



# A Case for Indigenous Ghanaian Counselling Practice

**P. K. A. Bedu-Addo <sup>a\*</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> *University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.*

## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper makes a case for the inclusion of indigenous African counselling practices in the 21st Century counselling practices. The seeming absence of a theoretical underpinning of indigenous counselling practice, especially within the Ghanaian ecosystem is addressed, together with what constitutes indigenous guidance and counselling. Additionally, the tools available for uses by the indigenous Ghanaian counsellor are scrutinized, together with situations that precipitate guidance and counselling in indigenous settings. The merits and demerits of indigenous Ghanaian counselling practices are also examined. The paper concludes with an advocacy for the inclusion of certain elements of indigenous counselling practices in modern day delivery of counselling especially in the African setting.

*Keywords: Indigenous counselling; counselling practices; indigenous setting; ecosystem.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Pre-colonial African societies have been labelled "Indigenous". The term Indigenous used here means the type of societal structure based on the beliefs and customs in the legitimacy of an authority that has always existed [1]. Long before the advent of formal and organized guidance,

indigenous African practitioners functioned as advisers in various aspects of social life such as work, marriage, morals and conducts. Most African societies had various forms of social services that provided direction for young people and children, assisting them develop and grow into responsible and productive members of their communities or ethnic groups.

\*Corresponding author: Email: [pkabaddo@uew.edu.gh](mailto:pkabaddo@uew.edu.gh), [koby63@gmail.com](mailto:koby63@gmail.com);

To function effectively in such communities, one needed to be aware of the values, beliefs and roles one had to play as a member of a particular regiment or society. Many young boys and girls were socialized or taught the ways of their communities, as well as the various skills their forebears used to earn a living, or to provide for their families. Initiation schools, for example, taught young people things they would need later on in their adult lives.

For instance, the young would learn about the history of their ethnic group, how to relate to each other as boys or girls, and how to behave as adults, as well as know their responsibilities as parents or members of the community. The 'initiation schools' or ceremonies did not only introduce young people to the history of the ethnic group and its customs but also any other cultural activities that every member of the community needed to know about, in order to live a successful life (UNESCO, 2009).

Indeed, the indigenous African assisted others find ways of dealing with, solving, or transcending problems and the people who often offered this sort of 'Guidance and Counselling' were authorities in the indigenous societies. So for instance, in the Akan society, there are authorities like "*Otwediampon Onyankopon*" (Supreme God) and "*abosom*" (minor gods) who offered Guidance through "*akomfo*" (Indigenous priests and priestesses/prophets and prophetesses), chiefs, elders of the society, "*ebusuapanyin*" (head of the clan), grandparents, parents, uncles and aunties, elder siblings and cousins and the elderly members of the society [2,3].

Indigenous guidance and counselling then is seen as a type of assistance offered in the form of advice giving and sharing of experiences through storytelling, wise sayings, poetry, proverbs and many more, with the aim of helping the individual member of the society to function effectively. Advice-giving has been a common way of providing help for other people. The advice offered was frequently instrumental in helping people to consider their future relationships, occupational choices etc. Giving advice often promoted the dependence of the young person on the advice giver. In most cases, it was largely subjective and did not promote the personal development of people because individuals were not made to understand themselves and take their own decisions [4-6].

Indigenous Guidance and Counselling can also be viewed as the aboriginal (putting into

consideration the beliefs and customs) way in which a person or persons of authority in the society consciously or unconsciously steer individuals towards a path of developing potentials, fulfilling societal demands and modifying undesirable behaviours. The words "conscious" and "unconscious" come into play here because as explained earlier, tradition becomes part of a society because it has been practiced for a long time. In the like manner most of the Guidance offered to individuals was unnoticed because they were deeply embedded in daily activities. Many scholars have defined guidance; however, most of the definitions do not consider Indigenous Guidance and Counselling [7-9].

Before dealing with the constituents of indigenous guidance and counselling, as well as the role it plays in the 21<sup>st</sup> century guidance and counselling space, it will be instructive to examine the theoretical basis (if any) of Indigenous guidance and counselling.

## 2. IS THERE A THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING FOR INDIGENOUS AFRICAN GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING?

Fiest and Fiest (1998) posit that a theory is a set of related assumptions from which a biological deductive reasoning, testable hypothesis can be drawn. A theory in this context can be seen as a set of deductive assumptions that explains a phenomenon; or a set of principles upon which a particular activity is based and derives its legitimacy. Not only should such an activity have legitimacy, but also it must be accepted by majority of the society as the sine qua non for undertaking such activities. Additionally, Wacker [10], posits that a theory must provide a framework for analysis of a particular phenomenon, provide an efficient method for field development and finally, provide clear explanations for the pragmatic world. A counselling theory according to Shertzer and Stone (1976) is a collection of assumptions, interpretations and hypotheses about human behaviour that helps to explain what happens in counselling, and that gives an observer a framework within which to make his or her future observations, evaluation and predictions about client behaviour.

In this section, assumptions underlying indigenous Guidance and Counselling will be drawn to establish a theoretical underpinning of

the practice. Awoonor [11] explains that the African world begins with the individual; each individual has value and importance. This means that the individual in the indigenous society is capable of enhancing his strengths and potentials. Consequently, such an individual imbibes societally acceptable standards that allow him to chalk successes since these are highly dependent on his values.

