
SUICIDE IN AN AKAN LANGUAGE NOVEL: A FOCUS ON L. D. APRAKU'S AKU SIKA

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ABSTRACT

Suicide in fiction can promote insights into perceptions of, and attitudes about suicide ideation and behavior in a society. This article uses the novel *Aku Sika* as a case in point. *Aku Sika* is a novel set in Ghana in the 1950s. It is about a young married woman who attempts to end her life to avoid imminent disgrace. The king's youngest wife, *Aku*, plots to commit suicide by hanging from a tree in response to rivalry and evil machinations of the king's senior-most wife, *Sekyeraa*. *Aku* suffers from a hand deformity caused by a childhood accident and had been successfully hiding the deformity from public view. Due to her extraordinary beauty, the king selects her as a wife unbeknownst to him that she had a physical handicap, this in a society with a cultural prohibition barring kings from marrying physically handicapped brides. *Sekyeraa* swears publicly under oath that she should be executed if it cannot be proven that *Aku* was not physically handicapped, then demands that if *Aku* was indeed physically handicapped, the king should abdicate his throne and divorce *Aku*. A date was set for *Aku* to reveal her hand to the public. She decided to self-destruct rather than face public ignominy. On the banks of a major river where she planned to die by suicide, the river spirit appeared and healed her deformed hand. Both *Aku* and the king kept this a secret until the day of revelation. *Aku* finally revealed her healed arm and *Sekyeraa* was put to death by state executioners.

Keywords: Attempted Suicide; Suicide Ideation; Suicide; African Literature; Ghana; Akan Language; *Aku Sika*; Koratwe; Ghana Literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The fictionalized works of a society constitute a powerful conduit for learning about and understanding aspects of the society's culture, including the values, norms, and beliefs of that society. The depiction of a suicidal ideation, a parasuicide (suicide attempt), or a suicidal act in fiction invariably has something to reveal about a particular society's perceptions of and attitudes towards suicide. A review of fictionalized works that make up the series of writings contained in the African Writers Series, show that published fictionalized works about a particular society may provide some useful information about the phenomenon. For example, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the protagonist of the story, Obi Okonkwo, engaged in fatal suicidal behavior. A careful analysis of this popular fictionalized tale reveals the events that contributed to Okonkwo's suicide. It further reveals the method of the suicide act. Obi Okonkwo died by suicide via hanging. Additionally, the reader learns that suicide was a taboo, a malefaction, an ignominy, in Igbo culture. Obi Okonkwo's hanging body could not be removed by his fellow clansmen because the culture proscribed suicidal behavior. Because of the culture's proscription of the suicidal act that included forbidding physical contact with a suicide's body, clansmen could not touch the deceased. We also learn that the land would have

to be appeased, placated, and consecrated due to its defilement by the dishonorable act of suicide. The revelations were consistent with Igbo cultural beliefs at the time (Adinkrah, 2013). Achebe writes:

Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead. "Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him," said Obierika. "We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming." The District Commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs. "Why can't you take him down yourselves? He asked. "It is against our custom," said one of the men." It is an abomination for a man to take his life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers." "Will you bury him like any other man?" asked the Commissioner. "We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. We shall pay your men to do it. When he has been buried we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land." Obierika who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (Achebe, 1969, pp.190-191).

Background: Suicide Research in Ghana

In recent years, the volume of research on suicidal behavior, suicide ideation, and public perceptions of suicidal behavior have blossomed in the West African nation of Ghana (Adinkrah, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). Despite this, gaps still exist in knowledge about suicide phenomena in the country. For instance, there remains a dearth of published research on cultural aspects of suicide, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior (Adinkrah, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Undoubtedly, the corpus of fictionalized works therefore will provide both a useful and powerful complement to extant knowledge and understanding of suicidal behavior (Adinkrah, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). The purpose of the current article, then, is to provide a detailed description of a suicide attempt, or a parasuicide, that occurred in one Akan language fictionalized work. In this work, a young married woman attempted suicide but was saved from the act through spiritual intervention. To provide context for the suicide attempt, I describe the events leading up to the woman's suicide attempt and the circumstances under which the suicide was aborted. In the discussion that follows, I relate this case of parasuicide to the state of current Ghanaian knowledge and extant information about suicidal behavior in Ghanaian society.

Suicidal Behavior and Suicidal Ideation: Concepts in Suicidology

Suicidal behavior refers to a form of behavior a person engaged in that was designed to deprive the actor of his or her own life. Such behavior may be fatal or non-fatal. Fatal suicidal behavior is commonly referred to as suicide. Non-fatal suicidal behavior is described as attempted suicide or parasuicide. Around the world, it is estimated that about one million suicides or fatal suicidal acts occur each year. It is also estimated that there are 10 to 20 parasuicides or attempted suicides for each fatal suicidal act. According to research by suicidologists, males are more likely than females to die by suicide. Females, however, attempt suicide more often than males. This gender disparity reportedly stems from the fact that males tend to use more lethal means in their suicidal behavior than females.

