

Concepts of achievement among Konkombas: Representations in their folktales

Tasun Tidorchibe¹

Introduction

Achievement is a culturalized construct imbedded in a people's social, economic, and political structures. In *Commodities and Capabilities*, Amartya Sen defines achievement as "what [a person] manages to do or to be" (1985, 25). Admittedly, an attempt to explore narratives of achievement would reveal that cultures regard achievement differently. This article explores how achievement is perceived among the Konkomba people of Northern Ghana and how this achievement culture manifests in their folktales.

The Konkomba people are largely located in the eastern corridor of the northern region of Ghana. They largely inhabit the Saboba, Chereponi, Yendi, Nanumba, Salaga, and Kpandai districts, with others scattered across the northern parts of the Volta region, Brong Ahafo region, and neighboring Togo (Tait 1961, 1, 8). They are predominantly agrarian and African traditional religion adherents, with only about 5% of Christian converts (Ryan 1996, 313). It is important to note that traditionally the Konkomba are not a socially stratified people as such: There are no privileged classes such as royals or the nobility, upper, middle, or lower classes who are born into wealth and power. There is a liberal society that affords everyone the opportunity to rise to greatness.

Among the Konkomba, achievement is highly celebrated while failure is abhorred and derided with labels such as "masor" or "kinifang" (a failure), which can even result in self-exile from one's community due to stigma. Their achievement culture largely revolves around one's success in agriculture, specifically the size of one's farm, the size of one's crop barns, and/or the size of one's herd – mostly cattle, goats, or sheep. The larger a man's farm is, the more respect he commands. As a result, every traditional Konkomba man's chief aspiration is to be a successful farmer – not primarily for commercial reasons but for prestige. It is interesting to note that boys are often encouraged to cultivate small farms and tend them to yield good harvests as a way of apprenticeship to instill in them hard work and give them a head start on success in farming. Even though one may occasionally seek communal help or labor (known as "nkpawiiin") to cultivate a large farm, the Konkomba society imposes on the individual the ultimate responsibility of working hard to excel in his farming career.

¹ etidor18@yahoo.com

Folktales as catalysts for social concepts

The centrality of success in agriculture in Konkomba achievement culture manifests in their folktales. Their tales often have pastoral settings, subject matter and plots that are woven around farming activities, and characters—human beings, animals, or inanimate objects like talking stones—who may often be engaged in farming activities or other actions around pastoral settings.² A close examination of these farm-related stories reveals that they often explore the theme of achievement in agriculture and showcase how a character's hard work or ingenuity culminates in his success in farming. For instance, in a tale titled "Why God Created Everyone," the narrative presents a farming contest between the sons of a farmer to ascertain which of them is the best farmer (Brew-Hammond 1991, 44-46). What is important here is not the details of this story but the fact that this contest lends credence to the fact that success in farming is perceived as an achievement among Konkombas. In another story titled "The Rabbit and His Singing Hoes" the narrative presents a rabbit (the wisest animal character in Konkomba folktales) who employs ingenuity and hard work to cultivate large tracts of farmland through "nkpawiiin" (50-51). One would realize that these two tales have plots that are built around farming, have pastoral settings, and feature characters who are farmers. Essentially, in the first tale the narrator does not only present the father of the competing young men as a successful crop farmer but also as the owner of a large herd: "Their father had many cows, and a cowboy looked after them" (45). All these encapsulate the centrality of a successful career in agriculture in Konkomba achievement culture.

Another achievement indicator among Konkombas is the size of one's household. Family is highly valued by Konkombas; and the larger a man's family is, the more respect he commands. This value for family explains the origin of names such as Unibonmor (transliterated as "a human being is fun"—figuratively suggesting that companionship is priceless). As a result, a successful Konkomba man, socially, is one with a large household—which he is expected to maintain all year round even in the lean season (known as "likpasiil") when food is scarce. A man's ability to do this is perceived as a great achievement among Konkombas. In most Konkomba folktales, one may hear narrations such as "Once upon a time, there was a man who had fifteen sons, eight daughters, five wives and several grandchildren" or simply "Once upon a time there was a man who had six sons" (Brew-Hammond 1991, 44). In the second example, even though the narrator fails to mention the number of wives, daughters and grandchildren the man had, due to shared communal values and perceptions his audience understand that the man equally had daughters and that his sons also had wives and children who all constituted his household.

