

# Akan cultural concepts and expressions for “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression”

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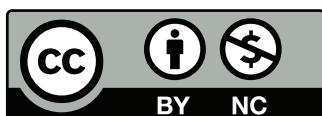
## Abstract

This paper examines Akan indigenous concepts for “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” through the interaction between language, culture, mind and the body. It applies the theory of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), with an emphasis on the theory of embodiment. The majority of Akan expressions and proverbs for “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” are derived from body part terms via embodiment. The nature of the semantic patterns and how the Akans perceive these emotions from the core pillars of their language and culture are explored. In addition to examining the use of body part expressions, the paper further discusses the use of idioms and proverbs to comment on the emotions mentioned above.

**Keywords:** Akan, conceptual metaphor, embodiment, emotions, proverbs

## About the author

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## 1 Introduction

The paper investigates the interface between Akan culture and language in the area of negative emotions and how they are expressed using Akan body part terms. It aims to fill a gap in Akan cognitive linguistic studies. Most research on Akan falls within areas of “core” linguistics and cognitive semantics. There are other studies on Akan emotions from psychological perspectives, which mention the Akan emotional terms in passing. The current paper seeks to combine cognitive psychology and cognitive semantics by drawing data from specific Akan body parts used in lexical items, idioms and proverbs to express “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression”.

The paper briefly discusses emotions both generally and from the Akan cultural standpoint and argues that, in Akan, the major means of discussing emotions is through body part expressions. Emotions are both mental and physical states that bring about changes in our responses, feelings, reactions, behaviours, and experiences, either positively or negatively. In the Akan language and culture, based on the metaphors of (a) from concrete to abstract, and (b) from known to unknown, the familiar body part is the source of expressions for emotions.

### 1.1 The Akan language and people

The word “Akan” refers to the people as well as their language.<sup>1</sup> Akans are considered from both an ethnographic and a linguistic perspective. The ethnographic Akans encompass the linguistic Akans plus the Achantas, Aowins, Nzemas, and Sefwis, who do not speak Akan as a first language, but rather as a second language, and who share cultural similarities with the Akans (Obeng 1987).

The linguistic Akans speak Akan as their native language and are the largest ethnic group in Ghana. In the 2010 national population census, 47.5% of the Ghanaian population were linguistic Akans and about 44% of the rest speak Akan as non-native speakers (see Agyekum 2019).

The linguistic Akans occupy the greater part of southern Ghana. Akan is spoken as a native language in nine out of the sixteen regions in Ghana, namely Ahafo, Ashanti, Bono, Bono East, Central, Eastern, Oti, Western, and Western North. The Akan speaking communities in the Oti Region are sandwiched by the Ewe and Gur language communities. Akan has 13 dialects: Agona, Akyem, Akuapem, Akwamu, Asante, Assin, Bono, Buem, Denkyira, Fante, Kwawu, Twifo, and Wassaw. There are some Bono speakers in Côte d’Ivoire. Akan is studied from primary school up to the university level (Agyekum 2019). The dialect names, such as Bono and Asante, refer first to the people, then to the dialects and the regions they occupy in Ghana.

### 1.2 Structure of the article

In the remainder of this section, I will discuss sources of data and methodology. This is followed in Section 2 by a literature review and a description of the theoretical framework of concep-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the singular Akan for the language and the plural Akans for the people, and refers to their culture as Akan culture.

tual metaphor and embodiment employed in the article. Section 3 discusses Akan expressions related to “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” extracted from specific Akan body parts, including the head, heart, brain, soul, and stomach, by applying conceptual metaphors and embodiment. The article goes on to look at idioms for expressing Akan emotions in Section 4. Section 5 treats proverbs related to these emotions and Section 6 concludes the article.

### **1.3 Data sources**

The data for this paper were extracted from library research on body part expressions (see Agyekum 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2018; Ameka 2002; Dzokoto 2010). Other major sources for the Akan data were Christaller’s (1933) Akan Dictionary, Akan oral literature, and written literature (prose, drama, and poetry) and the Akan Bible, especially the books of Proverbs, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

I also looked at Akan folktales, proverbs, and folksongs. Ritualized interactive expressions in greetings and daily conversations that deal with “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” were recorded. These conversations took place among adults at Asisiriwa, a village in the Ashanti region of Ghana, in January and February 2019. Some other expressions were recorded during funerals that I attended in Kumasi. I used my Android phone to record these encounters, which were later transcribed and analysed. I also recorded some data from the Peace FM station in Accra, when people were commenting on sorrowful breaking news, as in example (9).

In order to elicit direct personal experiences of Akan speakers related to the emotions under study, I interviewed six Akan colleagues at the University of Ghana who were under the pressure of constant financial demands from members of their extended families. In addition, Mr. Asenso Brobbey, an Akan mental health practitioner, was interviewed, and he gave vivid explanations of these emotions, which enriched those of my informants.

I finally cross-checked the expressions with four renowned Akan scholars, namely Agya Koo Nimo, Mr. Bosie Amponsah, Mr. Apenteng Sackey, and Mr. Baning Peparah. I asked them to crosscheck the authenticity of the data and give me their feedback. As a native speaker, I employed my own introspection to analyse the expressions.

### **1.4 Methodology**

The methodology for this paper involves the application and testing of the theories of conceptual metaphors and embodiment with regard to the Akan emotions related to “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” under this study. The Akan terms, especially those sourced from body parts, are semantically and pragmatically analysed, based on conceptual metaphor and embodiment, looking at body, mind, language, and culture. These theories, discussed in Section 2 below, are appropriate because the Akan emotions are expressed by means of body-part metaphors.

The methodology involved asking the informants about their understanding of the English emotional expressions “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression”, and what they consider to be their equivalents in Akan. The methodology further enquired about the factors that might cause people to fall into these negative emotions.