The Akan of Ghana

The book *Aku Sika* is written in Twi, the Akan *lingua franca*. The author of the current article is an Akan native with reading and writing proficiency in Twi, having been born and raised in Ghana. The Akans are the numerically dominant ethnic group in Ghana. They constitute 47.5% of Ghana's population of 31 million people. Spatially, Akans occupy the southern and central areas of the country. Akan subgroupings include Akim, Akwapim, Asante, Brong, Fante, and Kwahu. These groups are differentiated from one another by minor dialectical differences. Akans are a matrilineal group, tracing ancestry and transferring property through the maternal line. Regarding religion, Akans are animistic. They believe that their physical environment is populated by spirits, both benign and malevolent. They believe that mountains, rivers, lakes, oceans, trees, and animals—particularly the larger and ferocious ones such as elephants, buffalo, lions, and tigers—are all endowed with spiritual entities. Akans believe spirits in their cosmic world have the means to bless or curse or can be neutral. Akans also believe in reincarnation and ancestor veneration. They believe that death is inevitable but is not the end of existence. Relatedly, following death or physical expiration, the spirit of the decedent journeys to *asamando*, the Akan concept of the hereafter, where it takes residence with the spirits of his or her forebears. From there, it will be reincarnated and reborn into the same matrilineage. Akans celebrate several festivals during the year. During these festivals, spirits of dead ancestors are invoked via libation prayers involving the offering of drinks and food to dead ancestors. Akans believe that their deceased ancestors maintain keen or active interest in the welfare of the living. Though they are deceased, they are close by, spiritually. They bless those who engage in good deeds and punish those who engage in evil deeds. Acts of suicide and other forms of self-inflicted deaths are proscribed by Akan society. In precolonial Asante history, the bodies of suicides were subjected to postmortem trials and desecrations (Rattray, 1969). Akans believe that suicide has negative spiritual consequences. The spirits of those who die through deliberate acts of self-destruction are unable to journey to *asamando*, to become part of the revered ancestors, or to be reincarnated. Instead, they become peripatetic spirits that wander the earth, finding no peace in their neither fully-human, neither fully-spirit state (Adinkrah, 2012, 2015).

Aku Sika by L. D. Apraku

The title of the book that forms the basis of the current article is *Aku Sika*. It was authored by L. D. Apraku. The book was first published in Accra in 1959 by the Bureau of Ghana Languages. The second edition was published in 1969. The third edition was published in 1975. The copy I reviewed for the present article was printed in 2003. The author claims that his primary objective in writing this novel is to provide Akan readers with additional Akan-reading literature for their reading enjoyment given the paucity of such literature in the country at the original time of writing.

The story is about a farmer called Kwadwo Bani, his wife Asi Buruwa, and their daughter known as Aku. Kwadwo Bani's and Asi Buruwa initially struggled in their attempt to have children. In his quest for children, Kwadwo Bani married another woman in this polygynous culture. Later, the marriage to Asi Buruwa produced a daughter whom the couple named Aku, after Kwadwo Bani's mother. Aku's mother died from an illness just as Aku started to walk as a toddler. In addition to his farming activities, Kwadwo Bani worked as a hunter, setting traps to catch animals, both for personal consumption and sale. One day, Kwadwo Bani purchased a trap he intended to use to catch animals. On the day he was going to use the trap for the first time, he assembled it at home in preparation for use in the bush. He

stepped outside momentarily to get a stick that he intended to use to test the efficacy and readiness of the trap. Within moments, out of curiosity, the young Aku went and put her hand into the trap. This caused the trap to disengage. Aku's hand was caught in the trap. By the time she was rescued, her arm was badly injured and had to be amputated. Aku's father was saddened by the whole ordeal, resorting to excessive consumption of alcohol to deal with his grief and to mollify his pain. He became so ill from melancholia and excessive alcohol consumption that he died.

Kwadwo Bani (Aku's father) was succeeded by his younger brother named Yaw Nnam, described as a lazy and improvident farmer, an utter contradistinction with Aku's father in terms of his work ethic. Aku was entrusted to his custody and care and Aku formally became part of this blended family, as the couple also had two daughters of their own. The couple and their children abused Aku both physically and emotionally. Yaw Nnam frequently referred to Aku as "a cursed or jinxed child" and "an amputee." Aku's stepmother mistreated her with corporal punishment and other forms of abuse. Part of the mistreatment purportedly stemmed from Aku's extraordinary physical beauty and the reported relative unattractiveness of her stepsisters. One of the girls, for example, reportedly had a pronounced and ugly forehead while the other had a mouse-like mouth.

