

POVERTY AND SLOTHFULNESS: A READING OF PROVERBS 6:6-11 IN THE GHANAIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT: Poverty is inimical to human progress. It is pervasive and wreaks damage in societies. Poverty in Africa is particularly alarming, since the continent is home to a sizeable number of the world's poor. Yet talking about poverty in Africa is contestable, especially when it is about its causes. However, ascertaining the causes of poverty is a positive step in addressing this menace. Apart from the ideological character of many of the discussions on the causes of poverty in Africa, many times, discussions are carried out in the ivory towers of scholars, far removed from the understanding of many ordinary people. Too often then, what ordinary Africans think and the explanations that can be gleaned from their cultural traditions are sidelined. To effectively combat poverty, however, we need to approach the task of delineating its causes from a holistic perspective, one that takes seriously mainstream factors as well as what happens at the margins. One such cause which needs consideration is slothfulness. This paper looks at slothfulness, from the perspective of intra-cultural criticism, as a contributory factor to poverty in Africa and Ghana in particular. On this basis, the paper reads Proverbs 6:6-11 as an illustration of one of the ways ancient Israel dealt with the problem of poverty resulting from slothful attitude. It concludes that the text and indeed a number of proverbial sayings in the Old Testament cohere with Ghanaian proverbial tradition to identify slothful attitude as a promoter of poverty.

Introduction

The term 'poverty' is difficult to understand. It is a highly contestable term because of its ideological nature.¹

¹Michael Noble, Andrew Ratcliffe and Gemma Wright "Conceptualizing, Defining and Measuring Poverty in South Africa: An Argument for a Consensual Approach" (Oxford: CASAP, 2004), 3; See also P. Alcock, *Understanding Poverty* (Basingstoke: McMillan, 1993), 3.

Due to this ideological nature, a universal concept of poverty is difficult to obtain. Nonetheless, at its simplest, poverty always refers to a basic state of lack. MacPherson and Silburn as well as Ammah see the poor as those who face great difficulties and are unable to feed and clothe themselves properly and risk death as a consequence.² The poor also find their state as a perpetual one: one that extends the threat of survival beyond just the poor person to that of his/her immediate dependants.

Though a single satisfactory and convincing method of setting a poverty line that is 'objective' and appropriate for all purposes is not yet to emerge, it is important to enquire into the problem of poverty in specific contexts like Ghana. One important step in this direction is the search for the causes of poverty. The importance of the question, what causes poverty, lies in the fact that it shapes the kind of responses directed at it.³ Searching for the causes of poverty, however, is itself another highly contestable engagement. Two main approaches have characterized such an engagement in Africa in the past.

The first approach dealt with the problem of poverty from an extra-cultural perspective. This approach posited that Africa's underdevelopment was the direct result of machinations of external agents (mainly Western countries and their agents) through their imperialistic actions in the pre-colonial times, resulting in colonization and which now manifest in neo-colonial forms. The prevalence of poverty, accordingly, was the consequence of these external agents and their actions. Evidently, Africans and people of African descent mainly held such views.⁴

The second approach, on the other hand, prevailed among mainly Westerners. From an intra-cultural perspective, proponents of this approach looked within African societies to explain the problem of poverty. One dominant explanation given was that many African societies remained as traditional societies

²Michael Noble, Andrew Ratcliffe and Gemma Wright "Conceptualizing, Defining and Measuring Poverty in South Africa: An Argument for a Consensual Approach" (Oxford: CASAP, 2004), 3; See also P. Alcock, *Understanding Poverty* (Basingstoke: McMillan, 1993), 3.

³Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 12.

⁴Cf. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 1982).

(under-developed) because they lacked the needed scientific and technological advancement required to 'take off' for the much needed development. This lack was attributed to a number of factors such as cultural and religious belief systems inimical to modernity. Ultimately then, Africans themselves were held accountable for their poverty. It needs to be pointed out that such intra-cultural criticism, again, singled out African leaders as significant contributors to the poor performance of African countries.⁵

The two approaches above give exclusive explanations on the problem of poverty in Africa, revealing the ideological nature of such discussions in the past.