Indeed, in the indigenous Akan society in Ghana, indigenes recognize that “*Nkrabea*” determines the destiny of every individual. “*nkrabea*” literally means fate. This philosophy of the akans and many other indigenous societies in Ghana implies that man has no control over what happens to him. Rather it is the gods of the land that control the individual’s life affairs. This assumption plays a great role indigenous guidance and counselling practice, in that when an individual and sometimes the society goes through misfortunes, practitioners attribute it to “*nkrabea*”. For instance, when several people die continuously in a particular family, practitioners of indigenous guidance and counselling console mourners by telling them that it is fate and sometimes there is the need to perform certain rituals in order to change that particular fate.

Awoonor [11] further asserts that “*ebusua*” defines those who are linked by blood ties beyond the immediate parentage of father and mother and that it is only within the community of people, dead or alive that the individual’s personality and individuality receives fulfillment. Even if the individual loses both parents, he still belongs to that particular family line. It is because of this philosophy that among the Akans, members of the society have in-depth knowledge of the individual. The society often knows the individual from childhood and this makes it easier for practitioners of indigenous Guidance and Counselling to help the individual.

Indeed indigenous Guidance and Counselling also have its roots from the typical Akan belief, “*Ntease ma asomdwee*” which literally means

‘having understanding engenders peace’. This assumption posits the view that when there is misunderstanding, chaos, conflict, distress, anxiety and restlessness are inevitable. However, when there is understanding, there is peace. Based on this belief, Indigenous Guidance and Counselling seeks to help clarify issues and concerns at the appropriate time to avoid conflicts and distress. So for instance, the male child is directed to embrace the roles of manhood to enhance family and marital satisfaction in the future. These beliefs alluded to above and aspects such as like magic, sorcery, divination, gods, witchcraft and ancestral, worship, sum up the philosophy upon which indigenous Ghanaian societies thrive. Such societies inculcate into its socialization process, values and belief systems through Guidance and Counselling in order shape the individual “holistically”. Holistically here means that the individual, after going through the socialization process from childhood, becomes a responsible, productive and a functional member of the society. The individual consequently understands himself/herself better, utilizes his/her potentials better and generally, become capable of making intelligent and socially functional choices.

It must be noted here that the beliefs that form the basis of Indigenous Guidance and Counselling are passed over from ancestors to younger generations. Mead [12] asserts that indigenous society is characterized by a post-figurative lifestyle. That is, one in which children primarily learn from their forebears. Nukunya, (2000), inter alia also posits that the past of adults is the future of each new generation and the blue print of culture is essentially complete and therefore unchallenged by foreign models. These beliefs are very rigid and do not allow infiltration of other beliefs, thereby making the Indigenous society seemingly static. This is succinctly elucidated in Affum’s proposed model of Indigenous guidance and counselling, using the Ghanaian context as a basis as shown below.

AFFUM’S MODEL OF TRADITIONAL GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

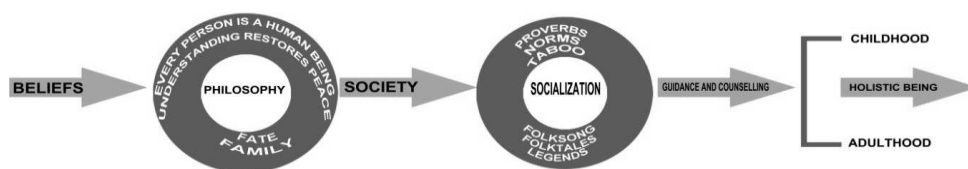


Fig. 1.

This linear model is premised on the fact that the Indigenous African society has its genesis in its belief systems. This includes the value of every human being, such as a human being's capacity to understand how the beliefs systems like fate impinges on his role in the society, and how these belief systems amalgamates into the society's philosophy of life. Finally, by assisting the individual by using things such as pithy sayings, taboos, proverbs, folksongs, stories et cetera, socialization is effected from childhood through to adulthood. This means of guidance and counselling therefore in the eyes of the Indigenous African ensures that the individual becomes a holistic being. Indeed Affum argues that African Indigenous Guidance and Counselling vis a vis his model does not allow for evaluation hence its linearity.

One may disagree to some extent with Affum's assertion. This is because even though in the typical African setting guidance or counselling in the form of advice may go 'unchallenged' (not evaluated) by the 'client', it is expected that the client comes back after some time to inform the giver of the counselling whether any of the solutions offered by the giver of the counselling, has worked. This can be considered as a form of evaluation. Thus, it can rather be asserted that evaluation is embedded in the practice of indigenous guidance and counselling.

From the above however, it is obvious that embedded in the Indigenous guidance and counselling paradigm is a myriad of principles, assumptions and therefore a theory (ies) that govern the practice Indigenous guidance and counselling even if devoid of the 'sophistication' of modern theories in guidance and counselling. One may argue that a theory should have undergone rigorous scrutiny through research and practical application before it is accepted as a theory. In this regard then, it is not far-fetched to point out that the principles, assumptions and theories that underpin Indigenous Guidance and Counselling have been tried and tested over centuries in different African and Ghanaian societies. Consequently, one can say without equivocation that Indigenous guidance and counselling indeed has a theoretical underpinning. What then are the constituents of Indigenous guidance and counselling?

### **3. WHAT CONSTITUTES INDIGENOUS PRACTICE OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING**

The very nature of the typical African society implies that the day-to-day living of the

indigenous African can be said to what constitutes Indigenous Guidance and Counselling. This is because the desire to see that each member of the society is able to understand, make meaning and take steps to take meaningful decisions, as well as make the intelligent choices that will ensure the maximization of the individual's functionality within the society. This implies that no facet of indigenous life is left untouched. Nonetheless, in this section we shall focus on elements like advice giving, prophecies, prescriptions, and reinforcements among the Akans of Ghana.