The interviewees were first asked about their general views on emotions, and I then focused on the emotions in this current paper. Some sample questions were, “How do you feel

when you hear about sudden sad news or the death of a close relative?”, and “How do you feel when your close relatives constantly pressure you for financial support?” A second set of questions aimed at eliciting equivalents of the emotional terms under study. I asked participants whether they could think of some idioms and proverbs that relate to these emotions. Their responses, along with idioms and proverbs I found in books and recorded from radio and TV discussions and news, form the basis of the data in the paper.

The next set of questions were posed in order to get feedback on the authenticity of some Akan terms for emotions collected from conversations on the radio, from books, and from the Akan-language Bible. Similar terms that were contextually inappropriate were rejected by the four Akan scholars mentioned in Section 1.3. Some of the other terms offered in interviews did not fit the emotions under investigation appropriately, and I used my native language intuitions and information from Christaller’s (1933) dictionary to eliminate them. One such example is the word *ateetee*, which a lecturer in psychology thought was the term for “stress”; instead, it fits rather well as an equivalent for “harassment”.

I used my Android Infix phone to record all the interviews and wrote some of the relevant portions in my notepad for reference. I transcribed the interviews and matched the terms given with existing terms in Christaller’s (1933) dictionary, the Akan Bible, especially those found in the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastics and Psalms, and in Akan oral literature genres and written literature. In the analysis, I applied theories of conceptual metaphor and embodiment to see how Akan body parts provide metaphorical extensions that yield terms for describing the emotions. The Akan sentences have interlinear glosses with free translations reflecting their metaphorical meanings.

## 2 Literature review and theoretical framework

Theories of conceptual metaphor and embodiment are adopted to discuss the Akan emotions of “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression”. Important works on the expression of emotion, both around the world and in African contexts, include Ansah, (2014), Dzokoto (2010), Dzokoto and Okazaki, (2006), and Yu (2002, 2008, 2015). In my earlier works on expressions of emotions in Akan (Agyekum 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2018), I primarily focused on specific body parts – for example, the eye, the body, the mouth, the hand, the face, and the heart, their morphological components, the semantics of their metaphorical expressions, and the pragmatic contexts in which they are used. Other works focused on anger and patience (Agyekum 2015a, 2015b). In the Akan context, Ansah (2014) discussed the metaphoric and metonymic conceptualisations of fear among the Akans. Ameka (2002) worked on the cultural scripting of body parts for emotions among the Ewes of Ghana, concentrating on “jealousy”. None of these works drew attention to proverbs encoding body part expressions, as found in this current paper. The current paper, while drawing inspiration from the above works, is different because it focuses on the Akan body parts used to express negative emotions and mental health. Before turning to the Akan data, we will introduce the theories of conceptual metaphor and embodiment.

### 2.1 Conceptual metaphor

Conceptual metaphor (henceforth CM) theory was pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who posited as follows:

Many aspects of our experience cannot be clearly delineated in terms of the naturally emergent dimensions of our experience. This is typically the case for human emotions, abstract concepts, mental activity . . . Though most of these can be experienced directly; none of them can be fully comprehended on their own terms. Instead, we must understand them in terms of other entities and experiences, typically other kinds of entities and experiences (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 177).

In CM, concepts expressed in metaphors, idioms, and proverbs correspond to cultural traits, socio-cultural interactions, natural experiences, and basic domains of human life, including bodily perception and movement, basic objects, and the environment (see Agyekum 2018; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). It is ideal to discuss the Akan concepts of “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” using theories of CM and embodiment (see Section 2.2. below).

In CM theory, the body is a potentially universal source domain from which bodily based metaphors emerge; however, any particular culture uses only certain bodily experiences that are mapped onto certain domain concepts. Emotions are universal; however, specific cultures and languages employ the strong synergy between the body and the mind differently to comment on specific emotions using CM and embodiment (see Yu 2002, 2008, 2015).

## 2.2 Embodiment

Embodiment deals with the interrelationship between language, culture, body, and mind, and its importance in the discussion of emotions. Yu (2015) describes the interface between embodiment, language, and culture clearly as follows:

The term embodiment, as suggested by the root of the word itself, has to do with the body, but it is really about how the body is related to the mind in the environment, and how this relationship affects human cognition. The basic idea behind embodiment is that the mind emerges and takes shape from the body with which we interact with our environment. Human beings have bodies, and human embodiment shapes both what and how we know, understand, think, and reason. We can know, understand, think, and reason only from and within our bodily experience. (Yu 2015, 227)

We see a strong correlation between our internal emotional and cognitive states and our external bodily experience in the idioms, metaphors and proverbs on “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” used among the Akans of Ghana. Dzokoto and Okazaki (2006, 129) posit that in most languages “the body is an integral part of the symbolism used in the expressions of affective experience by their speakers”. Gibbs (2006, 36–39) suggests that the body as a system offers insights into understanding cultural systems because people’s physical environments and the ways their bodies move are imbued with culture (see Yu 2015, 231). Geeraerts (2006) also worked on embodiment and posits that

[f]irst, we are embodied beings, not pure minds. Our organic nature influences our experience of the world, and this experience is reflected in the language we use. . . . Second . . . we are not just biological entities: we also have a cultural and social identity, and our language may reveal that identity, i.e. languages may embody the historical and cultural experience of groups of speakers (and individuals). (Geeraerts 2006, 5)

To understand Akan expressions relating to “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression”, we should note that they are derived from Akan-specific body part terms. The use of Akan body parts to express emotions fulfils the strong interaction between emotions, language, cognition, culture, and embodiment. As Enfield and Wierzbicka assert:

[P]eople everywhere are aware that their bodies (especially their ‘insides’) are centrally involved in the experience of emotion... [and] it is universally true that when people talk about their emotions, they often talk about what is happening inside their bodies – in their “heart”, “stomach”, “insides”, “liver”, “chest”, “throat”, “pancreas” or what have you. (Enfield and Wierzbicka 2002, 5)

