Beyond the Text: An Akan Perspective on Oral Literature and Literature as a Human Phenomenon

Comfort Bonsu[1], Anthony Boateng Owusu[2]

[1]Faculty of Ghanaian Languages, College of Languages Education, University of Education, Winneba (Ajumako Campus), Ghana

[2]Department of Languages, University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development, Kumasi, Ghana

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000213

Received: 09 October 2026; Accepted: 14 October 2026; Published: 31 October 2026

ABSTRACT

In many Western traditions, literature is equated with writing, a view that has marginalised the oral verbal arts of African societies. Among the Akan of Ghana, proverbs, folktales, dirges, songs and riddles remain living institutions through which identity, memory and morality are sustained. This study examines the Akan perspective on oral literature and argues that literature, oral or written, is fundamentally a human phenomenon: an activity whose meaning is produced by people in performance and context, rather than a body of fixed texts.

A qualitative, interpretive design was used. The study defines its three central concepts (oral literature, the Akan perspective and literature as a human phenomenon) and builds a conceptual framework that links performance theory, functionalism and reception theory to Akan concepts of performance, audience, memory, occasion and ownership. Data comprised 15 purposively selected scholarly sources on African and Akan oral literature and a corpus of 14 illustrative Akan oral texts and conventions, selected against explicit criteria. Each text was documented in Akan with a gloss and interpreted through a four-level contextual-functional reading (text, performance setting, cultural meaning and social function), and the material as a whole was examined through reflexive thematic analysis.

Six themes emerged: performance as the locus of meaning; the audience as co-creator and custodian; fluidity anchored in memorisation; context-bound appropriateness; communal ownership and ancestral authority; and genres as instruments of human life. Worked examples showed that proverbs such as *Tikoro nkɔ agyina* guide deliberation and arbitration, the tale of Ananse and the pot of wisdom forms moral character, dirges channel grief and preserve genealogy, songs accompany every life stage, and riddles sharpen reasoning.

From the Akan perspective, the meaning of literature resides in people, performance and community, not in the text alone. Oral and written literature differ in medium but share their grounding in human experience, cultural knowledge and interpretation.

Literature curricula in Ghana should integrate performance-based study of Akan oral genres, and documentation efforts, including digital archiving, should record performance context alongside verbal content.

Keywords: Akan; oral literature; performance; verbal art; literature as a human phenomenon

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature mirrors the lives of individuals and groups: their beliefs, histories, philosophies and everyday conduct. Agyekum (2007, p. 1) defines literature as "the artistic and imaginative or creative expression of individual and group experiences, nature, and values of a group of people over a certain period by the medium of language either oral or written". The definition recognises two modes of literature, the written and the oral.

In practice, however, the two modes have not been treated equally. Gunner (2000) observes that people raised in contemporary Western cultures are largely unfamiliar with the idea of oral literature, because those societies place a premium on literacy. Agyekum (2007) adds that the Western equation of literature with writing is, in the African case, accidental and misleading. Finnegan (2012) likewise notes that oral literature remains far less widely recognised than written literature, even though societies without writing sustained rich verbal arts through narration and performance. Ong (1982) shows that this bias runs deep: literate cultures tend to imagine words as things fixed on a surface, whereas in oral cultures words exist only as events between people.

1.1 The Research Problem

When literature is defined by the written text, the oral genres of African societies are easily reduced to raw material, folklore to be collected rather than art to be studied. This text-centred view also obscures what oral traditions reveal about literature generally: that meaning is produced by people in context. Among the Akan of Ghana, proverbs (*mmɛ*), folktales (*Anansesɛm*), dirges (*nsuiɛ*), songs (*nnwom*) and riddles (*abisaa*) remain part of daily life, arbitration, funerals, festivals and chieftaincy (Agyekum, 2011; Adogpa et al., 2026). Yet studies that set out the Akan perspective on what oral literature is, and that connect it systematically to broader theories of what literature is, remain limited.

1.2 Relevance of the Study

The study is relevant for the following reasons. First, it affirms oral literature as verbal art with its own structures and aesthetics, not an inferior precursor of writing (Finnegan, 2012). Second, it documents the Akan understanding of genre, performance and ownership in Akan terms, with worked examples, which is useful to teachers of Ghanaian languages and literature. Third, it offers a human-centred account of literature that can inform curriculum design and the documentation of oral traditions in digital media (Gyamera, 2026).

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Three concepts are central to the argument. Because each is used in different ways in the literature, they are defined here as they are used in this study.

2.1 Oral Literature

In this study, **oral literature** refers to verbal art that is composed, transmitted and received through the spoken or sung word and realised in performance before an audience. Agyekum (2011, p. 1) describes it as "literature transmitted orally rather than through written texts", and Finnegan (2012) stresses that it has its own artistic conventions rather than being a defective form of writing. Four features distinguish it: (a) oral transmission, (b) realisation in performance through voice, gesture, movement and costume, (c) variability across performances, and (d) communal rather than individual ownership (Okpewho, 2014; Furniss, 2020). The term therefore includes the verbal text together with its performance, and excludes written imitations of oral forms that are no longer performed.

