

Yoruba Proverbs About Women and the Psychology of Male Chauvinism

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ABSTRACT

Proverbs in every human culture are special features that are used to embellish communication and to teach moral values. They often portray the traditional beliefs and social practices of people in a particular society and serve as guides towards moral rectitude. However some proverbs are unreasonable by virtue of their prejudice and irrelevance to modern day realities. Such proverbs include those that demean the female gender. Often a reflection of traditional gender bias in a patriarchal and chauvinistic society of yester-years, such proverbs often recur in modern society. Since culture is dynamic and grows alongside social realities, such proverbs are anomalous. The average modern woman is no longer the servile, docile, uneducated, husband-reliant, baby-manufacturing machine and domestic servant which traditional African culture made women about a century ago. Moreover, some of the proverbs that denigrate women are simply based on bias, hearsay, misogyny and megalomania. There is therefore a need to obliterate them. This paper examines fifteen of such proverbs. The proverbs are translated or transliterated from their Yoruba original, and analysed in terms of meaning, usage, literariness and gender bias. The unreasonableness of each one is made obvious in a contrastive analysis with current realities. It concludes that since advanced societies have retraced their steps (through Gender Equity Projects, Women's Rights Movements etc) Africans too, especially the Yoruba race, should do the same by expunging insulting proverbs from their proverbs repertory.

Keywords: Proverbs, Chauvinism, Embellish, Women, Patriarchal

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs could be defined or referred to as expressions of mind wisdom, beliefs that are acquired through reflection, occurrence, experience, observation and general knowledge. They reflect the culture of a society. Proverbs mostly relate to abstract issues that constitute the foundation of the mindset of the people e.g. death, laziness, envy, love, power, wealth, poverty strength, weakness, mood, etc. Proverbs in Yoruba culture are special features that are used to embellish communication and to teach moral values - to praise, to condemn. They are often used to exhort, to persuade, or to dissuade action and in some situations serve as a warning, advice, admonition, curse, or blessing. Yoruba proverbs often portray the traditional beliefs and social practices of people in the society and serve as guides towards moral rectitude. However, some proverbs are unreasonable by virtue of their prejudice and irrelevance to modern day realities. Such proverbs include those that demean the female gender and engage in traditional gender bias in a patriarchal and chauvinistic society of yester-years. Unfortunately they often recur in modern society.

Gender Bias in Human Society

Gender in a simple language refers to the roles and responsibilities socially (rather than biologically) assigned to women and men. These roles differ from one community to another. It shows or reflects the perception by society of women and men. It also explains the ways in which social and cultural values and traditions determine how women and men are expected to behave and react to issues.

Gender bias is not peculiar to Yoruba or African culture alone, but is a universal phenomenon that permeates all human societies, from ancient to modern times. Feminists view it as a patriarchal mechanism that empowers men and grants them privileges above women and other gender non-conforming people. Grimke, (1838) an American feminist confirms this in her work where she stated:

All history attests that man has subjected woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasures, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill.

Patriarchy is a social system that presents / make the father the ruler of the family or clan, where descent is traced through the male line. In Marilyn Young's (1973) view:

For thousands of years, China was a male-centered patriarchal society. Women were regarded as useless economically. They were disqualified by sex from formal schooling and had no access to positions of political power

In political discourses, women are said to be created equally with men. The fact of the case is 'that women are imprisoned into traditionally restricted areas such as agriculture and domestic work Olutayo (2000:68). Kuneff (1980) made it known that women are a productive force in the Nigerian economy, though they may not be statistically identified as contributors or economically active population. Afolabi (1996) refers to women as pillars of national economy. Women's contributions are rarely acknowledged or appreciated in an economy, especially in the developing world.

In India, up till today, male children are revered above the female. Female lovers customarily pay dowry on their lovers, to qualify them to marry the men. The quality of the dowry is determined by the level of the male's education, family background, and the particular caste to which he belongs. It is only in recent times that Sati (a system of burning alive a wife whose husband dies - whatever the cause of the death once the husband is young) was abolished fairly successfully in India. An unfortunate wife may also be burnt if the dowry she brought is considered too low by her in-laws.

Discrimination against women was not limited to under developed and developing nations. In the so-called civilized societies, discrimination against women was rampant. The first America medical school was established around 1767, women were not allowed into the school until 1848 (Boston Female Medical College) - eighty years after its establishment, and women were not allowed to be members of the American Medical Association until 1915, after sixty-eight years of waiting for recognition even by their colleagues.

