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**From Oral Wisdom to Corporate Ethics: Human Resource Lessons
From Akan and Yorùbá Proverbs**



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From Oral Wisdom to Corporate Ethics: Human Resource Lessons From Akan and Yorùbá Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines how Akan and Yorùbá proverbs function as indigenous ethical frameworks that articulate principles relevant to contemporary Human Resource Management (HRM) and leadership.

Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and hermeneutic analysis. A purposive sample of Akan and Yorùbá proverbs related to work, leadership, cooperation, and moral conduct was drawn from established proverb anthologies and contextual cultural interpretations. The proverbs were thematically coded and analytically mapped onto key theoretical frameworks.

Findings: The findings reveal that Akan and Yorùbá proverbs constitute coherent indigenous philosophies of work and leadership that emphasize moral character, accountability, teamwork, reciprocity, and ethical stewardship. These principles closely align with contemporary HRM concepts such as employee engagement, ethical leadership, trust-based employment relations, and sustainability. The analysis further shows that African proverbs function as moral regulatory mechanisms, shaping behavior and reinforcing organizational norms through culturally embedded ethical reasoning.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy, and Practice: The study contributes theoretically by positioning African proverbs as legitimate indigenous management texts that extend and decolonize dominant HRM and leadership theories. At the policy level, it highlights the relevance of integrating indigenous ethical systems into organizational governance, leadership development, and corporate social responsibility frameworks, particularly within African contexts. Practically, the study offers a culturally grounded model for embedding proverb-based ethics into HR training, leadership evaluation, and organizational culture-building, advancing a human-centered and sustainable approach to management practice.

Keywords: *African Proverbs, Indigenous Ethics, Human Resource Management (HRM), Moral Philosophy, Sustainable Leadership*

1. Introduction

African proverbs function not merely as linguistic ornamentation but as repositories of collective wisdom and moral reasoning. As Finnegan (2012) observes, they serve as “vehicles of wisdom”, encoding philosophical insights, ethical norms, and social expectations that structure communal life. Among the Akan and Yorùbá, proverbs encapsulate complex moral logics that guide individual and collective conduct (Yankah, 1989; Owomoyela, 2005; Aragbuwa & Omotunde, 2022; Yede, Akanmu & Mayadenu, 2025; Lawer, 2025). Their rhetorical power lies in condensing social truths into memorable forms that regulate behavior. As Okyere (2020) demonstrates, these proverbs constitute not only aesthetic expressions but cognitive systems through which indigenous communities theorize ethics, leadership, and human labor.

Despite their significance, African proverbs remain marginalized within contemporary corporate and managerial thought. The dominance of Western-derived Human Resource Management (HRM) models in postcolonial Africa has produced an epistemic disjuncture between indigenous ethical systems and organizational practice (Kamoche, 2000; Zoogah, 2011). Dei (1996) and Nyamnjoh (2004) argue that imported managerial paradigms often disregard African moral economies grounded in reciprocity, community, and character, leading to what Jackson (2012) describes as managerial alienation. Consequently, scholars advocate the integration of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) into management thought (Iguisi, 2014; Abugre, 2018; Adedokun, 2024; Yede, Akanmu & Mayadenu, 2025). African proverbs provide a critical entry point into this re-engagement. Sayings such as “*Nsa baako nkura adesoa*” (“One hand cannot lift a load”) and “*Àjọjẹ o dun bí ẹni kò ní*” (“Communal eating is sweet only when everyone contributes”) emphasize collective responsibility, while “*Anoma antu a, ọbua da*” (“If the bird does not fly, it goes to bed hungry”) and “*Ìwà l’ẹwà*” (“Character is beauty”) foreground diligence and integrity (Adegbola, 2021). These expressions demonstrate that key HRM principles such as motivation, cooperation, and ethical accountability are deeply rooted in African epistemologies.

The study draws on the Theory of Reflection (Lukács, 1971), which views linguistic forms as mirrors of social realities, alongside functionalist perspectives that interpret proverbs as instruments of social regulation (Ssetuba, 2002; Yankah, 2012; Ehineni, 2017; Aragbuwa & Omotunde, 2022; Lawer, 2025). In organizational contexts, proverbs encode leadership ideals, discipline, and collective accountability. Contemporary HRM scholarship similarly emphasizes ethical culture and sustainability (Ezeafulukwe, Okatta, & Ayanponle, 2022; Hutchful, 2025; Kramar, 2014; Mariappanadar, 2020), highlighting a convergence between indigenous ethics and modern management frameworks. This paper argues that Akan and Yorùbá proverbs function as indigenous repositories of HR philosophy. By aligning proverbial ethics with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1989), the study demonstrates that indigenous notions of reciprocity and obligation parallel contemporary models of workplace trust and engagement. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, analyzing

proverbs from established collections through textual hermeneutics (Appiah, Appiah, & Agyeman-Duah, 2001; Owomoyela, 2005; Ehineni, 2017; Okyere, 2020; Adegbola, 2021).

The study aims to (1) identify proverbs reflecting HRM values, (2) interpret them through relevant theoretical frameworks, and (3) examine their implications for African corporate contexts. It ultimately advances a paradigm of Human Resource Africanization, emphasizing ethical character as central to organizational value. The paper argues that African proverbs offer enduring ethical insights for reimagining management thought and practice.

