they represent what Amba Oduyoye, in her discussion of Akan proverbs and female socialization, has termed "full personhood as may be experienced by the female" (1979:5). Through their subversive activity the women criticize traditional proverbs while also creating proverbs of their own. We may recall here a response to a similar situation as it is depicted in an Irish cartoon that Lady Augusta Gregory describes in her essay, "Laughter in Ireland" (1995:294):

There was a picture long ago in some paper, *Punch* or another, in which a painter's canvas had been left on an easel in the neighbourhood of a jungle, and the lion was looking at it for it represented a lion hunt, and saying, "You'll see the other side of the story when we have a painter of our own!"

As the lion does in the cartoon, the women recognize the usefulness of the literary canvas in depicting "the other side of the story." Thus, rather than reject traditional proverbs with their one-sided images of women, they seize the opportunity offered them by the "speaking encounter" (Raji-Oyelade 1999:76) between them and their joking partners to transform the canvas of existing proverbs into "a painting of their own."

"Joking" relationships exist in many African cultures and provide a safe context for psychological release, promoting group solidarity, expressing disapproval, and sanctioning behavior. Joking relationships, according to Regnar Johnson, are "relationships in which joking or behavior deemed to conflict with the norms of social order [is] contained by its institutionalization" (1978:131). In other words, the two parties are in a relationship in which they are by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of each other, without either of them taking any offense. "Joking" may be only verbal (in which case it may involve obscenity) or it may include horseplay. Therefore, the joking relationship is above all based on familiarity—or what A. R. Radcliffe-Brown calls "permitted disrespect" (1940:103)—and license. During joking, comments made to an addressee can apply to other members of the audience or

social/gender group. Thus within a joking relationship people can engage in an activity that would otherwise be condemned as disruptive. In this regard, the joking relationship becomes a convenient medium for women to interrogate the traditionally unassailable position of the proverb.

Proverbs are protected by traditional sanctions and therefore afford their users immunity from censure. According to Heda Jason (1971), proverbs constitute a very convenient vehicle because "all the connotations of a traditional expression are well known and the risk of being misunderstood is reduced. Still more important is the circumstance that the opinions expressed by the proverb, the message it carries, are traditionally sanctioned and the user can in a doubtful case hide behind this traditional sanction from public censure" (617). In order to criticize them the (female) interrogator has to look beyond the individual (male) user's immunity and examine the collective image that the proverb presents of women.

African oral literature in general, and the African proverb in particular, has been largely insulated against criticism due to the general view of folklore as a self-contained authentic peasant culture from which all references to changing social realities must be edited out.4 For instance, feminist scholar and activist Wanjira Muthoni (1994) describes the reception, in her native Kenya, of her re-telling of traditional oral narratives and her creation of new stories following traditional oral narrative structures. Although the stories were received "very, very well by teachers," she says, a lot of male readers and even some women have looked on her work with disfavor because they see literature as "a sacred field which [she] should not interfere with" (Arndt 2000:716). Proverbs in particular have been viewed as sacred texts that must remain unchanged and unchallenged. Although they are regarded as a "mirror" of culture in contemporary society, they tend to reflect the life of the morally superior ancestors (what the Kasena call diim tiina) rather than that of the morally inferior people of the day (zem tiina). In the Kasena worldview, the ancestors, also called the people of "yesterday" (diim), serve as moral and social gatekeepers for the people of "today" (zem), and proverbs are an important means by which this relationship is maintained. Diim tiina as authors of proverbs are the providers of a paradigm for proper behavior, while zem tiina as the beneficiaries of this paradigm are instructed through the proverbs (see also Awedoba 2000a).

In African societies proverbs have been a discourse shaped by a male orientation and a patriarchal mindset, a fact that is evident from the images of women that populate this traditional form. Women exist or are referred to

⁴ An exception is Raji-Oyelade 1999; see also Narayan 1993.