Discrimination was not only in science-oriented professions, women are discriminated against even in the legal profession. Howard, a university that was established in 1630s did not admit women into its law programme until three hundred and twenty years after (1950); a pioneering gesture which was emulated by Notre Dame University in 1969.

In politics, the same thing occurred. American women did not start to vote until in 1920, one hundred and forty four (144) years after the American declaration of independence.

Women are often not expected to function beyond the domestic roles they play. When women first ventured into literature, they had to hide under masculine pseudonyms in order to obtain recognition. An example of such women that ventured into literature is Mary Evan's *Silas Marner*, published under a masculine pseudonym of George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) published under a male name of Currer Bell. In fact, people who heard the rumour of the true authorship of Adam Bede (1859), believed it was too good for a woman's story. And when it was confirmed in 1860 that George Eliot was a woman, critics who had earlier praised the work in superlative terms condemned the work very viciously. Gender bias is as old as man. It should not be rebottled in modern society. It must be condemned in every human society. All nations should imbibe gender equity into their policies, and this should reflect in the attitude to women.

It is clear that gender power relations in the local culture of every nation have to be addressed to understand women's identity, that research protocols must target women and men to understand and change patriarchy and inequality (Afonja 1980)

Modern-day Manifestations of Gender Bias

Modern-day gender bias starts from the economic activities of women which was difficult to measure and interpret because of the pervasiveness of women's employment in the informal or unorganized sector in many countries. Women's work is largely unenumerated in official statistics and usually also unregulated or even exempted from labour legislation. The result of this is that it will be a casualized form of employment, requiring low entry costs, extremely low levels of remuneration and poor conditions of work.

According to Hilary Standing (1992) women's employment in much of the developed and developing nations is restricted by a number of general structural inequalities. Women earn lower wage rates than men, work with fewer hours of paid work, since part-time work is believed not to be meant for women. Women dominate in low valued-added services which results to wage disadvantage.

The genesis of low income for women is that many are unskilled. The skills they are credited with are casual work and manual skills that are undervalued in terms of wage rates. Women's jobs are designated as unskilled and semi-skilled, simply because they are performed by women. These are often caused by the Sex stereotyping of jobs and tasks. The gender segregation in the labour markets helps to maintain gender-based wage differentials.

As a result of ideological believe of the strength of 'male breadwinner' women are continuously undervalued as wage workers, Modern-day gender bias is not limited to employment alone, it is there in economic, political and social issues. Till date access to services, resources, status and power are still not easy to come by for women. According to Jacobson (2005) discrimination in the subsistence economics of the third world is responsible for population growth and causes poverty. The result of increasing women's control over economic resources would be reduction in birth rate and decrease in poverty rate.

Gender bias keeps population growth rate high as it does not allow women routes to economic security other than childbearing. Any effective population programme needs to address the social barriers to women's economic advancement in order to have any meaningful impact.

The average modern woman is no longer the servile, uneducated, husband-reliant, baby-manufacturing machine and domestic servant which traditional Yoruba culture made women about a century ago. Therefore, use of some of the olden day proverbs for women of today is simply based on bias, misogyny and megalomania. There is need to correct them.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore some Proverbs in Yoruba Culture that deal with gender issues
2. To examine the placement of women and establish the anomaly in some biased Yoruba proverbs.

METHODOLOGY

Exploratory research design was adopted for this study to investigate male chauvinism in some Yoruba proverbs. The choice of an exploratory design is informed by the need to understand the cultural values attached to proverbs, and gender power relations that are associated with women's identity. The study reviews different Yoruba proverbs that portray the attitudes, behaviour and societal expectations of women and men relations in the Yoruba society that is largely patriarchal. To gather these proverbs three Yoruba States were selected with deliberate consideration for their unique contextual relevance to the study, i.e. traditional/ local settings or environments. The states that were used include Osun State, Oyo State, and Lagos State. From each state one local government area was selected - Oba Ile in Olorunda Local Government area of Osun State, Awe Town in Afijio Local Government area of Oyo State and Epe in Epe Local Government area of Lagos state. Communities