#### **3.1 Advice Giving**

Advice giving has been and still is the commonest way of providing help to people among the Akan people. The advice given is considered helpful for people to consider their future. Among the Akans, for example the extended family is the main source of advice for girls and boys. There is usually no dearth of people willing to share their wisdom. For example among the Akans when the elderly observe that a child is developing recalcitrant attitude, they will call the child and advice the child against that attitude; the advice usually takes the form of proverbs. Giving advice encourages the dependence of the young person on the advice given. An example of an advice from typical Akan (Fante) society is as follows; "*Abɔfraba a wɔ ka asɛm Kyerɛ no a ɔntse no ɔko antse antse kromu*". The above statement literally translates, - a disobedient child will find himself/herself in a 'land of regret'. To the Akan, everything sums up to advice giving because every other thing you do to the individual will not cause intrinsic change as much as advice-giving would. When an individual is advised, he/she gains a better understanding of himself and the consequences of his actions. So most Akans are of the opinion that advice giving is the most effective of the constituents alluded to here.

For example, to the Akans advice giving is not merely calling the person with the problem and talking to him/her once. In addition there is a consistent emphasis of what has already been told the individual in proverbs and sometimes songs in every 'space' be it in the market, by the road side or in the house so that the message "sinks in" well. Indigenous Akan elders normally take advantage of occasions such as festivals and funerals to advice the citizenry about issues such as environmental cleanliness, teenage pregnancy et cetera. Indeed advice giving is the crux of Indigenous Guidance and Counselling

and irrespective of the issue presented before an elder or chief, investigation is done to identify the offender and the victim, after which advice is given. The next element to be discussed is prophecy.

### 3.2 Prophecies

Prophecies have also been one of the most effective form of Guidance among the Akan people. People dared not disobey the “*akomfo*” (prophets or prophetesses) because the people of Akan believe they are the messengers of the “*abosom*” (gods). The term “*abosom*” which is used by the Akans suggests that the gods, which they worshipped, were formerly only stones [13]. The name ‘*Akom*’, which refers to hunger, is viewed in the context of referring to fasting. Fasting, the seeking of visions (sometimes in dreams), prayer, drumming and dancing are some of the aspects of the Akan Indigenous initiation.

The Akans believe that “*Akom*” enables the *Okomfo* to interact with the “*abosom*” (gods/goddesses). Interactions with the “*abosom*” lead to gaining knowledge about their songs and other incantations, as well as their taboos and specific rituals [14]. The “*abosom*” through the “*akomfo*” inform the people of what they should do and how they should do it in order to live good lives. For instance when an Akan society is facing some misfortunes, they (usually lead by the chief and his elders) call on the “*akomfo*” to intercede on their behalf and often after going through fasting, singing, dancing and incantations the “*akomfo*” return with some sort of information and interpretation from the gods regarding the situation.

Indeed, before the advent of churches and other modern religious entities Africans relied on ‘indigenous prophets’ (*akomfo*) for interpretations about misfortunes in their lives and how they could deal with them. Indigenous prophets interceded for people who had had misfortunes in their lives so that the gods could help them to recover from their adversities and live good and happy lives. Such prophets were/are so feared and revered to such an extent that indigenous peoples will take whatever suggestions or directions he/she gives for dealing with any situation in the life of the individual, line, hook and sinker. Now let us consider prescriptions.

### 3.3 Prescriptions

Prescription here refers to the process when someone gives an instruction of what someone

else must do. Professionals give prescriptions. For example, in most contemporary societies, doctors give prescriptions. Among the Akan people of Ghana, prescriptions are given as a form of direction to help individuals understand themselves better, and to follow a procedure(s) or live in a certain way that brings about healthy or good life. The authority that usually directs the Akan, Ga, Ewe or Dagari people of Ghana through prescription is the herbalist or a priest or priestess of a particular shrine.

Individuals visit herbalists or shrines when they are encountering problems. This they do with the hope that they will get a better interpretation of what they are facing or going through, and may eventually find a solution to their problems. Many people among the Akans often start seeking advice from the elderly in the society when they are facing certain problem situations, however, if the elderly realise that they are unable to prescribe any solution to them, they refer them to people who have the professional training and skill to deal with such problem situations, such as the herbalists or *akomfo*.

This often happens when the problem or situation requires a medicinal approach or magic to solve it. Herbalists are indigenous healers who use herbs to treat people. There is the belief among the Akans that the knowledge herbalists acquire is attributable to weeks of training and education that is given to them by “*amotia*” (dwarfs) after they have been chosen by the gods for that position. Priests and priestesses are people who use magic to heal people. They often relay prescriptions from the “*abosom*” (gods) of what people should do and how they should do it in order to come out of their problem situations.

Indeed even with the advent of modernity and technology, people still consult these herbalists, fetish priests and priestesses. According to Sarpong (1975), people go to their gods to ascertain the underlying causes of disasters in which they may have been involved and there are others who seek Guidance from their gods about certain enterprises they want to undertake. He further explained that on higher national or clan levels, in time of war, the gods forecast the outcome of the encounter with the enemy and should they foresee defeat, it becomes incumbent on them to “prescribe” the necessary “strategies” for victory; this is done by the priests or priestesses of the shrine. Priests and priestesses also deal with intense problems

(such as depression, heightened anxiety et cetera); herbalists sometimes refer people to shrine priests and priestesses depending on the problems that are brought before them.