2. Literature Review

African proverbs have long been recognized as repositories of moral knowledge and social philosophy, functioning as epistemic instruments through which ethical principles, social hierarchies, and communal expectations are encoded. Foundational studies by Finnegan (1970, 2012) describe proverbs as condensed archives of collective experience, while Yankah (1989) conceptualizes them as performative “social acts” that mediate moral reasoning and reinforce social cohesion. Within Akan and Yorùbá traditions, proverbs articulate the interdependence between ethical character and communal well-being, which foreground moral integrity as the basis of personhood (Abimbola, 1975; Idowu, 1996; Gyekye, 1995; Wiredu, 2002; Arowosegbe, 2017). In this sense, proverbs function as ethical infrastructures, oral constitutions that encode justice, accountability, and balance, while also operating as “philosophical signposts of African rationality” (Okyere, 2020; Aragbuwa & Omotunde, 2022). Their performative nature renders them both didactic and pragmatic, making them valuable analytical tools for understanding moral agency across social and institutional contexts.

This ethical orientation extends to conceptions of work and labor, which in African philosophy are framed as moral obligations rather than purely economic activities. Gyekye (1997) emphasizes that labor links individual effort to broader social and cosmic order, a principle reflected in some proverbs. These expressions highlight diligence, responsibility, and moral causality, aligning closely with contemporary Human Resource (HR) concepts of motivation and engagement. Scholars such as Ssetuba (2002) and Yankah (2012) further argue that proverbs encode indigenous theories of social and economic organization grounded in reciprocity and collective benefit, principles that anticipate Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1989). Proverbs such as “*Nsa baako nkura adesoa*” (“One hand cannot lift a load”) and “*Agbajo ọwọ la fi n so àyà*” (“We join hands to protect the chest”) reinforce cooperation as the foundation of both social and organizational life, resonating with modern HRM emphases on teamwork and inclusivity (Ezeafulukwe, Okatta, & Ayanponle, 2022; Mariappanadar, 2020). Similarly, historical systems of apprenticeship and collective production in Akan and Yorùbá societies reflect values of mentorship and accountability, echoed in proverbs such as “*ɔsono wura na ɔma ɔsono tena*” (“It is the owner of the elephants that causes the elephant to stay”) which underscores leadership responsibility.

Beyond labour, proverbs also function as key instruments of social communication and organizational mediation. Abrahams (1972) characterizes them as “*social lubricants*” that enable the articulation of complex or sensitive ideas, while Yankah (1994) highlights their role in maintaining social order and legitimizing authority. Expressions such as “*Kasakoa ye duru sen akatua*” (“A good word is more precious than payment”) and “*Òrò là n rá, a kì í rá ènìyàn*” (“It is words we buy, not people”) illustrate the ethical centrality of speech, aligning with contemporary HR principles of communication, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Proverbs further encode leadership norms and accountability, as seen in sayings such as “*Ɖpanyin na ɔte n’adwuma so*” (“The elder supervises his work”) and “*Bi omode ba subu, a wo iwaju; bi agbalagba ba subu, a wo eyin*” (“When a child falls, he looks ahead; when an elder falls, he looks behind”), which reflect mentorship, reflective leadership, and institutional responsibility. These insights align with modern leadership theories, including transformational and servant leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2021), thereby demonstrating the convergence between indigenous communicative ethics and contemporary organizational practice.

The relevance of these insights is reinforced by scholarship on African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS), which recognizes indigenous epistemologies as legitimate frameworks for understanding ethics and governance (Hountondji, 1997; Wiredu, 2002; Nabudere, 2011). Studies in management further demonstrate that African communal values, such as cooperation, reciprocity, and relationality, provide robust foundations for leadership and corporate governance (Kamoche, 2000; Iguisi, 2014; Abugre, 2018). Within HRM, emerging research emphasizes the importance of integrating ethical culture, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and sustainability into organizational practice (Ezeafulukwe, Okatta, & Ayanponle, 2022; Adedokun, 2024; Hutchful, 2025). These perspectives align closely with Sustainable Human Resource Management frameworks, which prioritize well-being, fairness, and long-term organizational resilience (Kramar, 2014; Mariappanadar, 2020, 2024). Proverbs such as “*Woforo dua pa a, na yepia wo*” (“It is when you climb a good tree that we push you”) and “*Eni tí ó bá ɣeun rere, a máa rí rere*” (“Whoever does good will meet good”) exemplify these ethical principles, which highlight moral accountability and reciprocity as the basis of sustainable governance.

Theoretical engagement further reveals strong parallels between African proverbial ethics and modern HR frameworks. The Theory of Reflection (Lukács, 1971) interprets proverbs as mirrors of social realities, while Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1989) conceptualize relationships in terms of reciprocity, trust, and moral obligation. Proverbs such as “*Wo nsa ka me nsa, na eba mu*” (“When your hand touches mine, it produces results”) and “*Se wo yera nokware a, wo yera biribi kese*” (“If you lose truth, you lose something great”) articulate these principles, emphasizing cooperation and ethical integrity as foundations of social and organizational cohesion. Similarly, Sustainable HRM highlights the importance of moral stewardship and institutional responsibility, reflected in proverbs such as

“*Nsuo beto a, efi nsutire*” (“When water spills, it starts from its source”) (Kramar, 2014; Mariappanadar, 2024).

Despite this rich body of scholarship, the systematic integration of African proverbs into organizational theory remains limited. While studies by Iguisi (2014) and Abugre (2018) emphasize indigenous ethics, and linguistic research by Yankah (1989), Owomoyela (2005), and Okyere (2020) documents proverbial expression, few studies explicitly connect these insights to contemporary HRM frameworks. This gap reflects the marginalization of oral epistemologies within management discourse and results in the continued reliance on imported ethical paradigms that often fail to align with African moral contexts (Wiredu, 2002; Dia, 1996; Nabudere, 2011).

This study addresses this gap by positioning Akan and Yorùbá proverbs as indigenous frameworks of human resource ethics. It argues that these proverbs encode enduring principles, integrity, cooperation, accountability, and reciprocity, that align with and extend contemporary HRM theories. By bridging indigenous knowledge systems and modern organizational frameworks, the study contributes to the development of culturally grounded, human-centered, and ethically sustainable approaches to management.