selected from each of these local Government areas have the culture of retaining traditions. The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify and recruit participants who possess the knowledge and experiences directly relevant to the study. The age of the participants interviewed is 60 years and above. Six participants comprising three women and three men were used for the study. The identities of all participants, were kept confidential to take care of ethical considerations. To ensure authenticity, face-to-face interviews were conducted, using informal interviews which were scheduled primarily in the evenings, between 4:00 pm and 6:00 pm, to accommodate participants' daily responsibilities and ensure a relaxed, unrushed environment. Before each session, the researcher sought consent of the participants to record the interview and assured participants of the confidentiality of the research. Each session lasted approximately 25 to 40 minutes, allowing for proper interaction on the proverbs while maintaining a structured approach. Out of some of the Yoruba proverbs on women that were gathered, 15 that are regarded as culturally biased were selected for analysis. The collected proverbs were subjected to two focus group discussions, one for males and one for females within the age of 35 and 50 years. Their views were analysed using thematic analysis, which allowed for rich, detailed accounts of participants' perspectives of the proverbs. Some Yoruba proverbs reveal a complex interplay between cultural expectations, cultural perceptions and gender biases. A total number of 15 proverbs were identified under this study and grouped into two major themes: (i) Seven Proverbs that rate men above women in Yoruba Culture and (ii) eight proverbs that denigrate women.

ANALYSIS OF SOME SPECIFIC YORUBA PROVERBS WITH GENDER BIAS

Proverbs in Yoruba culture are special features that are used to embellish communication and to teach moral values. The importance of proverbs is demonstrated by a Yoruba proverb that says:

Owe lesin ọrọ, ọrọ lesin owe
Bi ọrọ ba sọnu owe la fi nwa.

This simply means that proverb is the horse that transports conversation, when the conversation/word is missing, proverb is used to find it. Proverbs in Yoruba land is used to enrich utterances. It is learnt in an informal setting, especially when in the midst of elders. According to Michael (2004) proverbs are vehicles through which morals are conveyed for informal education of the society.

Use of proverbs deepens the richness of messages. For this reason, there is need to remove those proverbs that demean the female gender, those proverbs that are unreasonable by virtue of their prejudice and irrelevance to modern day realities.

The fifteen proverbs used in this research were gathered from elders and subjected to Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) among male and female discussants where the unreasonableness of each one is made manifest. These are grouped into two thematic projections which are those Proverbs that rate men above women in Yoruba culture and those that denigrate women.

Proverbs that Rate Men above Women in Yoruba Culture

The richness of Yoruba proverbs in condensing messages cannot be overlooked. But it is sometimes a reflection of traditional gender bias in a patriarchal and chauvinistic society of yester- years which sometimes still recur in modern society. Some proverbs show the superiority of males over females and this has its own negative effects on women and so limits their areas of operation.

1. Obinrin sọ wa nu, o lo n o lori ọkọ. O gbohun tọkọ
wi ni ọkọ lee jade?

(A woman has no character and so complains of not being lucky with husbands. Had she been obedient would her husband have sent her out of her matrimonial home?)

Women in the female focus group attribute this proverb to society's expectation of women to be voiceless, regardless of any abuse, while majority of discussants in the male focus group agree that divorce is often caused by the bad character of married women. The proverb in its gender bias assumes that each time there is a divorce, the woman is always at fault. Whereas in many cases of matrimonial crisis' men are the causative factors. The proverb put all the blames of failed marriages on women. This is not correct or fair on women.

2. Awoku lobinrin, aisan ti obi wo titi to fi de ọwọ ọkọ,
ọkọ naa wo titi to tun fi de ọwọ ọmọ, ọmọ nii pari rẹ.

(A woman is a half-cured lunatic, the curing of her sickness which is started by her parents continues with her husband and then to her children where it ends.)

Both the male and female focus groups regard this proverb as unfair on women. This proverb reflects how women are often regarded as partially insane in their behaviour. The proverb is of the view that women are not expected to be normal at all times, and so nothing perfect should be expected from them, as their training for normalcy is throughout life. The proverb actually believes that men can never go wrong and that they have authority to control / train women. This is a fallacy and purely a statement of gender bias.

Such a highly insulting proverb that equates women (who are mothers of the men) with lunatics, needs to be expunged from the repertoire of Yoruba proverbs.