² See Brew-Hammond 1991, 44-53 for sample stories. More of these Konkomba folktales would soon be available in a planned publication of a collection of Konkomba folktales translated into English and German.

In another tale titled “The Disobedient Girl and the Python,” the narrator (the son of the chief of N-nalog community in the Saboba district) begins thus: “Do you know why it’s important that children listen to their parents? There was a man who had several sons and nine beautiful daughters from different mothers” (Ilimoan Yamba, Phone interview with author, March 10, 2019). As the narrative takes shape, one realizes that the girl is the last of the nine daughters and that she refuses to marry all suitors her father picks for her and ends up marrying a stranger who turns out to be a python with shape-shifting abilities. Implicitly, the above tale’s opening lines and the plot reveal that the man’s household is a large one consisting of sons and daughters who are married and have children of their own, except the last daughter. Also implied is the fact that this last daughter’s predicament consequently renders her a failure in the eyes of her community as she is saddled with an unsuccessful marriage, childlessness, and possibly self-exile due to the stigma attached to failure among Konkombas.

Pertinently, the acquisition of titles is a contemporary development in Konkomba achievement culture. Prior to contacts with their Muslim neighbors and Western culture, Konkomba achievement culture did not include aspiration for titles, especially chieftaincy titles. Typical Konkomba communities were headed by clan leaders who were usually the most elderly in the communities (Tait 1961, 1, 4). Today it is common to find some Konkomba communities referring to such leaders as chiefs. Some communities even have both clan elders and chiefs. In the latter case, the clan elder assumes all spiritual and culture-related responsibilities while the chief handles political or administrative affairs. These chieftaincy titles are gradually becoming a source of disputes because of the prestige and material gains such as money, lands, and free labor they come with. In “The Rabbit and His Singing Hoes” tale mentioned earlier, the rabbit and the chief both appealed for “nkpawiin” on the same day. On the said day, all the animals went to the chief’s farm and ignored the rabbit even though the rabbit first asked for communal help (Brew-Hammond 1991, 50-51). Here one would notice that the chief’s position brought him respect and economic benefit in the form of his people responding to his call for free labor and ignoring the rabbit’s appeal.

Contemporary Konkombas actively seek political titles such as assemblyman or woman, district chief executive, member of parliament, and minister of state among others. In addition, Konkombas now strive for laurels in education, resulting in a steady rise in the number of educated Konkombas with various academic credentials. Perceived as higher achievements among Konkombas today, such achievements receive greater recognition and praise and come with both prestige and economic gains. In effect, then, the concept of achievement among Konkombas has evolved over time and may continue to do so in response to changing trends.

As evidenced from discussions above, achievement culture among Konkombas is gender defined. While about 99% of the above achievement indicators apply to Konkomba men, females’ achievement culture, according to Roger Mayen (a Saboba-based native

Catechist and Likpakpaaln³ translator), centers on “a female’s ability to marry, give birth and maintain her home” (Roger Mayen, Phone interview with author, March 14, 2019). Females who fail to accomplish these are branded “nbanjawul” (promiscuous women) for the unmarried or divorced and “bignoob” for the barren. That obviously explains why in most Konkomba folktales female characters are confined to domestic and childbearing roles. From “The Disobedient Girl and the Python” tale, one would realize that the theme of marriage (betrothal or arranged marriage) stands tall; and the outcome of events in the plot reveals that a successful marriage and childbirth are considered as female achievements among Konkombas. In recent times, although some Konkomba women have ventured into public service and attained academic laurels, these are not considered as real achievements until these females fulfil the socially imposed benchmarks of achievement—marriage and childbearing. This explains why the narrator of “The Disobedient Girl and the Python” tale adopts a rather disapproving tone by labeling the girl as “disobedient.”

Conclusion

To sum up, it is important to reiterate that achievement is highly valued and pursued by almost every Konkomba. Hard work and diligence are inculcated in the Konkomba right from childhood for this purpose as failure is not tolerated and can even result in self-exile due to derision or name-calling. From the discussions above, it is clear that Konkomba achievement culture revolves around success in agriculture, family, marriage, and title acquisition; and the motivations for the pursuit of these achievements are prestige and economic benefits. But above all, Konkomba achievement culture is gender defined and evolving in nature.

References

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