In looking at the strong interface between the body and the mind, Marshall (2008) states that

[h]ow we think affects every aspect of what happens to our bodies, and what happens to our bodies influences our minds... Your thoughts, your emotions, your reactions, your memories and your imaginations can all be supported through the body and its experiences. (Marshall (2008, 21–22)

These observations further support the important connections between emotions, the body and the mind. In Akan, like in other cultures, it is impossible to discuss emotions without reference to body parts (see Agyekum 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2018; Kövecses 2008, 385). In analysing cultural universalities and differences and the interface between culture, language and embodiment, Yu (2008) avers that

[o]ur body, with its experiences and functions, is a potentially universal source domain for metaphorical mappings from bodily experiences onto more abstract and subjective domains. This is because human beings, despite their racial or ethnical peculiarities, all have the same basic body structure, and all share many common bodily experiences and functions, which fundamentally defines us as being human. (Yu 2008, 250)

Marshall (2008) further describes the importance of the body as a link between internal and external experiences, and states that

[t]he body is the direct point of connection between our inner self and the outer world. We communicate our desires and ideas outwards through the physical activities of speech and action... It is our body that actually lives our life. Our mind may plan, and process, and recall, but it is the body that directly experiences the reality of the world. (Marshall 2008, vii)

In this paper, we will notice that the majority of the emotive expressions in Akan are extracted from the eyes, heart, chest, head, stomach, and other body parts using CM and embodiment (see Agyekum 2018).

### 3 Akan expressions on “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression”

Throughout this article, we adopt Wierzbicka’s (1997) presentational strategy for cross-linguistic conceptual comparisons, with Akan emotional concepts given in italics and their close English equivalents in double quotation marks. We do this to indicate that the Akan emotional terms and concepts do not necessarily have exactly the same meanings as the corresponding English words but, rather, that they are close in meaning. This strategy seeks to avoid the introduction of Anglo-Western perspectives on emotions into the Akan language and culture, and thereby pays greater attention to the Akan semantic and conceptual notions of these emotions.

In Akan culture and traditions, “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” are closely related, since they all create problems for the mental and emotional abilities of the SELF. They are generally viewed as negative emotions. The Akan equivalent terms are *awerɛhoɔ* “sorrow”, *awerɛhodie/ayawdie* “distress”, *adwendwene/adwenemuhaw* “stress”, and *adwendwenentrasoɔ* “depression”. Table 1 gives the Akan terms studied, their literal meanings in English, and their close translations; all of them are from Christaller’s (1933) dictionary.

**Table 1:** Akan terms related to “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow” and “depression”

	<b>Akan</b>	<b>Akan literal translation into English</b>	<b>English translation</b>
1	<i>adwendwene/ adwenemuhaw</i>	mind/brain think	stress, thinking
2	<i>adwendwene ntrasoɔ</i>	mind/brain think, beyond	depression
3	<i>adwenentanta</i>	mind/brain twin/double	double-minded, confused
4	<i>adwenesɛɛɛ</i>	mind/brain spoilt	disturbed
5	<i>ahodwane</i>	body paining	disturbance, harassment, oppression
6	<i>ahohia(hia)</i>	body need (redupl.)	distress, embarrassment, perplexity
7	<i>ahokyere</i>	body tightening	hardships, anguish
8	<i>ahoyera</i>	body get lost	uneasiness, anxiety, vexation
9	<i>ahoyerayera</i>	body get lost (redupl.)	uneasiness, great distress
10	<i>anibereɛ</i>	eyes redden	distress, wrath
11	<i>atirimukyere</i>	head inside tight	perplexity
12	<i>atirimutwetwe</i>	head inside pull pull	causing emotion
13	<i>awerɛhodie</i>	soul flying over eating	distress
14	<i>awerɛhoɔ</i>	soul flying over	grief sorrow, sadness
15	<i>ayamgya</i>	stomach fire	consternation
16	<i>ayamhyehyee</i>	stomach burning	anxiety, anguish

“Distress” in Akan refers to the state of affairs where one becomes psychologically disturbed when things are not going well. During the research, responses from my informants acknowledged that in Akan culture, one can be stressed due to numerous and rampant demands from the extended family that are beyond one’s capabilities and resources. A depressed person becomes cold, mentally and physically disturbed, inactive, and hopeless and believes that the situation will be permanent; these were common themes in the discussions and programmes on radio and TV.

The Akans can express *adwendwene* “stress” in the form of unbearable demands as *menhunu me ho ano* (lit.) ‘I cannot see the end of myself’; *menhunu deɛ menyɛ* ‘I am clueless’. *Adwendwenentrasoɔ* “depression” is expressed as *agye me nsam* ‘it has stripped out of my hand’; *megyɛ me ho baabiara a, ennye* ‘there is no way I can release myself’; and *meto m’ani a, ensia* ‘when I cast my eyes around they do not fall on anybody’. In *adwendwene* “stressful” and *adwendwenentrasoɔ* “depressing” emotions, one feels that the demands one is experiencing exceed what one’s human capacity and resources can cope with and that there is nobody who



can help. One is in a state of despair and “depression” and becomes mentally traumatised. My informants, as well as people recorded on radio and TV health programmes, indicated that lack of assistance from the extended family system and ridicule due to barrenness or impotency are very “depressing” and “distressing”.

### 3.1 Akan body part expressions for “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression”

Apart from idioms, maxims and proverbs, most concepts, experiences and expressions of *awerehoɔ* “sorrow”, *awerehodie* “distress”, *adwendwene* “stress”, and *adwendwenentrasoɔ* “depression” in Akan are drawn from body part terms. The concepts derived from body parts cement the symbiotic relations and strong synergy between the body and the mind (see Section 2.2). The emotional expressions are based on *ho* ‘body’, *tiri* ‘head’, *adwene* ‘brain’, *yam* ‘stomach’, and *were* ‘soul/heart’.