While an intra-cultural criticism characterized the approach of the West, an extra-cultural criticism typified the approach of Africans.⁶ Both parties, accordingly, put the blame at the door step of the other. These simplistic approaches, however, did not augur well for the goal of dealing with poverty. Today, these approaches are being replaced by more critical ones which take cognizance of the complex nature of the problem of poverty. What this means is that there have emerged a number of Africans who having in mind the contributions of external factors, are also critical of what goes on within African societies which contribute to poverty. As Africans, they provide a critical self-understanding of their own situations.⁷ Self criticism is the key issue here. Its importance lies in the fact that Africans begin to see how they themselves in some ways contribute to poverty.

⁵See Oludenga Adesida and Arunma Oteh, eds., *African Voices and Visions* (Stockholm: The Nordic Africa Institute, 2001) which features collection of articles from young Africans expressing their views on the problems in Africa and their visions for Africa. A number of these articles try to give various perspectives on the causes of poverty on the continent. Also see Igwe, S. C. *How Africa Underdeveloped Africa* (Port Harcourt, 2010). This book provides a self-criticism of what goes on within Africa which contributes to poverty. It mainly approaches this self-criticism from the perspective of leadership and their role in corruption.

⁶Tirfe Mammo, *The Paradox of Africa's Poverty: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge, Traditional Practices and Local Institutions – The Case of Ethiopia* (Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 1999).

⁷David H. Kodia, *Poverty in Grace: Social Responsibility of the Church & Society in War* (Nairobi, Uzima Publishing House, 2005), 26.

Such a quest has led to criticism of certain cultural practices and beliefs systems. Kodia who believes in a holistic approach to the problem of poverty explains that any attempt to expound on the causes of poverty in Africa must “take cognizance of people’s spirituality, their politics, economy, environment and culture.”⁸ On cultural factors, he points out that some cultural practices which are dominant in African societies are detrimental to economic growth. He identified laziness and dependency syndrome as examples of the unproductive cultural practices which have to be put away.⁹ Kimilike shares similar ideas when he deals with the notions of poverty in traditional African societies. He points out that traditional African people believed that poverty resulted from factors such as deprivation of farm lands, childlessness, and laziness. On the issue of laziness he writes;

Finally poverty is caused by laziness, idleness and frustration.... Lazy behaviour may comprise an unwillingness to engage in productive activity and an evasion of as much work as possible. A lazy type person works under the stress of necessity and tries to make his or her living from hard-working people by continual begging, stealing and other fraudulent means.¹⁰

By pointing out the role of laziness and dependency, Kodia and Kimilike do not argue that these two totally explain the presence of poverty in Africa. Instead, their observation confirms the complex nature of poverty and calls Africans to reflect critically on their way of life. Again, to identify slothful attitude as a contributory factor to the presence of poverty in Africa is not to deny the role of external agents such as Western countries and their multilateral institutions or the role played by some African leaders and their incompetency. These perspectives continue to be of major significance, but there is the need to pay attention to what

⁸See Oludenga Adesida and Arunma Oteh, eds., *African Voices and Visions*.

⁹Kodia, *Poverty in Grace*, 27

¹⁰Lechion Peter Kimilike, *Poverty in the Book of Proverbs: An African Transformational Hermeneutic of Proverbs on Poverty* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 109-110.

happens at the margins (especially at the individual level), by exploring the worldviews of the ordinary people. This means that what the people themselves also have to say on the causes of poverty is crucial. The cultural traditions of the people contain valuable information on what they believe are the causes of poverty within their societies.¹¹

This paper examines Prov. 6:6-11 which deals with how ancient Israel understood slothfulness and its relation to poverty. The text will be read from the Ghanaian context with the aim of exploring how it resonates with Ghanaian cultural understanding of slothful attitude and its relation to poverty.

