

Gender and African Proverbs

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ABSTRACT This paper emanates from an ongoing study. The preliminary literature review shows that some proverbs have gender connotations. The examples provided from various ethnic groups demonstrate that proverbs are used to articulate the deeply entrenched patriarchal systems of African social and cultural organization. They show the subordination of women in society. As it is not possible to eradicate the existing gendered proverbs in various societies, this study aims at documenting and interrogating the gendered proverbs associated with both negative and positive connotations. This is meant to establish how such proverbs can be used as a stepping stone to promote gender equality. The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the Reformist African-feminist approach framework within the context of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) to analyze critically the role of African proverbs in gender construction and articulation in Southern and East Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Djite (2008) states that language expresses the patterns and structures of culture and consequently influences human thinking, social practices and power relations in society. Like in other cultures in the world, in Africa different language tools are used to communicate cultural values including articulation of power relations, especially the way men and women relate in society. Example of such language tools are African proverbs. Matiki (1996) defines a proverb as a short saying in common use that expresses some obvious truth or familiar experience. Ogbulogo (2002) explains that proverbs are used as tools to describe and express socio-cultural events and practices including communicating a community's cultural traditions across and within generations. Proverbs also communicate expected cultural codes of behavior used by a group of people within a cultural context to persuade others to view the world and behave in a common way.

This paper was motivated by the authors' own experiences in interacting with the use of proverbs in society. As they grew up in African rural social environments in Southern and East Africa, the authors experienced an abundant use of proverbs in social interaction at all levels of society, that is, from family, school, media and community as a whole. Proverbs were a powerful authoritative expressive language tool used to communicate and affirm our cultural beliefs, values and norms of life. A day would not pass without one hearing a single proverb from parents, relatives, teachers or other village members.

Traditionally, like in other African tribal communities, the fireplace was used as a symbol and place of unity (Owour 2007). All the family members across generations would gather around it winding up the day's activities and plan for the coming days. Children would sit with grandparents listening different stories and folktales associated with family traditions and other ways of life. The children would listen attentively to these stories; especially the messages and wisdom contained in them as part of cultural heritage of the family, tribal community and community indigenous ways of knowing and value systems. What can be remembered very well is that every story would start or be concluded with a proverb as a way of concretizing the message for self-reflection. Examples of such proverbs in Chichewa were; '*chosamva anachiphikira mmasamba*' meaning a stubborn caterpillar ended up being cooked together with vegetables; '*pawiripawiri sipauzilika*' meaning one cannot serve two masters at a time; and '*akuluakulu ndi mdambo mozimira moto*' meaning elders are like swampy areas no matter how big the fire is it gets extinguished in there.

The researchers argue that in spite of the fact that proverbs are meant to safeguard society's wisdom, across and through generations, educate, guide and inspire children as future wives/mothers, fathers/husbands, some of them have negative gender connotations to the advancement of gender equality and women empowerment. Examples of such Chichewa (Malawi) proverbs are:

'mkamwini ndi mlamba sachedwa kuteleleka' meaning 'a husband is slippery like a cat fish he needs to be handled with care.

'Mphongo ya chiwala sichepa' meaning a male grasshopper should not be undermined regardless of its physical size because it equally perform its duty.

'Ovala nyanda salumpho moto' meaning: a woman wearing a sanitary cloth (pad) should not be involved in fire skipping games.

Reflecting through the cited proverbs are hidden meanings which are contrary to policies and aspirations of promoting gender equality. The proverbs directly prescribe the social space, roles and behaviors that men/women should or should not display. This study acknowledges the already existing gendered proverbs in various societies and aims at documenting and establishing how such proverbs can be used as stepping stones in promoting gender equality.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses secondary sources as its source of data. Poly-epistemic conceptual framework within the context of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) is used to analyze the role of African proverbs in gender construction and articulation in Southern and East Africa. According to Haralambos et al. (2013), secondary sources describe, discuss, interpret, comment upon, analyze, evaluate, summarize, and process primary sources. Secondary source materials can be articles in newspapers or popular magazines, book or movie reviews, or articles found in scholarly journals that discuss or evaluate someone else's original research. The value proposition of IKS as a specific cultural based knowledge production and value system is its critique of western conceptual frameworks which tend to be universalistic and ignore the cultural specificity of African indigenous ways of knowing, knowledge production and value systems. This includes the experiences of the African women themselves in their diverse African cultures (Olasupo et al. 2012).