The body parts are used because they relate closely to emotions. For example, *were* ‘soul/heart’ in *awerehoɔ* “sorrow” and *awerehodie* “distress”, and *adwene* ‘brain’ in *adwendwene* “stress” and *adwendwenentrasoɔ* “depression” are metonyms that indicate emotional states affecting the entire personality. The examples above support the notion that CMs select and transfer physical entities into the mental and emotional world. Let us discuss specific body parts that relate to the emotions above.

### 3.2 Using *were* ‘soul/heart’ in expressing “distress” and “sorrow”

The most common term is *awerehoɔ* “sorrow”. It is also popular on radio and TV, and is found frequently in the Bible and in the oral and written literature examples examined for this study. The terms *awerehoɔ* “sorrow”, “sadness”, and *awerehodie* “distress” are derived from the body part *were* “soul/heart”. *Awerehoɔ* “sorrow” has the prefix *a-* plus *were* ‘soul/heart’ + *ho* (ɔ) ‘blows off’.<sup>2</sup> It refers to a situation where the soul/heart becomes too light due to physical, mental, psychological or social pressures. The light heart is likened to a feather, a leaflet, cotton, kapok, or any light material that can be easily blown away by the slightest wind (see Agyekum 2018). Semantically, the person is “distressed”, and that situation can lead to “depression”.

- (1) *Me maame wuo no a-ma me were a-ho.*  
 my mother’s death the has-let my soul has-blown\_off  
 ‘My mother’s death has made me sad.’

In the above, the cause of the sorrow is the mother’s death. The verb can syntactically precede *were*, ‘the soul/heart’; this places the cause (agent) in the subject position while the soul/heart is pushed to the object position as the experiencer, as seen in (2).

<i>X</i>	<i>ho</i>	<i>Y</i>	<i>were</i>
X	blows off	Y’s	soul/heart

<sup>2</sup> The Akan language has the noun *ho* ‘body’ with nasalized vowel (*hõ*) and the verb *ho* ‘blow off’ (not nasalized). In Akan orthography, nasals and tones are not marked; it is the context that makes the difference.

- (2) *Me maame wuo no a-ho me werɛ.*  
 my mother’s death the has-blown\_off my soul/heart  
 ‘My mother’s death has made me sad.’

The verb *ho* can mean ‘be not well cooked’; if the food does not get sufficient heat, the Akans say *aduanɛ no aho*, ‘the food is not well cooked’. Similarly, if the heart is metaphorically “not well cooked”, then it has moved from its normal state to a pensive mood. Each semantic extension means that the person is “distressed” and “depressed”, through the mechanisms of CM and embodiment. The two metaphorical extensions are derived from Akan ethnosemantics, and Akan experts attested to the veracity of each explanation.

The nominal *awerɛhoɔ* refers to “sorrow”. The Akans have expressions like *di awerɛhoɔ* ‘to experience “sorrow”’, *wɔ awerɛhoɔ mu* ‘to be in “sorrow”’, *te awerɛhoɔ mu* ‘to live in “sorrow”’, *kɔ awerɛhoɔ mu* ‘to go into “sorrow”’, *firi awerɛhoɔ mu* ‘to come out of “sorrow”’, *awerɛhoɔ aba* ‘“sorrow” has come’, *awerɛhoɔ abu me kɔn* ‘“sorrow” has broken my neck’, etc. Here, “sorrow”, which is derived through embodiment, is conceptualised as being permanent, and situations either push people into it or relieve them from it because the body is still alive. Again, in *di awerɛhoɔ* ‘to experience “sorrow”’, one conceptually and metaphorically “eats” “sorrow” (literally), and the emotional state becomes inseparable from the person’s bodily cells.

In using the motion verb *kɔ* + *awerɛhoɔ mu* (lit.) ‘go into “sorrow”’, speakers indicate that one moves into a “sorrowful” state, but in *awerɛhoɔ aba*, (lit.) ‘“sorrow” has come’; “sorrow” (the agent) moves towards the person to cause the “sorrowful” situation.

- (3) *Adwuma-seeɛ no de awerɛhoɔ a-ba fie.*  
 job-spoiling the take “sorrow” has-come home  
 ‘The unemployment has brought sorrow to the house.’

In example (3), “sorrow” is derived from the CM and embodiment as an entity in motion from an unknown place to the house. Some idiomatic expressions involving *awerɛhoɔ* are found in examples (4–6).

- (4) *Awerɛhoɔ a-hyɛ/si Danso ataadeɛ.*  
 “sorrow” has-worn Danso dress  
 ‘Danso is filled with too much “sorrow”.’

In (4), “sorrow” is conceptualised as a cloth that covers the entire body, implying close contact between the person and the sorrowful feeling (Agyekum 2018). Other synonymous expressions that metaphorically use clothing are *awerɛhoɔ asi no ataadeɛ*, *awerɛhoɔ afura no ntoma*, ‘“sorrow” has clothed him’. In the Akan Bible, Mathew (26: 38) reads as in (5) below.

- (5) *Awerɛhoɔ a-hyɛ me kra so de rekɔ owuo mu.*  
 “sorrow” has-filled my soul on use is\_going death inside  
 ‘Sorrow has filled my heart till death.’  
 ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death.’

The above is a translation of Jesus’ words spoken close to crucifixion when he reached Gethsemane and realised that his death was near and inevitable. *Awerɛhoɔ* “sorrow” is portrayed as a liquid that can fill an empty space, including the soul. The power of *awerɛhoɔ* “sorrow” to

overcome a person is expressed in (6) below.

- (6) *Awerɛhoɔ*    *a-bu*            *nnyanka*        *no*        *kɔn*.  
 “sorrow”        has-broken        orphans        the        neck  
 ‘“Sorrow” has broken the neck of the orphans.’  
 ‘The orphans are in deep “sorrow”.’

