

Dzi Wo Fie Asem:

Rhetoric and the Politics of Expediency

By

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Prelude

Over the past two weeks or so when the topic of today's lecture was announced in the media, many friends and colleagues have called, to express concern, that I had chosen a topic that they wouldn't have touched with a long spoon. Was this the safest topic I could have chosen? Then came a message from a colleague in the Facebook who said, 'Prof, are you sure the national security is not going to confiscate your script?' Then last Sunday, I met another friend after church who promised to attend this talk, but said, "Owo Kwesi, Eye abofra bon, paa!"

Introduction

For several years now, I have dedicated myself to an area in linguistics called ethnography of communication, which deals with the interface between communication and culture, which led to a very rewarding study I made on proverb communication within the context of rhetoric in Africa. This was followed a few years later by my much cited work on Okyeame, which took me on a fascinating journey into the heart and soul of orators within the royal setting. The issue of political communication then has occupied a greater part of my work as an academic, as could be discerned in most of my journal articles, monographs, and public lectures. My 2006 J. B Danquah Memorial Lecture series followed a similar thematic pattern, where I examined the interface between, Language, Literacy, and Governance. My interest in the interface between rhetoric and power relations should thus come as no surprise to those who know my work.

While I was in the process of undertaking an overview of traditional rhetoric in contemporary politics, a great opportunity presented itself on 7th January 2011, when His Excellency the President, in a face to face encounter with the media, used a proverb that has now become a household expression: *Dzi wo fie asem*.

The 7th January incident then could be considered as only a trigger for this evening's talk, which centers on the character of political rhetoric within Ghana's contemporary history.

Recent events have indeed brought the phenomenon of talk, to the centre stage of national discourse. Indeed whenever national discussions shift from events to the phenomenon of talk itself, or when talk or speech events become the topic for talk, it tells you that we are a nation that holds dearly to our hearts, the phenomenon of speaking, the values of speaking, indeed the social value of communication.

There appears to be a growing sensitivity to political communication in this country: specifically the norms of communication, or standards of propriety in speech comportment. There is a collective realization that the spoken word may have done a lot to shape our political fortunes.

In politics, communication, both written and spoken, is so important that any process of determining one's qualification for the presidency, legislature or executive, directly or indirectly includes an unspoken assessment of one's capacity to effectively communicate in public. This is due to perceived inextricable links among communication, governance and development. In the words of the renowned Kofi Antobam, "The beauty of thought, speech, action, and appearance are the basic and necessary pre-requisites for appointment to the high office of state."

Even though rhetoric or the art of persuasion is important in politics, we hardly pause to examine logical links between words carefully or artfully couched for public consumption, on one hand and political reality, on the other.

Our passion for political power and also the high premium we place on the cultural aesthetics of communication, must be partly accountable for this.

Verbal Ornaments

Consider the proliferation of slogans, expressions, political catch phrases that have been fashioned or adopted to effectively convey policy, mobilize the masses for action, or signal a new orientation in economic, social or political policy. The period from the 1st to the 4th Republic has been replete with rhetoric and the politics of expediency, where a greater emphasis is placed on the propriety of speech within the context of usage, rather than its logical propriety.

From the General Acheampong regime, which began in 1972, emerged a policy of 'capturing the commanding heights of the economy,' or rather exercising complete control over the economy--- a very lofty expression meant to signal a passion for poetics in political engineering. During the PNDC of Jerry Rawlings emerged a transfer of 'power to the people,' and later an uncompromising adherence to 'probity and accountability,' which the nation adopted

as the bedrock of the 1992 constitution. In J. A. Kufuor's inauguration speech in 2001 came an avowed 'zero tolerance for corruption.'

The political passion for rhetoric also explains a strategic preference for euphemisms in dealing with public issues that would otherwise hurt, cause offense to individuals or cause political damage to Government. Just consider a major national policy in K. A. Busia's regime in 1970, when aliens without proper immigration documents, were sent packing. Had they been asked to go home? The answer was no, there was only an 'aliens compliance order' requiring that they should merely comply with existing immigration laws.

From time immemorial workers have never been laid off, or declared redundant; but within the politics of expediency, they are often 'retrenched'. Hardly are people dismissed, if that will incur public wrath; political expediency requires their being labeled as 'redeployed,' except that their new location or office is not equally announced or publicized. When there is cabinet reshuffling, in which certain ministers have been replaced, and names of original ministers are never heard again, it is never said they have been dismissed. It is often said, the cabinet reshuffling is still ongoing, and that the reshuffling was done to introduce new and fresh ideas. When pressed further we say the relevant ministers were reshuffled not for any wrong doing, but that they have completed the specific assignments for which they were appointed. When a minister or public officer appears to have been demoted in a reshuffling exercise, it may be said 'he has been asked to extend his vast experience to transform his new portfolio.'

In the early 1960s when Kwame Nkrumah was cracking the whip on chiefs and foreigners who did not fall in line, threatening them with deportation, the public became familiar with the famous refrain of Mr Krobo Edusei, Minister for Interior in charge of the police and security matters: "The continued presence of ... is not conducive to public good." In pedestrian terms, he had indeed been deported; in political language, it was a matter of public interest. In this vein, suspects are never arrested and detained: 'they have been invited by the police to help in investigations.'

Even in the lexicon of Western politics, there is hardly any tax increase, there is rather a 'revenue enhancement' drive. Indeed, the late amiable Mr Kwadwo Baah Wiredu when he was Minister for Finance and Economic Planning had a rare gift in explaining Kufuor government's fiscal policies to the ordinary man. After one such face-to-face encounter with spare parts dealers at Abossey Okai, one spare parts dealer was overheard telling his colleague, *Baah Wiredu is so good a communicator that after he has explained the Government budget to you, you feel like pleading with him 'to please give us more taxes to pay.'*

A Babel of Tongues

The politics of expediency becomes more pronounced by multiple voices that seek to shed light on public policy or public assertions by a President. The contemporary political practice makes ministers Government spokesmen in their own right, in respect of matters pertaining to their

portfolios. This is besides regional ministers and district chief executives, who represent the Government at the lower levels.

