

Oral Literature and the Representation of the Image of the woman in the Contemporary African Context: The Study of Nso, Mbum and Idoma Proverbs

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ABSTRACT: *The paper investigates the representation of the image of the woman in oral literature using selected proverbs from Nso, Mbum and Idoma oral communities. The paper is anchored on the prediction that these proverbs are both ideologically and aesthetical relevant to the communities that produce them. The thrust of argument of this paper resides around the premise that the languages of the people are vectors of their significant view points, and collective cultural experiences. The study holds that as an aspect of oral literature, proverbs serve various functions and one of such is that as mirrors of the social and cultural experiences of the people they can be read as instruments that reveal how women are viewed, thought of, expected to act, live and behave in the society. From the functionalist perspective and the relevance theoretic lens, the paper sees proverbs as contributing in uncountable ways to the positive transformation of oral communities due to their dynamic and transcendental character. The analysis revealed that the selected proverbs under scrutiny in this study are effective instruments through which one can perceive the representation of the image of a woman in most African oral communities for a better transformation, recognition, and reevaluation of developmental policies.*

KEYWORDS: proverbs, image, woman, representation, oral literature.

INTRODUCTION

The proverb as an aspect of African oral culture and genre of oral literature has been the attention of researchers across different disciplines for varied purposes. Ruth Finnegan (1970) has written that “oral literature arises from society” (5). The implication here is that this form of literature is communally owned, exists in the oral form and therefore not read from books. Nkem Okoh (1982) remarks thus:

“When we talk of oral literature, there is nothing for us to read, work upon, criticize, analyze, derive pleasure from, exercise our visual influence and obvious tendencies on, even send by post, whether traditional or electronic (57). He further maintains: “an oral piece cannot make an impact or have an existence, much less maintain its continuity, outside the process of performance (158). Finnegan and Okohs’ observations put emphasis on the unique character of oral literature. It is a legitimate property of a people and their community which comes to live through performance. Performance is a unique forum and distinct avenue where orature survives in response to the needs of the people at different moments of their historical evolution. They further suggest that society gives birth to oral literature and performance assures its existence and sustenance. From their views one identifies the connection between text and context in relation to oral literature.

Proverbs as properties of society can be used as a mirror through which one can view a social unit, its ideological constructs, philosophy, norms and world views. In oral communities like those of the Nso, Mbum and Idoma, that are chosen for this study, the proverb as a genre of literature and as aspect of language portrays a society with greater effectiveness than other oral art forms. As an essence and important dimension of culture and carrier of people’s collective philosophy, proverbs reflect people’s perspectives of life and social systems. This is because they are a property of society as Finnegan has earlier pointed out.

Among the Nso, Mbum and the Idoma people, proverbs have been collected for diverse uses and purposes by theologians, anthropologies, oral historians, sociologies and other scientists. Their intergenerational relevance, dynamism, concise and condensed but not necessarily the simplest form justifies their collection for different uses and in varied contexts and disciplines.

This paper makes use of the selected proverbs collected from the three oral communities under reference as an aspect of oral literature to determine the extent to which the image of the woman is represented. Given extensive scholarship on the Nso, Mbum and Idoma in the area of orature, these proverbs have been collected for other uses, but this paper hopes to use the proverbs to obtain new meanings and new interpretations as it seeks to investigate how proverbs portray the image of the woman in these social units. Proverbs are chosen for this investigation because they “seem to occur almost everywhere in Africa” (Finnegan, 1970, p 393). They are a distinct and a rich form of people’s artistic and creative ability that occur in context of their daily lives and overlap with other oral art forms like incantations, songs, legends, myths and oral tales.

Also, proverbs can easily be used to understand people’s perspective and worldviews, philosophy and ways of living because “they frequently occur in general conversations and in oratory to embellish,

conceal or hint. Proverbs, in short, are closely interwoven with other aspects of linguistics and literary behavior” (Finnegan,1970, p.393). The choice of proverb as a vehicle of studying the representation of the image of the woman is informed by the fact that proverbs occur everywhere and intimate relation with human oral communities in Africa in general.

Researchers have in different contexts made attempts to define proverbs, and Peter Gryzybek points out that “there is no generally accepted definition which covers all specifics of proverbial genre” (1994, p.227). What one deduces from Gryzybek’s opinion is that no definition of the proverb is prescriptive or inflexible. The suggestion here is that it is not very easy to define a proverb despite its apparently short, terse, compact and simple form. Kashim Ibrahim Tala opines that, “proverbs are fundamental ingredients in the intellectual traditions of Africans. They stem from everyday activities and embrace the philosophical and socio-cultural value systems of the people” (1998, p.138)

This definition indicates that proverbs carry the weight of all African cultural values, activities and norms. As ingredients in the intellectual traditions of the people, they can be collected for a variety of purposes, in different contexts and across different disciplines. Nol Alembong posits that, “a proverb is a gnomic or Metaphorical statement accepted and used by community as an expression of truth and wisdom” (2011, p.131). The sum total of all that one needs to know about a culture is contained in their proverbs. Proverbs are ancient and valuable manifestations of human culture, whose terse, short and compact character sustain their pedagogic relevance in all generations. They express commonly held ideas and beliefs of a community and provide audience with glimpse on their history, geography economic activities, religion, ideology, physiology and social views. They are condensed and memorable sayings that summarize and mirror a people’s perspective of life. In Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, it is written: “Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (p.6). Palm oil is an important element in the culinary tradition of most African communities. Comparing proverbs in speech to palm oil in food implies that any conversation, speech, teaching from an educator that ignores proverbs will not communicate effectively just as one can hardly swallow certain foods in Africa without palm oil. Proverbs are therefore a traditional and dynamic, indeed resilient and adaptable oral art form that fulfills significant functions. They entertain and instruct as they preserve traditional knowledge and cultural identity.