3. Iyawo ta fẹ losu aga ti nfi iyan mọ ile, o fẹ sọ ni
darungun

(A woman that is married at a period when yam is scarce, and who always prepares a mountain of pounded yam is wasteful and is likely to cost the husband misfortune)

Both focus groups agree that this proverb portrays women negatively as wasteful. In an obvious reference to housewifification of women, it regards housewives as economic embarrassments to their husbands. The proverb is oblivious of the fact that many women save their husbands from economic embarrassment by their hard work which are not always recognized. Women generally are known to be economic managers of their families. Such a proverb should be withdrawn, and appreciation of women's work, even including the domestic ones such as preparation of pounded yam should be appreciated.

4. Ojowu binrin fi ọkọ rẹ tọrẹ

(A jealous woman often loses her husband)

Some of the male focus group members agree that jealous women often end up in losing their husbands. The bias in this proverb is seen in the fact that instead of cautioning men to refrain from marital infidelity, the proverb ridicules jealous women and says they often lose their husbands. Even God calls himself a jealous God (Exodus 20 v,5) and where there is true love, there must be jealousy. The proverb did not blame promiscuous men but abuses their jealous wives. When problems arise out of men's promiscuity, the women are always at the receiving end.

5. Asupo kii se daradara loju obinrin. Bi obinrin ba bere
okoo taa fun lẹgbaa, a ni ọkọ on Adisa nbẹ niha
ibikan (Obinrin ti a su lopo kii ni itẹlọrun)

(A husband that inherits a widow is never appreciated by the widow. If he gives her less than what she demands, she will say if it were my old husband he will do more.)

This mean that inherited widows lack contentment. Husbands in levirage marriages often feel they have done the widow a favour, even if the widow did not consent to the marriage willingly.

Inheriting widows is one of the widowhood rites in Africa. It is insulting to accuse a widow of lack of contentment; as she has the right to complain if she is not properly taken care of by the new husband. The proverb portrays inherited widows (levirate marriage) as ungrateful elements who are often dependent on their new husbands. The proverb expects inherited widows to be docile and uncomplaining, no matter how badly they are treated.

The female focus group believes that levirage system should only be allowed when the widow is willing to go into it, and that widows have the right to complain if they are not properly treated by the new husbands. They are also of the opinion that those widows that consented to such arrangement do so out of fear of the responsibilities left for them. The male focus group on the other hand is of the view that such arrangement become necessary in order to take care of the deceased family and not to subject the deceased man's children to abuse or maltreatment if the widow marries out of the husband's family.

6. Pami nku obinrin se ori bẹnbẹ sọkọ.

(A termagant woman will always be aggressive to the husband)

This proverb relates to human behaviour, women in Yoruba society are expected to be respectful to their husbands, so if a woman resists being maltreated or complain, that implies that she is stubborn. Society believes that men have the right to beat their wives when they misbehave. This is one of the ways men can show their superiority over their women. Violence of this nature was totally condemned by both the male and female groups. Matrimonial violence is barbaric and the idea of wife-beating will continue to be passed on if the proverb is retained. The proverb does not see anything wrong in husbands beating their wives but abuses women who resist violence from their husbands.

7. Ile ti obinrin ba ti nke atoto arere, titu ni ntu, igi arere nii hu nibẹ kẹhin.

(A household where women give instructions / announcement will disintegrate and collapse permanently and wild trees will grow over it.

This is a very bad opinion about women in authority, even in the homestead. It is a curse, to warn men against allowing their wives to exercise any measure of authority or control in the homestead. The reality of the situation however is that in certain areas of the home, like childrearing for instance, women cannot but give opinions and instructions. This proverb is borne out of male chauvinism and not a genuine desire to ensure sanity in the homestead. While the female group are totally against the proverb, the male group believes in orderliness in a home where male should be the controlling head, who also listen and tolerate women's opinions in crucial matters.

Proverbs that denigrate women

1. Obinrin nika obinrin leke, obinrin lo mọ ibẹrẹ ọlẹ ko to gbe fun ẹni ẹlẹni

(Women are wicked, women are fraudulent, women know the origin and right owner of their fetus and yet give it to somebody else).

This is a very negative portrayal of women as irresponsible, promiscuous, deceptive and wicked. Although some very few women may be like this, it is very wrong to assume that women generally possess such negative attributes. While the female group totally opposed this proverb, the male group also feel it is unfair to generalise such proverbs.