3. Theoretical Framework

The interpretation of African proverbs as repositories of corporate ethics and human resource philosophy requires a theoretical foundation that recognizes their dual nature, as cultural texts and moral instruments. This study employs four complementary frameworks: the Theory of Reflection, Social Exchange Theory, Psychological Contract Theory, and Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM). Together, these frameworks illuminate the ethical, relational, and organizational dimensions encoded in Akan and Yorùbá proverbial wisdom. When synthesized within an African epistemological context, they provide a robust analytical lens for understanding how indigenous moral systems can inform contemporary HR practices, bridging the gap between oral ethics and institutional management.

3.1 Theory of Reflection: Proverbs as Mirrors of Social Ethics

The Theory of Reflection, articulated by Georg Lukács (1971) and later expanded by sociocultural theorists, posits that artistic and literary expressions mirror the moral, ideological, and structural realities of their societies. Cultural texts, whether oral or written, encode not only collective experiences but also the contradictions that define social life. Within the African oral tradition, proverbs occupy a unique epistemic position as what Yankah (1989, p. 32) calls “*microcosmic reflections of macrocosmic realities*”. They embody the ethical grammar of the community, functioning as condensed mirrors of its worldview.

In Akan and Yorùbá societies, proverbs serve as reflective moral instruments that define how work, leadership, and human relations are socially constituted. Okyere (2020) asserts that the reflective force of proverbs lies in their capacity to “mirror life as lived, imagined, and prescribed.”

The Akan proverb “*Ɔpanyin na ɔte n’adwuma so*” (“The elder supervises his work”) mirrors communal expectations of leadership accountability, while the Yorùbá saying “*A kì í ɛe olóri, ká má ní ìwà*” (“One cannot be a leader and lack character”) underscores the moral inseparability of authority and virtue.

From a reflectionist perspective, proverbs operate as cultural diagnostics, recording, reinforcing, and regulating ethical consciousness. They distill the moral architecture of diligence, cooperation, and integrity, values central to modern HR principles of engagement and performance. The Akan “*Anoma antu a, ɔbuá da*” (“If the bird does not fly, it goes to bed hungry”) articulates the psychology of purposeful work, echoing contemporary discourses on employee motivation and mental well-being. As Finnegan (2012) observes, proverbs also function as didactic commentaries through which societies critique and restore moral order. In traditional Akan and Yorùbá arbitration, proverbial discourse serves the same function as corporate ethics training or professional counseling, publicly reaffirming ethical norms. Thus, Reflection Theory situates African proverbs as moral mirrors: texts that not only describe ethical realities but actively participate in the formation of collective moral consciousness.

3.2 Social Exchange Theory: Reciprocity and Mutual Obligation in Work Relations

Social Exchange Theory (SET), developed by Blau (1964), explains social behavior through the logic of reciprocity, trust, and mutual benefit. In organizational settings, it underpins models of employee engagement and leadership trust (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When fairness and respect are perceived, employees reciprocate through loyalty and performance; when trust is violated, cooperation diminishes. This relational ethic is deeply ingrained in African philosophy and vividly expressed in Akan and Yorùbá proverbs. The Akan saying “*Wo nsa ka me nsa a, na eba mu*” (“When your hand touches mine, it produces results”) and the Yorùbá “*Àjoṣe o dun bí eni kò ní*” (“Communal eating is sweet only when everyone contributes”) encapsulate a moral economy grounded in cooperation and fairness. These expressions are not merely aphoristic; they represent indigenous articulations of the social exchange principle, emphasizing that productivity emerges from equitable relationships.

Within HRM contexts, SET translates into mentorship, participatory decision-making, and collaborative leadership. As Abugre (2018) argues, African organizational culture is structured by collective reciprocity rather than individualism. Proverbs like “*Woforo dua pa a, na yepia wo*” (“It is when you climb a good tree that we push you”) mirror the HR ideal of rewarding ethical and purposeful leadership. In both traditional and corporate domains, leaders are expected to embody fairness to elicit trust, an ethic captured in the Yorùbá “*Eni tí ó bá ɛeun rere, a máa rí rere*” (“Whoever does good will meet good”). These proverbial principles affirm the African understanding that moral reciprocity sustains institutional cohesion, much as SET underlies modern organizational harmony.

3.3 Psychological Contract Theory: Trust, Integrity, and Expectation in HR Ethics

Where SET outlines the logic of exchange, Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1989) explores the invisible moral agreements underpinning formal employment relationships. It posits that beyond written contracts, workplaces operate through implicit expectations of fairness, trust, and mutual respect. Violations of this psychological contract in the form of favoritism, deception, or neglect lead to disengagement and diminished morale (Rousseau, 1995). African proverbs capture this psychology of ethical expectation with precision. The Akan “*Se wo yera nokware, wo yera biribi kese*” (“If you lose truth, you lose something great”) equates dishonesty with the collapse of moral capital. Similarly, the Yorùbá “*Ojú tì ni í pa omolúàbí*” (“Shame destroys the person of good character”) frames moral failure as a breach of trust that undermines social legitimacy.

Okyere (2020) notes that trust (*gyedie* in Akan and *igbagbo* in Yorùbá) is simultaneously personal and institutional, binding communities through moral expectation. The breakdown of trust, whether in family or corporate structures, precipitates alienation, akin to Rousseau’s (1995) notion of contract breach. These proverbs, functioning as oral “psychological contracts”, articulate the moral foundations of organizational life. The Akan “*Wò tirim hɔ ye den a, bɔ bra*” (“If your conscience is heavy, correct your behavior”) advocates ethical self-regulation, while the Yorùbá “*Ìwà rere l’èwà ènìyàn*” (“Good character is the beauty of a person”) asserts that integrity is not merely desirable but constitutive of identity. Such proverbs underscore the African premise that sustainable institutions depend not on systems alone, but on the moral consistency of individuals who inhabit them.