only as they relate to men (as wives, daughters, or sisters) or by their "biological function" as mothers or non-mothers (Arndt 2000:713). And as Muthoni and her colleagues in the Kenya Oral Literature Association [KOLA] point out, in this literary world that purports to mirror society, women are categorized into "good" and "bad": good if they obey patriarchal norms and bad if they engage in autonomous activity, articulate their own interests, or act in line with individual and "unpredictable" demands. The speaking up and the activity of women, they argue, can be understood as symbols of women's power and influence as well as their independence from men (Arndt 2000:713). These and other similar ideas are behind the gender-sensitization efforts of KOLA as well as those of some Zimbabwean feminists (718). Antonia Kalu posits that "for the African woman's subjectivity to make sense, it has to be rooted in a convincing cultural subject that is well-grounded in an accessible world view" (1999:43). It is in this context that a project such as Muthoni's "Literary Road to Empowerment," which seeks to among other things "sensitize creative writers and the readers on gender prejudices," deserves to be appreciated (1994:58). However, the unfavorable reception of Muthoni's (re)created folk tales leads us to the conclusion that for any attempt at altering traditional oral literature to succeed, the change will have to evolve within the oral culture. To try to impose such a change on a predominantly oral society through the medium of writing, as Muthoni does, is to invite opposition from a people who see their cultural identity as inextricably linked to their traditional oral literature.

The close relationship between traditional lore and cultural identity largely accounts for the persistence of "de-womanizing" Kasem proverbs and the strong moral force that they wield as the "wisdom" of the ancestors. Male users consider such proverbs humorous rather than offensive, even when their female referents feel humiliated by them. In effect, Kasena women, like other African women, have always occupied a position in traditional society whereby, in Oyekan Owomoyela's words, they are "expected to accommodate the men's libertine [meaning bawdy] talks, even about [themselves], with good humor and demureness" (1972:752). Owomoyela refers here to Yoruba men's use of proverbs that express crudity and sex without attracting "the stigma of uncouthness traditionally associated with such talk in the genteel Western World" (*idem*). He takes for granted the silent subordinate role that traditional society ascribes to women.

Owomoyela also does not discuss the joking relationship as a social context in which such obscenity is socially sanctioned. My own experience shows that the joking relationship that exists in most African societies between an individual and his/her spouse's siblings provides a suitable

context for such behavior that is liberating to women. In such joking relationships, not only are women expected to take no offense at the men's teasing, abuse, banter, or ridicule, but they are also permitted, if not required, to tease in return. This situation is better understood in the Kasena view of fair play as imaged in the proverb: *Kukura we, to se n'dong to mo kweera* ("The dog says it is fair play if you fall and the other falls too"). To ignore such fair play is to act as if *doå yira ye luu mo* ("the other's body is made of metal"), that is, to show a lack of sensitivity for others. Such disregard for the principle of fair play would also constitute a breach of the "permitted disrespect" and familiarity upon which the joking relationship between a person and his/her spouse's siblings is based.

But such joking relations are not all about the thrill of the forbidden (Read 1977:9; Owomoyela 1972:752). The obscene metaphors, insult, abuse, banter, teasing, and ridicule, as well as the joking relationships that sanction them, may serve as "psychological release" from the constraints "placed on the individual by society" (Bascom 1969:499), but they also serve to promote group solidarity, express disapproval, and sanction behavior. Within this institutionalized practice, whoever is at the receiving end of such joking would be aware that the humiliation and/or hostility that this behavior would generate in any other social context is not to be taken seriously. It is thus within this context that the Kasena women discussed here choose to articulate their own "proverbial" protest against what they perceive as misogynistic tendencies on the part of their joking partners or their use of proverbs.

But positioning their social protest within institutionalized joking relationships should not lead us to underestimate the radical nature of these women's activity. As already suggested, in traditional Kasena society, as in most African societies, proverbs constitute cultural texts through which men act out their conditioning in a masculine, patriarchal culture that privileges male dominance and power. This is evinced by the images of women as well as the underlying connotations that are expressed in them (women bear and rear children, they are daughters/ wives). This does not mean that women are excluded from their use; however, it does mean that in order to transcend these images and connotations they must, among other things, engage in the kind of activity that the Kasena refer to as "fighting with proverbs." "A fight with proverbs" is deemed to occur when a person questions the logic of an existing proverb or proverbs, or uses a proverb in a sense that engages and critiques another proverb. It is a situation that, until recently, Kasena would avoid. Awedoba articulates this point clearly (2000a:34):

The truth of the proverb is . . . of an order that cannot be challenged. Kasena seem by their attitudes to accept tacitly that it is unseemly to call into question the proverb and its tenets. To do so would appear to amount to a challenging of the wise ancestors, an exercise not only in arrogance, but also in itself a sacrilege. . . . This is in spite of the fact that Kasena proverbs, like most other African proverbs, do contradict. This does not however, seem to matter to Kasena. It is unlikely that Kasena proverb users would exhibit any overt interest in contradictions between proverbs, make a comparison between proverbs that are perceived to contradict or attempt to "fight with proverbs."