2.2 The Akan Perspective

The **Akan** are the largest ethnolinguistic group in Ghana, comprising sub-groups such as the Asante, Fante, Akuapem, Akyem, Bono and Kwahu, who share the Akan language (Twi-Fante) and closely related institutions of matrilineal kinship, chieftaincy and ancestral veneration (Agyekum, 2011). By the **Akan perspective** this study means the understanding of verbal art that is embedded in Akan practice and vocabulary: the categories Akan speakers use to name genres (*mmɛ*, *Anansesɛm*, *nsuiɛ*, *nnwom*, *abisaa*), the conventions that govern their performance (who may speak, when and where), and the values expressed in formulas such as *Nananom se…* ("The elders say…"). The perspective is thus reconstructed from Akan terms, formulas and documented practice, as interpreted in Akan scholarship (Agyekum, 2011; Yankah, 1989; Asubonteng, 2022), not imposed from outside categories.

2.3 Literature as a Human Phenomenon

To call literature a **human phenomenon** is to claim that its existence, meaning and value depend on human beings who create, perform, receive, interpret and preserve it, rather than residing in the text as an object. The claim has three parts: (a) **origin**: literature arises from human experience and social life; (b) **meaning**: meaning is produced in the encounter between a performer or author and an audience or reader in a particular context; and (c) **value**: literature is valued for what it does in human life, such as teaching, consoling, entertaining and preserving memory. The concept draws on performance theory (Bauman, 1977), functionalism (Bascom, 1954) and reception theory (Iser, 1978), discussed below.

3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study combines three lenses, each of which explains one part of the claim that literature is a human phenomenon.

3.1 Performance Theory

Performance theory (Bauman, 1977; Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 2014) holds that verbal art is a mode of communication in which the performer takes responsibility before an audience for a display of communicative skill, so that meaning emerges from the event, not from words alone. The lens explains the roles of performer, audience, gesture and occasion, and accounts for the **meaning** dimension of the concept as it applies to oral literature.

3.2 Functionalism

Functionalism in folklore studies (Bascom, 1954) holds that verbal genres persist because they serve social ends: education, validation of culture, social control and amusement. The lens explains why each Akan genre is tied to particular human needs and occasions, and accounts for the **value** dimension of the concept.

3.3 Reception Theory

Reception theory (Iser, 1978) holds that a written text is completed only in the act of reading: readers fill the gaps the text leaves, so that meaning is produced in the interaction between text and reader. This lens connects the Akan case to written literature. What performance theory says of the oral audience, reception theory says of the reader, so that both modes locate meaning in human engagement rather than in the text alone.

3.4 Linking Akan Oral Literature to the Broader Theory of Literature

Table 1 sets out how the framework works. Each Akan concept identified in the data is paired with the lens that explains it and with the corresponding claim about literature in general. In this way, the Akan material is not treated as an isolated case but as evidence for a general account of literature.

Table 1

Conceptual Framework Linking Akan Concepts, Theoretical Lenses and the General Theory of Literature

Akan concept	Theoretical lens	What it shows in Akan oral literature	Implication for literature in general
ɔyɛkyerɛ / *ɔyɛfoɔ* (performance / performer)	Performance theory (Bauman, 1977)	Meaning depends on voice, gesture, costume and skill	A text is realised only when it is enacted or read
atiefoɔ (audience)	Performance theory; reception theory (Iser, 1978)	Listeners respond, correct and co-create	Readers complete written texts through interpretation

nnwegotirimu (memorisation) and variation	Performance theory; orality (Ong, 1982)	A remembered core is re-created in each performance	Meaning is stable in core but renewed in each reception
berɛ ne beaeɛ (time and place)	Functionalism (Bascom, 1954)	Each genre belongs to a proper occasion	Context shapes how any text is understood
ɔman agyapadeɛ (communal heritage); *Nananom se…*	Functionalism; Indigenous authority (Mahuika, 2019)	Authority comes from ancestors and community	Literature is a shared cultural inheritance
Genre functions (*mmɛ*, *Anansesɛm*, *nsuiɛ*, *nnwom*, *abisaa*)	Functionalism (Bascom, 1954)	Genres teach, console, coordinate and entertain	Literature takes part in organising social life

3.5 Aim and Research Questions

The study aims to examine the Akan perspective on oral literature and to show what it implies for understanding literature as a human phenomenon. It asks:

RQ1. How is oral literature defined and characterised from an Akan perspective?

RQ2. How do the main genres of Akan oral literature serve human and social life, in their cultural contexts and performance settings?

RQ3. What does the Akan perspective imply for understanding literature, oral and written, as a human phenomenon?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative, interpretive design based on document analysis (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis was chosen because the aim was to reconstruct the Akan perspective as it is recorded in scholarship and in documented oral texts, and to examine those texts closely in their stated contexts. No data were collected from human participants.

