



THE HAZEL TREE

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Word Travels

It seems unnatural to think that in a world where slums are home to 65% of the population and the average wage is £1.50 per day, literature is booming. To many Ghanaians, literature is an escape from a reality that they are reluctant to live in. Fiction provides an outlet for those wanting to let their thoughts escape into words and a comfort for those who struggle to cope. Within the chaos of this country, it's hard to believe that the written word still holds a prominent place – particularly when you consider that 33% of the population are illiterate.

Word of mouth is relied on in Ghana for much of the news and similarly, for the telling of stories. While literature has more recently been formally written and published within the country, much of the traditional fiction still travels through generations and tribes. Ghana is divided into ten regions, each with their own tribe and each tribe with their own literature. The Ashanti tribe's literature is written mostly in Twi – their native language – and is distinguishable by its frequent fixation with gold. The people of Ashanti take pride in their huge involvement with the gold trade and this filters into their writing. Traditional stories often boast of the riches of their King and their prosperity as a region. This aspect of the literature in Ghana shows a flicker of competitiveness between tribes as they use literature to show their superiority to others.

Tribes in the central region use literature as a means of venting their political frustration and objection to the modernisation of Ghana and colonial rule. This genre of Ghanaian literature became hugely popular during the British invasion of Africa in the late 1800s; however, it still manages to survive today. Some authors choose to attack the government through fiction which mirrors their actions. As a contrast to this, it is more common for authors to celebrate and cherish their traditional culture within fiction as a way of holding on to it and preventing modernisation.

As with much of Ghanaian culture, religion is the stem. Three-quarters of the country are devoted Christians, therefore it is inevitable that their literature reflects this. As Ghanaian literature developed, it moved away from the

rigid barriers of a religious base and it became more common that novels were centred on traditional Ghanaian proverbs. Proverbs are a huge part of the literature of Ghana. The following are native proverbs and their interpretations.

“Do not call the forest that shelters you a jungle” - do not abuse things which benefit you. Ghana is fortunate in some aspects of its natural resources; however, the abuse of gold, trees and native plants have always been present in Ghana. For this reason, the country's relationship with its resources has been negative. More recently, literature has reflected this relationship as less traditional authors have blamed their current poverty on the greed of

previous generations.

“Hunger is felt by a slave and hunger is felt by a King” - this proverb displays the unity and equality present in Ghanaian culture. These values are crucial in maintaining the tribal culture of Ghana and showing the understanding between the hierarchies of each tribe. It can be interpreted as an attempt to criticise the slave trade by showing the slaves as equal to the white men, referred to as 'kings'.

Ghanaian literature does relate to the slave trade, this proverb was used hundreds of years before the use of Ghanaians as slaves.

“A woman is like a blanket: if you cover yourself with it, it bothers you; if you throw it aside, you will feel the cold” - this proverb focuses on the unity of marriage and love and its sacredness within Ghanaian culture. Literature still reflects the inequality between men and women within the country as women are seen as hugely inferior. This proverb uses that aspect of the relationship between men and women to relate to male Ghanaians. Through this, the proverb is telling men to be tolerant and patient as women are useful to them, even if it is hard to see at times.

Many societies, schools, churches and tribes re-word or create their own proverbs to inspire those around them with more relevant ideas. When in Ghana last July, the Atonsu MA School, Kumasi, in which I taught, used their own proverb to inspire their students: **“Knowledge is treasure.”** (Pippa Pudney)