The study used a poly-epistemic conceptual framework because it recognizes the existence of multiple ways of knowing and value systems. For instance, the paper methodologically and theoretically, uses Afrocentric and postcolonial African feminism to discuss the role of African proverbs in gender construction and articulation. Principal to Afrocentric approach is the centrality of the agency of the African people in

responding to phenomena through their own cultural and human interest. It pays particular attention to the lived experiences of the African people (Asante 1998). Goheen (1996) discusses African proverbs in the context of research in African indigenous knowledge systems by indicating that Africa proverbs, like stories, can be used to transmit powerful gender ideologies that perpetuate the dominance of some groups by privileging knowledge and practices that discriminate on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, social class, etc. She emphasizes that these ideologies do not come out easily through conventional western data collection methods, such as the questionnaire and even interview method. These research methods tend to use questions that are framed on the basis of the day-to-day language of research. Afrocentric framework is critical of the marginalization of human thought and experiences of the African people, especially African women. Issues of African women and gender, including the use proverbs in social interaction, are given special prominence within the Afrocentric framework. The centrality of women is considered equally important as the centrality of African people. The Afrocentric framework has been used throughout the study to bring to the fore the issue of proverbs and gender equality.

Similar to Afrocentric approach is postcolonial African feminism that recognizes the African woman as an active participant in all aspects of life. Postcolonial African feminism recognizes that Western knowledge systems contributed to the subjugation and marginalization not only of African knowledge systems but of the African women's capabilities in society as well. In this regard, postcolonial African feminism concerns itself with the restoration of the African women capabilities in society including those African proverbs which promote gender equality and denounce women marginalization. It challenges oppressive and harmful aspects and practices of African indigenous systems within African communities whilst on the other hand, it seeks to restore those aspects of African indigenous cultures that promote gender equality and empowerment of women in society (Arndt 2002).

The paper also uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze proverbs in the context of IKS to articulate and understand the power relations between men and women in African ways

of knowing and value systems. Aje-Ori (2003) elaborates that CDA examines how social and power relations, identities through written, visual, and spoken texts, their production and how people use them in various contexts. It serves as the epistemological framework for examining how traditionally, views about women/men in Africa have been socially engineered and constructed.

The paper also deploys the Reformist African-feminist approach, which is concerned with how individuals, patriarchy-molded attitudes, norms and conventions both modern and old, discriminate against women. In the context of this study, patriarchy refers to institutionalization of power relations and male supremacy (Lakoff 2004). In this regard women's interest are subordinated and marginalized. The power relations take many forms, from the sexual divisions of labor and social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which women live. Within the African reformist perspective, men are not only accomplices but also products of patriarchal patterns of thought. Arndt (2002) elaborates that in the reformist African feminism discourses, women's oppression is fundamentally a direct consequence of the rigid deeply entrenched African patriarchal societies. Palamuleni et al. (2012) argue that patriarchy spreads its various influences in society to situate women as subordinate to men. Haralambos et al. (2013) argue that because of the unequal standing in both the workplace and domestic spheres, and their economic dependence, domestic work, childcare, and marriage, women are exploited by patriarchy. The understanding of patriarchy is crucial because it provides a framework within which to express the totality of exploitative relations which affect African women. The system devalues the substantial work that women do for the society. Patriarchal structures privilege men over women; whether demonstrated directly or indirectly in social, political and economic dominance over women; or by restricting women's movement, education and development activities. Asimeng-Boahene (2013) states that critiquing proverbs within male dominated patriarchal structures might give insights why societies use proverbs to justify patriarchal hegemonic practices.

In the context of the critical discourse analysis, proverbs in both written and spoken texts are used to articulate power relations between

men and women in society. The African-feminists conceptual framework is employed in this discussion because patriarchy uses African proverbs to articulate attitudes, norms and conventions, both modern and traditional, which discriminate against women (Salami 2005).

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

African Proverbs and Gender Construct

A review of literature on Africa proverbs reveals that the African continent is known for its richness in oral traditions and proverbs are among the most widely and commonly used language tools in African oral traditions and social interactions. The use of proverbs permeates the entire African oral fabric as the foundation of social cultural wisdom of African societies (Letsholo 2007). This explains why the Zulu people of South Africa say, *'without them, the language would be a skeleton without a flesh, a body without soul'* (Asimeng-Boahene 2013: 123). Oha (1998) states that in many African cultures a feeling for language for imagery, for expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly in proverbs. The influence of proverbs on African thought is so strong that even the construction of gender as a social concept gender, that is male superiority and female subordination is articulated in proverbs. However, Haralambos et al. (2008) note that the African continent is also culturally complex and fluid with diverse cultures, natural environments and different ways of living. This cultural diversity as an aspect of African indigenous ways of knowing and value systems needs to take into consideration in interrogating the role of proverbs in social interaction in African societies. Thus, proverbs serve as a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinion and beliefs.