4.2 Study Setting

The cultural setting is the Akan-speaking area of southern and central Ghana, where Akan (including Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi and Fante) is the most widely spoken indigenous language. The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Education, Winneba (Ajumako Campus) and the University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development, Kumasi, between August and September 2026.

4.3 Sources of Data

Two types of data were used:

- **Scholarly sources (n = 15):** books and journal articles on African and Akan oral literature, orality and indigenous knowledge (Adogpa et al., 2026; Agyekum, 2007, 2011; Asubonteng, 2022; Finnegan, 2012; Furniss, 2020; Gunner, 2000; Gyamera, 2026; Mahuika, 2019; Mbube, 2023; Mireku-Gyimah, 2014; Nketia, 1955; Okpewho, 2014; Rattray, 1930; Yankah, 1989). Works cited only for theory or method (Bascom, 1954; Bauman, 1977; Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Iser, 1978; Ong, 1982) were not part of the analysed corpus.

- **Akan oral texts and conventions (n = 14):** proverbs, folktale formulas and narratives, attribution formulas, and documented features of dirges, songs and riddles, listed in Table 2.

4.4 Selection of Scholarly Sources

Sources were selected purposively. A source was included if it (a) defined or characterised oral literature, (b) discussed African or specifically Akan oral genres, or (c) addressed performance, orality or the documentation of oral traditions. Sources were excluded if they treated oral forms only as linguistic data without reference to performance or function. Works on Akan oral literature (Agyekum, 2011; Asubonteng, 2022; Mireku-Gyimah, 2014; Nketia, 1955; Rattray, 1930; Yankah, 1989; Adogpa et al., 2026; Gyamera, 2026) were given priority, and foundational works on African orality (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 2014; Furniss, 2020) were included to situate them.

4.5 Identification and Documentation of Oral Texts

The illustrative oral texts were identified in two steps. First, every Akan text or convention quoted or described

in the scholarly sources was listed. Second, texts were retained for analysis if they met all three of the following criteria:

(a) **Attestation:** the text or convention is documented in at least one published source, or is a widely used expression whose wording and meaning the authors confirmed against such a source;

(b) **Genre coverage:** together the texts represent each of the five major genres (proverbs, folktales, dirges, songs and riddles) and the attribution formulas that mark communal ownership;

(c) **Recoverable context:** the occasion, performance setting and social use of the text can be established from the sources.

Each retained text was documented in a standard format: the Akan text in current orthography, a literal or free English translation, the genre, the source, the typical performance setting and the stated function. Where dirges and songs are extended and vary by performer, their documented structural features, rather than a single verbatim text, were recorded. Table 2 lists the corpus.

Table 2

Corpus of Illustrative Akan Oral Texts and Conventions

No.	Text or convention (Akan / English)	Genre	Source and basis of selection
1	*Abɔfra hunu ne nsa ho hohoro a, ɔne mpanimfoɔ na ɛdidi* / When a child knows how to wash his hands, he eats with the elders	Proverb	Agyekum (2011); conduct and reward
2	*Baanu so a ɛmia* / When two carry, it becomes easy	Proverb	Agyekum (2011); cooperation
3	*Tikoro nkɔ agyina* / One head does not go into council	Proverb	Yankah (1989); deliberation and arbitration
4	*Obi nkyerɛ abɔfra Nyame* / No one shows a child the Supreme Being	Proverb	Agyekum (2011); religious belief, self-evident truth
5	Opening formula of *Anansesɛm* disclaiming literal truth	Folktale formula	Rattray (1930); frames the performance
6	*Me Anansesɛm a metoo yi… ma ebi nkɔ na ebi mmra* / closing formula	Folktale formula	Agyekum (2011); returns the tale to the community

7	Ananse and the pot of wisdom	Folktale	Rattray (1930); widely told; moral and etiological
8	*Mmoguo* (song interludes within tales)	Folktale feature	Agyekum (2011); audience participation
9	*Nsuiɛ*: reference to lineage, place and deeds of the deceased	Dirge	Nketia (1955); funerals
10	*Asafo nnwom* (war songs) with costume and body marking	Song	Mireku-Gyimah (2014); martial occasions
11	Work songs and lullabies	Song	Agyekum (2011); labour and childcare
12	*Abisaa*: question-and-answer riddling contest	Riddle	Agyekum (2011); Asubonteng (2022)
13	*Nananom se…* / The elders say…	Attribution formula	Agyekum (2011); communal authority
14	*Yɛn agyanom kaa sɛ…* / Our forefathers said…; *Yɛate sɛ…* / It is said…	Attribution formula	Agyekum (2011); ancestral authority

4.6 Data Collection Procedure

Each source was read in full or in its relevant chapters. Passages that defined oral literature, described its characteristics, or explained the form and function of a genre were extracted into a coding sheet. For each passage, the sheet recorded the source, the genre concerned, the context of performance and the function described.