### 3.4 Reinforcements

Re-enforcement are probably the commonest constituent of Indigenous Guidance and Counselling that passes unnoticed. Reinforcements have been used from time immemorial by most Indigenous societies in Ghana, to encourage desired behaviours and discourage undesired behaviours in the society. Re-enforcement as properly explained in the operant conditioning theory by B.F Skinner sees human behaviour in relation to anticipation of a stimulus [15]. Beier and Young [16]. explain that operant conditioning occurs because of what happens after behaviour has been exhibited. The operant conditioning theory has it that the behaviour of an individual is shaped by the consequences of the environmental activities that follow it [17]. In the Akan indigenous society, positive re-enforcements are used to encourage a desired behaviour and increase its occurrences. A vivid example of positive reinforcement is revealed in this scenario; when a child obediently fetches water for an elderly person, a simple praise or reward may encourage that behaviour. An example of such praise is:

*Akwesi aye adee. Monpre no e!!! yee ye!!!*

The above literally translates “Akwesi has done well, let’s all give him thumbs up” and usually the people around will all respond, “Thumbs up Akwesi”. Negative reinforcement on the other hand, is used to discourage undesirable behaviours. When used, negative reinforcement reduce the frequency of occurrence of the behaviour. Negative reinforcement often takes the form of threats and sometimes punishments. Such threats were not “empty” at all and that children whose behaviours were not modified by continuous threats were punished severely.

Let us now turn our attention to situations that will precipitate guidance and counselling.

## 4. SITUATIONS THAT PRECIPITATE THE OFFERING OF INDIGENOUS GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

In this section, we shall be using the Gas of the Greater Accra Region of Ghana as a case study.

According to Laryea (2012), among the Gas of Ghana the situations, which precipitate indigenous guidance and counselling, include rites of passage such as birth, puberty, marriage, death and even life after death. Additionally, installation of chiefs, festivals, communal labour; out-break of diseases and occurrence of natural disasters are all situations that precipitate the practice of Guidance and Counselling. In this section, we shall consider birth rites, installation of a chief, and communal calamities. It is noteworthy that in the various situations that precipitate the offering of indigenous guidance and counselling, the practitioners draw from their ‘professional expertise’ and experiences. More often than not, there are other situations in indigenous Ghanaian society, where the practice of guidance and counselling goes unnoticed. These are situations mostly related to the field of work where people are not called or consciously trained, but find themselves acquiring the skills, competences and necessary experiences to function effectively, through participation and observation.

Consequently, the practice of indigenous guidance and counselling becomes an aspect of informal education since the proponents of the concept are of the view that the nature of the practice is greatly embedded in the informal component of education/training. An example is when a girl observes the mother in the home during meal preparations. The girl child assists the mother in the kitchen and in the process learns how certain meals are prepared and served.

Such instances are unconsciously learnt other than the mother calling the girl child and instruct her as she prepares the meal. These aforementioned situations which precipitate the practice of indigenous guidance and counselling can be classified or grouped under various key concepts. For instance, in the Ghanaian indigenous societies, the life of a human being is seen as a cycle, which involves various stages. This cycle of life starts from conception to death, and these stages serve as important points indicating new experiences [18].

This is regarded as Developmental Counselling where assistance is given to individuals to help them cope with challenges associated with developmental stages in life. In Teshie, birth, puberty, marriage, death, and life after death are the stages of the life cycle that people are given assistance to be able to cope with. We shall now deal with these situations in turn.

#### 4.1 Birth Rites

Birth rite is one of the situations that precipitate indigenous guidance and counselling practice in the Teshie area for example. According to Sarpong [13], when the child is born, it is spiritually fortified and protected through medicines after which he is given a name and prepared to rub shoulders with adults. During child naming, the “shia onukpa” (family head) who is someone with high moral standards and a respectable personality in the family, dips his index finger into a calabash or glass of water and wets the lips of the child with the water. He repeats this three times mentioning the child’s name each time he touches the baby’s lips. Some symbolic words are mostly recited to the child’s hearing. For example, “Nii Laryea, ke nu ni, nu ni” which literally means “if it is water, it must be water. The shia onukpa then repeats the procedure with either palm wine or a strong drink saying, “Nii Laryea, ke daã ni, daã ni” meaning if it is alcohol, then it is alcohol. He then adds “ke eyen, eyen, ke edin, edin” literally translates as “if it is white, it must be white and if it is black, it must be black”.

Actually, this is done telling the child that let your “YES” be “YES” and let your “NO” be “NO”. This is to instil within the infant a consciousness of morality. Right from the beginning of the child’s life, guidance and counselling is given about the need to be truthful, sincere and honest and, be able to differentiate between good and evil. A final libation, which is known as out-dooring prayer, is poured. This libation is offered to ask for blessings of the child’s family and prayers for the child to be obedient, truthful and respectful. The child’s name is then announced to the gathering after which “ɲmedaã” (corn wine) is served and gifts are presented to the child. The ceremony ends with feasting and merry making. The next situation is the installation of a chief.