It is only when viewed against this background that the women's "proverbial" revolt (which ironically was already going on at the time Awedoba wrote these words) can be seen for what it is: a subversive and potentially socially disruptive act that is neutralized (or is it?) by its occurrence within a socially sanctioned context.

Perhaps it is fitting that a "paremiological revolt" (Raymond 1981: 301) within a society that is still described as "a rural, isolated area where...traditional patterns of marriage, family formation and social organization persist" (Binka, Nazzar, and Phillips 1995:123) should come from women. For on no other occasions is the moral and authoritative force of proverbs stronger than when it applies to women. Mineke Schipper shares this view (1991:5): "The proverb's authority and its evaluative nature exhort the listener to agree. Although there are cases where the authoritative aspect of the proverb is not so much stressed, in many proverbs on women it apparently plays a role." Perhaps this is to be expected, considering the prevailing form of social organization in traditional Kasena society, where compound heads, husbands, brothers, and sons all conspire in their "gatekeeping" role against women, who are classified as minors and therefore allowed very little autonomy. It is because of this authoritative function that proverbs play such a crucial role in traditional education, especially for females. In this process, the fact that the proverb only reveals the (patriarchal) ideal rather than the real, what ought to be rather than what is, is overlooked.

One of the philosophies transmitted through proverbs is the conservative worldview of gender differences and roles. The role of the female in society, as traditionally constructed by Kasem proverbs, is to provide pleasure and profit for the male, that is, to ensure his sexual gratification, bear and nurture his children, look to him for her upkeep, and boost his ego by her lack of "maleness." Thus, it is very common to come across Kasem proverbs such as the following that portray women's traditional role:

*Kaane ba gu dii o gwone de yuu.*A woman who kills a python must not go on to cut off its head.

This proverb functions very much like a maxim of interdiction: it focuses on an act to be avoided by women, but implicit within it is a taboo for its violation (Kubik and Malamusi 2002:171). In other words, not only is a woman prohibited from performing an action that is traditionally reserved for men —because it is considered too daring or dangerous—but she also risks social disapproval for usurping a man's role and therefore demystifying "maleness" and threatening the boundary between male and female. Consider the following series of examples:

*Kaane kuri mo lomma, se o nii ba lomma.*A woman may have a warm bottom but not a warm mouth.

This proverb is often cited by men to silence a woman to whom they do not want to listen. In two out of three situations that I observed, the proverb was used when the user felt that the woman had spoken a "truth" about his behavior that he would rather not deal with. The irony in employing a proverb that belies its own "truth" cannot have been lost on the woman whose ability to speak "rationally"—or in metaphorical terms to "have a warm mouth"—is being called into question.

Mon-jôn' gôgô veri de o kaane mo. A sex maniac always walks with his wife.

The assumption here is that the male sex maniac must have ready access to his wife. It inherently fails to acknowledge the possibility of a female sex maniac. In his interpretation of this proverb, Awedoba explains that while the male sex maniac is free to indulge himself, he is debarred from "infring[ing] on the rights of others." Awedoba continues (2000a:79-80): "The point of the proverb is that those who have special needs have a duty to make provision for themselves; it is unacceptable to expect that society [read "other men"] should be inconvenienced on their behalf." In effect, this proverb assumes and sanctions men's sexual rights and "special needs" (*ibid*.:80). There is no corresponding proverb expressing the wife's sexual needs or rights, because she is deemed to be accorded none in a Kasena traditional marriage.

Kafena kalo na gabe kakwia to mo gabe kabia. It is the whip that lashes the senior wife that also lashes the junior wife.

The assumption underlying this proverb is that a woman is regarded as a child, to be "disciplined" when she goes wrong. In this context there is no respite for the junior—usually (but not always) the youngest—wife who is considered the husband's favorite.

In the world outside these proverbs, Kasena women have lived and continue to live in a way that casts much doubt on the "reality" portrayed by the proverbs. In addition to catering to the needs of their husbands and their extended families, bearing and rearing children, as well as performing their household chores, women assert their independence by pursuing their own interests and earning their own income, very often by engaging in the same activities as the men. For instance, although traditional society has specified the kind of work to be done by men and women, it is common to find both genders performing tasks such as hoeing or clearing weeds on a farm, activities that have traditionally been reserved for men. This adoption of male roles by Kasena women is not a new trend; in pre-colonial times women were known to make and tend their own farms for food and for income, with or without the help of their men. The women's "paremiological revolt," based as it is on their interpreting existing proverbs from their own perspective and creating counter-proverbs that respond to existing ones, more appropriately articulates the "truth" of their lives.