3.4 Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM): Ethics, Culture, and Long-term Stewardship

The concept of Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) emerges from the sustainability paradigm that integrates economic, social, and environmental responsibility within organizational strategy (Kramar, 2014; Mariappanadar, 2020). SHRM emphasizes long-term value creation, employee well-being, and social justice. These priorities resonate with African moral systems, where labor is conceived as a communal contribution to moral and ecological balance (Adedokun, 2024; Ezeafulukwe et al., 2022). African proverbs articulate sustainability as moral foresight. The Akan “*Nsuo beto a, ɛfi nsutire*” (“When water spills, it starts from its source”) encapsulates the principle that moral decay at the top corrodes the whole institution. Similarly, the Yorùbá “*A kì í fi àná ɛ òní, ká má ɛ̀wò̀n ọ̀lá*” (“One does not misuse yesterday to destroy tomorrow”) stresses accountability and intergenerational responsibility. These sayings constitute indigenous sustainability ethics, emphasizing stewardship over exploitation and continuity over profit.

The Akan proverb “*Nti ahenfie da hɔ na yekɔkyere ɔhene.*” (“It is because the royal palace is there that we go to catch a chief.”) further aligns with the SHRM concept of participatory

governance, underscoring that institutions endure through collective effort and shared moral purpose. Contemporary research supports this convergence: Ezeafulukwe et al. (2022) highlight the centrality of ethics in HR sustainability frameworks, while Hutchful (2025) argues for moral reorientation grounded in cultural values to combat corruption in Ghanaian corporate practice. Proverbs such as the Yorùbá “*Èni tí ó bá jẹun ọ̀rọ̀, á tún rí ọ̀rọ̀ jẹ*” (“He who eats deceit will also be consumed by deceit”) and the Akan “*Nea ɔyɛ bɔne bekoƙa ne ho*” (“He who does evil will meet his own evil”) stand as timeless ethical audits, warning that moral negligence is antithetical to sustainable leadership.

By embedding proverb-based ethics within SHRM, this study affirms that African oral traditions articulate an indigenous model of sustainability grounded in empathy, justice, and moral stewardship. In doing so, they offer alternative frameworks for ethical corporate governance that privilege human dignity alongside profitability.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design situated within the epistemological framework of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) and hermeneutic phenomenology. The interpretive approach recognizes that meaning in African proverbs emerges not from literal translation but from contextual and cultural performance. Okyere (2020) argues that proverbs in Akan and Yorùbá traditions are “living texts”, dynamic utterances whose meanings evolve with social experience. Consequently, the study treats proverbs not merely as linguistic units but as repositories of moral, social, and organizational knowledge. Grounded in the hermeneutic tradition (Ricoeur, 1981), the research aims to interpret the ethical and managerial worldviews embedded in selected proverbs. This approach privileges depth over quantification, emphasizing understanding, interpretation, and cultural insight rather than statistical generalization. In line with Pan-African research principles (Hountondji, 1997; Nabudere, 2011), the methodology rejects the separation of knowledge and culture; it assumes that indigenous philosophy is an authentic and self-sufficient foundation for analyzing contemporary social phenomena such as corporate ethics and human resource management.

The primary data for this study consist of Akan and Yorùbá proverbs that explicitly or implicitly reference work, leadership, cooperation, diligence, integrity, and moral conduct. Proverbs were drawn from both published collections and contextual field interpretations. Core textual sources include:

- a. Appiah, Appiah, and Agyeman-Duah’s *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akan* (2001),
- b. Owomoyela’s *Yorùbá Proverbs* (2005), and
- c. Okyere’s *The Dynamics of African Proverbs: Akan and Yorùbá* (2020), which provides ethnographic commentary and analytical categorization of proverbial use in moral and social contexts.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select fifty proverbs (twenty-five from each language group) relevant to themes of human resource ethics and corporate behaviour. The proverbs were selected based on four key criteria:

- a. Relevance: explicit or inferred connection to work, leadership, or moral conduct.
- b. Cultural Authenticity. This confirms widespread recognition and traditional usage within the Akan and Yorùbá oral communities.
- c. Interpretive Richness: the capacity of a proverb to yield multiple layers of ethical and organizational meaning.
- d. Comparability: thematic alignment between Akan and Yorùbá proverbs to allow cross-cultural synthesis.

Each proverb was considered not in isolation but within its context of use. Thus, its performance in speech, moral instruction, and social correction. This contextual reading ensures fidelity to the oral cultures that sustain their authority.

The analysis followed a three-stage interpretive process: textual categorization, thematic coding, and theoretical mapping. Each proverb was classified according to its ethical domain and that includes work ethics, leadership, teamwork, honesty, diligence, accountability, or interpersonal communication. The second phase involved developing thematic codes that capture both the ethical content and organizational relevance of each proverb. Coding categories emerged inductively from the data but were guided by theoretical concerns derived from Reflection Theory and HR frameworks. The major themes identified include:

- a. Moral Integrity and Character
- b. Leadership and Accountability
- c. Teamwork and Cooperation
- d. Diligence and Productivity
- e. Social Justice and Reciprocity

In the final phase, each thematic category was mapped onto one or more of the study's guiding theoretical frameworks: Reflection Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Psychological Contract Theory, and Sustainable HRM. For instance, proverbs emphasizing mutual support were aligned with *Social Exchange Theory*; those highlighting moral responsibility in leadership were interpreted through *Reflection Theory* and *Sustainable HRM*. This triangulated analysis provided interpretive coherence between indigenous wisdom and modern HR paradigms.