#### 4.2 Installation of Kings/Chiefs

Another situation necessitating the Indigenous practice of guidance and counselling in the Teshie community was the one offered to chiefs before they were installed. According to Neequaye (2011), the “Mantse” of the Teshie area, before a chief is installed, he is usually kept in a room for a minimum of seven days. During this period, the would-be chief is trained and guided on how to speak and walk in public (how to behave in public), how to use appropriate proverbs in his dialogue with other council of

elders, and during different occasions. The elders also counsel and guide the would-be chief on how to chair meetings, especially at the palace, and how to dress and dance in public. Finally, the would-be chief is counselled on leadership styles and leadership qualities.

On a wider pedestal the customs and traditions of the area is inculcated in the chief in order that he preserve and uphold its values and practices. The chief priest “wulomo” also offers counselling on how to observe and perform some indigenous rituals and rites, and spiritually fortify the chief against evil forces. Libation is poured and certain incantations are said to wish the chief success in his ascension on the throne. The chief swears an oath of allegiance and secrecy before community members and the elders.

#### 4.3 Communal Calamities

The people of Teshie mostly seek advice especially during crises such as sudden and frequent deaths of relatives, lack of rainfall, poor harvest, and outbreak of deadly diseases. These situations are regarded with reference to the concept of counselling as crises where according to Brammer [19], is a process of helping the individual who is in a state of disorganization and is faced with frustration of important life goals with methods of coping with stress. Family members most often seek counsel from the fetish priest and other deities in the community on the crises befalling the family. This is especially when they feel, such crises are beyond their control and understanding.

The family members are made to appease the gods by presenting the fetish priest with drinks (schnapps), eggs, among others to plead with the ancestral gods to help solve their problem and to protect them against future occurrences. This practice is mostly regarded as “aa ya, aya bi nii” which means “we are going to ask about issues”. Elders of the family mostly do this. Lets now turn our the tools employed by indigenous therapists in assisting individual lead functional lives

### 5. WHAT TOOL S ARE AVAILABLE TO INDIGENOUS PRACTITIONERS OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING?

The tools available to Indigenous guidance and counselling practitioners within the Ghanaian setting include proverbs, poems, symbols and emblems; music, storytelling or folklores, mores,

riddles and puzzles; rituals, taboos, beliefs etc. Though indigenous guidance and counselling among indigenous Ghanaians is not structured, the practitioners use their experience and expertise in the practice of guidance and counselling. These tools aid therapy that is geared towards the developmental, preventive, crises, and career counselling among others when compared to the types of the organised or western counselling. The guidance services are also not overlooked when delving into the tools available to practitioners and their uses in offering assistance. Havinghurst [20] opined that developmental counselling for instance helps the individual to learn how to achieve healthy growth in society. It is an assistance given to individuals to help them cope with problems associated with developmental stages in life. Africans believe in the totality of a person, for that matter, the three domains of the human development (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor) cannot be ignored when help is offered to an individual, to enable him to function effectively within the society. We shall now take the tools in turn.

### 5.1 Riddles

The study of local and oral history, legends, poetry, riddles, puzzles and proverbs are tools employed by the indigenous practitioners in offering guidance and counselling to individuals in promoting their intellectual, psychological, emotional and social well being. Children were trained to keep all these in memory and upon demand recall them accurately and exactly. So from the Gas of Southern Ghana, riddles like “*ɲkɔ yɛ bɛ ni folɛ ewo toianii*” directly translated “there is something when born, had earrings”; “*awula ko yɛ daa nɛɛ lɛ gnyɛ ehɛ ɲ*” literally means “there is a lady who is always holding waist”; “*ɲkɔ yɛ daa nɛɛ lɛ eɛɲmɔ*” that is “there is something which is always laughing” were used to help children to think logically and divergently, which in turn made them wise and smart. This is because by understanding the ethos of the riddles, the individual is able take meaningful decisions and make intelligent choices to aid in his functioning within the society. Consequently, Riddles are used in indigenous societies to make individuals both critical thinkers as well as well as problem solvers through the agency of riddles. The next set of tools we shall deal with are proverbs.

### 5.2 Proverbs

According to Makinde [21], proverbs are accumulated treasures of African philosophy.

They contain the observations, knowledge and wisdom of our forefathers, who condensed what they would have put down in writing into short witty phrases that could be transferred from generation to generation. Proverbs are used to show the human nature and behaviours and give insightful knowledge on issues. These proverbs are not easily understood, unless they are explained.

Although proverbs are short, and sometimes funny, proverbs teach the ethical rules of the community. Proverbs may rhyme, or be a play on words. They often use plants or animals to describe human behavior, both good and bad. In the Ga language: “*Kedzi Baah enyo miiple loo he le Baah ni tasee le dzi moni nine sheo niyenii le no*”. Loosely translated, this proverb says, “When two crocodiles fight over a piece of meat, it is the third crocodile standing by who eventually will get to eat a meal”. This teaches tolerance and cooperative living indigenous Ghanaian societies, and consequently allows the individual to make informed choices when dealing with important life situations.

In Teshie in the Accra Metropolis of Ghana for example proverbs like “*kɛ tso futu tɛi amli lɛ, efoo jaraa*” that is “if sticks are mixed with stones it becomes difficult to cut”. This means if a child is not trained in a respected home, or by respected people, he does grow to become an irresponsible adult. This is used to teach the essence of proper child rearing since bad child rearing will eventually become the bane of the indigenous society. Another proverb is “*akɛ kpon folo shaaa tsile*” which means “we don’t expect an empty hook to catch a fish”, connotes the essence of reciprocity in life situations. In this regard proverbs are used as a tool to direct, reprimand, sanction, restrain and coach individuals in the society, in order to make them useful members of society.