The goal of this paper is to put into focus the socio-economic problem of poverty resulting from slothfulness within the Ghanaian society. An exercise of this nature will help shape positive values for society's welfare, since many Ghanaians read the Bible to inform their attitudes.¹² This means that the Ghanaian context provides both the critical resources for biblical interpretation and the subject of interpretation.

Rhetorical criticism is the exegetical method used in reading the text. This method concern itself with the way the language of texts is deployed to convey meaning. Its interests are in the devices of writing, in metaphor and parallelism, in the poetic

¹¹Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 84-85. He points out that in a Tanzanian research, for instance, it came out that while the indigenes thought that laziness is a contributory factor to poverty in their society, the World Vision, a NGO, working to eradicate poverty amongst these people thought otherwise.

¹²Gerald West, "Interrogating the Comparative Paradigm in African Biblical Scholarship" in *African and Europeans Readers of the Bible Dialogue*, ed. Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 37-41. The validity for Africans scholars to read the bible with their life situations lies in the fact that in Africa the bible is a living book. Many people shape their lives with its message; Hans De Wit, "Exegesis and Contextuality: Happy Marriage, Divorce, or Living (Apart) Together?" in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue*, ed. Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 14-16. He on his part hints on the decline of the influence of the Bible in European societies as a contributory factor to Europeans reading the bible with less interest in addressing life situations.

structures and stylistic figures. The method allows us to examine the composition of the text as well as explore its persuasive prowess.¹³

Before we engage in the exegetical task, we shall first deal with Ghanaian wisdom tradition. This part is to serve as the hermeneutical framework for the text. The reading of the text will then follow, carried out in dialogue form to allow an interaction between the text and the Ghanaian context. Such an interaction has the potential of generating a contextually relevant meaning.¹⁴ Finally, we will conclude by drawing implications for the Ghanaian society.

Ghanaian Wisdom Tradition: A Resource for Addressing the Problem of Poverty

The Ghanaian society is endowed with valuable indigenous knowledge. This knowledge base is becoming increasingly important in current theories of development as scholars introduce indigenous knowledge into mainstream development theories.¹⁵ Indigenous knowledge comes in many forms, and wisdom traditions feature dominantly. Gyekye conceptualizes wisdom in Africa as “the ability to think out ways of making success in one’s personal life – to analyze and solve the practicable problems of life – and the ability to pay reflective attention to fundamental principles underlying human life and experience.”¹⁶ Such an insight is needed to allow one negotiate the contradictions of human life. Among the Akan, wisdom (*nyansa*) is the most valuable asset in the society.¹⁷

¹³Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

¹⁴Cf. B. A. Ntreh, “Towards an African Biblical Hermeneutics,” *AJT* 19 (1990)

¹⁵Cf. Stephen B. Kendie and Bernard Y. Guri, “Indigenous Institutions and Contemporary Development in Ghana: Potentials and Challenges”, in *Traditional Knowledge in Policy and Practice: Approaches to Development and Human Well-Being* (United Nations University Press, 2010).

¹⁶Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 137.

¹⁷Kofi Asare Opoku, *Hearing and Keeping Akan Proverbs* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1997), xix.

Ghanaian indigenous knowledge is, therefore, invaluable sources of ideas and motivations for socio-economic transformation. Proverbs are a dominant part of the wisdom traditions. Proverbs do not only serve as a tool for approaching life, but more importantly, they serve as vehicles for stimulating hearers to act wisely. The transformative character of proverbs is seen in their authoritative framework. This is conspicuously illustrated in the exordium of Akan proverbs: *our ancestors/elders say*. The exordium is a gateway for comprehending the philosophy of proverbs and their usage by the people. Appealing to the ancestors or elders gives “power or authority to what is being said.”¹⁸ The authority, as Opoku explains, springs from the reverence given to old age, as well as, the ancestors and their position as transmitters of ancient wisdom.