Besides these, however, the 4th Republic has presented specially appointed government and presidential spokesmen, and presidential aides whose schedules and responsibilities are rather ambiguous, because almost in the same breath, other communication functionaries are appointed and given positions like: directors of communication, sometimes press secretaries, presidential spokesmen, spokesman for the vice president, (which appears to be a novelty), and the like. In the past, the system of speaking functionaries created so much confusion that the Government had to do a reshuffling of roles and responsibilities, to restore order in portfolios that explain government policy. But to all these may be added a Ministry of Information, with a substantive minister and two deputies. Earlier on, one administration had presented the scenario of a Minister for Information, one deputy minister, and three spokesmen, each dealing with a distinctive cluster of portfolios; and all of these were separate from the presidential spokesman.

I once met a former student who finished the University in 2009, and when I inquired from him where he was working, he hesitated at first, but later said he was a special assistant to a deputy minister. Knowing that deputy ministers themselves are assistants to substantive ministers, it only meant that the gentleman was an assistant to an assistant. But the dry smile playing around his lips when he announced his new portfolio clearly indicated his awareness of an anomaly that only played out as 'job for the boys.' But surprisingly, Vice Presidents (who to all intents and purposes are part of the presidency) also have separate spokesmen these days, a rather expensive novelty which implies that from the office of the Vice President may emanate state policy, which would need further explanation to the public by a separate functionary other than the President's own. The situation conveys the impression of a rather wobbly executive apparatus, which needs parallel structures for reinforcement, or double-assurance. To all intents and purposes, however, the stage may have been set for the emanation of state policy from a multiplicity of sources, and subsequently for a catalogue of policy contradictions.

The current comedy of errors, retractions, and glitches arising out of a proposed World Bank loan, is the expected outcome; and the earlier a single voice spoke for the entire presidency the better.

The surfeit of communication functionaries on the political landscape has also spilled over to party governance, where whole communication hierarchies have been instituted, and one hears of the director of communication and his massive administrative apparatus replicated at the national, regional and district levels. This is not to talk of propaganda secretaries of political parties, and several other executive members who may speak to policy issues when the need arises.

There appears to be a common awareness that effective communication and rhetoric are important in determining electoral fortunes in contemporary politics. To ensure that a party's

policies and positions on key issues of governance permeate the entire polity, no stone is left unturned in engaging communication specialists to spread the good word, and contest alternative opinion expressed by political opponents. The situation has been enabled also by the proliferation of community-based radio stations throughout the country, and the high patronage they enjoy in the discussion of political issues. Invariably, it is the various party-aligned speaking functionaries that are called upon to represent their parties on radio discussion programs, where all shades of opinion on current events are expected to be expressed.

With such a proliferation of speaking functionaries, both official and unofficial, disorder in policy articulation and interpretation is inevitable where there is no effective co-ordination.

Sources in Tradition

The situation of multiple tongues speaking for the executive realm, appears to be an overenthusiastic attempt to replicate the communication portfolio within the traditional governance apparatus in several parts of Africa, where the chief spoke to the public through spokesmen, *akyeame*, who were specifically appointed for the purpose. Apart from speaking for the king, and receiving messages meant for him *in situ*, *akyeame* were also lords of diplomacy as well as ministers of foreign affairs who carried messages from the executive to other states. In the traditional system, however, roles were clearly defined in the case of multiple spokesmen, and there was a prevailing system of co-ordination to minimize misrepresentation. The likelihood of inaccurate interpretation of the chief's word, was not impossible though, but that often led to severe sanctions, or instant withdrawal from foreign missions.

In any case, a commitment to adhere to the chief's word, and never to subvert it, was part of the oath the spokesman swore on his formal installation.

As I point out in my book **Okyeame**, before the advent of motor vehicles, the laid down system of ensuring accuracy was even more remarkable.

It is said,

Information carried on behalf of the king was expected to be judiciously and accurately transmitted. Where necessary the message was committed to memory. In the kingdom of Dahomey, there was a relay system of communication. Messengers travelled in pairs, so that one might act as a check on the other. On the road from Abomey, there were various stations, where messengers were relieved by relays of others, so the message was conveyed by running speed all the way.

But diplomats were not mere parrots; they sometimes exercised personal discretion in negotiations, based on previous experience and their rich knowledge of foreign policy and

history, as well as traditional logic and oratory. Whether or not discretion was exercised, the thrust of the royal word or message was not undermined without sanctions, since an error could have implications for war.

Politically Speaking

The trend of public communication described above appears to have reached its peak from January this year, after the President, John Atta Mills articulated the *Dzi wo Fie Asem* adage, which has since remained a major topic in domestic and foreign affairs. The proverb and its interpretations have broader implications for political communication. It touches on the general principles of political persuasion, aesthetics of indigenous rhetoric, the framing of foreign policy as well as the political exploitation of ambiguity in proverb meaning.

Before this is further explored let me briefly recount the broad spectrum of speech comportment that has characterized political discourse, touching on the aesthetics of speaking, the allegorization of governance, and what appears to be the shifting values of political communication, which all feed into the rhetoric of expediency.

The rhetoric and politics of expediency drive people in positions of power to aim at engaging their various publics in the appropriate idiom or register. In order to signal social solidarity with the broad mass of constituents, public speakers may lace their speeches with rhetorical devices and local speech ways that are meant to reduce the social distance between them and the electorate. A conscious effort is made to cultivate speech ways that have an evocative effect on the people, to demonstrate the speaker's constant touch with his roots and tradition, thereby enhancing his appeal to the common folk whose support is needed to gain or maintain political power.

Thus regardless of the channel or original medium of the discourse, whether English or a local language, the speaker may momentarily switch codes and insert a local idiom, sometimes followed by an instant translation where necessary. Devices like proverbs, aphorisms, local metaphors, allegories constitute an enormous rhetorical capital available to public officials representing ordinary people. When used appropriately, they signal the speaker's linguistic versatility as well as sensitivity to the local aesthetics of speaking. There is of course general awareness of the huge political capital inherent in local idioms, when used by people in power. It assures the electorate, that the unequal power relations originally assumed between the two parties have been obliterated, putting speaker and addressee on the same social pedestal, thus justifying mutual interaction.