For the purpose of this paper, two major concepts first need to be defined in this discussion, that is gender and proverbs for guidance. Holmes et al. (2003) define gender as the socially constructed relationship and roles prescribed to men and women in society. Gender is different from sex as the former is not biologically determined. Talbot (2003) elaborates that gender ideology is a systematic set of cultural beliefs through which society constructs and

wields its gender relation and practices. As such, every society establishes a set of accepted behaviors to which males and females are expected to conform. In this regard, the roles ascribed to men and women vary from culture to culture and overtime they are accepted as normal. In the context of African ways of knowing and value systems, the African gender ideology is also a system of shaping different lives for men and women by placing them in different positions and patterns of expectations for social cohesion. In most African cultures including Chichewa in Malawi, rituals, legends, name-giving ceremonies, oral narratives, have been used in mobilizing the gender ideology, that is the role of men and women in society (Letsholo 2007).

Haralambos et al. (2013) explain that sex on the other hand refers to the biological difference of male and female. They emphasize that sexual organs of men and women, their hormones and chemical functions are different. Sex is defined by the fixed biological and physical differences for example menstruation, pregnancy and lactation that women experience. However, culturally, people are brought up to socially and culturally act and think as males and females based on these fixed sexual differences. McLachlin (2006) argues that as a result of the deeply entrenched patriarchal system of social organization in Africa, proverbs as language tools of societal interaction between men and women serve as the basis for formulating concepts that govern social power relations between the two gender sections as it is explained in the following section.

African Proverbs and Gendered Power Relations

Like in other societies throughout the world, in most African societies gender power relations tend to be expressed in proverbs which have further exacerbated the subordination and have disadvantaged the condition of women in their respective societies. Atanga (2004) argues that African proverbs have reinforced the prevailing African society power hierarchies and established rigid images of what it means not to be a man but a woman in an African society. Litosseliti (2006) observes that as power defines knowledge, proverbs contain messages to sustain African male supremacy both at household level and formal public domain. Mikell (1997) adds

that due to their physical power, men have used this power to their advantage against women in the different forms of women abuse in society. Just to mention a few, examples can be drawn from a Chichewa proverb of Malawi which says '*Mamuna mzako mpachulu umalinga utakwelapo*' -meaning a man is like an ant hill which is so difficult to climb due to its sharpness (Chakanza 2001). While the Setswana proverb in Botswana says '*ga di ke di etelelwa pele ke mana magadi die tle di wele ka selomo*', meaning an oxen cannot be pulled by female cows it will fall into a ditch (Nhlekisana 2007: 124). The Akan people of Ghana also have a proverb which propagate the view as it says: '*when a woman buys a gun, it is kept in a man's room*' (Asimeng-Boahene 2013: 128). The proverb shows that women do not have the capacity to manage valuable and dangerous property.

Proverbs and Women's Unfitness

Lakoff (2004) argues that African proverbs are also used by men and society in general to articulate and emphasize women's unfitness to assume important leadership and decision-making positions in society. This can be demonstrated by the following proverbs:

'Tsa etwa keya tshadi pele di wela leopeng' meaning if a leader is a woman, disaster is bound to happen and *mosadi ke tshwene o lewa mabogo* meaning the only contribution a woman can make in society is through her physical hard work (Kanjere et al. 2011: 246). Likewise the Kiswahili (East Africa) proverb: *Mwanamke ni kama Mtoto*: "The Woman is like a child. (She must be guided all the time). Kimamagoli-Luhya Proverb (Kenya): *Avankani Vaganag anyianga imbiri we vidavi vya vagoonaa ku davu*: Meaning: The woman never thinks beyond the bed she sleeps on. Kikuyu Proverb (Kenya): A woman and an invalid are the same thing.