Given the interpretive nature of proverbial analysis, contextual validation was essential to ensure analytical authenticity. Interpretations were cross-checked against existing ethnolinguistic scholarship (Yankah, 1989; Owomoyela, 2005; Abimbola, 1975) and complemented by informal consultations with native speakers of Akan and Yorùbá who possess cultural fluency in proverb

usage. Their insights provided confirmation of nuance, tone, and pragmatic implications often lost in direct translation. To maintain linguistic integrity, the study retained the original proverbs in Akan and Yorùbá alongside their English translations.

As noted by Okyere (2020), translation without cultural exegesis risks semantic impoverishment, as African proverbs are often layered with metaphor, irony, and contextual sensitivity. By presenting both language versions, the analysis preserves the semantic rhythm and cultural weight of each expression. Additionally, reflexivity was integrated into the analytical process. This recognized the researcher's position as both scholar and cultural insider (Yankah, 2012), interpretive judgments were continually assessed against both academic rigor and cultural empathy. This reflexive posture aligns with Afrocentric methodological ethics, which value self-awareness, communal responsibility, and dialogic interpretation according to Asante (2007).

To enhance credibility, the study adopted the four classical criteria of qualitative rigor:

- a. Credibility: achieved through triangulation of sources (textual, cultural, and theoretical).
- b. Transferability: supported by detailed contextual descriptions enabling application to other African cultural settings.
- c. Dependability: ensured by maintaining consistent interpretive logic across themes and theoretical lenses.
- d. Confirmability: reinforced through transparent documentation of analytical decisions and cross-referencing with established sources.

Furthermore, the interpretive outcomes were aligned with insights from recent HRM literature (Ezeafulukwe et al., 2022; Hutchful, 2025; Ademowo & Balogun, 2014; Adedokun, 2024), ensuring contemporary relevance and cross-disciplinary dialogue. The combination of indigenous hermeneutics and modern theoretical triangulation grounds the study in both cultural authenticity and academic validity.

Although the research is based on textual and cultural data rather than human participants, ethical consciousness was maintained throughout. Proverbs were handled with respect for their communal ownership and spiritual significance. As Yankah (1989) cautions, proverbs are not mere linguistic curiosities but moral properties of the community. The study, therefore, acknowledges its intellectual debt to the oral custodians of Akan and Yorùbá wisdom. Proper attribution to published and community sources has been maintained in accordance with academic ethics and indigenous intellectual property values (Hountondji, 1997; Dei, 2012).

By adopting this interpretive model, the study bridges oral tradition and organizational theory, illustrating that African proverbs can serve as context-sensitive models of ethical reflection, communication, and leadership. This methodological synthesis thus prepares the analytical foundation for the ensuing section, which examines the thematic manifestations of HR

values of diligence, teamwork, leadership, integrity, and reciprocity, as expressed in Akan and Yorùbá proverbs.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis interrogates the ethical and managerial paradigms embedded in Akan and Yorùbá proverbial discourse, demonstrating their resonance with principles of modern Human Resource Management (HRM). Five interrelated thematic domains organize the discussion: (1) Integrity and Character, (2) Leadership and Accountability, (3) Teamwork and Cooperation, (4) Diligence and Work Ethic, and (5) Reciprocity and Social Justice. Each theme illustrates how indigenous African ethics, articulated through proverbial language, mirror, reinforce, and extend contemporary HR frameworks.

5.1 Integrity and Character: The Moral Core of Human Resource Ethics

In Akan and Yorùbá cosmologies, *character* (*suban* in Akan; *ìwà* in Yorùbá) constitutes the ontological and moral essence of personhood. Integrity is conceived not merely as an individual virtue but as a communal asset that sustains collective trust and social harmony. This orientation parallels Psychological Contract Theory, which positions trust as the foundation of organizational relationships (Rousseau, 1995). The Akan proverb “*Onipa yɛ adeɛ a, ɔsɛ ayeyi*” (“*When a person does something [good/worthy], they deserve praise/gold*”) encodes a moral metaphor equating integrity with intrinsic value. In Akan moral philosophy, gold/praise symbolizes durability, purity, and radiance; thus, it serves as a semiotic marker of ethical steadfastness. Within corporate contexts, this expression conveys that employees and leaders are judged not solely by skill or productivity but by their capacity for transparency, honesty, and moral resilience. The metaphor of gold also evokes testing through fire, an image consonant with HR frameworks that assess ethical reliability under pressure.

A parallel moral principle appears in the Yorùbá proverb “*Ìwà l'ẹwà*” (“*Character is beauty*”). As Idowu (1996) elucidates, *ìwà* encompasses “the totality of moral behavior” that defines *omolúàbí*, the ideal moral person. The proverb reorients beauty from the aesthetic to the ethical: virtue, not appearance, constitutes true excellence. Within HRM discourse, this perspective aligns with the view that moral competence embodied in integrity, fairness, and empathy supersedes technical proficiency in determining professional credibility.

Both proverbs function as ethical diagnostics linking personal virtue to institutional integrity. Their logic coheres with the tenets of Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) (Kramar, 2014), which identifies individual ethical behavior as the cornerstone of organizational sustainability. In this regard, the proverbs illustrate Lukács’s (1971) Theory of Reflection, whereby language serves as a mirror of social values and collective moral consciousness. Thus, the moral imperative “*Character is beauty*” transcends its aesthetic origin to become a universal managerial principle, a call for moral consistency, transparency, and

trustworthiness across all tiers of labor and leadership. Within both Akan and Yorùbá worldviews, integrity is not an optional professional trait but a moral ontology: to possess character is to be human, and to act without it is to forfeit both social and organizational legitimacy.