Kabaga na sâ åwana, ka wo sâ veåa mo. Once a slave accepts chains, she/he must agree to walk [in them].

This proverb is typically used in a context where people commit themselves to an action or cause that turns out to be unpleasant, but which they are obliged to complete. I observed on one occasion that a "version" of the proverb was used by a woman in a conversation with her classificatory "husband" (a husband's sibling or a kinsman/woman of his generation). It was after the man jokingly told her that having borne several children for "him," he knew she "had nowhere to go" [couldn't leave], so he could go ahead and marry a second wife without her permission. Her response was "yes, you can do what you want. But you need to know that a slave may accept chains, but when they begin to hurt, she can refuse to walk." This woman's subversion and inversion of the proverb calls attention to two things. First, she identifies polygamy, a common traditional practice, with discomfort [slavery], and secondly, she articulates her right to reject it. An

interesting contrast can be drawn between this (and other Kasena women's) perception of polygamy and that of some Western-educated Nigerian and Kenyan women who prefer to marry into polygamous households because they see polygamy as less oppressive than monogamy (Arndt 2000:716-17).

Ko guni mo, se ko wo loge. It has tilted, but it has not poured.

A person would use this proverb to console another that a situation is not out of hand. Its purpose clearly is to bring hope or relief. However, one woman used the proverb in a context in which it appeared to sound a warning. Here again the exchange was between the woman and a male visitor with whom she enjoyed a "joking" relationship. The woman had just returned from the bush with some firewood and teased him for not helping her put down the load. He responded that he thought she had carried too little, and declared that he would ensure that she was made to carry the right amount the next time. She then said "Do you think I was bought? If they overwork me that way, won't I return to my father? After all, it has only tilted, it hasn't poured yet. Is it not just the guinea fowls they gave to my family? They can go back for them." This woman has subverted the existing proverb so that it does not relieve her listener—or a third person, for that matter—but herself. Or rather, it announces an uncalled-for "relief" for her husband and his family who risk losing her. It is interesting that she, like her "sister" who used the previous proverb, compares oppression in the marital home to slavery.⁵ But for the property-less Kasena woman it is a short leap from (dis)honor to living death. While it is not uncommon among the Kasena to draw an analogy between oppression and slavery, these women proceed more subtly, referring to situations that in traditional society would not be considered oppressive. The women's technique of critiquing existing proverbs through the use of counter-proverbs is more direct.

Proverb:

It is the patient person who will milk a barren cow.

⁵ This is entirely in keeping with the Kasena woman's increasing awareness of her position. Orlando Patterson, in *Slavery and Social Death*, presents the enslavement process as one that leads to loss of honor, respect, and property, all prerequisites to the existence of the slave as a member of "the living who are dead" (1982:45).

Counter-proverb:

The person who would milk a barren cow must prepare for a kick on the forehead.

This exchange of proverbs occurred between a married woman and her male "classificatory" husband. It began with the man breaking the ice with a question that can loosely be translated as "what's up?" When the woman asked what he wished to know by the question, he replied that he was inquiring about her health, but beyond that he was also wondering when she would bear his next child (the woman's youngest child was about 15 years old).

Here is the context:

Woman: How should I know (when I will bear your next child)? Am I God?

Man: Oh well, that's all right. I can wait. Our elders say that it is the patient person who will milk a barren cow.

Woman: When it comes to milking cows, then the person who would milk a barren cow must prepare for a kick on the forehead.

The female user employs an existing proverb but deliberately subverts it to serve a specific purpose, that is, to critique the narrow construction of female role as bearer and rearer of children, as well as to warn against the dangers of exploiting others, particularly females. That she could so spontaneously rise to the occasion and make the connection between her fifteen-year "barrenness" and the barren cow suggests her awareness of her position in the society. Via her counter-proverb she both criticizes and alters the existing proverb to achieve what Raji-Oyelade terms "the radical spirit of textual/verbal liberation" (1999:76). In the words of Harold Bloom (cited in Raji-Oyelade *idem*), she achieves a

freedom of meaning, the freedom to have a meaning of one's own. Such freedom is wholly illusory unless it is achieved against a prior plenitude of meaning, which is tradition, and is also against language . . . freedom of meaning is wrested by combat, of meaning against meaning.