Yutong as Metaphor

The immersion of the electorate in the indigenous aesthetics of speaking also encourages officials to occasionally use parables, extended metaphors, or even folktales in discussions where expedient.

Indeed there is evidence that political discourse encourages ingenuity in the usage of adaptive metaphor and allegory, thereby demonstrating the dynamics of cultural and literary experience. Even though governance has sometimes been portrayed as a social experience on the animal farm, and occasionally as a journey, one hardly expected that a passenger bus called Yutong, an innocuous Korean import, would ever be sprayed in political color. But the indigenous aesthetics of communication is dynamic and incorporates new imagery, to demonstrate the capacity of political orators to respond to the vagaries of contemporary experience.

In May this year, two renowned politicians out of political expediency, successively used the journey of the Yutong bus as a metaphor for governance and political tenure. In its maiden usage, a Member of Parliament within the governing party, sought to advocate a change of the driver, since the Yutong bus, now a popular mode of long distance transportation, was deemed to be heading towards disaster. The allegory was rebutted a few days later, when the Vice President on a similar platform, defended the driver's performance urging that even if imperfect, the driver should be retained, but assisted (with coffee) to navigate his august passengers to a safe destination.

In support of the rebuttal, another public officer, a deputy minister of information, embellished the allegory, this time associating passengers on the bus with high levels of intoxication.

In a bus where noisy passengers reek of alcohol, the driver has every right to order the disembarkation of drunken passengers. The import of the allegory was not lost on the idiom-sensitive public.

Any public reference to the Yutong bus these days is presumed to be a political allusion.

All Die Be Die

To these devices may be added a rich armory of the 'rhetoric of mobilization,' which compels social and political groups to craft slogans and verbal formulae that mark their unique identities, and constitute a rallying cry for political action.

Party slogans creatively composed and deployed exemplify this. But in recent times the verbal formula 'All Die be Die,' stands out as the most controversial expression that has attracted a variety of interpretations. The expression, which was not new, arrested public attention when it was used as a rallying call by the Presidential candidate of the opposition New Patriotic Party, when he was addressing party members in the Eastern region on 8th February this year. He had charged party members to be bold and defend themselves when intimidated by political opponents, since the forefathers of the party were men of courage. Members should be prepared to defend themselves, he said, particularly since law enforcement agencies often looked on with indifference whenever members of the opposition were under attack. Members should fight to

defend themselves after all, as he declared passionately, 'All die be die.' The same message was repeated in several subsequent speeches to members in other parts of the country, each time receiving spontaneous acclamation.

The governing party, NDC, swiftly reacted, interpreting the slogan as a call to violence, which should not be tolerated in a peace loving nation. They called on the opposition to take steps to remove their flag bearer whose actions are 'inimical and dangerous to Ghana's democracy.' The General Secretary of the ruling Party, depicted the Flag bearer of the opposition as a 'suicide bomber,' who should relocate to countries where suicide bombing is a routine practice. Communication functionaries of the opposition, on the other hand, inferred from the slogan a call to self defense and patriotism as well as an indictment on a partisan police.

Looking closely at the context of the expression, however, there appears to be a subtle mismatch between the slogan and the exhortation for resistance. Whereas the surrounding verbal cues call for the exhibition of courage and the preparedness to die for a noble cause, the slogan debases the lofty ideals espoused and rather portrays all kinds of death as equal, obliterating social distinctions between martyrdom and mundane death. *All living things shall die one day; death is inevitable so be prepared to die*, etc. are statements evoked by the slogan. These portray death as a mere organic process, depriving the concept of subtle social and cultural distinctions that debase certain kinds of death, and elevate others.

This notwithstanding, *All die be die* was embraced overnight by the party's rank and file. Its popularity was driven by its simplicity, poetic appeal and the informal vehicle of Broken English in which it is conveyed. Summarily, it contains all the necessary ingredients required for mass mobilization and political action; for it comes handy to the pedestrian looking for ready-made clichés in which to wrap his sense of desperation. Indeed the sense of helplessness felt by the poor man wallowing in penury and self-deprivation could signal a condition of virtual death depicted in the slogan. The expression then would be appropriate since dying in self-defense could be death all the same, a zero sum game. It is not surprising that soon after the informal inauguration of the slogan, non-partisan demonstrations against government policies throughout the country latched on to, 'All die be die,' partly as a rallying cry, but also to signal sympathy with sentiments expressed in the slogan.

The situation recalls the instant popularity of *kumi prekol sie me preko* used as slogans and labels for a series of mass protests against hard living conditions in the 1990s. *Kumi preko* meaning 'kill me once and for all,' 'deal me an instant death' or *wie me preko*, 'finish me instantly,' *sie me preko* 'bury me now,' are rallying cries of helplessness, that signal a preference for instant death. Here protestors implied that they would rather be killed protesting than live a life of virtual non-existence. Indeed instant death, to them, is preferable over a prolonged agonizing death spelled by hunger and severe poverty. Like the proverbial *odwan funu* 'carcass of a dead sheep, that does not shrivel when the butcher's knife is brandished,' they consider

themselves in a virtual state of death, which could as well be sealed through gun shots. To wit, 'he that is down needs fear no fall.'

The *kumi preko* slogans clearly played on routine clamp-downs on unarmed protestors in the 1990s, when innocent protestors were sometimes shot and killed.

Such slogans in a way constitute a symbolic longing for euthanasia, mercy killing, under conditions of prolonged helplessness.

Fiery Rhetoric

Besides the use of catchy slogans, extempore metaphors and allegories, there is an emerging trend in our value system that puts a high premium on fiery, combative discourse in public space, where we applaud bold, tough and ferocious speakers, who are capable of matching political opponents boot by boot in speech comportment. In local terms, the tougher and more combative a speaker or media discussant, the better. Creeping into the indigenous value system is a culture of vociferous rhetoric, where media heroes are made sometimes on the basis, not of reasoned argumentation, but fiery speech comportment. In response to these emerging standards, political discussants including public officials outshout their opponents and scream at the top of their voices in media talk. This mode of discourse is sometimes in keeping with the objectives of some talk shows or discussion programs that thrive on heat, noise and verbal dueling among discussants.