5.2 Leadership and Accountability: Ethics of Stewardship

In both Akan and Yorùbá traditions, leadership is an ethical vocation grounded in service rather than self-interest. Authority, *tumi* in Akan and *àṣẹ* in Yorùbá, is not construed as a right to command but as a moral responsibility to preserve balance, justice, and collective welfare. Leadership thus operates as a covenantal form of stewardship, aligning closely with the moral foundations of contemporary organizational governance.

The Akan proverb “*Ɖpanyin na ɔte n’adwuma so*” (“It is the elder who supervises his work”) articulates the imperative of self-regulation in leadership. The elder here symbolizes the accountable leader whose authority is legitimized by ethical conduct rather than positional hierarchy. The proverb cautions that effective leadership cannot be outsourced; moral responsibility rests with the individual in power. This resonates with the contemporary managerial principle of reflective leadership, where self-auditing and ethical transparency constitute the basis of legitimacy.

Similarly, the Yorùbá saying “*A kì í ṣe olórí, ká má ní iwà*” (“One cannot be a leader and lack character”) affirms that leadership devoid of integrity undermines the moral order. As Brown and Treviño (2006) argue, ethical leadership entails both personal morality and the active modeling of ethical behavior within institutions. The proverb thus functions as a traditional mechanism of moral accountability, a form of indigenous “performance review” that anticipates the evaluative systems of modern HRM.

From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), these proverbs capture the reciprocal nature of trust and authority. Leadership, in this framework, is sustained by a moral exchange: followers grant loyalty and cooperation in return for fairness and integrity. When this reciprocity is violated, authority collapses. The Akan “*Nea ɔye bɔne beka ne ho*” (“He who does evil will meet his own evil”) and the Yorùbá “*Èni tí ó bá jẹun ọ̀rọ̀, á tún rí ọ̀rọ̀ jẹ*” (“He who eats deceit will also be consumed by deceit”) codify the moral symmetry of justice: a logic of ethical causation that aligns with accountability mechanisms in both traditional and corporate governance.

These proverbs, collectively, advance an African HR philosophy of accountability rooted in communal ethics. They extend the logic of Sustainable HRM (Kramar, 2014) by embedding accountability within a moral ecology, where the well-being of the collective depends on the ethical stewardship of leaders. Within this framework, leadership is not a display of command, but a performance of care, and the true test of authority lies not in its possession, but in its moral exercise.

5.3 Teamwork and Cooperation: Collective Strength as Corporate Ethic

African proverbial discourse consistently privileges cooperation over individualism, framing collective effort as a moral and existential necessity rather than a pragmatic choice. This communitarian ethic aligns closely with contemporary Human Resource Management (HRM) paradigms that emphasize teamwork, inclusivity, and participatory communication as vital determinants of organizational effectiveness and employee well-being (Ezeafulukwe, Okatta, & Ayanponle, 2022).

The Akan proverb “*Nsa baako nkura adesoa*” (“One hand cannot lift a load”) and its Yorùbá counterpart “*Agbajo ọwọ la fi n so àyà*” (“We join hands to protect the chest”) encapsulate this philosophy of interdependence. Both images, hands joining to lift or to shield, articulate a moral ontology of cooperation wherein collective effort constitutes the very fabric of productivity. Within HR discourse, such proverbs instantiate the logic of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that social and organizational stability depends on reciprocity, trust, and mutual reinforcement.

In Akan and Yorùbá ethical systems, cooperation functions as both a social glue and a moral duty. Okyere (2020) characterizes these proverbs as “performative ethics,” linguistic instruments that not only describe harmony but enact it through speech. The Akan saying “*Woforo dua pa a, na yepia wo*” (“It is when you climb a good tree that we push you”) exemplifies this moral solidarity. Communal support is conditional upon moral legitimacy; one receives assistance only when one’s endeavor serves collective well-being. This principle mirrors modern HR reward systems that privilege ethical leadership and collaborative contribution over mere individual performance.

The HR implications of these indigenous philosophies are profound. Collaboration, in the African worldview, is not a managerial tactic but a moral imperative, an ethical mode of being that ensures the flourishing of both individuals and institutions. Contemporary frameworks such as Relational Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien, 2011) echo this indigenous insight, emphasizing that leadership efficacy arises within networks of mutual trust, cooperation, and shared meaning rather than hierarchical command. Thus, Akan and Yorùbá proverbs provide a culturally grounded model of organizational cohesion, situating teamwork within a broader moral economy of reciprocity. They demonstrate that sustainable productivity emerges not from individual ambition but from a collective ethic of care, accountability, and shared purpose, a principle that modern HRM increasingly seeks to recover under the banner of relational ethics and inclusive organizational culture.

5.4 Diligence and Work Ethic: The Moral Economy of Labour

In Akan and Yorùbá cosmologies, work (*adwuma* in Akan and *iṣé* in Yorùbá) is not merely an economic necessity but a sacred moral duty integral to human dignity and social balance. Labour

is framed as both an ethical and existential act, linking productivity to personal virtue and communal well-being. Idleness, conversely, represents a form of social and spiritual disorder, disrupting not only individual fulfillment but also the collective harmony upon which African moral philosophy is founded (Ademowo & Balogun, 2014; Adegbite, 2025).

The Akan proverb “*Anoma antu a, obua da*” (“If the bird does not fly, it goes to bed hungry”) captures this ethos with poetic precision. The image of the restless bird suggests that purposeful activity is intrinsic to human sanity and self-realization. Work thus emerges as a medium of moral and psychological equilibrium, reflecting what contemporary HR psychology describes in Self-Determination Theory that meaningful engagement in productive activity enhances motivation, autonomy, and psychological well-being. In this sense, the Akan worldview anticipates modern organizational paradigms linking work with self-actualization and mental health.