2. Obinrin ko se finu han, a sọrọ ori bibẹ, O nwoni lẹrunlẹrun (yio tuu asiri kọ?)

(It is not good to discuss secrets in the presence of women, we talk of beheading a person in the presence of a woman, the woman starts looking at our necks. (Won't such a woman leak the secret?))

This proverb shows that women are not trustworthy, they should not be allowed to have access to secrets, since they can easily leak that secret. In reality we know that this is not true. Both focus groups rejected this proverb, since many women have proved to be trustworthy and capable of holding secrets.

3. Alasehan obinrin, ọkọ ku tan o dadi de saare. Se ara ọrun o ma bara aye se pọ ni?

(A woman that shows off, her husband died and she sets her buttocks on his grave. Does she think dead men make love to living women?)

This is one of the insults that Yoruba proverbs pass on women. When women are demonstrative of their love to their husbands they are regarded as fake. Rather than pity a widow, she is ridiculed as trying to make love with her dead husband.

Although showing off is not peculiar to women, women are the ones saddled with the impropriety in this proverb. Both focus groups believe that this proverb is ridiculous and composed only to spite women who are bereaved.

4. ọwọ o dilẹ ti nyọ koko lobo ana

(A slothful hand picks grass from his in-laws vagina)

This proverb is used to abuse indolent men who have no work to do and so engage in trivial issues that are not expected of them. Both focus groups agreed that this proverb is deliberately used to ridicule women because the action itself is not plausible or possible. In the first instance there is no way grass can get into a woman's private part, secondly even if it does, it is not plausible that a son-in-law would see the grass and help to remove it.

The two groups are of the opinion that this proverb ridicules the marriage institution and the high esteem in-laws are placed in Africa. It is a ridiculous, and unreasonable proverb that should be expunged, as it ridicules women's dignity and genitalia.

5. Ko mọọ kọ, kẹtẹkẹtẹ adugbo, tẹru tọmọ ni ngun un

(She doesn't know how to refuse, public ass. Every Dick, Tom and Harry rides her)

A woman is symbolized here as an ass, that is ridden by anybody that cares to ride her. It is a statement on the promiscuity of some women. This is an insult. The character being ridiculed here is a woman, as if it is only women that are promiscuous. In most cases, when a man is promiscuous, it is never considered an aberration. A man may have four wives at home and fourteen concubines outside; it is seen as normal, whereas, a woman that has a single concubine is considered a prostitute or public ass. The female group believes that in most cases, men are the aggressors moving like butterfly, from flower to flower sucking nectar. Such a proverb is gender biased.

6. Furọ lorogun ko se fọ mọ

(A rival wife is an anus, it can never be totally clean)

Here relationship between women married to the same husband, is compared to an anus that cannot but smell. Both groups believe that this is a disgusting and vulgar description of human relationship among women. The proverb wants to explain that rival wives in a polygamous settings can never be at peace with each other. They are always at loggerheads. The idea that women relationship are compared with anus is denigrating.

7. A n sọrọ ole, aboyun nda si, odidi eeyan lo gbe pamọ

(We are talking of thief and a pregnant woman joins in the discussion, when she herself is hiding a whole human being)

Both focus groups believe that this proverb is a mere joke that is not appreciative of women's reproductive roles. Instead of appreciating a pregnant woman for ensuring continuity of life, she is regarded as a thief.

8. Obinrin ni asọrọ ana di bamii kojumọ to mọ

(A woman is the one that changes yesterday's discussion to something else before today)

This proverb claims that women are fickle-minded and very unsteady, they are not reliable as they can change agreements overnight. The male group members believe that to some extent, women are guilty of such a crime described in this proverb. The female group members believe that men are often more treacherous when it comes to issues of trust.

CONCLUSION

It could be seen that these proverbs are gender biased. The dangers they pose physically and psychologically limit the areas of functionality of women in human societies and also spread wrong notions about women. These proverbs are just negative propaganda which reflects patriarchy and male chauvinism in the Yoruba psyche.

These type of proverbs lead people to assume that there is high probability that females will exhibit certain traits which are not in men. These gender-biased proverbs relegate women to housewife roles while their male counterpart is projected as actors, providers and final authority. There is need to propagate issues of complementarity between the male and female genders, so that female contributions will also be recognized.

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