The outcomes are intemperate talk on salacious issues, unfounded allegations, vilification, invectives, insults, personal attacks and physical threats. Issues-based discourse that is governed by regulated turn taking characterizes only a few discussion programs. Rules of turn taking virtually collapse in conversational discourse, giving way to noise and street side cacophony, which compels hosts to switch off microphones of combatants.

Occasional pleas by radio hosts for order are often ignored, and calls for the withdrawal of foul language and invectives, at best evoke half-hearted apologies.

The situation of late has taken a more dramatic turn; for not only may listeners call in and issue instant rejoinders; listening 'foot soldiers' may join radio discussions by breaking into the studio and participating with their fists, assaulting political opponents. Thus even as we bask in high democratic credentials and exercise free speech, our constitutional democracy appears not to have completely shed off rhetoric of the muscle. Physical combat still lingers underneath free speech, and the bullet has not completely yielded to the ballot.

Indeed the physical interruption of radio programs, by activists and sometimes by public officials, now commonplace, is an unfortunate blotch on our constitutional democracy.

Invectives

The pervasive use of insults and coarse rhetoric appears to have reached its peak in current politics, where public officials, with or without provocation seek to denigrate political opponents, out of expediency.

Such discourse often ranges from outright abuse like ‘thieves,’ ‘armed robbers,’ *ohene gyengyan*, and the like to indiscreet assaults on individuals or social groups to which opponents or other personages belong. The latter can be exemplified in derogatory attacks in abuse like *kookooase kuraaseni* (village dweller), an invective which was hurled by a minister of state against an opponent.

The term *ohene gyengyan*, ‘worthless chief,’ was verbally inflicted on radio, by a legislator on a traditional ruler soon after a festival, where the leader of the opposition party appeared to have been slighted by chiefs when he appeared on the festival grounds to which he had been invited. The bare-faced insult tended to depict the traditional ruler as hopeless and not worthy of the honorifics and positions of authority associated with him.

Similarly, *kookooase kuraaseni*, rural dweller from a cocoa growing area, under normal circumstances is an ordinary reference to cocoa farmers of the countryside, but was deployed on a specific occasion to denigrate a particular opponent as uncivilized, uncouth, and lacking civility in manners or behavior. In a single breath, not only had the speaker denigrated his adversary, he had also made a scornful reference to the teeming farmers and their dependants who largely dwelled at the countryside. But this invective had also in a single swoop undermined state policy on rural development.

In another instance, the victim of the insult above, also disparaged an opponent as having started life as a palm wine tapper, at a time the speaker was a trainee in the noble profession of law. This juxtaposition of urban and rural professions of course was meant to debase the humble vocation of palm wine tapping, which is a source of livelihood and sustenance to many, even while the speaker unfortunately boasted of the apparently high profile profession to which he belonged.

In all the cases cited, undignified utterances are attributed to men of honor who, perceived as role models, would normally have been expected to uphold the values of decency in public speech.

In other instances, unproven references have been made to promiscuity, and immorality on the part of political opponents. Where this has been inflicted on public officials of the fair sex, it had not only defamed people in authority, it also amounted to undermining the public policy of encouraging women and disadvantaged groups to take positions of authority. Where the authors

have been legislators or policy makers, it amounted to undermining the constitution and subverting the national vision.

Official Indifference

In several other dispensations, one would normally expect summary dismissals, or executive calls for either resignation, or even public apologies, which would emphasize the crucial significance of national virtues in nation building. It would have been the duty of men of honor, who are perceived as role models, to play a pivotal role in upholding these virtues, rather than subverting them in speech behavior.

Indeed, in one particular case, not only did the abusive public official, against public opinion, fail to render an apology for the public insult; he also dissociated himself from an apology rendered on his behalf by worried party agents who feared political repercussions in the 2012 elections.

Significantly, in one other case where a public official had unfairly imputed immorality to a respectable female politician (publicly insinuating that she had succeeded in public life through immoral behavior), the electorate of the relevant constituency months after, quietly declined to renew his mandate in the party's primaries. The voices from below, rather voted overwhelmingly in favor of the unfairly abused woman who was contesting the seat, to demonstrate their power to sanction law makers that overstep the bounds of decency. Where executive leadership has failed to define and uphold cherished values, one can sometimes count on the voices from below to apply the rod.

In Ghana's political history, very little is known of public officials who have been sanctioned for indiscreet remarks, or abusing public trust in positions of power. Some are quietly applauded for teaching opponents a lesson they deserve, while in worst cases some are transferred to other portfolios, presumably to go and spread the virus. Examples of sanctions applied to clearly signal a leader's principled aversion to verbal abuse on opponents, are rare. This is remarkable because in the current political dispensation, the President and other party leaders are themselves decent public speakers. The President indeed is on record as having expressed concern about insults in public discourse. Yet neither he, nor other levels of leadership past or present, is known to have openly applied the whip on abusive public officials.

Proverbs and Presidents

Over the ages, world leaders from Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Harry Truman, Thomas Jefferson to Barrack Obama, have used notable proverbs or proverbial expressions which have been perpetually associated with them. Furthermore proverbs played a significant role in the politics of the twentieth century; and world leaders have used proverbs to prosecute clearly

defined political agenda, be it the horrors of Nazi Germany perpetrated by Adolf Hitler, or at crucial periods in the tenure of modern American presidents. Chronic blemishes in the use of proverbs by George Bush Jnr have been noted, and so has Barrack Obama's fondness for aphorisms and witticisms, in his prepared speeches. Indeed the full text of the 'Yes We Can' speech, as well as several important speeches Obama has delivered, demonstrate the President's proverb readiness in significant moments. In the case of Barrack Obama, his fondness for witticisms and proverbial expressions, has been traced by some scholars to his origins in the Luo ethnic group of Kenya.