4.7 Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded at two levels. At the level of **individual texts**, each item in Table 2 was interpreted through a four-level contextual-functional reading derived from the framework in Section 3:

1. **Text:** what the words literally say, including imagery and structure;
2. **Performance setting:** who performs it, to whom, on what occasion and with what gestures, music or costume;
3. **Cultural meaning:** what the text means within Akan values and beliefs;
4. **Social function:** what the text does for individuals and the community, using Bascom's (1954) four functions.

At the level of **the whole data set**, the extracted passages and text interpretations were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in six phases: familiarisation, initial coding, generating candidate themes, reviewing themes against the data, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Initial codes included *performance*, *gesture*, *audience response*, *memory*, *variation*, *occasion*, *ownership* and *function*. Codes were grouped into themes that answered the three research questions, and Akan terms were retained as theme labels where they captured the concept precisely.

4.8 Trustworthiness

Both authors coded the material independently and then compared and discussed their codes until agreement was reached. Akan terms, orthography and glosses were checked against Agyekum (2011) and Asubonteng (2022). Each theme was retained only if it could be traced to at least two independent sources, and each interpretation in Section 5 is linked to its source.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

The study relied exclusively on published literature and publicly documented oral texts. It involved no human participants, interviews, recordings or personal data, so individual informed consent was not applicable.

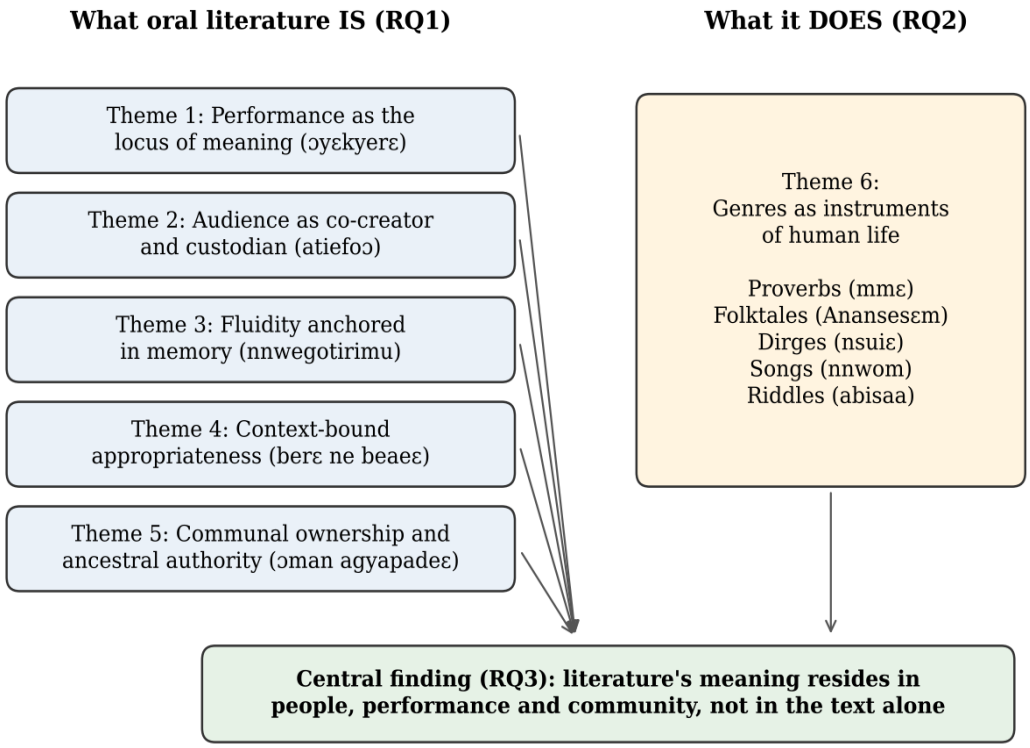
5. RESULTS

The analysis produced six themes. Themes 1 to 5 answer the first research question on how the Akan define and characterise oral literature. Theme 6 answers the second, on how the genres serve human life, and presents worked examples of each genre in its context. Figure 1 maps the themes to the study's central finding.

Across the sources, definitions of oral literature converged on four features. It is transmitted by word of mouth (Agyekum, 2011). It is performed, using voice, gesture and movement (Asubonteng, 2022). It is owned by the community. And it is multifunctional, serving to educate, entertain, settle disputes and record history (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 2014; Furniss, 2020).

Figure 1

Thematic Map of the Akan Perspective on Oral Literature



Note. Themes 1 to 5 describe what oral literature is; Theme 6 describes what it does. All six converge on the finding that literature's meaning resides in people, performance and community.

5.1 Theme 1: Performance as the Locus of Meaning (*ɔyɛkyerɛ* and *ɔyɛfoɔ*)

The sources agree that the words of an oral text are only part of its meaning; the rest comes from the performance (Finnegan, 2012; Furniss, 2020). In *Anansesɛm*, the narrator changes voice for each character, imitates animals, and points, claps, crouches or runs to dramatise events (Mireku-Gyimah, 2014). Ananse himself is traditionally voiced with a nasal, lisping speech, so that the audience recognises him before he is named. Dirge performers express grief through chanting, weeping, rhythmic movement and sometimes beating the chest (Nketia, 1955).