The Yorùbá complement this philosophy with the proverb “*Ohun tí a bá ẹ̀ lǎǎ rí*” (“We reap what we sow”), which articulates a moral law of causation connecting effort to consequence. Productivity and moral reward are inseparable; diligence yields prosperity while negligence invites decline. This notion of ethical reciprocity parallels the justice-based foundations of Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) (Mariappanadar, 2020), which upholds fairness, long-term equity, and merit-based advancement as the pillars of responsible corporate culture.

Other proverbs deepen this moral economy of labour. The Akan “*Obi nnim obrempon ahyease*” (“No one knows the beginning of a great person”) extols perseverance and humble beginnings as the seedbed of excellence, while the Yorùbá “*Iṣẹ́ ni òdògùn ìṣẹ́*” (“Work is the cure for poverty”) defines labour not only as duty but as a therapeutic act of self-redemption and social contribution. Together, these maxims elevate work to a spiritual discipline and a moral vocation, a worldview that aligns with contemporary HRM theories of motivation, purpose-driven employment, and employee development.

Viewed through Lukács’s Theory of Reflection (1971), these proverbs operate as moral texts that mirror the socio-economic consciousness of African societies. They encode an ethic of productivity grounded in balance, reciprocity, and accountability, a triadic moral order where labor, virtue, and social welfare are mutually reinforcing. Thus, the Akan and Yorùbá traditions articulate an indigenous template for a *moral economy of work*: an economy in which productivity is never detached from ethics, and diligence is as much an act of moral being as it is of material creation. In translating this indigenous ethic into HRM discourse, these proverbs invite a reimagining of corporate productivity beyond metrics of efficiency. They propose instead a relational paradigm in which work serves both individual self-fulfillment and collective flourishing, a lesson that modern organizations, in their search for sustainability and humane labor practices, would do well to heed.

5.5 Reciprocity and Social Justice: The Moral Contract of Work

At the core of African ethical thought lies the principle of reciprocity: the conviction that justice, harmony, and moral equilibrium govern all human relations. This axiom posits that the individual's welfare is inextricably bound to that of the collective, establishing a moral economy in which fairness, empathy, and accountability sustain social order. The notion of reciprocity in Akan and Yorùbá philosophy aligns profoundly with the relational logics of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1989), both of which conceptualize organizational life as a network of moral and emotional exchanges grounded in trust and mutual obligation.

The Akan proverb “*Wo nsa ka me nsa, na eba mu*” (“When your hand touches mine, it produces results”) and its Yorùbá parallel “*Àjọjẹ o dun bí ẹni kò ní*” (“Communal eating is sweet only when everyone contributes”) encapsulate this ethic of balanced reciprocity. Both expressions enshrine participation as a moral duty and fairness as a precondition for harmony. Within organizational contexts, these proverbs articulate the indigenous logic behind equitable reward systems, participatory decision-making, and shared governance, principles central to ethical HRM practice. In these moral economies, justice is not procedural but relational; it is enacted through care, recognition, and reciprocity.

African proverbial discourse also warns against violations of this ethical balance. The Akan proverb “*Dee stan nyansafo, stan ne ho*” (“The one who hates the wise, hates himself”) and the Yorùbá “*Eni tó bá jà níta, á pà dé inú*” (“He who fights outside will be trapped inside”) convey the moral self-destruction inherent in envy, injustice, and anti-social behavior. These sayings exemplify what Hutchful (2025) terms *restorative ethics*, the principle that social well-being is preserved through accountability and self-correction rather than retribution. Their wisdom anticipates modern HRM's emphasis on diversity, inclusion, and restorative justice, in which fairness is viewed as a continuous relational process rather than a static institutional rule.

Reciprocity in African thought transcends transactional exchange; it constitutes a spiritual covenant grounded in moral symmetry. To give and to receive fairly is to sustain the ontological rhythm of existence itself. In HR terms, this philosophy parallels Sustainable HRM models (Kramar, 2014; Mariappanadar, 2020), which argue that long-term organizational success depends on upholding equity, mutual respect, and communal welfare. The Akan and Yorùbá proverbs thus extend the moral economy of work into a form of social justice ethics, insisting that institutions flourish only when justice circulates through every relational level, from employer and employee to the wider community. Ultimately, reciprocity represents the moral contract of work in African humanism: a living covenant of fairness, empathy, and accountability. In translating these indigenous ethics into contemporary HR frameworks, the study reaffirms that sustainable organizational cultures are not founded solely on policy but on moral interdependence: the same principle that has long animated Africa's most enduring social philosophies.

5.6 Synthesis: Indigenous Wisdom as Corporate Compass

The thematic synthesis demonstrates that Akan and Yorùbá proverbs function as dynamic repositories of moral and managerial intelligence, offering a culturally grounded framework for understanding ethical conduct within organizations. These proverbial traditions articulate principles of leadership, cooperation, diligence, and justice that not only resonate with but also deepen the ethical imperatives of contemporary Human Resource Management (HRM). Through the Theory of Reflection, proverbs emerge as mirrors of collective moral consciousness, encapsulating the ethical codes and social expectations that sustain communal harmony. Social Exchange Theory elucidates the reciprocity at the heart of teamwork, fairness, and trust, revealing that African ethics view cooperation not as contractual compliance but as relational duty. Psychological Contract Theory illuminates the moral expectations that govern trust and integrity in leadership, while Sustainable HRM connects these ethical insights to institutional resilience and social well-being.