Among the Ewes of Eastern Ghana, during a marriage ceremony, for example a parent may say ‘*wometsoa misa fia amerɲtor fe dume o*’. This means you do not point to your hometown using your left hand. The underlying guidance or counselling implication is that one should not belittle his origins whether where one comes is seen as great in the eyes of people or not. Another proverb from the ewes may be thus: *nyas ɛto menyɛ abakae o*. This translates as – a listening ear is not a basket. This connotes that an obedient child does not need much talking to, so normally words to such a child must be few, allowing the individual to make



up his own mind about issues of life in an informed manner. The next tool we shall allude to are taboos.

### 5.3 Taboos

According to Myrick [22], all the things that the society is trying to prevent young people from experiencing such as abusing drugs, sexual promiscuity, unwanted and teenage pregnancy, smoking, alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, unemployment among others are all within the purview of preventive counselling. In some cases, taboos are used to prevent certain occurrences. Taboos are prohibitions imposed by social customs as protective measures on the society. In the Teshie indigenous area, since fishing is the main occupation of the inhabitants, it is widely believed that it is the sea god that aids in their success at fishing. Therefore, on Tuesday, it is believed that the sea god rests and so it is a taboo to go fishing on Tuesdays. Should anyone violate this practice he will not return to see the family either by drowning or may not find his way back home?

This type of taboo was imbibed by fishermen to aid their rest and mend their nets on Tuesdays, and for the fish stock to replenish. These kinds of taboos were used to preserve the water bodies and other forms of nature. In conservative indigenous societies for example, it is a taboo for a girl to become pregnant before she is initiated into adulthood. A girl, who commits this taboo, is banished from the community including the boy responsible for the pregnancy. This was done to keep the girls pure, prevent teenage pregnancy and prevent disgrace on the family and the community.

There is the belief that the consequences of a broken taboo may fall on the entire society physically or mystically. For example having sexual intercourse with a woman in her period may cause famine to the entire society unless rituals are performed to cleanse the entire society of such repugnance. This simply means that the society is undergoing punishment for the sins of one man. It is therefore an issue of great concern for every member of the society to ensure that taboos are observed; this forms Guidance in the Indigenous setting. Taboo is an impeccable tool used in shaping productive individuals in the society. A critical observation of the taboos mentioned earlier indicates that all the deeds considered to be taboos from an objective point of view, are wrongful acts which could

cause chaos in the society. For instance sanctions against people who go hunting or fishing on particular days is for the purpose of allowing games and aquatic creatures to multiply and be caught later when food is scarce. We shall now turn to symbols as tools of Indigenous Guidance and Counselling.

## 6. SYMBOLS AND EMBLEMS

Indigenously, symbols are used in every aspect of life – social, religious, political and economical. Ghanaians have attached proverbial meanings to each of these symbols that are used to guide them in their day-to-day activities. Indigenous counsellors also refer to these symbols during their counselling sessions. Some of these symbols are used on the Linguist Staff tops, in textiles, on canoes, just to mention a few.

### 6.1 Linguist Staff Top Symbols

In the indigenous setting, the linguist is the official spokesperson of the royal court through whom, all statements to and from the chief is addressed. As a sign of his office, the linguist bears a staff, which has a proverbial symbol at the top, most of which are in the form of human beings, animals and fruits. Some common examples are:

- Three human heads carved together. This reminds us that one head cannot go into counsel, and that it is improper for one person to take decision for a whole society. This encourages the cross-fertilization of ideas in enhancing social cohesion and development in indigenous societies.
- A hand holding an egg. This represents a warning to people who is in authority. It indicates that power is as delicate as an egg. When held too tightly, it may break. It may fall and break when held too loosely. This shows that a person in authority needs to be firm and consistent, but sympathetic.
- A bird with the head turned backwards picking something from behind (the Sankcfa bird). This indicates that it is not a taboo to return to fetch something that has been forgotten. We can always correct our mistakes.



- A pineapple. The pineapple is plucked and eaten only when it is ripped, otherwise it can be sour. This indicates that whatever has to be done, should be done at the appropriate time. Things done in haste are often not done rightly.

Understanding and imbibing the ethos of these symbols allows the individual to become well integrated in the society. The next are textile symbols

### 6.2 Textile Symbols

These are fabrics that have motifs, which have proverbial meanings. The names given to these symbols indicate their significance in the society. They express the general beliefs and ideas of the people. These motifs are known as ‘Adinkra’ (Saying goodbye) symbols. Some examples include the following;

- “Obi – nnka – bi. This literally means, “Bite not one another or “avoid conflict”. Therefore, it is symbol of unity
- Akoma (Nya Akoma). Akoma means ‘heart’. Nya akoma, literally means ‘take heart’ or ‘be patient’. It is a symbol of patience and endurance.
- Obosoom ne nsoroma. This means moon and star. The two together form a symbol of faithfulness.

Understanding and appreciating the importance of these symbols allows the individual member of the society to order his/her life in every sphere in an effective and functionally beneficial manner. So for example a client who faces an imminent divorce is shown the Mframadan symbol and encouraged to prepare emotionally, psychologically et cetera to face such the vicissitudes of life.