She wrests from tradition "a meaning of her own" that both derives from and contests the grounds of a traditional proverb. The man, ill-prepared as he was for this counter-proverb, could only give the formulaic response: "Times have changed, and women have changed with them."

In the next proverbial exchange, the woman engages two existing proverbs in one coup:

Proverbs:

Once you sleep with the chief's wife, you might as well continue until she bears your child.

A woman who kills a python must not go on to cut off its head.

Counter-proverb:

If neither cutting off the snake's head nor leaving it on will bring you peace, then crush it.

This "fight" with proverbs arose between a woman and her female "classificatory" husband (CFH) who was visiting in the house of the former. There arose an argument between the two, an argument that the woman was winning. Obviously enjoying her intellectual superiority, she taunted the CFH with more force:

CFH: You must know when to stop in order to avoid humiliating your husband. A woman does not know more than a man [this is an existing proverb].

Woman: When you speak the "truth" you are not free, and if you don't you're still not free. So let me speak my mind and whatever will be, will be. After all, is it not you people [the "husbands"] who say that once you sleep with a chief's wife, you should just continue till she bears your child? [Implying: "Why should I stop when I'm winning an argument?"]

CFH: Yes, but we also say that a woman who kills a python must not go on to cut off its head. Some things are reserved for husbands.

Woman: You mean things such as winning arguments?

CFH: Yes.

Woman: If neither cutting off the snake's head nor leaving it on will bring you peace, then crush it and be free.

The counter-proverb provides a resolution to the conflict created by the command to complete an action and the prohibition for a woman to do so. The first proverb derives from the fact that chiefs typically marry as many wives as are dictated by their whims. Very often, the chief ends up with

more wives than he can satisfy sexually, and some of these women are thought to seek sexual gratification with other men. But adultery in Kasena society attracts a heavy punishment, and cuckolding the chief comes with an even greater penalty. However, the punishment is the same for all cases and does not correlate with the frequency of the adulterous act prior to the exposure of the offenders. The proverb literally urges the adulterer not to stop after the first instance but to take his act to its logical conclusion since his punishment in either case will be the same.

Like the first proverb, the second also deals with the issue of completing an action once it is begun. To the Kasena, the action of killing a snake is not completed until its head is cut off. This perception is based on a belief that a snake that is presumed dead can survive if its head is left on. Thus, by prohibiting a woman from cutting off the snake's head, the society is denying her the right to complete an action, a right that is reserved for the man. But for this woman it is also a denial of her peace, since by leaving the snake's head on she still has to contend with a possible attack from a surviving snake. She thus finds an ingenious way to resolve her dilemma. When asked what crushing the snake's head would mean in the context of her argument with her "husband," she explained that she would show some respect in dealing with a husband but she would not compromise the "truth." For her, it is respect for her husband, rather than submission to his will as is espoused by traditional norms, that governs the relationship between spouses.

The kind of cultural activity in which these women are engaged is quite similar to the "playful blasphemy" that Raji-Oyelade delineates as occurring in the use of Yoruba proverbs by a Western-educated younger generation (1999:75). These young people who, according to Raji-Oyelade, "are cosmopolitan in consciousness" are said to distort traditional proverbs deliberately in order to "metropolize or disindigenize" their meaning (idem). The Kasena woman, living in what Fred Binka terms "a climate of traditionalism" (Binka, Nazzar, and Phillips 1993:123), in which a "low level of literacy, combined with a dispersed pattern of settlement" are deemed to have "effectively isolate[d] [her] from new ideas and institutions" (Nazzar, Adongo, et al. 1995:310), may yet not be too far from a "cosmopolitan consciousness." Barbara Mensch and company (1999), who conducted research on the changing nature of adolescence in the Kasena-Nankana district in 1998, report several repetitions, practically verbatim, of the phrase "times have changed, and everything has changed with them." The authors were left wondering if "it is a local proverb or saying" (see Mensch, Bagah, et al. 1999:n.110). Times, indeed, have changed for Kasena women—what with the increase in urbanization and education and the

breakdown of traditional authority structures. However, contrary to the Yoruba youth's intention to "disdindigenize," Kasena women's "playful blasphemy" with proverbs is intended mainly to foreground gender. It is a strategy for viewing patriarchy and female subjugation with "the look of surveillance [that] returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed" (Bhabha 1984:129).

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