The above conceptually indicates the hyperbolic degree and power of *awerɛhoɔ* “sorrow” as a heavy weapon that can break the undergoer’s neck. The neck is specifically used in Akan CM because when your neck is broken and cut off from the head you will die. The neck is conceptually a metonym for SELF. *Awerɛhoɔ* “sorrow” is metaphorically considered as a powerful entity that can eventually break people’s necks.

### 3.3 Expressing “distress” and “anxiety” using the body part *ani* ‘eye’

The body part *ani* ‘eye’ can be used to express distress in Akan. A corollary expression to *awerɛhoɔ* is *anibereɛ*, made up of *ani* ‘eye’ and the verb *bere* ‘to be reddish’; it connotes “distress” or “anxiety”. *Anibereɛ* “distress” refers to the emotional state of physical or psychological pain when one has lost an item or is bereaved. Sometimes the physical eyes are red from crying during bereavement.

- (7) *Owuo*            *de*        *anibereɛ*        *ba*            *abusua*        *mu*  
 death            use        “distress”        come to        family        inside  
 ‘Death brings about “distress” in the family.’

### 3.4 Expressions of “distress” and “sorrow” related to *ho* ‘body’

In Akan, *ho* ‘body’, a metonym for one’s entire personality in CM, has compounds that represent “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression”. They include *ahohiahia* “distress, perplexity”, *ahoyera* “uneasiness, anxiety, vexation”, *ahokyere* “distress, uneasiness”, and *ahodwane* “disturbance, vexation, harassment” (see Agyekum 2016, 2018).

The term *ahoyera* (lit. ‘body loss’) has the nominal prefix *a-* + *ho*, ‘body’, plus the verb *yera* ‘to get lost’. *Ahoyera* denotes a physical bodily state where parts of the body are presumably lost to the personality due to some negative psychological or physical state. We normally experience this physically under very severe heat conditions. This is further transferred metaphorically into “uneasiness”, “anxiety”, and “vexation”, where the person finds himself in a tense situation leading to “distress” (Agyekum 2016, 336).

- (8) *Asem*    *keseɛ*    *no*        *a-ma*            *me*        *ho*        *yera*        *me*.  
 case    big    the        has-made        my        body    lose    me  
 ‘The big case has made me uneasy.’  
 ‘I am “distressed” by the big case.’

Syntactically, *X ho yera X* is a reflexive construction, implying that X is in the state of “uneasiness”; this construction gives us the nominal *ahoyera*. If one has a serious case, one becomes

very stressed out, and to express this condition, *ahoyera* is reduplicated as *ahoyerayera*. In the Akan language, reduplication denotes intensification, frequency, repetition and plurality (see Agyekum 2008, 4; Dolphyne 1988, 124).

In 2016, before Ghana’s general election, an MP for Abuakwa North constituency was murdered in cold blood in his house near East Legon in Accra. The statement below was recorded from Peace FM radio station, when the sad news was announced. The New Patriotic Party (NPP), the late MP’s party, his family, and the entire nation were in mourning and in a “distressing” situation (see Agyekum 2018).

- (9) *Awudifo no de ahoyerayera a-to abusua no so.*  
murderers the use “great\_distress” has-put family the on  
‘The murderers have made the family very uneasy.’  
‘The murder case has put the family into a “stressful” situation.’ (Agyekum 2016).

Another term, *ahokyere* “distress”, is made up of the prefix *a-*, plus *ho*, ‘body’ and the verb *kyere*, ‘to be tight’ *Ahokyere* implies the tightness of one’s body, where one has no control over the body. Conceptually, the various parts of the body do not have free space to operate and they struggle for limited space in a tight corner; *ho* refers to the SELF.

- (10) *A-ho-kyere kɛse a-tu no Winneba kɔ Ahafo.*  
PREF-body-tight big has-moved him from\_Winneba go Ahafo  
‘The severe “hardships” have caused him to move from Winneba to Ahafo.’

The cost of living in Winneba is very high and one cannot survive without a good job; this situation sends one into *akokyere* “distress”, hence the person has resettled in Ahafo.

Another concept, *ahodwane*, literally means that the person feels physical “distress” and a painful sensation in the body. The pain is mentally reconstructed and transferred metaphorically to situations in which people have troubles, disturbances, consternation, harassments, or mental or bodily pains. The FORCE in emotions conceptually exerts pressure onto the body and the brain and pushes the SELF into “distress” via embodiment (see Agyekum 2016).

### 3.5 Using *adwene* ‘brain/mind’ to express “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow” and “depression”

The body part *adwene* ‘brain/mind’ is one of the sources for the expression of “sorrow”, “stress”, and “depression”. The Akans use *adwendwene* for “stress”, (lit. ‘mind/brain think’), *adwenesɛɛɛ* ‘spoilt, confused mind/brain’, *adwenentanta*, ‘mind/brain double, double-minded’ and *adwendwene ntraso* ‘excessive thinking’, “depression”, (Agyekum 2018). Let us look at examples (11–13) below.

- (11) *Owuo gya nnipa adwene-dwene.*  
death leaves people mind-think  
‘Death leaves people thinking.’  
‘Death “stresses” people out.’  
(This is one of the metaphors tested with and confirmed by my informants.)

In (11), the nominal *adwendwene* is a combination of *adwene* ‘brain’ plus the verb *dwene* ‘think’; literally the brain thinks, or there is an intensity or multiplicity of thinking at various levels. In the process of compounding, the last vowel in *adwene* ‘mind’ is deleted, resulting in *adwendwene*. The term *adwendwene ntraso* connotes excessive thinking: *tra* means ‘beyond’ and the adjective *ntraso* implies “excess or extreme”. This is one of the closest Akan terms to the English concept of “depression”. When an enigmatic issue crops up, it becomes very difficult to find an instant solution and one must reflect on many strategies, hence *adwendwene* or *adwendwene ntraso*. The person twists the mind in many directions while trying to solve the problem, but there is no solution and she or he is “stressed out” and “depressed”, as seen in (12) and (13) below.