Reading Prov. 6:6-11

- v. 6 Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.
- v. 7 Without having any chief, officer or ruler,
- v. 8 she prepares her food in summer, and gathers her sustenance in harvest.
- v. 9 How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?
- v. 10 A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest,
- v. 11 and poverty will come upon you like a vagabond, and want like an armed man.

(RSV Translation)

- In order to gain a better understanding of the text, we need first to point out the assumptions or philosophy of the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs is part of the wisdom tradition in the Hebrew Bible. Scholars consider it as “conservative” wisdom.¹⁹

¹⁸Opoku, *Akan Proverbs*, xix.

¹⁹See Kathleen A. Farmer, “The Wisdom Books (Jobs, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes),” in *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues* (Kentucky: Westminster Knox, 1998), 133-134.

This means the book operates on the assumption of old wisdom which goes that the cosmos contains all the rules of God. The role of humans, accordingly, is to discern the cosmic order, apply it and achieve happiness.²⁰ To work is not only important because it gives a sense of purpose to human life. More than this, to work is a way of maintaining the cosmic order. Remaining idle is an act of folly: it disrupts this divine order. This is because the consequence of an inactive life is to lack or be poor, a state which defaces society. In ancient Israel, poverty was seen as a menace. In the Hebrew Bible, there is a clear indication of worry expressed over the presence of poverty in the Israelite society. In the prophetic books, for instance, Yahweh shows his concern for the poor, who are almost always the victims of corruption and injustice (cf. Amos 2:7, Micah 3:1-3, and Jeremiah 2:34).

The book of proverbs, as a wisdom literature, on the other hand, acknowledges that some poverty situations are self imposed; they result from imprudent lifestyles (cf. Prov. 14:23; 20:4; 20:13). Such perspectives on poverty are significant because the Hebrew Bible does not approach the problem of poverty from a single perspective. Instead, the Hebrew Bible acknowledges the complexity of the problem of poverty and approaches it as such. As will be demonstrated below, the Hebrew Bible reserves terms which distinguish poverty due to political and economic exploitation from poverty as a result of the imprudent life of an individual.

The text, Prov. 6:6-11, is part of the instruction genre of the book of Proverbs (Prov. 1-9).²¹ Michael Fox categorizes the instructions into two; “lectures” and “interludes”. The text falls under the interlude. According to Fox, the block, Prov. 6:1-19, is unique among the interludes.²² This block sets itself apart from the other four blocks of interludes which are united by the fact that they all “praise wisdom and share an unusual idea of its nature.” Prov. 6:1-19,²³ on its part, is a miscellany made up of epigrams on follies and evils.

²⁰ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 491-495.

²¹ Cf. W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, OTL (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970).

²² Michael V. Fox, “Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9” JBL 116 (1997), 613-615.

²³ Fox, “Proverbs 1-9”, 614.

The text reads best as a satire.²⁴ It ridicules slothfulness and promotes diligence. This is aptly captured in the structure of the text:

a). Prov. 6: 6-8: the ant and its way of life as wisdom

b). Prov. 6:9-11: the sluggard and his way of life as folly.

The binary form of the text illustrates that two actions are pitched against each other – industriousness and slothfulness. The first part of the text (Prov. 6:6-8) is itself a ternary. Its structure is as follows:

a¹: v.6: the claim that the ant and its way is wisdom

b¹: v.7: the details for the claim – no chief, officer and ruler

c¹: v.8: the closing – gains of the ant (abundant food)

The second part (Prov. 6:9-11) parallels the first as its structure below demonstrates.

a²: v.9: the slumberous state of the sluggard

b²: v.10: the expatiation of this state – little sleep, little slumber, little folding of arms

c²: v.11: the closing – poverty of the sluggard

Predominantly used, the ternary style demonstrates the simplicity in the way the message is conveyed.