Whether through the strokes of appointed speech writers, or out of their own interest in wise words, various Presidents have left rhetorical landmarks in the proverb repertoire of their people, and sometimes in the global proverb lore. Many of these speech landmarks may have been uttered or crafted for the first time by the leaders; others were adaptations of prevailing witticisms and proverbs. Yet a few may have been known sayings of unknown authorship, which were given a greater boost and visibility by a celebrity, and thereafter got associated with that eminent personage. Over the years, that celebrity is officially recognized as the author of sorts, and may be acknowledged whenever the proverb is used, even though that dignitary only lent visibility or credibility to the saying.

The famous statement of Kwame Nkrumah, at the dawn of Ghana's independence on 5th March 1957, "The Independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent," became a major landmark utterance, that is uniquely associated with Osagyefo. This statement became a policy blueprint that gave meaning to Ghana's own independence but also inspired Nkrumah's support for liberation struggles in various parts of Africa until he was overthrown in February 1966. On attaining independence for Ghana in 1957, Nkrumah was later to adapt a biblical quote for political ends. "Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all other things shall be added unto you," which was adapted and used as the motto of his Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute. This was derived from Matthew Chapter 6 verse 33, which says "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all other things shall be added unto you."

In 1970, soon after assuming the reins of power, Dr Kofi Abrefa Busia, Ghana's Prime Minister had to cope with a heavy debt burden bequeathed by the previous military regime of the National Liberation Council as well as the Nkrumah regime. Dr Busia had occasion to interrogate questionable deals of some foreign firms which had contributed to Ghana's indebtedness, and therefore sought a rescheduling of Ghana's debts. Busia had the support of Mr J H Mensah, his Minister for Finance and Economic Planning. Secondly, as Busia said at a rally in Takoradi in April 1970, while Ghana was committed to repaying the debt, her citizens must get employment, houses and other social amenities before they could help the Government pay those debts. It was under these circumstances that Dr K. A. Busia uttered his famous proverb, *Kafo Didi*, to signal to the nation's creditors, that we cannot sacrifice the expansion of the economy (in the interest of

jobs, housing, etc.) for the sake of debt repayment. After all *Kafo Didi* ‘The indebted person need not starve,’ implying that the indebted person has to survive before he pays his debt.

In other words, if Ghana should spend a substantial part of the GDP in debt repayment, what would be left in the kitty, to build infrastructure, to create jobs? Of course, Busia who was at the verge of repudiating the debt, eventually had Ghana’s debts rescheduled, but was overthrown by the military within two years after his *Kafo Didi* utterance.

Meanwhile, he had prepared the grounds for his successor, General Kutu Acheampong in 1972, to articulate his famous policy of *Yentua*, (‘we shall not pay’) repudiating all so-called debts owed to creditor nations. This famous utterance sent university students to the city centre of Accra in a massive ‘Yentua’ Demonstration, in support of Ghana’s daring posture. According to Acheampong, debts whose negotiations were vitiated with corruption were simply un-payable, and perhaps also uncollectable.

Once again, a major foreign policy stance had been wrapped in a pithy utterance. Several other memorable statements by Ghanaian presidents could be cited, but will be skipped for lack of time.

Dzi Wo Fie Asem

On 7th January, 2011 then came the now famous *Dzi Wo Fie Asem*, uttered by President J E A Mills, during a rare Meet the Press encounter with the media at Osu in Accra, on the second anniversary of his swearing in as the President of Ghana.

President Mills used the Fante wise saying in response to a question from a journalist, on his reaction to the prevailing stalemate in Ivory Coast, where Laurent Gbagbo having lost the presidential elections to Alassane Ouattara, had refused to relinquish power, but had indeed been illegally sworn in as President for another term. President Mills, who had been using English throughout the news conference momentarily switched to Fanti, his mother tongue, to drive home his argument, prefacing it with a statement, “I have been guided by the proverb,” “Dzi wo fie asem,” which he quickly translated as ‘Mind your own Business.’

In all these instances, there is recourse to memorable phrases, words, poetic capsules as a strategy in framing opinion or policy, or giving such opinion a more enduring value, to facilitate easy articulation, recall transmission from generation to generation.

Even more specifically, there is recourse to proverbs or traditional forms of persuasion in contemporary politics, a clear evidence of voices of tradition proffering remedies to

contemporary dilemmas, as a way of demonstrating the relevance of past therapies in managing contemporary crises.

In communities that are sensitive to proverbialisms, there has often been a flurry of public rejoinders to such policy oriented adages. In the case of K. A. Busia's, there were two related rejoinders by the opposition party, K. A. Gbedemah's National Alliance of Liberals (NAL). First G. K. Agama, pointed out the contradiction between Busia's posture of 'there is no debt that is sacrosanct,' and a statement he had made in Legon, where he gave a hint that the debt would be honored. Secondly, Gbedemah's NAL was quick to retort, that Busia's proverb may be appropriate in justifying the need for Ghana's creditors to reschedule our debt; but it in no way justified profligacy in government spending. They implied that, 'while you are indebted, it is clear you need not starve, but your circumstances should dictate modesty in the choice of menu.' The proverb rejoinder instantly issued by the opposition party was simply, *kafo didi na onni abenkwan*. 'Yes, the indebted may eat, but must avoid palm soup' which is rather expensive and luxurious. In other words, 'the indebted person must spend within his means.'

In the case of *Dzi wo fie asem*, rejoinders have been particularly extensive in both the local media and international press, with most of these responses including the foreign media, making admirable attempts to cite the original, indigenous saying sometimes in halting Fanti, to lend the media discourse a measure of authenticity.

Indeed the controversy sparked by the President's proverb cited in January still rages. It slackened a month or so thereafter, but has picked up since the capture of Laurent Gbagbo and the subsequent swearing in of Allassane Ouattara, as the President of Ivory Coast. The debate has been whether the President has been vindicated or embarrassed by subsequent events. But the re-emergence of the issue has taken other forms also, sustained by the social media.