- (12) *Adwendwene a-hye yen kra so ma.*  
 mind\_think has-filled our souls up full  
 ‘Our souls are full of thoughts.’  
 ‘We are completely “stressed out”.’

We deduce from the above that our souls are bothered by several thoughts and there is no free space for other things. The above example can also be put as in (13).

- (13) *Adwendwene a-hye yen akoma mu ma.*  
 mind\_think has-filled our heart inside full  
 ‘Our hearts are full of thoughts.’  
 ‘We are completely “stressed out”.’

### 3.6 Expressions of “stress and depression” derived from *tiri* ‘head’

There are certain expressions relating to “stress”, “distress”, and depression” that are derived from *tiri* ‘head’. They indicate that in Akan CM and embodiment, the head stands for the mind or brain, and there is a close relationship between them. The head acts as the container for the brain, and both of them handle cognitive and psycho-social issues including “stress”, “distress”, and “depression”. We will discuss *atirimukyere* “perplexity” and *atirimutwetwe*, “emotional uneasiness”. Let us look at the morpheme-by-morpheme translations of these emotions.

- (14) *a tiri mu kyere* ----- *atirimukyere*  
 NOM\_PREF head inside tight ----- “perplexity”
- (15) *a tiri mu twe twe* ----- *atirimutwetwe*  
 NOM\_PREF head inside pull pull ----- “uneasiness”

The expression *tirimukyere* is made up of *tiri* ‘head’ + *mu* ‘inside’ + *kyere* ‘to be tight’. The compound indicates a situation where many things are struggling for limited space in the head. The head stands for the brain, which is then transferred to the personality in a part-for-whole CM relationship. When things are overcrowded and there is competition for space, there is friction and confusion, represented by *atirimukyere* “perplexity”. The person is uncertain as to which problem to handle first, and how to tackle it, and hence becomes emotionally “stressed out”. A near synonym, *atirimutwetwe* ‘emotional “uneasiness”’, is derived from *tiri* ‘head’ *mu*

‘inside’ and *twetwe* ‘to pull’ (reduplicated). Christaller (1933, 516) postulates that such an emotional state can drive one mad, like the manic phase of “depression”. Let us look at (16), where the husband has a chronic disease that will ultimately kill him.

- (16) *Papa no yareε koankorɔ no a-gya ne yere no atiri-mu-twetwe.*  
 man the disease chronic the has-left his wife the head-inside-pulling  
 ‘The man’s chronic disease has dragged his wife into “depression”.’

### 3.7 Expressions of “stress”, “distress”, and “depression” relating to *yam* ‘stomach’

In Akan, some metaphorical and idiomatic negative emotional expressions relate to *yam* ‘stomach’. A compound *ayamgya*, (lit.) ‘fire in the stomach’, made up of prefix *a* + *yam* ‘stomach’ and *gya* ‘fire’ refers to “distress” and “consternation” (see Agyekum 2015c).

- (17) *Adu gu- -u Ama ayam-gya enti ɔ-ankɔ Turkey.*  
 Adu put Ama stomach-fire so she-did\_not\_go Turkey  
 ‘Adu put some “fear” in Ama so she did not go to Turkey.’

Agyekum (2015c, 103) states, “When somebody puts another person in a state of exasperation, it is conceptualised as setting fire into that person’s stomach.” Such a state is based on the metaphor FEAR IS A PHYSICAL FORCE (see Kövecses 2000, 219). As the “fire” flames up, there is a transfer from the stomach into the heart, and upwards into the brain; the person metaphorically gets into psychological turmoil, “distress”, and “depression”. There is a close connection between (a) the container – STOMACH, (b) the HEART, a conventionally conceived location for emotions and feelings, and (c) the mental faculty BRAIN/MIND. The synergy between the three body parts makes the emotional state serious. Akan thus have the CM EXASPERATION IS A FIRE IN THE STOMACH; it relates to “stress”, “distress”, and “depression” via embodiment.

There is another expression, *ayamhyehyeε*, similar to *ayamgya* above; it is derived from the nominal prefix *a-* + *yam* ‘stomach and *hye* ‘to burn’ or ‘to be hot’; it is reduplicated as *hyehye* ‘to be intensely hot’ plus the nominal suffix *-ε*. *Ayamhyehyeε* is “anxiety”, “anguish”, “emotional tension”, or “distress” (see Agyekum 2015, 103). The component parts are:

- (18) *a yam hye-hye-ε → ayamhyehyeε*  
 PREF stomach burn-burn-SUFF → “distress/tension”

*Ayamhyehyeε* literally means “a burning in the stomach”, or “anguish” that puts one into psychological imbalance and “distress”. Yu (2002, 360) records the link between anxiety and the stomach in Chinese. Anxiety is related to heat; there is a higher level of emotion, which, in Akan, is captured by the reduplication of the verb *hye* ‘burn’ and its impact on the stomach.

- (19) *Nsɔhwε no de ayamhyehyeε atɔ Akosua so.*  
 examination the put anxiety has\_fallen Akosua on  
 ‘The examination has afflicted “anxiety” on Akosua.’

In Akan, some emotions are conceptually conceived as being stored in the stomach. The stomach is linked with the heart, which is another conventionalised place that is conceptualised

for emotions and feelings, just like the stomach or the liver. The burning of the stomach thus implies the burning of the heart (see Perez 2008, 46). We derive the CM EMOTIONAL TENSION IS A PRESSURE INSIDE THE CONTAINER. In example (19), metaphorically, the tension and pressure is from *nsɔhwɛ* ‘examination’, the source of the *ayamhyehyɛɛ* “anxiety”, and the container is the *yam* ‘stomach (see Agyekum 2015; Kövecses 2000, 219). All these CMs indicate that the person is “stressed out” and “distressed”. The Akan examples sourced from specific body parts indicate that they fall within the theories of CM and embodiment.