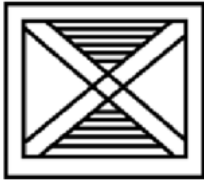

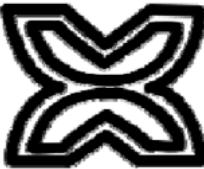

| Symbol  | Adinkra label or Name | Interpretation                      | Meaning   |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
|  | Mframadan             | Wind resistant house                | Symbol of fortitude and readiness to face life's vicissitudes |
|  | Adinkrahene           | Chief of the adinkra symbols        | Symbol of greatness, charisma and leadership                  |
|  | Fawohodie             | Independence                        | Symbol of independence, freedom, emancipation                 |
|  | Mpatapo               | Knot of pacification/reconciliation | Symbol of reconciliation, peacemaking and pacification        |

Fig. 2. Gives a vivid description of some of these Adinkra symbols as well as their meanings  
Source: Arthur Kojo, 2001

### 6.3 Canoe Symbols

Among the fishing communities along the coast of Ghana symbols engraved on canoes. These symbols are put on these canoes to engender hope, courage, fortitude among fisherman who on a daily basis have to deal the perils of the sea as well as their own families. Below are some of the symbols.

- The crab

The crab may be made together with a bird or alone. This symbolizes the fact that a crab does not give birth to a bird, but a crab. It shows that the behaviour of children often reflects their parents' attitudes and lifestyles. It is, therefore, advice to the adults in society to live exemplary lives.

- The arm and hand.

These signify that the arm and hand are meant for work and not for mischief. This is advice given to idle persons. Thus, the hand is a symbol of hard work. So when individual imbibe the import of such a symbol, they eschew idleness and embrace hard work.

- The Star

When the fisherman loses his way at sea, he uses the stars at night to find his direction. The star is, therefore, a symbol of hope.

The next set of tools in the repertoire of the indigenous therapist are folksongs

### 6.4 Folksongs

Folksong is one of the most famous ways directing individuals towards understanding acceptable norms in the society and change. From birth through to adulthood, the Akan people have been known to have influenced their younger generations through folksongs. Folksongs are those songs that are sung on special occasions especially during story telling. They often depicted the consequences of laziness, greed, jealousy, and wickedness. Below is a popular Akan (Fante) folksong sung to guide and counsel girls who are being introduced into adulthood. A typical Fante folksong is illustrated below:

*Esi ei!!! (Esi-Akan name for a girl born on sunday)*

*m'enyɛ ewi ooo (Don't become a thief )*

*ewi nnyɛ ooo (stealing is wrong)*

*Esi ei!!! (Esi)*

*m'enyɛ ewi ooo (Don't become a thief )*

*Nana Nyame woama wo nsa (Almighty God has graced you with hands)*

*Fa kɛyɛ edwuma (Go and work with it)*

*na sɛ Nyame yɛ adom a (and by God's grace)*

*ɛdze ato adze ara dze ayɛ woara wo (you will be able to buy items for yourself)*

*Esi ei!!! (Esi)*

*m'enyɛ ewi ooo (Don't become a thief )*

*ewi nnyɛ ooo (stealing is not wrong)*

The folksong above is sung to prepare the young girl for her future. The song encourages her to be independent by working hard to earn a living. It also advises her against unacceptable social vices specifically stealing. More importantly, the song seeks to change the young girl, and make her an individual who is capable of making productive decisions in her community.

We shall now discuss whether Indigenous guidance and counselling possesses and advantages or otherwise.

## 7. WHAT ARE THE MERITS OF INDIGENOUS GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING?

Firstly, indigenous guidance and counselling, there is nothing like lack of counsellors because all experienced adults can offer counselling. Counsellors were present, always ready to be of assistance to another in need. In this regard the paucity of assistance within the indigenous society is virtually non-existent. Consequently the occurrence of issues like suicidal ideations, stress and generalized anxieties among individuals are virtually non-existent in typical indigenous Ghanaian societies

Secondly, indigenous guidance and counselling can lead to harmony, and co-habitation of individuals and groups. For example, the problems of divorce, quarrels and deviant behaviours in the society are minimized since members of the society were taught communalism. Consequently, individuals 'were there for each other'. Like the Gas normally say "gbomo nyemi ji gbomo" and "moko sane ji moko no" meaning a "friend in need is a friend indeed"

Additionally, the practice of indigenous guidance and counselling can be seen as preserves the natural resources and cultural heritage of the indigenes. For example, it is a taboo to go fishing on Tuesdays and this helps to replenish the fish stocks. In addition, the festivals, proverbs, songs and dance helped to preserve the culture, traditions and history of indigenous societies. This is especially poignant when these cultural aspects are used to inculcate acceptable and productive societal behaviours in individuals, who in turn become useful members of the society.

Yet again, the practice of indigenous guidance and counselling is holistic in nature. It is done to cover all aspects of one's life (physical, social, economic, psychological) of the individual and seeks to address all human problems in life. Consequently the individual domiciled in the indigenous society seem to be able to have the peace of mind, to pursue other interests, with the knowledge that help is readily available should he need one. Since the process does not require any specialist training, counsellors or any significant others assume the role of therapists, and provide the needed help, when required.

Indeed indigenous counsellors often have foreknowledge of the clients and their problems even before they come into therapy. They are therefore, not usually taken by surprise by the problems presented before them because the counsellors live in the same environment as the clients. Presenting problem is therefore, easily verifiable. Moreover, the needed resources (human, material, experiences and expertise) for therapy are almost always available allowing practitioners to reach as many people as possible.