The text is arranged in an order in which there is logical progression of ideas. The first steps (a¹ and a²) begin with a claim on the ways of the subjects (the ant and the sluggard). The second (b¹ and b²) provide a substantiation of the claim. The third and final steps (c¹ and c²) give the conclusion that is the result or consequence of the respective actions and inactions of subjects.

In a¹ the sage is preoccupied with establishing what constitutes a wise action. The ultimate goal is to cause the addressee, the sluggard (*tseḥ*), to take the right choice. This explains the predominance of the imperatives ‘go’ (*halak*), ‘see’ (*ra’ah*) and

²⁴Crawford. H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 122.

‘bé wise’ (*hakam*) (v.6). The vivacious ant is projected on the mind’s screen of the sluggard through the inventive use of metaphor. Cleverly, the sage uses an everyday occurrence as the source of inspiration for the sluggard. In Ghanaian wisdom tradition, such creativity combined with purposeful intent as demonstrated by the Israelite sage is discernible. Ghanaian proverbs are full of images that draw on everyday experiences and encounters. The African imaginative prowess comes to the fore here. With a plethora of animals personified into wisdom characters, these sayings come as nuggets for the discerning hearers. A popular example is the spider known as *Ananse* in Akan folklores who represents clever ways of negotiating one’s way in life.²⁵

In b¹, the sage points to the sluggard the basis for the ant’s astute ways. The ant has no ‘chief’ (*patsin*) ‘officer’ (*soter*) and ‘ruler’ (*moshel*), yet it reasons well to engage in a purposeful activity. Self motivation, therefore, is the basis for the ant’s industriousness. Here, the sage is not privy to modern scientific information which has established that ants have elaborate social organizational systems. The concern for the sage, however, is that certain elements within human society fail to capitalize on opportunities which a society with its structures including leaders offer. It is only a fool whose eyes are always closed to the stimuli in society which push one to be purposeful in one’s activity. In order to convince the sluggard of the imprudent choice of not working, the sage employs the act-consequence tenet for his goal.

The act-consequence tenet comes out clearly in c¹. It concludes the first part of the sage’s message and serves as the climax for the first part of the text. The sage wants to point out explicitly to the sluggard that it is because of the industriousness of the ant which secures its food. For the sage to repeat in a synonymous fashion the result of the ant’s choice shows his strong appeal to the act-consequence tenet (v.8).

²⁵C. A. Ackah, *Akan Ethics* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1988), 61-68.

This tenet is, itself, a characteristic of wisdom literature (cf. Prov. 10:14; 12:11; 14:23), and mainly serves as one of wisdom's rational appeal to human conscience for certain right action. In this specific case, the sage wants the sluggard to engage in purposeful activities, one that involves working to produce something in order to avoid poverty.

This idea of self motivation and diligence as well as the act-consequence tenet coheres with Ghanaian ethos. The practice of greetings among the Akan reveals their work ethic; one that promotes diligence.²⁶ When the Akan person sees another in the act of working, he greets *eduma oo!* (how is work) and the person working responds *eduma ye* (work is good). Ghanaian proverbs, also, affirm this work ethic. For instance the saying that, *Nobody cultivates his farm the same way as he courts a woman*²⁷ demonstrates the need to place work above pleasure.²⁸ The Ewe proverb, *Afo nafe ale (vi) o* (the foot that stays at home brings in no profit),²⁹ promotes hard-work as the means to avoiding poverty. Equally the Fante proverb *Abrabo ho nhomahoma no widze anatsenantsew tsetse mu* (to succeed in life, one must be up and doing)³⁰ as well as *ekoho a ekowoade do* (if you sit down you sit on your own success) reveal the act-consequence tenet. The industry of members of a society, in this case, perhaps, is the single most important ingredient for a society's survival.