Synthesized together, these frameworks reveal that Akan and Yorùbá proverbs articulate a Pan-African Human Resource Philosophy rooted in *moral ecology* rather than mechanistic efficiency. They locate the essence of management not in control or productivity metrics, but in ethical stewardship, empathy, and reciprocal care. In doing so, these oral traditions anticipate global discourses on sustainability, corporate responsibility, and human-centered leadership. Concerning this, the wisdom of Akan and Yorùbá proverbs affirms that the true measure of organizational success lies not in profit alone but in the cultivation of humane relationships and moral balance. By recovering these indigenous philosophies, Africa contributes a distinctly ethical paradigm to global management thought, one in which the *soul of work* is inseparable from the *spirit of community*.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study has demonstrated that Akan and Yorùbá proverbs encapsulate complex moral philosophies that not only align with but, in many respects, exceed the ethical depth of contemporary Human Resource Management (HRM) frameworks. Far from being vestiges of an oral past, these proverbs function as *living epistemologies*: dynamic repositories of ethical reflection and social reasoning capable of guiding corporate governance, leadership behavior, and institutional accountability in the present. Drawing upon Reflection Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Psychological Contract Theory, and Sustainable HRM, the study has shown that these proverbs embody indigenous human resource principles centered on character, diligence, reciprocity, and stewardship.

At the heart of both Akan and Yorùbá worldviews lies the conviction that moral integrity sustains social harmony and legitimacy. The Akan proverb “*Onipa ye adee a, ste se sika*” (“A person of worth is like gold”) and the Yorùbá “*Ìwà l’ẹwà*” (“Character is beauty”) foreground the primacy of ethics over achievement. This moral axiom mirrors contemporary HRM ethics, which

hold integrity and trust as the bedrock of effective leadership and employee engagement. Likewise, sayings such as “*Ọpanyin na ọte n’adwuma so*” and “*A kì í ẹ olóri, ká má ní iwà*” articulate a distinctly African philosophy of moral stewardship, anticipating modern discourses on ethical leadership and corporate responsibility.

The findings affirm that African proverbs operate as indigenous equivalents to formalized HR frameworks, encoding lessons on teamwork (“*Nsa baako nkura adeso*” / “*Agbajo ọwọ la fi n so àyà*”), accountability (“*Nea ọye bọne bẹkọka ne ho*” / “*Ẹni tí ó bá jẹun ọrọ, á tún rí ọrọ jẹ*”), and diligence (“*Anoma antu a, ọbuwa da*” / “*Işé ni òdògùn işé*”). These proverbs reveal that African oral traditions have long articulated the philosophical foundations of what modern HRM now codifies as ethical governance and sustainable leadership. As Okyere (2020) observes, proverbs are not passive mirrors but “*ethical instruments of social governance*”—tools that actively shape behavior and institutional ethos across generations.

6.1 Practical Implications for Human Resource Practice

The insights distilled from African proverbs offer actionable pathways for transforming HRM into a culturally grounded, ethically resonant practice:

1. Cultural Integration in HR Training

HR departments can embed proverb-based ethics into training modules, leadership seminars, and performance evaluations. For instance, “*Nsa baako nkura adeso*” can illustrate collaborative interdependence, while “*Ìwà l’ẹwà*”- *Character is beauty*, can reinforce integrity as a non-negotiable leadership virtue.

2. Indigenous Ethics as a CSR Foundation

Proverbs provide a moral vocabulary for corporate social responsibility (CSR) rooted in communal accountability. The African axiom that “leadership is service” redefines CSR not as philanthropy but as a moral obligation, reaffirming social reciprocity between organizations and their communities.

3. Restorative Organizational Culture

Incorporating proverb-based ethics can help build restorative justice systems within workplaces. Rather than relying on punitive disciplinary measures, African moral traditions emphasize reconciliation, moral correction, and reintegration, principles that can humanize HR approaches to conflict resolution.

4. Decolonizing HRM Education

Universities and professional bodies can indigenize HR curricula by incorporating African epistemologies as legitimate sources of management theory. Teaching proverbs as ethical case studies would promote intellectual sovereignty and challenge the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms in business education. Through such measures, African proverbs can evolve from

cultural heritage to *ethical capital*, transforming the moral architecture of African organizations and redefining professionalism in culturally authentic terms.

6.2 Broader Theoretical and Pan-African Implications

Beyond HRM, this study contributes to the broader Pan-African project of epistemic sovereignty, the reclamation of indigenous intellectual traditions as legitimate foundations for global theory. African proverbs, as moral and philosophical texts, reveal an intellectual rigor that rivals written philosophical systems. As Wiredu (2002) and Gyekye (1995) contend, African moral philosophy is neither pre-theoretical nor merely communal; it is systematic, rational, and profoundly humanistic.

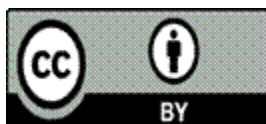
By placing proverb-based ethics in dialogue with global HRM frameworks, the study participates in the emerging field of decolonial management theory, demonstrating that African moral systems can generate universal models of ethical governance. This repositioning resonates with Hountondji's (1997) and Nabudere's (2011) call for African knowledge systems to contribute to, rather than merely supplement, global intellectual production. The synthesis of Akan and Yorùbá traditions thus models *intra-African epistemic dialogue*, articulating a shared moral lexicon (integrity, diligence, reciprocity, and stewardship) that transcends ethnic and linguistic boundaries to form a continental philosophy of humane governance. Based on the findings of the study, future research could explore how proverb-based ethics influence employee attitudes, retention, and performance within African organizations. Other studies could examine digital ethnography by exploring how proverbs circulate and evolve in corporate and social media spaces to reveal the intersections between indigenous ethics and digital communication relating to business management.

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