#### 4 Idiomatic expressions related to “stress”, “sorrow”, “distress” and “depression”

Apart from the individual expressions, Akan has conceptual idiomatic expressions about “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, “depression”, and other negative mental states.

##### (a) *Bɔ asesa* ‘to be “restless”’

One of the expressions is *bɔ asesa*, ‘to be restless/depressed’; it is nominalised as *asesabɔ*, ‘restlessness/depression’. The Akans think that when someone is “depressed”, he sometimes becomes restless.

- (20) *Nimo ba no wuo abɔ no asesa.*  
 Nimo child the death has\_struck him “restless”  
 ‘The death of Nimo’s child has made him “restless”.’

The above expression is a clear example of physical manifestation of an emotional state. It emphasises how the physical body communicates with the mind via embodiment and how this is further captured in the Akan culture and language. This is evidenced in the definitions of embodiment (see Section 2.2, Gibbs 2006, 36–39, 156, and Yu 2015, 231).

*Asesabɔ* “restlessness” gets people confused and makes them aimless. The “distressed” and “restless” person wanders about without a focused goal and is full of uncertainties; the demands are so great that he or she cannot sit in one place to reflect.

- (b) *Y tu fra X adwene* — ‘Y moves to mix X’s mind.’  
 [*Y tu fra X adwene*]  
 [*Y move mix X mind*]  
 ‘Y is mixed up in X’s mind.’

This expression indicates that things are mixed up in the person’s mind. The mind is conceptualised as a system with various units, where each functions separately. If the units are conceptually mixed up, there will be an explosion; because the specific units do not function optimally in the mind, there is confusion and this is “distressing” and “stressful” (see Agyekum 2018).

- (21) *Adwumaseɛ no a-tu a-fra n’adwene mu.*  
 Job\_loss the have-moved have-mixed his\_brain inside  
 ‘The job loss is mixed up in his mind.’  
 ‘The job loss has confused him.’

In (21), there are mixed competing issues, as a consequence of unemployment, that bother the subject’s mind; the person ultimately becomes clueless. The expression, *a-fra n’adwene mu*, can be rendered as *abɔ afra ne tirim*, (lit.), ‘it is scattered in his head.’ In all these, he is “depressed”, and many things are weighing him down.

- (c) *Y fa X adwene/tiri mu* — ‘Y takes the inner part of X’s mind/head.’  
 [Y *fa* X *adwene/tiri mu*]  
 [Y takes X mind/head inside]  
 ‘Y takes hold of X’s mind/head.’

In this expression, an issue Y takes hold of the inner part of X’s mind/head. When that happens, some capacity of the mind is conceptually blocked and the person’s mental processing becomes poor; the person becomes “stressed out”.

- (22) *Ne ba yaree no a-fa n’adwene /ne tiri mu.*  
 his child’s sickness the has-taken his\_brain /his head inside.  
 ‘His child’s sickness has confused him.’  
 ‘He is “stressed” due to his child’s sickness.’

When the child’s sickness (lit.) ‘takes the parent’s mind’, the person is controlled by the implications of the severe ailment. This conceptual metonym implies that the personality is “distressed” (see Agyekum 2018).

## 5 Some Akan proverbs on “sorrow”, “distress”, “stress” and “depression”

Ethnographically, emotions in Akan can be referred to by maxims and proverbs based on sociocultural experiences. The lexical and metaphorical expressions for emotions in the Akan proverbs are sourced from body parts based on CM and embodiment.

Agyekum (2005, 9) states that “proverbs are interpretations of traditional wisdom based on the experiences and socio-political life of our elders.” In Akan indigenous communication, the use of proverbs is the acknowledged mark of one’s communicative competence. Proverbs are time-tested expressions that give a philosophical window into the Akan worldview and their indigenous knowledge. Akan proverbs are literary devices that depict holistic experiences in life, including a diversity of emotions. Undoubtedly, some proverbs relate to “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” using CM and embodiment. These Akan proverbs, based on specific body parts, were collected from my informants, radio discussions, folk songs, oral literature genres and written literature books, and my own knowledge as an Akan native speaker.

- (23) *Awerɛhoɔ kum sunsum.*  
 sorrow kills spirit  
 “‘Sorrow’ can lower a person’s spirit.’

In (23), sorrow is a CM “weapon” that can metaphorically kill a person’s spirit.



- (24) *Asesa rebɔ wo a, wose wonim nante.*  
 “restlessness” PROG. afflict you then you\_say you\_know walking  
 ‘When you are “restless” you think you are a great hiker.’

The Akans think that when people are “depressed” or “despairing”, they become “restless”. They hope that by moving around, things will be better, but all to no avail.

- (25) *Onipa ani bere a, deɛ ɔka n-ye na.*  
 person eyes redden then that he\_says not-be scarce  
 ‘If a person is “desperate” s/he says anything.’

- (26) *Aboa no ka anibere.*  
 animal the bites in\_“desperation”  
 ‘People’s behaviour may be violent when they are desperate.’

In the above examples, the body part used is *ani* ‘eye’. In CM and embodiment, the eye physically changes in colour, and becomes reddish, as in example (25). In (26), when an animal has been harassed, the emotional state of its heart and mind is reflected physically in the reddish eye. In Akan CM and embodiment, there is a strong relationship between a reddish eye and “desperation”. The above proverbs indicate that in CM when people are “stressed out” and “desperate”, they have no limits on what to say and what not to say and this can be seen in their physical outlook and body language (see Yu 2015, 227; Geeraerts 2006, 5 in Section 2.2). Their behaviour may change from positive to negative, and it is better not to provoke “distressed” people.