The expression has gained considerable currency, and was declared proverb of the week by BBC, a day after it was used. *Dzi wo Fie Asem* has been registered as a domain name on the internet. Apart from being a domain name in Facebook and Wall, there is also a *Dzi Wo Fie Asem Fun Club*. Then also is the abbreviated form DWFA, which originally stood for one of the numerous groups formed to support the President in his bid to retain the flag bearership of NDC. DWFA then stood exclusively for *Defected Workers and Friends of Atta Mills*. The abbreviation has now picked up another meaning, *Dzi wo Fie Asem Fan Club*.

There is also a registered pharmaceutical company called *Dzi wo fie Asem*.

Among Fanti fisher folk of the Central Region where the President comes from, there have been canoe inscriptions of *Dzi Wo Fie Asem*, implying that *Dzi Wo Fie Asem*, as a proverb existed long before the President made the utterance. The proverb indeed also exists in a corpus of canoe inscriptions compiled by Gray Allison in 1996. Indeed at Elmina in the Central region, one house among a cluster of houses close to the sea shore, has the inscription *Dzi Wo Fie Asem*, by which the house has been known within living memory. The 70 year old land lady Maame

Mansa told me, her late grandmother, Adooba, was the brain behind the inscription long ago. She said, her grandmother at the time poked her nose into somebody's domestic matters and got into trouble. The experience was so painful that, her grandmother adopted the saying *Dwen Woara Wo Ho* ('Think of yourself'), and decided that *Dzi Wo fie Asem* should be inscribed at the entrance of the house, and also given as name to a canoe then owned by the family. To her, that would be a timely piece of advice to the community to exercise caution in dealing with people. The canoe, *Dzi wo Fie Asem* has since broken down, but the inscription on the house remains.

In Cape Coast, a woman living at Akon a suburb, is also called Maame Dzi Wo Fie Asem, based on past experiences and family philosophies. It is indeed not surprising that the famous proverb associated with Dr K. A. Busia, namely *Kafo Didi*, is the name of a village near Kommenda, in the Central Region. The Village is simply called *Kafo Dzidzi*, 'The indebted person does not sacrifice his/her meals,' and existed long before Busia's famous proclamation in 1970.

Indeed such proverbs and inscriptions, whether on vehicles, canoes, houses or stores, or as names of villages and towns tend to be philosophical summaries of significant moments in people's lives; and denote the verbal strategies adopted by individuals in response to crises. The inscription serves as an indelible principle of life, a memento, and recalls a major landmark experience.

Apart from its regular use in oral discourse, *dzi wo fie asem* also occurs in popular lyrics in the form of 'Mind your Business, na Asem wo wu fie.' In another lyric by the Uhuru Dance Band in the 1970s, the singer advises an imaginary addressee, who has been inquisitive, to *dzi wo fie asem*, in a situation where two hunters carry separate head loads of antelope meat. One of them out of naïve curiosity, stops his colleague and requests him to declare the contents of his hunting bag. The suspicious colleague quickly retorts, 'Dzi wo fie asem.'

Neither can one forget experiences in smaller towns and villages in the past, where our mothers cooked on clay-made tripods, or hearths *bukya*, It was the habit of other women cooking late, to go next door to fetch a burning log or pieces of smoldering charcoal, to enable them to start their own fire. But sometimes, rather than simply scoop the hot coal and go away, they would take advantage and, not only sniff the aroma in the kitchen, but also steal glances at the contents of the soup on fire. Any significant findings would, of course, be the topic of gossip next door, particularly if the soup sighted was not well endowed. Whenever the lady of the house noticed the furtive glances of the intruder, she conveyed a quick reprimand, "*Herr... did you come here to fetch fire, or to look into my soup?*" I am sure one could as well have added, "*Mind your own soup.*" To date, the query, *wobesoo gya anaa wobehwee nkwan mu*, is used metaphorically to reprimand intruders who appear to be overly inquisitive, and poke their noses in other people's affair.

Contextual Meaning

The proverb, *Dzi wo fie asem*, has the semantic advantage of somehow conveying a close-to-literal meaning. Even though the President immediately followed the saying with the closest English rendition ‘Mind your Own Business,’ the original proverb throws emphasis on home: conveying a sense of the familiar, the intimate, the known, as against the unknown, the uncertain. Simply put, it admonishes one to deal with matters over which one has intimate knowledge, direct concern or control. More specifically, the dominant verb, *dzi asem*, refers to judicial proceedings or serious deliberations over an issue or matter, where a significant outcome is expected. *Dzi asem* would normally rule out frivolity in the undertaking; matters of grave significance would normally attract being ‘consumed.’ *Dzi wo fie asem* would literally imply, ‘adjudicate over, or pay attention to, serious matters within your own jurisdiction.’

Significantly, within the context used, it is rather the unspoken converse of the aphorism that carries a greater semantic burden. It could as well be ‘*dzi wo fie asem... and do not poke your nose into serious matters outside your home, area of jurisdiction or immediate concern.*

The proverb is often used in situations where another person seems to be overly obsessed with other people’s domestic affairs, following which there may then be an admonition, cautioning against any interventions in crises that fall outside one’s dominion, and over which one may have limited knowledge. Such ill-advised intrusions may end up exposing the intruder’s ignorance or sense of indiscretion. The unspoken half of the proverb repudiates indiscreet interventions in serious matters outside one’s jurisdiction.

While the spoken part of the aphorism advocates dealing with issues within one’s dominion, it may also convey a reprimand for one’s indifference to weightier crises brewing within one’s boundaries. In other words, there are *bigger crises within your house; demonstrate the capacity to resolve these before you intervene in mine.*

Within the context in which the proverb was used by the President, the first meaning was intended, let us *stick to our own affairs, and leave others’*. The immediate context of the President’s utterance, justifies this interpretation, for the verbal cues to meaning are amply evident. Immediately after the proverb, the President referred to dangers inherent in an adversarial (armed) intervention, that is exposing the lives of Ghanaians in that country to possible retaliation, and even more importantly, the non-availability of troops to sustain an intervention, since his troops are deployed in various parts of the world. The President assumed here that an intervention would be a military action involving his soldiers.