Costume and colour carry meaning before a word is spoken. White signals joy, victory, thanksgiving and purity; red and black signal mourning, gravity or hostility. Performers of *Asafo nnwom* (war songs) wear red or black and mark their bodies with charcoal or clay to signal courage and readiness for battle (Mireku-Gyimah, 2014).

The performer (*ɔyɛfoɔ*) is central: the same tale succeeds or fails according to the performer's skill in selecting, shaping and delivering it.

5.2 Theme 2: The Audience as Co-creator and Custodian (*atiefoɔ*)

The audience does not simply listen. In *Anansesɛm*, the narrator opens with a formula that disclaims literal truth, which Rattray (1930) renders as "We do not really mean, we do not really mean (that what we are going to say is true)", and the audience answers it, signalling that the play-world of the tale has begun. During the tale, any listener may break in with a *mmoguo*, a short song interlude, which the others take up as a chorus; listeners also laugh, clap and correct the narrator when a detail is dropped (Agyekum, 2011). The customary closing formula hands the story back to the community:

> *Me Anansesɛm a metoo yi, sɛ ɛyɛ dɛ o, sɛ ɛnyɛ dɛ o, ma ebi nkɔ na ebi mmra.*
>
> ("This spider story I have told, whether it is sweet or not sweet, let some go and let some come back.")

The formula invites the next teller to take a turn, so that storytelling passes around the circle. In riddling (*abisaa*), audience members compete to answer, turning the event into an intellectual contest. At funerals, mourners respond to dirges with shouts and refrains that intensify the emotion. The audience is also a custodian: because members know the tradition, they recognise omissions and improper changes, and the performer is answerable to them. Performers therefore adapt to their listeners, telling a light, humorous version to children and a proverb-rich, formal version to elders.

5.3 Theme 3: Fluidity Anchored in Memory (*anomsɛm nsesamu* and *nnwegotirimu*)

Oral texts vary from one performance to the next. Performers correct themselves on the spot, embellish, and adjust delivery in response to audience feedback. This variation is not disorder: it rests on memorisation (*nnwegotirimu*). Elders, storytellers, praise singers and drummers commit long narratives, proverbs, dirges, appellations and drum messages to memory, together with the gestures, rhythms and voice modulations that go with them. What is memorised is the core (themes, sequence of events and moral lesson), not a fixed wording, as Ong (1982) observes of oral cultures generally. The tale of Ananse and the pot of wisdom (Section 5.6.2) illustrates this: tellers vary the details of the tree, the son's words and the songs, but the sequence of hoarding, failure and the scattering of wisdom remains constant. Adogpa et al. (2026) note that recording and digitising these forms preserves them but does not replace their performed nature.

5.4 Theme 4: Context-bound Appropriateness (*berɛ ne beaeɛ*)

Every Akan genre has its proper time and place, and a performance that fits one occasion may offend in another. Dirges belong to funerals; lullabies to the care of infants; work songs to farming, fishing and building; war songs to preparation for battle; and drum language to festivals, chieftaincy and state occasions. *Anansesɛm* are traditionally told in the evening, after the day's work, and telling them in daytime is discouraged (Rattray, 1930). Even within one genre, wording shifts with the setting: a libation prayer at the chief's palace differs from one said at home or at a shrine, though its structure is the same. Proverbs, too, are governed by social rank: Yankah (1989) shows that a proverb used by a junior person to an elder must be cushioned with attribution formulas to avoid seeming presumptuous. Gyamera (2026) argues that context, audience and occasion determine whether a performance is appropriate and how it is interpreted.

5.5 Theme 5: Communal Ownership and Ancestral Authority (*ɔman agyapadeɛ*)

No Akan folktale, proverb, dirge or riddle belongs to a single author. Each is treated as the inherited wisdom of the ancestors, and the performer is its custodian rather than its owner. This is marked in speech by attribution formulas:

> *Nananom se…* ("The elders say…")

Yɛn agyanom kaa sɛ… (“Our forefathers said…”)

Yɛate sɛ… (“It is said…”)

These formulas lend the speaker’s words ancestral authority and signal that the knowledge is shared. They also protect the speaker: by presenting a pointed remark as the elders’ saying, a speaker can criticise or advise without appearing to speak on personal authority (Yankah, 1989). Authority thus rests on the community’s acceptance and transmission of a text, not on an identifiable source (Mahuika, 2019).

5.6 Theme 6: Genres as Instruments of Human Life

Each major genre met a specific human need. The following worked examples set out each genre’s text, performance setting, cultural meaning and social function, following the four-level reading described in Section 4.7. Table 3 summarises them.

5.6.1 Proverbs (mmɛ)

Proverbs are the most valued form of Akan speech; skill in using them is a mark of wisdom, and the linguist (*ɔkyeame*) at a chief’s court is expected to command them (Yankah, 1989; Agyekum, 2011). Four examples illustrate their range.