Aku grew up to become a beautiful woman. However, she was self-conscious about her deformity. Throughout her young life, she managed to hide her deformity and so not many people in the community were aware of her deformity. At age 21, she was part of an audience witnessing the festivities that marked an annual festival known as *Odwira*. The king noticed her exceptional beauty and magnificence in the audience and asked to marry Aku. Customarily, Aku did not have a right to decline the marital offer. Following the performance of marital rites, Aku became the king's youngest wife, and she went to live in the king's palace. The king who was hitherto unaware of Aku's deformity, found out about the deformity only after the marriage. Aku explained to him the circumstances of her deformity. Custom barred the king from marrying a woman with a physical deformity. The king was expected to divorce her, but he felt deep sympathy for her and came to love her dearly. He swore that he would never divorce her because of her physical deformity.

The king was polygynous and Aku became one of several wives in the king's palace. Aku became the king's favorite wife. The king's first and senior-most wife was called *Sɛkyeraa*. She resented Aku's favored status. Incidentally, according to the customs of the society, it was tabooed for a king to marry a physically deformed woman: *eye abusude ne oman akyide*, (p.29). *Sɛkyeraa* had learned about Aku's deformity and plotted to make it public. To verify the fact of Aku's hand deformity, she recruited one of her own maidservants to enter Aku's bathroom while Aku was having a bath. This was tabooed behavior. Aku could have caused the maidservant to be put to death for violating her privacy, but she did not report the matter to anyone. The maidservant informed *Sɛkyeraa* about Aku's deformity. *Sɛkyeraa* quickly made the news public in her bid to get the king to divorce Aku. The king's detractors seized upon the information and also requested that the king divorce Aku and abdicate the throne for committing a transgression of the highest order.

A meeting of kingmakers was held to enquire into the matter and to settle the dispute. *Sɛkyeraa* swore an oath, offering herself to be executed if Aku was not physically deformed. She demanded that if Aku indeed suffered a physical deformity, the king should be dethroned for having violated customary rites. Following a long review of the charges made against the

king, the kingmakers ruled that Aku was a king's wife; she could therefore not be summarily summoned to come and show her hand in public. Meanwhile, the annual Corn Festival was only a few months away. During the Corn Festival, all the wives of the king are required by custom to pound corn in a wooden mortar in public. It was ruled that the event would be an appropriate venue to ascertain if Aku indeed had a physical deformity of the hand. The decision was communicated to Aku. A day was scheduled for all the king's wives to pound corn in public. Aku would be required to publicly pound corn in public with both hands. Aku was frightened of the shame or disgrace that would come with public discernment of her deformity.

Reportedly, when King Fosu reached home following a decision by the kingmakers, he called Aku late at night and broke the news to her. Aku advised him to divorce her so he would save his kingship; she would also be saved from public disgrace. The king swore to her that he would never divorce her, even if information about her physical deformity meant he would be executed for having married her. A distressed Aku traveled back to her natal home to seek advice from her stepfather and stepmother. She found no consolation or helpful advice from either parent. Instead, they excoriated her for having embarked on a marital journey they did not condone or approve. They asked her to go and deal with it in the manner she deemed personally fit. Aku became melancholic.

One week prior to the Corn Festival, Aku's parents asked her to leave their abode and to go to her marital residence. They claimed that they were afraid of accusation that they were sheltering her. Aku departed in tears. A day after arriving at home, she decided to go to a thicket on the banks of river Sikasu, a major river in the community, with the intention of committing suicide. She considered death by suicide preferable to the imminent public humiliation and disgrace. She tied a cloth she had brought along for the suicide to a tree branch and made a noose. While preparing to commit the act, a strange man appeared at the scene. He was resplendent in marvelous, expensive clothes and rich jewelry. Ostensibly, he was the river God who had transformed himself into a human being for an encounter with Aku. He enquired from Aku the reason why she wanted to engage in that despicable act of suicide. When she told him her troubles, he felt deep sympathy for her and decided to assist her in overcoming her troubles. He commanded a snake to come out of the stream. He then asked Aku to put her deformed arm inside the widely opened mouth of the snake. Moments later, he asked Aku to pull out the hand. Aku's deformed hand was now a full hand, with no evidence of ever having been deformed. Aku was sent away with a large quantity of gold finger rings and bracelets that adorned her arm. Aku continued to keep her arm hidden from public view. When Aku reached home, she revealed her prior plans to commit suicide and the intervention of the river god to her husband the king. The pair decided to keep the matter a secret until the day of the Corn Festival when Aku would be required to pound her corn in public.

On the day of the festival, Aku, being the youngest of the king's wives, was the last to be invited to pound her corn. When she revealed an intact hand adorned with gold bracelets, the crowd was flabbergasted. Due to the gold adornments, Aku earned the nickname *Sika*, meaning money or wealth. She became known throughout the kingdom as Aku Sika, which is the title of the book. For her punishment, Sɛkyeraa was sent to her grave by the executioners of the state.