Technically, however, the very fact that the President has sent troops outside his country on other peace keeping missions, signals that the proverb was not intended as an absolute prohibition of the nation’s involvement in external affairs. The latter posture would have conveyed a compelling need to close down all foreign missions, since their very existence implied the involvement of Ghana in other people’s matters.

It is the proverb's immediate context, the surrounding discourse, that drives home its intended meaning. From one perspective then, the President conveyed the meaning intended in the statement made.

Saying this, let me say a word about pragmatic uses of proverbs.

A proverb may be suitable for a particular situation, or may be just a situational response summing up the speaker's viewpoint at a particular point in time. It may be considered as a practical response, a guiding principle, but not a compulsive fiat or injunction appropriate for all situations. To this extent, one should not be surprised that proverbs appear to have contradictory counterparts, or that a President may utter the proverb *dzi wo fie asem* today with reference to Ivory Coast, because he does not want his troops there, whereas months before he could have advocated an apparently contradictory policy of *wo yonko da ne wo da* 'your neighbor's crisis is potentially your own crisis,' which encourages empathy, or putting yourself in the shoes of a suffering friend. He could have spoken the latter proverb when he sent three million dollars to relieve the people of Haiti when they were hit by a major earthquake, a gesture which implies that *dzi wo fie asem* used in one context, does not necessarily imply a total lack of concern for others.

Proverbs are crafted to sound authoritative for purposes of persuasion. Speakers resort to them when they need an authoritative voice to lend credence to their viewpoint. It is a treasure to the speaker, well aware that his listener with whom he shares a common socio-cultural background appreciates the importance of proverbs. He therefore implies that since you accept this authoritative proverb, as containing an incontrovertible truth, you should as well agree with my viewpoint. In actual fact, however, proverbs only sound absolute, without being, absolute: they momentarily serve to clinch an argument. If rules of proverb composition allowed it, one could more conveniently have said, "Sometimes, *dzi wo fie asem*," and "Sometimes, mind your friend's business," depending on the context.

The issue as to the political prudence of the President's posture is another matter altogether, for it appeared to have violated a December ECOWAS protocol he signed that prescribed the application of legitimate force, as a last resort, if diplomacy failed. Having hastened to rule out military intervention involving Ghana, was he in breach of the sub regional protocol? Even more importantly, was the president really ruling out a military intervention?

Comedy of Contradictions

The answer depended on which of the President's several spokesmen was on duty and where. But it also varied with whom the President was addressing. A little over a week after the

President's statement, the AU mediator in the electoral crisis in Cote D'Ivoire, Mr Raila Odinga, who had a closed door meeting with the President, met the press thereafter and set hearts at ease, when he said Ghana had not broken ranks with other African leaders as such; and that Ghana was still committed to using military force as the last option in resolving the crisis. In other words, based on his discussions with the President, the latter had not ruled out a military option after all.

Then came another puzzling moment when in the third week of January, the African Group at the UN, was quoted by Government sources as ruling out a military option in Ivory Coast. Significantly, Government sources said, that was indeed a vindication of the President's position that a military intervention was truly not an option. In the words of the Public Affairs Director, "Ghana and President Mills have been vindicated in choosing not to go to war, but dialogue dialogue dialogue." To this the Foreign Minister added that, "it is in fact affirming that a military option is no option at all."

The story, however changed again within a week. January 24th, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, after accusing the BBC of misrepresenting the President out of context, added to the confusion by interpreting his Boss as implying that the issue is an African one in which non-African countries were trying to interfere. In his words, 'when the President spoke of minding your own business, he was talking of an African position. La Cote D'Ivoire problem is an African problem, demanding an African solution which is based on negotiation; it is based on mediation and peace building.'

The President's adage would then be perceived to have been addressed to Western countries seeking to interfere in the affairs of Cote D'Ivoire. In other words, Ghana could intervene (diplomatically, with military support as a last resort), but the greater target of the proverb would be the West. This would imply that the question to which the President replied at the news conference was rather directed at Western countries, which the President unwittingly intercepted? This interpretation I am sure would surprise the President himself; for even though proverb meaning is sometimes negotiable, this does not mean anything at all goes for meaning.

Then came late March 2011, a GNA story gave another headline, **Government to change policy on Ivory Coast**. In the story, a Deputy Minister for Information, is quoted as saying the Government had changed her position and was now willing to contribute troops if the time came to use military force to oust Laurent Gbagbo from power. He said, "in politics, one day is a long time, one week is a very long time, and a month can be a year."

And when the dust appeared to have settled, with Laurent Gbagbo having been captured with the help of French forces, congratulations began pouring in, for the peace posture of the President had helped to resolve the crisis!

Ghana then had cleverly placed herself in a position where she could eat her cake and have it: saying a military option as a last resort was acceptable; saying even if acceptable, Ghana would

not contribute troops; saying also that military intervention was no option whatsoever, then saying *Dzi wo fie asem* was not with reference to Ghana; and now saying the Government had changed her position, and would now contribute troops, and also accepting congratulations for peace mongering.

The ambiguity of our posture was likened by a colleague writer to the bat, which counts himself as a mammal and is indeed a mammal, when mammals are being counted; but also says it's bird, when birds are ready to take to flight. Ghana's multiple, contradictory posturing enabled us to perpetually say to the exclusive diplomacy option, *that's exactly what the president is saying*, and to the possible military option, *that's exactly what the President is saying also*. And then to the military-not-an-option posture, *he also meant exactly that*.

Blaming the Messenger

But the situation goes beyond policy interpretation. Where a policy itself is not clearly defined, no amount of embellishment by spokesmen and interpreters can salvage it; for good and effective spokesmen may be publicly embarrassed and sacrificed for political expediency.