Example 1: *Abɔfra hunu ne nsa ho hohoro a, ɔne mpanimfoɔ na ɛdidi* (“When a child knows how to wash his hands, he eats with the elders”). **Setting:** used by parents and elders in the home, and in family meetings when a young person is commended or advised. **Meaning:** washing the hands before a shared meal is a sign of good upbringing; a young person who shows good conduct is admitted to the company, counsel and rewards of elders. **Function:** education and social control; it motivates good behaviour by linking conduct to social standing.

Example 2: *Baanu so a ɛmia* (“When two carry, it becomes easy”). **Setting:** communal labour, family discussions of shared responsibilities, and marriage counselling. **Meaning:** the image of two people sharing a head-load expresses the Akan value of cooperation and mutual support. **Function:** validation of culture; it affirms communalism as a guiding value.

Example 3: *Tikoro nkɔ agyina* (“One head does not go into council”). **Setting:** chieftaincy deliberations, arbitration and family meetings, often when a decision is to be referred for wider consultation. **Meaning:** no single person has all wisdom; good decisions come from collective deliberation (Yankah, 1989). **Function:** social control; it legitimises consultation and restrains autocratic decision-making, even by chiefs.

Example 4: *Obi nkyerɛ abɔfra Nyame* (“No one shows a child the Supreme Being”). **Setting:** conversation and argument, when a speaker wishes to stress that a point is self-evident. **Meaning:** the existence of God is so evident that even a child knows it without being taught; the proverb thus also records a central Akan religious belief. **Function:** validation of culture and persuasion; it ends a dispute by appeal to what is obvious.

5.6.2 Folktales (Anansesɛm)

Example 5: Ananse and the pot of wisdom. In a widely told tale, Kwaku Ananse, the spider, gathers all the wisdom in the world into a pot so that he alone will possess it. He decides to hide the pot at the top of a tall tree and ties it to his front, but it keeps getting in his way and he cannot climb. His young son, Ntikuma, who has been watching, suggests that he tie the pot to his back. Ananse realises that, despite holding all the wisdom, he has been corrected by a child; in anger he throws the pot down, it breaks, and wisdom scatters across the world, which is why everyone today has a share of it (Rattray, 1930).

Setting: the tale is told in the evening at a family or community gathering, framed by the opening and closing formulas, with the narrator voicing Ananse and Ntikuma differently and the audience contributing *mmoguo* (Agyekum, 2011; Mireku-Gyimah, 2014). **Meaning:** wisdom cannot be hoarded by one person, and even the wise can learn from the young; the tale echoes *Tikoro nkɔ agyina*. **Function:** education and amusement; it forms moral character by showing the folly of greed and pride, and offers an etiological explanation of why wisdom is

shared among all people. Because Ananse is both clever and foolish, children learn to judge conduct rather than simply admire cleverness.

5.6.3 Dirges (nsuiɛ)

Example 6. Nketia's (1955) study of Akan funeral dirges shows that they are performed mainly by women, sung or chanted with weeping at the wake, the laying-in-state and the funeral. Dirges follow recognisable conventions: the deceased is addressed by kin terms and appellations; the singer refers to the deceased's matrilineal clan (*abusua*), ancestral home town and notable ancestors; and the deceased's virtues, generosity and deeds are recalled. The singer may also lament her own loss and ask the deceased to greet the ancestors on her behalf. **Setting:** funerals and mourning only; performing a dirge outside a funeral would be considered ominous. **Meaning:** death is understood as a journey to the ancestors, and the deceased's identity is defined by lineage and place. **Function:** dirges give grief a socially accepted form, console the bereaved, and keep genealogy and family history in public memory, a form of oral record-keeping (Nketia, 1955; Mbube, 2023).

5.6.4 Songs (nnwom)

Example 7:* Asafo nnwom. *The songs of the* Asafo *(traditional warrior companies, especially among the Fante) are performed at martial displays, festivals and the funerals of members. Performers wear red or black and mark their bodies with charcoal or clay, and the songs praise the company's past victories and taunt rival companies (Mireku-Gyimah, 2014). Function: they inspire courage and affirm group identity and history.

Example 8: Work songs and lullabies. Work songs accompany farming, fishing, pounding and building; their call-and-response structure sets the rhythm of labour so that a group works in time and the work feels lighter. Lullabies are sung by mothers and older siblings while rocking or carrying an infant, often naming the child and family members. **Function:** coordination of labour, soothing of children, and early transmission of language and kinship to the child (Agyekum, 2011). Together, these songs show that song accompanies the whole Akan life course, from birth to death.

5.6.5 Riddles (abisaa)

Example 9. Riddling is a play activity among children and young people, often in the evening alongside storytelling. The challenger poses a short, image-based statement about something familiar, and the others compete to name the hidden referent, which is usually drawn from nature, the household or farm life; a correct answer wins applause and the right to pose the next riddle (Agyekum, 2011; Asubonteng, 2022). **Meaning:** riddles rest on metaphor and close observation, linking two unlike things through a shared feature. **Function:** education and amusement; they sharpen reasoning, memory and quick thinking, and pass on knowledge of plants, animals and the environment.