The above cited proverbs in the respective societies clearly imply that culturally, women cannot lead or make decisions. These beliefs breed in women low self-esteem, self-doubt and lack of confidence in themselves. Olasupa et al. (2012) and Corbett et al. (1987) observed that despite the high levels of education women can attain, most tend to be intimidated or not trusted to take leadership roles. The paper argues that

some African proverbs are used to articulate and portray women as a weak social group. An example of such African proverb is found in Acholi society of Northern Uganda which says that 'women have no chief or court' (Mbiti 1988). In a patriarchal view, this proverb implies that by their very nature, women are a weak group and no woman is thus better than the other.

It is in the basis of these gender based belief systems that it is commonly agreed in most African traditions that husbands are regarded as head of families and decision makers. This includes administering the family estates and property. Women/wives for the most part concur with husband's views as dictated by tradition and society. It is commonly claimed that if a woman tried to manage property, she would likely make mess of it (Nhlekisana 2007). This belief emphasizes the necessity of women's social and emotional dependence on men. The demeaning attitudes portrayed towards African women, makes it difficult for them to acquire resources such as loans and property for self-development. She argues that it is very common to find in most African societies, where a wife owns a property but it is held in trust by husband or son.

Wodak (2008) argues that generally, society tends to underestimate the power of women. This leads to the erroneous view held by society that women have no power of their own or if they have it at all, then it is inferior to that of men. Atanga (2012) argues that while men rely on force and physical power in fighting wars, women rely on psychological and cultic knowledge which are by far more superior. She goes to the extent of saying that women can use their knowledge and spiritual power to disarm the strongest of men. Men's domination of temporal world can also be contested on three grounds of women's domination: Firstly, is the power and influence of women at 'home' and second due to her affairs of the home, i.e. bearing and rearing of children; third taking care of the husband and home in terms of cooking and feeding the children as well as the husband. This exposition implies that the entire management of the home is under the control of the woman.

Dzimbiri (2007) states that the contemporary world developments have also proven wrong the gender belief systems on the inferiority of women in society as articulated in the various African proverbs. Women all over the world, including African women, have demon-

strated that they too have the intellectual and physical capabilities to perform all the functions which society tend to attribute to the capabilities of men. McLachlin (2006) provides numerous examples in different African walks of life where women have proven their strengths. There are successful female Chief Executive Officers in industry and commerce; top athletes, presidents, ministers, legislators, chancellors and vice chancellors of universities and colleges all over the world. Women have therefore, been accepted as employers of men and men take instructions from women in the performance of their official functions without friction.

African Proverbs and Gender Spatial Parameters

Corbett (1987) is of the view that since African proverbs are an accumulated treasure of African wisdom, they also serve as a divide and rule apparatus in the context of gender relations in society. This is due to the fact that as the form the ore from which Africans mine the meaning of the past, present and future of their cultural beliefs, African proverbs have facilitated the transmission of knowledge and belief systems on social and cultural constructs on the position of men and women in the society. For Chakanza (2000) cited a Chichewa proverbs from Malawi which says '*mwanamamuna ndi kabudula amathela moyenda*' meaning a boy is like a short which gets worn out on errands. This is opposed to another proverb which says '*mkazi ndi chitenje chimathela pakhomo*' meaning- a woman is like a wrapper which gets worn out around home. Similarly, there is a Kiswahili proverb which says 'clothes for women, hoes for men, Zimmerman (2006) states the disturbing situation in African societies; however, is the interpretation of proverbs. Proverbs tend to be considered as a blue print with absolute truths in society. As a result of these culturally entrenched beliefs important decisions in life are often taken based on the truths that are considered inherent in the proverbs. Salami (2005) elaborates this by indicating that the definitions of the term 'proverb' have centered on its economy of words, origins in human experience and observation of social phenomenon. It actually reflects the users and society's aspirations for control and desire to impose a given view of life as unshakeable and accepted. This is where

proverbs help to perpetuate patriarchy in society from generation to generation by presenting the content of the proverb as a stable immutable part of social order including male dominance in society.

African Proverbs and Women as Commodities

Talbot (2003) interrogates the situation in African tradition society whereby proverbs are used as a tool for objectifying women. In most African traditional societies, women have for a long time been used as a conduit through which men formed and solidified their power and relations with other men. For example, the Xitsonga/Xichangana proverb says: '*Nhwanyana I huku yo khomela vayeni*' meaning 'a girl is a chicken reserved for visitors' (Nhlekisana 2007). Families enhance their wealth and alliances by giving away their female children in marriage, often against the wish of the daughters. The Igbo proverb portrays women as implicitly or explicitly as objects: 'When a woman is getting old, it would seem as if money (bride price) was not paid for when marrying her' (Ogbulogo 2002).