2.DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion has provided descriptive and contextual information about a planned, but aborted suicide of a king's young wife who planned to end her life over imminent

disgrace. A few issues require elaboration. First had she died by suicide, Aku's suicide would have been a suicide by a female. In Ghana, suicide is extremely rare among females (Adinkrah, 2011a). Second, Aku selected hanging as a suicide means. In Ghana, hanging is the dominant mode of committing suicide (Adinkrah, 2011, 2012). Aku did not select drowning as a method of suicide even though the scene of the suicide was the banks of a river. In Ghana, drowning suicides are extremely rare (Adinkrah, 2011b, 2012). This perhaps derives from the fact that rivers and other bodies of water are considered sacred abodes of the gods or deities. Ghanaian females' suicide method is often via poisoning (Adinkrah, 2011a). Perhaps during the 1950s when the book was published, drowning deaths were more common. There is no available data to verify this. These days, with the easy availability of agrochemicals such as weedicides and pesticides, ingestion of poisons has become an increasingly common method of suicidal behavior in Ghana.

We may now further analyze the context, circumstances, and events leading to Aku's suicide attempt. At the time of the purported act, she had been under severe stress. People suffering from high levels of protracted stress are at an elevated risk of suicide. What were the sources of Aku's stress? First, she was orphaned at a young age. Her mother died shortly after her birth. Second, she lost an arm through a freak accident involving a hunting trap. Third, she lost her father who had drunk excessively in response to her physical handicap or disability. She was also dealing with a stigmatized physical deformity which constantly weighed on her mind, including the stress of constantly hiding her deformity from public view. Then there was the protracted physical and emotional abuse from both her stepparents and stepsisters. Her stepparents were strangers to her. She became his ward only through succession while she only came to know her stepmother through her stepfather's marriage to her. The reader further learns that Aku was saddled with the burden of performing all the household chores—such as fetching water, cleaning dirty dishes, and laundering clothes—while her stepsisters lazed about or slept. She found a short respite from her domestic troubles when she left home for marriage. However, another source of strain for Aku was her marriage to the king. This was an arranged marriage. She did not have any say in her choice of husband. She was forcibly taken to the king. To make matters worse for a young woman going into a royal marriage, she did not have a helpful mother, aunt or any female relative to prepare her for the marriage. Next, Aku became a victim of *koratwe* or co-wife rivalry. She was despised by some of the king's earlier wives, particularly *Sekyeraa*, who scorned her because they perceived that she had become the king's favorite wife. Finally, she was to face an ordeal where she would have to reveal her hidden deformed hand in public to the full gaze of the entire world. She concluded that it would be easier for her to die by suicide than to live a life of perpetual infamy.

If Aku had completed the suicide, this would have been a good example of a suicidal act that was done to preempt imminent disgrace or shame. Aku decided that it was better for her to die by suicide than to live with dishonor or live in infamy, ignominy, or disgrace. Indeed, a popular Akan saying is: *fereɛ ne animguaseɛ deɛ, fanyinam owuo*. The translation is: death is preferable to shame or dishonor. Below is Aku's justification for planning to take her life:

Hmmm! Obi birempɔn nuonyamfo, me nti wɔrebetu no ade so bɔ no ahohora.

Wɔbeɔ me odede na masoa nnimokyew. Dabi, merentumi; animguase de na efanim owu.

Mewu, Abenaa Aku bewu; miwu a, na asem asa. Aduoku bekɔ; okisi aduoku

bekɔ ama esie mu adwo. Anaafi bekɔ; abotokura anaafi bekɔ ama okwan ho adwo.

Mewu, mewu mahye Sɛkyeraa (pp.37-38).

(English Translation)

Hmmm! Because of me an honorable king will be dethroned and suffer ignominy

They will ridicule me. No, I cannot stand such disgrace; it is better to die than to live in infamy. I will die by suicide. Abenaa Aku will die by suicide. When I die by suicide, everything will come to an end. The bush rat will go away and leave the anthill in peace. I will die and make Sɛkyeraa culpable.

In conclusion, the foregoing essay has delineated the conditions under which a young married woman developed a suicide ideation, plotted a suicide, and attempted to terminate her life. It demonstrates how stress and extreme psychic pain provide an impetus for suicidal behavior. While the author in the prefatory remarks of the book insists that this is indeed a work of fiction, information about the suicide and the driving forces are reminiscent of real-life situations where real persons have died by suicide through the same method. It is notable that the story contained in the book has been the subject of a popular highlife song titled *Aku Sika* by the highlife legend Nana Kwame Ampadu and the African Brothers International Band of Ghana (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kO92tDbFxYs>). Although the book is a work of fiction, it is still remarkable that the author made no mention of Akan's prohibition of suicide.

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