So far, the sage has spelt out what wisdom is in the first part of the text. He tacitly uses the style of contrast to make obvious what constitutes wisdom in the second part of the text. Interestingly, unlike a¹ where a pool of imperatives surrounded the sluggard (v. 6), in a², a pile of interrogatives dominate (v.9). The opening clause asks how long the sluggard will lie, and the closing demands when the sluggard will rise up. The questions 'how' and 'when' are linked to the central verbs 'lie/sleep' (*sakav*) and 'rise' (*qom*). These questions reveal a note of disbelief from the sage.

²⁶ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 102

²⁷ The proverbs from Gyekye are already in the English translation – *African cultural Values*, 103.

²⁸ Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 103.

²⁹ In N. K. Dzobo, *African Proverbs: The Moral Value of Ewe Proverbs*, Vol. II (Proverb No. 125) (Accra: Bureau of Ghana Languages, 1997), 39.

³⁰ J. Y. Bannerman, *Mfantse-Akan Mbeusem: Ghanaian Proverbs Translated into English*, (Proverb No. 25) (Accra: Ghana Publishing Company, 1974), 13

If one sleeps (*sakav*), one is supposed to rise (*qom*). This unfortunately is not the case with the sluggard. The sluggard's refusal to follow the natural order, therefore, is a foolish choice. For the sage, the acts of sleeping and rising are at the heart of being human. If this cycle gets broken, one's humanity then hangs in the balance.

By asking 'how' and 'when', accordingly, the sage shows the nexus between sleeping and rising and how they are linked to human's industriousness. The strong inclination for an active life fits well in the Ghanaian socio-cultural ethos. Among the Akan, the act of greeting, again, implicitly portrays the wisdom behind humans' daily life cycle. For instance, in the morning, an Akan greets *maakye*. *Akye* means 'life', and *memawo akye* means 'I am giving you life'. This greeting is a reminder that any time one sleeps, the person is closer to death: that is a state of inaction (the Akans' say *innyim owu a hwe nda* – if you do not know about death, liken it to sleep). Therefore, if one wakes up from sleep, one is back to life. Similar to the sage's philosophical understanding, the Akan view the act of sleeping as an inactive moment in humans' daily life cycle; one that is important because it follows series of actions carried out during the day. To rise from sleep, on the other hand, is a contrast to the act of sleeping: unlike sleeping where an Akan considers as pseudo-death (a state of inaction), waking up from sleep is to be back to life because of the daylight, a life of activities, which will eventually lead back to sleeping/resting.

In b², we see the disposition of the sluggard. He evidently has his bearing wrong. Instead of being active during the daytime, he prefers to remain inactive by sleeping. This is brought up by the sluggard's repetition of the word *me'at* (little). *Me'at* is used attributively by the sage to qualify the three reasons the sluggard gives for his inaction; "little sleep", "little slumber" and "little folding of arms". By repeating *me'at* (little), the sluggard believes that he is engaged in a momentary rest (v.10). However, this momentary rest turns out to be a perpetual one. The sage through the rhetoric of *Me'at* reveals an entrenched character of sluggards as they try to rationalize their slothful attitude (cf. 22:13; 26:13)

Self delusion is present here. McKane believes that the evasive tactics are used by the sluggard "to hide the truth from himself that he has a character defect and is a kind of cripple."³¹

Sheer laziness clearly characterizes the sluggard's life. This is why the sage does not tarry to give the consequence of the sluggard's choice in c² (v.11). Two main rhetorical acts illustrate the inventiveness on the part of the sage. First is the appropriate selection of words to convey the crux of his message. The terms *re'sh* (poverty) and *makhsor* (want) are two of the several words used to refer to the poor and the state of poverty in the Hebrew Bible (HB).