As far back as the late 1980s, there was a remarkable public incident, which ridiculed a Deputy Minister for Finance for no fault of his. The Chairman of the PNDC, Flt Lt Rawlings at a durbar with chiefs and people in a town in the Central Region, stepped up to explain to the largely illiterate crowd, the rationale behind the Structural Adjustment Policy, and its practical effect on the daily lives of the people. He spoke in English, and invited the Deputy Minister to explain his speech in Fanti. The Minister stepped forward, and sought to summarize the president's speech to the people, illustrating with the improved purchasing power of the cedi in the purchase of commodities, as a result of the SAP. Midway through the Minister's explanation, the Head of State who looked very uneasy during the Minister's interpretation, characteristically broke protocol and interrupted, loudly declaring through the microphone: *Manka Saa* 'I did not say that,' thus leaving his unofficial interpreter cold and humiliated. Chairman Rawlings then took over the microphone and tried to explain himself in halting Fanti.

Spokesmen the world over have been occasionally victimized, when the king's word or policy, even when perfectly interpreted, has not been well received. Politics of expediency then sets in, and the messenger rather than the message ends up taking the blame. Conversely, when official policy well interpreted by the spokesman, goes down well with the public it is the king, and not the spokesman, that takes the credit.

What of the case of a Deputy Minister, who contradicted a Government policy about the proposed one-time premium on health insurance, by publicly expressing Government's uncertainty about its feasibility? In an act of damage control, the substantive Minister had to rush to the press the day after, to denounce the junior minister, and reassert Government's

commitment to the proposed policy. The Deputy Minister had misspoken and was publicly scolded. To date, the policy has not seen the light of day, and one is not sure who has been vindicated: Minister or Deputy?

And do we forget the multiple voices in response to the Chairman of a Party who had used the metaphor, 'there are many ways of killing a cat'? While his colleagues had supported his argument that the Government should deal with the judiciary, to restore Government's faith in the judiciary, others had construed his statement as alluding to a plan to repeat the 'disappearance' of judges in the early 1980s. Was there a plan to interfere with the judiciary?

This happened when the President was out of the country. Overnight, a special assistant to the President, who claimed to have spoken to the President by phone, told sections of the media that the President indeed was in support of the Chairman's position. The whole world then waited with bated breath to hear from the horse's own mouth. On his return to the country within days, however, the President reiterated his commitment to the independence of the judiciary, implicitly negating the allegation of the Special Assistant. The cat was out of the bag, and appeared to be out of danger after all.

But the politics of expediency may also include blatant public denials of embarrassing statements or misdeeds associated with public officers. As soon as the media has made an allegation of impropriety, the first step taken by a public official has been to vehemently deny the allegation, followed by a statement threatening legal action if the publication is not withdrawn and due apologies rendered. In a few cases where indiscreet invectives have been attributed to public officers, weak denials and protests have been intensely publicized for record purposes, at best followed by the charge that the unprofessional media has done it again: 'I was quoted out of context.' After a tape recording of the incident has been played as proof of the incident, the implicated public official has felt embarrassed, sometimes insisting that even if he said it, no harm was intended, because 'I am also a villager from *kokoase*.'

Once again, the messenger, rather than the message, had been unfairly targeted for public blame.

Conclusion

The return to constitutional governance in 1992 helped to pave way for democratic practice, which was further enhanced by the liberation of the media landscape in Ghana, enabling greater popular participation in governance. But it also gave the broad masses of people greater access to the governance apparatus, as well as government functionaries.

The creation of an open interface between Government and the people has promoted strategies of communication that are in keeping with local norms and aesthetics. It has enabled public officers

to position themselves through speaking, in ways that simulate or signal solidarity with the broad masses of people.

Dzi wo fie asem, quoted directly from the grassroots may have been invoked to summarize a nebulous policy direction; **all die be die** inspired by the speaking ways of the masses, may have triggered a diversity of interpretations. Even the **Yutong Bus** allegory and the **Atta Mortuary Boy** narrative (which to date nobody really understands), may all have raised controversies within the public sphere, when they were respectively cited. But altogether, they constitute rhetorical landmarks in our political history, and help to take stock of the vast linguistic and rhetorical resources invoked by political leaders in response to stressful moments in our political life.

But the winner-takes all mentality as well as an emerging politics of intolerance, threaten to denigrate our social values of communication, leading to a creeping culture of combative discourse, and the celebration of verbal abuse and invectives on decent political platforms. The outcome has been a perception that rationality in public debate is diminishing with time. Subject specialists and experts who would have enriched the quality of public discourse appear to have yielded the floor to ubiquitous pseudo experts (sometimes glorified serial callers) who seek to standardize noisy argumentation and fiery discourse as cherished values. But it has also triggered a swath of ill-prepared spokesmen and communication functionaries (official and unofficial) who unleash a Babel of tongues at the least opportunity, and end up polluting public space, shedding more heat than light on party as well as national policy. The perception of spokesmen in traditional society as associated with unanimity of purpose and finesse in communication, has been enormously eroded over time.

It is perhaps not too late for spokesmen and all speaking agencies of government to reflect over the serious business of government before making public utterances. In the public sphere, they are torch bearers, role models; they set standards of speech comportment; and it is not too late for them to take lessons from seasoned traditional spokesmen, who place a higher premium on public standards over political expediency in speech comportment. Let the culture of public abuse, invectives, and slander take the back seat and rationality and civility be elevated.

Finally, let me dare say the current state of rhetoric in the public sphere is a cause for alarm. Regardless of the real intent, I dare say the establishment of a Heroes' Fund by one party, and the adoption of an 'All Die Be Die' slogan by another party, are bad news for peace and democracy. They are liable to interpretation as institutional preparations for lawlessness, hooliganism and civil strife in Election 2012. Indirectly, however, they both constitute an indictment on a partisan state security that cannot even-handedly discharge their constitutional obligations of protecting life and limb, and a state that appears to lack a reliable mechanism for non partisan celebration of national heroes, leaving this to the capricious designs of individual parties.

Let the Presidency, the Council of State, the National House of Chiefs, the various religious bodies, and civil society not sit aloof and supervise these open preparations for war. Let them rise to the occasion and speedily intervene, calling on both sides to hold back the rhetoric of war, with assurances that the President is in firm control of the ship of state, and assurances that mechanisms will be put in place to ensure free and fair elections.

Let me conclude by saying, *the elder that looks on while innocent children make a meal out of a python snake, is not spared when eaters of python meat are being reprimanded.*

Thank you.