More often than not, indigenous guidance and counseling involves more than one counsellor attending to one or more clients. This is evident in the case of the immediate and extended families. The council of elders assumes the role of counsellors. These people brainstorm the issues at stake and come up with a solution that is usually accepted for the individual(s) in question. Thus the saying, "etso kome eya adjena" literally meaning "two heads are better than one". Even though one may allude to the fact that confidentiality may be compromised in indigenous societies in the Ghanaian ecosystem, this is far from the truth. This is because community members are adept at keeping family secrets, since there was always the sceptre of a punishment or a curse on the revealer of such

family discussions. Hence individuals were amenable to multiple counsellors dealing with their problems, knowing that their issues were safe with such counsellors.

Finally, the mode of communication (the language) used is native to the community. This is an essential feature of indigenous counselling. For instance, illiteracy does not constitute a serious obstacle in indigenous counselling, since the practitioners are usually experts in the lingua franca of the community. Again, individual clients are better able to describe their problems in a very relaxed atmosphere knowing the therapist is sure to understand and appreciate his/her issues. This engenders a faster therapeutic process, as well as an efficient problem resolution regime. We shall now turn our attention to some demerits of indigenous guidance and counseling.

## **8. DEMERITS OF INDIGENOUS GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING**

Indigenous guidance and counselling is usually provided in the form of advice- giving and sharing of wisdom, which to all intents and purposes cannot be considered adequate. For instance, giving advice often promoted a dependency syndrome where the client depended on the elderly and their advice. This is largely subjective and based on the counsellor's experience. And when the advice given is wrong and compounds the situation, there are no early warning systems or remediation mechanisms, to prevent the negative impact of such advice. Additionally, the fear of losing future counsellors stifles initiative and make people timid, thereby further perpetuation the counsellor-dependent syndrome among indigenes.

Having an intimate foreknowledge of the client and his problems prepares the counsellor to enter into the counselling situations with personal biases. Problems are therefore often not tackled from the personal point of view of the client. Such a counsellor assumes an all- knowing position. This is especially associated with elders whose ages are normally associated with wisdom, as well as priests and native doctors who are thought to possess super-natural powers. Solutions offered by such individuals are often highly prescriptive such that the client cannot accept responsibility for their successes or failure. This goes against on fundamental philosophical foundation of counselling which inter alia posits '*with freedom comes*

*responsibility. If man is to have freedom of choice and be able to decide what he will be, he must take responsibility for his choosing and what he is.*

Finally, the people who assume the role of counsellors in indigenous settings have no specialized training in the principles and practice of guidance and counselling. They therefore offer assistance based on their subjective personal or various experiences. Such experiences cannot be congruent with the subjective personal experience of the client. Consequently, without the basic understanding of the principles of human behaviour and the practices of counselling, the counsellor's efforts may in fact be counterproductive in enabling the client to overcome his problems.

It is instructive to point out that in spite of these drawbacks, indigenous guidance and counselling in the African and Ghanaian contexts have some contributions to make towards the practice of Guidance and Counselling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Like Western Guidance and Counselling, Indigenous Guidance and Counselling in Africa in general and Ghana in particular seeks to help man to become useful to himself and his fellows though their approaches to achieving this aim is quite different. It is for this reason that the writer believes that both practices can adopt skills and techniques from each other to make the helping process more efficient, especially within the African setting, owing to the unique socio-cultural and politico-economic nuances. For instance, Makinde [21] explains that the following Indigenous practices can be incorporated into Western therapy;

First is Invitation: Owing to the fact that indigenous African practitioners may have have the correct concept of the stresses, anxieties and general despondency that may bedevil many an indigenous client, they know when to invite such individuals with the aim of assisting them solve their problems. Modern western counsellors can no longer wait in their offices and always expect clients with problems to always come to them. They, too, can be proactive in this regard, especially when dealing with shy and reserved clients.

Again, indigenous practitioners' rich knowledge of their clients' history and background allows

them to approach clients' problems with intimacy. They spend longer hours with them. They do not operate on specific timetables as modern counsellors do. This allows client to do an initial full disclosure, which goes a long way in speeding up the therapeutic process. Modern therapeutic practice can glean from this intimacy labyrinth embedded in the African indigenous therapeutic practice.

Yet again the use of local language and tools like folksongs, riddles, proverbs, lyrics and aphorisms employed by indigenous Ghanaian therapists in the therapeutic process can be emulated by modern therapists. In this regard multicultural counselling should be a sine qua non for counselling programmes at every.

Again modern art therapy can incorporate many of the Adinkra symbols alluded to earlier, as well as culturally specific songs, proverbs, riddles etc, in their daily practice. This may go along way in assisting clients release some of the tensions they carry as the come into therapy.

Additionally, the gaps in the practice of indigenous guidance and counselling have come because of its comparison with the practice of formalized guidance and counselling. This calls for the need to have Indigenous practitioners being trained either formally or non-formally in view of modifying and revising some aspects of the practice that is obsolete in this contemporary time. By so doing the trainers of trainees need to be circumspect in their quest to modify those aspects in order not to throw away the core values and morals of the society or the cultural heritage of a particular indigenous society.

Finally, even though formal training is important in the therapeutic ecosystem, care must be taken since certain cultural practices such as the rites of passage, celebration of festivals and enstoolment of chiefs among others are vital in integrating the age-old concept of values and morals as well as the ethics of indigenous guidance and counselling in indigenous societies. In the event of the influx of technology and the dynamism of society, practitioners need to be abreast with the current trend of issues in order to be effective in their assistance to society.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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