Table 3

Main Genres of Akan Oral Literature: Performance Settings, Cultural Meanings and Social Functions

Genre (Akan term)	Performance setting	Illustrative text or feature and cultural meaning	Social function (Bascom, 1954)
Proverbs (*mmɛ*)	Conversation, family meetings, marriage, chieftaincy, arbitration	*Tikoro nkɔ agyina*: wisdom is collective; *Abɔfra hunu ne nsa ho hohoro a…*: good conduct earns honour	Education; social control; validation of culture
Folktales (*Anansesɛm*)	Evening gatherings, framed by formulas, with *mmoguo*	Ananse and the pot of wisdom: wisdom cannot be hoarded	Education (moral formation); amusement

Dirges (*nsuiɛ*)	Funerals and mourning; mainly women	References to clan, home town and deeds: identity rests on lineage	Consolation; preservation of genealogy; validation of culture
Songs (*nnwom*)	Birth, work, festivals, war, worship, funerals	*Asafo nnwom*, work songs, lullabies: unity and courage	Coordination of labour; identity; soothing
Riddles (*abisaa*)	Play among children and young people	Question-and-answer contest: metaphor and observation	Education (reasoning, nature knowledge); amusement

In each case the value of the genre lies in what it does for people: it teaches, gathers, heals, entertains and sustains culture.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings show that, from an Akan perspective, literature is a human phenomenon: its existence, meaning and value come from the people who create, perform, interpret and preserve it. This answers the third research question and has five implications, each of which corresponds to a row of the framework in Table 1.

6.1 Literature Begins in Life, Not in Writing

Akan history, customary law, religious belief, ethics and indigenous knowledge were transmitted through folktales, proverbs, dirges, drum language, libation prayers and songs long before they were written down. They were held in the memories of elders, linguists (*akyeame*), priests, queen mothers and chiefs. Writing records these forms but does not create them. This supports Agyekum's (2007) argument that the link between literature and writing is accidental, and Finnegan's (2012) insistence that oral literature has its own artistic conventions. Written literature, too, grows from the experience of authors shaped by their societies.

6.2 Meaning Depends on People, Not Words Alone

Themes 1 and 2 confirm the central claim of performance theory (Bauman, 1977): meaning emerges in the event. A folktale is incomplete without the narrator's voice and gesture and the listeners' responses; a proverb such as *Tikoro nkɔ agyina* makes sense only when used in the right situation. Okpewho (2014) makes the same point when he locates meaning in the interaction of performer, audience and context. The finding extends to written literature through reception theory: Iser (1978) argues that readers complete a text by filling its gaps. A novel or poem may not change on the page, but its meaning shifts as different readers and generations engage with it from their own histories. The Akan *atiefoɔ* and the modern reader therefore play parallel roles.

6.3 Literature Is the Memory of Society and Is Inseparable From Culture

Themes 3 and 5, and the dirge examples, show oral traditions working as a store of genealogies, migration histories, political institutions and philosophy, consistent with Mbube's (2023) view of oral literature as a repository of indigenous knowledge. The attribution formulas *Nananom sɛ…* and *Yɛn agyanom kaa sɛ…* express an Akan view of knowledge as collective, in line with Mahuika's (2019) account of authority in Indigenous oral tradition. Akan literature reflects communalism, respect for elders, reverence for ancestors, kinship and traditional leadership; culture is both its material and its meaning.

6.4 Literature Serves Social Functions

Theme 6 supports Bascom's (1954) functionalist account. Akan genres educate (folktales, riddles), validate culture (dirges, proverbs such as *Obi nkyerɛ abɔfra Nyame*), exercise social control (proverbs in arbitration) and entertain (tales, songs). Modern Akan and Ghanaian written works continue these functions when they examine

colonialism, migration, corruption, gender relations and identity. Literature therefore takes part in organising and transforming society, rather than standing apart as an object of contemplation.

6.5 New Media Change the Medium, Not the Nature

Akan oral forms now circulate on radio, television, podcasts, YouTube, Facebook and TikTok, and written literature as e-books, blogs and digital libraries. Gyamera (2026) shows that Akan folk song keeps its core linguistic features as it moves into digital soundscapes. Theme 3 suggests why: what persists is the remembered core and the human interaction around it. Technology widens access, but a text on a screen, in a village square or at a funeral remains grounded in human creativity and interpretation (Adogpa et al., 2026).

6.6 Implication

Taken together, the findings challenge approaches that study literature only as text. Textual analysis of language, structure and imagery remains valuable, but it cannot fully account for literature unless it is set within the human life from which the text springs. Oral and written literature differ in mode of expression, not in their foundation in human experience.