- (27) *Adwendwene nua ne “me ampara me ni.”*  
 “stress” sibling is me of\_all me this\_is  
 ‘Much thinking is the brother of “Is this what I have become?”’  
 (See Appiah et al 2000, 392, Prov. 2167)

The above proverb is based on *adwene* ‘mind’, ‘brain’, (see Section 3.5). The example implies that too much (usage of the *adwene* ‘brain’) thinking and reflection leads to self-doubt. A highly “stressed out” and “depressed” person begins to doubt the purpose of his or her existence in life, since everything seems negative. This is another evidence of the use of CM and embodiment: a person’s existence in life is sourced from the brain (see Yu 2015, 227 in section 2).

The proverbs in examples (28–30) below utilise two body parts, namely *were* ‘soul’ or ‘heart’, as discussed in Section 3.4, and *yafunu/yam* ‘stomach’ in Section 3.7. In these proverbs, while the emotional state is derived from *were* ‘soul/heart’, the *yam/yafunu* ‘stomach’ indicates that the conceptual container must be filled regardless of what is happening to the soul and other body parts. In example (29), the body parts used in the proverb are *ani* ‘eye’ and *were* ‘soul/heart’. The proverbs indicate that “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression” emanate from the soul, thus producing *awerehoɔ*, but that the body must rest by sleeping and relying on *ani* ‘eye’. Here, it is *ani* ‘eye’ that does not recognise “sorrow”: *ani* is a conceptual metonym for the SELF. In Akan conceptualisation, one body part can resolve the negative situation that another body part is going through. This phenomenon implies that one should be resilient since difficulties are part of life, and many people go through such “depressing” and “stressful” experiences. The proverbs indicate that in the midst of all adversities, life should continue.

- (28) *Awerɛhoɔ* *kɔ* *agyina* *a,* *yafunu* *nkɔ* *bi.*  
 if\_“sadness” goes meeting then stomach do\_not\_go some  
 ‘If “sadness” goes into counselling, the stomach does not accompany it.’
- (29) *Aniwa* *nnim* *awerɛhoɔ.*  
 eyes do\_not\_know “sadness”  
 ‘Eyes know nothing about “sadness”.’  
 ‘Even in situations of “sorrow” we still sleep.’
- (30) *Ani bere* *a,* *ensɔ* *gya.*  
 eyes redden if it\_does\_not\_light fire  
 ‘If eyes are red they do not light fire.’  
 ‘No matter how “distressed” you become there is some relief.’

Appiah et al. (2000, 1125) explain that whatever your situation is you must eat; again, no matter the agony one is going through, one still falls asleep. Proverbs (28) and (29) talk about natural things that cannot be changed; no matter the atrocities, agony, grief, “stress”, and “depression”, one must eat and rest to be physically strong. Life must go on notwithstanding the troubles and trials; there is hope for better things.

The proverb in (30) encourages people to recognise that despite the high levels of “depression” and “stress” in life, there is a limit; it cannot burst into flames. Proverbs (28–30) are proverbs of encouragement during times of “stress”, “distress”, and “depression”; people can compare their precarious states to natural events.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the strong interrelationship between a people’s language, culture, body, mind, and emotions, using the theories of CM and embodiment. We have used different Akan body parts to discuss lexical compounds, idioms, and proverbs that express “sorrow”, “stress”, “distress”, and “depression”. We have also discussed the use of Akan body parts via CM and embodiment in proverbs that state the negative emotions and their impact on people. Notwithstanding this impact, the body part terms used in the proverbs encourage people to be resilient when “distressed” or “depressed”.

We have found out that body part expressions are indispensable in Akan CMs and embodiment in the discussion of negative emotions. The use of the body parts in lexical items, idioms, or proverbs is based on the Akan socio-cultural concepts, beliefs, indigenous knowledge, and worldview, expressing the above emotions through metaphors of body parts.

We noticed that body parts like *tiri* ‘head’, *were* ‘soul’, *ho* ‘body’, *akoma* ‘heart’, *yam* ‘stomach’, and *ani* ‘eye’ can be used to express “stress”, “distress”, “sorrow”, and “depression”. There are also emotional compound terms like *adwendwene* “stress”, *adwendwene ntraso* “depression”, *ahodwane* “distress”, *ahohiahia* “distress”, “perplexity”, *ahokyere* “distress”, *atirimukyere* “perplexity”, *awerɛhoɔ* “sorrow”, *ayamgya* “consternation”, and *ayamhyehyee* “anxiety”.

The discussions and illustrations in this paper show that CM and embodiment are important components of the descriptions of emotions in Akan. We thus agree with Yu (2015, 237), who looks at the indispensability of embodiment in emotions, thoughts, language, and culture

by positing that “[t]he central idea is that embodiment is always situated in its sociocultural context. That is, fundamentally, the human body shapes the way humans think and talk because what they perceive and do through the sensorimotor systems of their bodies sets up the contours of what they know and understand.”

The findings of this paper agree with Wierzbicka’s (1997) work on the understanding of people’s cultures through their key words, because terms of emotion and their meanings are culturally specific. The discussion of *awerɛhoɔ* “sorrow”, *awerɛhodie* “distress”, *adwendwene* “stress”, and *adwendwene ntrasoɔ* “depression” reflects an “inner perspective” of Akans’ shared knowledge. Based on comments from my informants and on my own knowledge of Akan tradition, I posit that while *awerɛhoɔ* “sorrow” is momentary and less severe, *adwendwene ntrasoɔ* “depression”, is serious and long lasting.

This paper has contributed to the study of Akan negative emotions by looking at the interface between language, body, and mind, concentrating on specific body parts. The contents of this paper will improve cultural understanding of body parts used for emotions, which is necessary for effective mental health care. It has provided linguistic explanations of the Akan emotional terms and concepts, which will benefit Akan native and non-native mental health practitioners and researchers working in Akan communities in developing their questionnaires and interviews.

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