These words have strong presence in wisdom literature. The word *re'sh* appears twenty two times in the HB with seventeen appearances in wisdom text while the word *makhsor* appears thirteen times in the HB with eight appearances alone in the book of Proverbs and the rest in the Psalter, Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History.³² Frick explains that these terms are used in the wisdom books to refer to one who is in a state of poverty due to laziness. They deviate from other terms for the poor in the HB such as *'ani* and *'ebyon* which refer to poverty due to economic exploitation.³³ Significantly, by the use of these terms, the sage emphatically dwells on poverty which is self imposed: the sluggard brings it upon himself due to laziness. This insight reinforces the idea that humans determine their own fate through their actions. The act-consequence tenet of the book of Proverbs is evident here, resonating with another Akan saying that *Dzea idua no onoara na ibotwa* (It is what you sow that you will reap).

The second rhetorical tools in c² are the imagery of personification and simile. They aptly appear in two clauses of synonymous parallelism in the last verse. The first clause personifies 'poverty' (*re'sh*) as 'a vagabond'. And the second strengthens the message by personifying 'want' (*makhsor*) into

³¹McKane, *Proverbs*, 596.

³²Frank S. Frick, "CUI BONO? – History in the Service of Political Nationalism: The Deuteronomistic History as Political Propaganda," in *Semia* 66. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 85-88.

³³Frick, CUI BONO?, 85-88.

'an armed man'. Personification enlivens the message in order to give a picture of the damaging effect of poverty. This kind of poverty is shameful as one invites it upon oneself.

The state of poverty, for the sage, is a dreadful thing; it is an experience which any wise individual tries to avoid. In line with the tenet of the book of Proverbs, avoiding poverty is foremost an individual affair.³⁴ Rylaarsdam points this out when he writes, "... on a strongly individualistic basis human misfortune is considered avoidable."³⁵ This understanding, however, does not mean the effect of poverty is felt individually. On the contrary, ancient Israel like many African societies was highly communalistic, thus people were dependents on others.

What this means is that poverty did have a ripple effect, since the level of interdependence was high. This is the more reason why for the sage, an individual's refusal to engage in a purposeful activity is outrageous. Reiterer says this of the sluggard which mirrors the frustration of the sage;

All in all, the word [sluggard] conveys a strongly pejorative sense: it is not simply a superficially derogatory term for an idler, but a concentrated expression denoting someone who, through laziness both endangers his own well-being, indeed his very life and existence, and exerts a baneful influence on society: "as to the social aspect of the vice of laziness, a lazy person is a repugnant creature."³⁶

Evidently, the sluggard's imprudent choices transcend beyond individual repercussions. In a communalistic society, where the culture of inter-dependence is high, some elements in the society would want to take advantage and through that submerge their inventiveness. In line with this, there is the belief that a communalistic society lacks individual entrepreneurship.

³⁴C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books: The Wisdom and Songs of Israel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 22. He observes that ancient Israelite wisdom was mainly an individual affair and not corporate one.

³⁵J. C. Rylaarsdam, "The Proverbs," in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (Nairobi: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1962), 448.

³⁶Reiterer, "āšam" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 11, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. John T. Wills (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 285.

However, as Gyekye argues from the African perspective, the communal life in Africa does not negate individual enterprise. African social life has in-built systems for individual entrepreneurship, such as the proverbial traditions.³⁷ For instance, the Twi saying *aniha mu nni hwee se ohia* (there is nothing in laziness except poverty) and the Fante saying *anoma nntu a obua da* (a bird that fails to fly sleeps hungry) promotes individual industriousness. Ancient Israel and African societies know that when the social system of inter-dependence is abused to become over-dependence, it will be a disincentive for the society. Proverbs and other linguistic structures (short stories) are, therefore, put in place to confront and counter such negative attitudes.