Proverbs and Profligacy

Goheen (1996) discusses African proverbs in the context of research in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems. She argues that proverbs, like stories, can be used to transmit ideologies of the powerful hence perpetuate the dominance of some groups by privileging knowledge and practices that discriminate on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, social class, ableness, etc. She emphasizes that these ideologies do not come out easily through conventional western data collection methods, such as the questionnaire and even interview method. These research methods tend to use questions which are framed on the basis of the day-to-day language of research. They do not take into consideration of the fact that proverbs communicate ideologies and worldviews that the researched may find too sensitive to discuss using explicit language. For instance, Chilisa et al. (2009) provide the following examples of Setswana proverbs which reflect community messages on sexuality with regard to multiple partners and male dominance:

Monna poo ga a gelwe lesaka- meaning- a man is like a bull, should not be confined to one kraal.

Monna phafana o a hapaanelwa'-meaning- a man is like a calabash, he must be shared.

Monna selepe o a adimanwa'. a man is an axe so he can be shared.

Monna nawa o a nama-meaning'- a man, like a bean seed, spread out.

Chilisa et al. (2009) explain that the dominant message expressed in these Setswana proverbs is the presentation of male sexual drive which must find an outlet and whose scope of operation must know no limits. A man's infidelity is implicitly socially and culturally sanctioned because, like a bull, he should go outside his kraal to look for mates. Just as a bull can be rotated in several kraals to mate with cows, a man can also meet the sexual needs of several women. In addition, in the same way that neighbours can share an axe used for chopping firewood or share a calabash of water for drinking, a man can be passed from one woman to the other. The proverbial metaphors, seeing man as an axe or calabash, also encourage women to *accept* sharing a man. The bean seed metaphor encourages males to spread their seeds (genes) as far and wide as possible. Such metaphors influence how people behave sexually and shape the societal attitude toward promiscuous behaviour. To employ proverbs in the indigenous knowledge research process is to engage in a dialogue about people's lives using their own indigenous literature as a frame of reference for discussion, analysis and interpretation. The study has the opinion that these cultural practices need to be empirically researched and documented to inform policy and create awareness in order to eradicate such practices.

Although the proverbial messages cited above disadvantage women, this study still find new hopes in those African proverbs which can be used to enhance gender equality. For example, Fasan (2006: 71) reveals proverbs in Yoruba such as '*Okunrin rejo obinrin pa, sebi kejo sati ku ni*' meaning there is no problem when a man sees a snake and a woman kills it. This is an indication that within African traditional knowledge systems, there are proverbs that recognize and encourage the complementary gender roles. In a similar notion, a study conducted in Kenya by Dickson et al. (2014) reveals a Kikuyu proverb which says "As long as grandmother is in the house, the rain will not spoil the millet". The cited Kikuyu proverb challenges the notion that women are considered passive or rather useless

but acknowledges the important role that they hold within their domestic parameters. Probably such gaps in knowledge are there for a reason, i.e. “that existing paradigms systematically ignore or erase the significance, the agency and the resistance of women and fail to look for their voices in different contexts” (McElhinny 2003: 1). This challenges the feminist critique of traditional African societies which exaggerate the differences in roles between the sexes.

CONCLUSION

This paper used proverbs from various African ethnic groups to interrogate their role in gender relations. A poly-epistemic conceptual framework within the context of indigenous knowledge systems was used for this analysis based on the recognition of existence of multiple ways of knowing, knowledge production and value systems associated with proverbs. The findings show that African proverbs are a powerful authoritative expressive language tool used to communicate and affirm Africa’s cultural beliefs, values and norms of life. However, it was also seen that in spite of the fact that the proverbs are meant to safeguard and promote cultural wisdom aiming at social cohesion across and through generations, some of them have gender connotations which hinders gender equality and women empowerment. The examples provided from various ethnic groups in East and Southern Africa demonstrate that they were used to articulate the deeply entrenched patriarchal system of African social and cultural organization. Although very few proverbs acknowledged the importance of gender role complementarity and positive contribution of women in society, the majority reflected the belief systems on the subordination of women in society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that these gendered proverbs and associated social practices should be documented to inform policy and create awareness for their eradication in order to promote gender equality in the respective countries. Proverbs that promote gender equality and inequality should be brought to the awareness of the people and policy makers for proper action.

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