7. CONCLUSION

The Akan perspective treats oral literature as a living cultural institution defined by performance, audience participation, memory-based variation, context and communal ownership. Its genres serve concrete human ends: proverbs guide conduct and deliberation, folktales form character, dirges carry grief and memory, songs accompany the life course, and riddles develop reasoning. Read through performance theory, functionalism and reception theory, this perspective shows that literature in any mode is best understood as a human phenomenon. To study it only as text is to study its visible form while missing the people, values and experiences that give it life.

7.1 Recommendations

- Literature curricula in Ghanaian schools, colleges and universities should teach Akan oral genres through performance, including live or recorded performances and audience roles, not through written transcripts alone.
- Teacher education programmes in Ghanaian languages should train teachers to use proverbs, folktales and riddles as tools for moral, cognitive and cultural education.
- Archives and digitisation projects should record the performance context (performer, audience, occasion, gesture and costume) alongside the verbal text.
- Future research should gather primary data through fieldwork with Akan performers and audiences to test and extend these themes.

7.2 Limitations

The study relied on secondary sources and documented oral texts; it did not observe performances or interview performers and audiences. Its findings therefore reflect how the Akan perspective is represented in scholarship. The corpus of 15 sources and 14 illustrative texts, while purposive, may not capture regional variation across Akan groups such as the Asante, Fante, Akuapem and Bono. Some older sources, such as Rattray (1930), reflect the outlook of colonial-era scholarship and were used for documented texts rather than for interpretation.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical Approval and Consent

This study used only published literature and publicly documented oral texts and involved no human participants; informed consent was therefore not applicable.

Authors' Contributions

CB conceived the study, collected and analysed the data, and wrote the first draft. ABO contributed to the conceptual framework, independently coded the data, and revised the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Authors' Information

Comfort Bonsu is a tutor of Ghanaian Language (Twi) at OLA College of of education and a PhD student in the Faculty of Ghanaian Languages, College of Languages Education, University of Education, Winneba (Ajumako Campus), Ghana. She holds B.A Arts English Language

Mphil in Ghanaian Language

Research interest are in Gender issues, folklore studies, written and oral literature, Ethngoraphic research, and translation

Anthony Boateng Owusu is a tutor of Literature in English Language, and a guidance and counselling co-ordinator at Obuasi Senior High Technical School, currently pursuing a Master of Philosophy in English Language (Literature) at the University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (USTED), Ghana, and is nearing completion of a Master of Philosophy in Guidance and Counselling at the University of Cape Coast. He holds a Master of Education in Guidance and Counselling, a Bachelor of Education in English Language, and a Diploma in Basic Education, all from the University of Cape Coast, together with a Bachelor of Education in Basic Education from the University of Education, Winneba. His research interests include African and diaspora literature, Africana Womanism, and the representation of gender, trauma, and communal resilience in West African fiction and drama.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Availability of Data and Materials

All sources analysed are published and listed in the References. The corpus of oral texts is given in Table 2.

REFERENCES

1. Adogpa, J. N., Lawali, M. T., & Tontoh, E. (2026). Oral text as embodiment of cultural heritage: An analysis of Akan oral forms from Wenchi. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies, 8*(4), 86–96. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i4.270
2. Agyekum, K. (2007). *Introduction to literature* (2nd ed.). Media Design Limited.
3. Agyekum, K. (2011). *Akan oral literature and verbal arts*. Adwinsa Publications.
4. Asubonteng, K. (2022). *Introduction to Akan oral literature*. Black Mask.
5. Bascom, W. R. (1954). Four functions of folklore. *The Journal of American Folklore, 67*(266), 333–349. https://doi.org/10.2307/536411
6. Bauman, R. (1977). *Verbal art as performance*. Newbury House.
7. Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40. https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027

8. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
9. Finnegan, R. (2012). *Oral literature in Africa*. Open Book Publishers. https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0025
10. Furniss, G. (2020). *Orality: The power of the spoken word in African cultures*. Routledge.
11. Gunner, L. (2000). *Africa and orality*. Cambridge University Press.
12. Gyamera, V. (2026). From oral performance to digital soundscape: Linguistic transformation and continuity in Akan folk song. *Adom Social Science and Humanities Journal, 2*(1).
13. Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
14. Mahuika, N. (2019). *Rethinking oral history and tradition: An Indigenous perspective*. Oxford University Press.
15. Mbube, N. M. (2023). *African oral literature and indigenous knowledge systems*. Routledge.
16. Mireku-Gyimah, P. B. (2014). Performance and the techniques of the Akan folktale. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies, 3*(4), 311–340.
17. Nketia, J. H. K. (1955). *Funeral dirges of the Akan people*. University College of the Gold Coast.
18. Okpewho, I. (2014). *African oral literature: Backgrounds, character, and continuity*. Indiana University Press.
19. Ong, W. J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. Methuen.
20. Rattray, R. S. (1930). *Akan-Ashanti folk-tales*. Clarendon Press.
21. Yankah, K. (1989). *The proverb in the context of Akan rhetoric: A theory of proverb praxis*. Peter Lang.