Implication of Prov. 6:6-11 for the Ghanaian Society

Ancient Israelite wisdom is a pragmatic reflection of human life. Unlike the Torah and the Prophets, where God prescribes what constitutes the best human behavior, wisdom literature focuses on humanity's own self-understanding of life and how life's goal can be achieved. Von Rad is right in positing that proverbial wisdom was important "for decisions of daily life and thus for orientation in the thick of everyday activity ...".³⁸

Accordingly, wisdom in ancient Israel is primarily a quest to maximize human life. Such a quest should be the concern of every member of the society because every human life deserves fulfillment. Wisdom in many respects is also directed towards a social goal. Societal values such as harmony, cooperation, diligence and truthfulness are championed through wisdom sayings. Prov. 6:6-11 dwells on the societal goal of diligence which is one of wisdom ways in combating poverty.³⁹

Prov. 6:6-11 admonishes a lazy person to be up and doing. It does this by promoting the value of diligence over and against slothfulness. As demonstrated in the reading above, the Ghanaian society also abhors laziness and promotes diligence as an

³⁷Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 149-162

³⁸Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 26.

³⁹The book of Proverbs also talks about doing away with injustice as a way to combat poverty (cf. Prov. 13:23; Prov. 22:16)

important ingredient for an individual's welfare and that of society in general. The text reaffirms this Ghanaian value and calls attention to the prevalence of poverty within the society. Again, the text invites us to think through the problem of poverty in an innovative way. Several critical issues emanate from the text and deserve to be isolated for consideration

The need for self criticism or intra-cultural criticism is an important step in dealing with social vices which threaten common societal goals. This is amply testified by the sage's blatant confrontation of the sluggard. The addressee is called a sluggard on two occasions without the mincing of words (v. 6 and v. 9). Again the sage indirectly labels the addressee as foolish (v. 1). These indicators point to a sense of criticalness on the part of the sage. The serious tone is affirmed by the authoritative attitude of the sage. The cluster of imperatives in v. 6 affirms this authoritative style. Ghanaians, on their part, need to embrace self criticism as a way to confront certain cultural practices such as laziness and dependency syndrome.

Social organization should lead to a purposeful life of individuals within a society. This point emerges from the false impression of the sage that though ants lack leaders, they are wise in their acts. Clearly, the sage expects that humans with the benefit of leadership should act in a manner which reflects what true leadership should be. This is a call to African leaders to provide the kind of leadership which motivates people to be industrious. A slothful attitude is addictive. This truth is revealed in the continuous repetition of *me'at* 'little' by the sluggard. While the slothful attitude of the sluggard is motionless, today's slothful attitudes take place in subtle manner, such as watching movies, addiction to video games, addiction to mobile phones and their features such as Facebook and Twitter, etc.

There is the need for one to be discerning to be able to deal with these behaviours which have become entrenched with many Ghanaians, especially the youth.

Some poverty situations are self-imposed. This is the truth and wisdom the sage puts across. As pointed out, the choice of the words *re'sh* 'poverty' and *makhsor* 'want' illustrate this fact. Such a revelation is important in dealing with a complex problem like poverty. Indeed there is the need to identify all the causes so that there can be directed measures taken for each respective cause.

Conclusion

The book of Proverbs is a fountain of ancient Israelite wisdom tradition. The book aims at equipping readers with nuggets of wisdom to aid them as they negotiate their way through the journeys of life. In general, wisdom aims to empower individuals to avoid life-negating forces and instead search for life-affirming ones. The text, Prov. 6:6-11, dwells particularly on the social problem of poverty and proposes one way of dealing with it. It conveys the simple message that one has a role to play in determining his/her fate with respect to poverty. If one wants to avoid poverty, one is to be industrious. Though this view on poverty seems quite simplistic, there is wide support of this stance in many cultures. Among the Akans of Ghana, this caution permeates their various wisdom traditions. Many proverbs and stories echo the lesson that laziness leads to poverty. Prov. 6:6-11 together with Akan wisdom traditions caution, therefore, that the contribution of slothfulness to the problem of poverty should be critically looked at.

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