Representation

In *the Oxford Dictionary*, representation is defined as “the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way”.

By representation, this study hopes to bring to light the images of the women as constructed by society and sustained by its oral art. Since proverbs are dynamic and respond to context both within milieu and moment the paper looks at how the three communities under scrutiny perceive the woman. The study of the representation of the contemporary woman through proverbs which are a dynamic oral art form bring out society's attitude towards women since they are a reflection of every community's cultural philosophy

The concern of this study is to investigate the contribution of oral literature in portraying the role of African Women. Literature whether written or spoken is about man, his society and how he lives in it. Proverbs form an integral part of Nso, Mbum and Idoma cultures. They are an intergenerational oral genre that can be performed by anybody in the society. They survive anywhere so long as there is an occasion for people to come together. They touch on every aspect of the lives of the people and make significant comments on the lives of the Nso, the Mbum and the Idoma women.

Literature, whether written, verbal or nonverbal has the potential to capture social relations in a society and review their diverse and multifaceted cultural perspectives. This paper focuses on how proverbs as a genre of verbal art function in bringing out the image of the woman in the communities are in the process of development. Our communities are in the process of development, which can therefore be attained through our thorough review of how we interact, the ideology and philosophy that guide our social interactions. Men and women are principal actors in any developmental effort. How they perceive each other can either sustain or retard development.

For instance, if a woman who has the ability and the capability to be a teacher, an engineer, a politician or a pilot is seen only as mother, a domestic servant or a wife, such a society's development will be retarded. The proverb genre is seen here to portray the image of the woman from the perspectives of the oral communities as read through the metaphors used by performers to represent them. Representation from the context of this study means how society expects the woman to act, what to do, how to do it in order to be accepted as woman. Through such reading the image of the woman can be redefined to suite the present context. This is because oral literature and proverbs in particular respond to the needs of a society at every stage of its evolution. Therefore, to move forward what is already ongoing needs to be reviewed in order.

In scrutinizing the proverb texts, we employ detailed individual deconstruction of the image of women by means of a performer-centered approach with emphasis on parallels between as well as convergence in the various performer ways of portraying women's circumstances. The literary representation of the woman is examined both in public and private sphere through the performer's emphasis and effective

use of aesthetic material. The representation of the image of the woman is greatly influenced by socio-cultural values of a given social unit.

Besides serving as a medium for creative verbal expressions which reflect both personal and social experiences, proverbs in the social units under study serve as a means of recreation, revelation and recognition of the role women play in their different cultural contexts. The proverbs selected for this study portray the image of the woman which is read from the various activities and tasks they undertake in their societies. According to John Middleton et al, "Women have always been present in accounts of African societies, but because of androcentrism on the parts of informants and scholars, they were not properly represented: Women were treated as theoretically uninteresting in descriptions of social process, and the parts they played were marginalized or diminished" (1997, p.194). This paper contends that oral literature is committed to matters of serious social concerns as proverbs that have to do with women among the Nso, Mbum and Idoma provide snapshots of the roles African women play in their various contexts and how they are perceived by society. Man and woman are the basic foundations that guarantee continuity in any given social unit. Culture and ideology tend to affect how they interact with each other and the role each play in the society to participate to its progress.

According to Michael Hughes and Carolyn Khroeler, there is little that is psychologically either male or female, although our cultural definitions often make it appear so. It seems that all societies have seized on the anatomical differences between men and women to assign social roles, the sets of cultural expectations that define the ways in which the members of each sex should behave. Consequently, we are all born into societies with well-established cultural guidelines for behavior of men and women (2005, p.276). The concern of this paper is to demonstrate that proverbs can be used as a communicative strategy among the Nso, Mbum and Idoma oral communities to identify social representation of the image of the woman.

Though the researcher also relied on library search and the internet, the analysis is informed by the functional approach and relevance theoretic reading of the proverb texts. The approaches are relevant to the success of this study since it sets out to highlight the role of oral literature in portraying the image of the African woman. The functional approach to criticism is one of the oldest and is still the dominant theoretical orientation in anthropology, sociology and other social sciences. The functional approach draws substantially upon the ideas of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. But it significantly gained grounds through the writing of Durkheim, the great French sociologist who stressed the functional role of each social institution in any society. Functionalists take their starting point from the notion that society is a system, a set of elements or components that are related to one another in a more or less stable fashion through a period of time.

Michael Hughes and Carolyn J. Kroehler comment on functionalism and writes:

Functionalists also assume that members of a society agree on what is desirable, worthless and evil. Through a social learning process, they come to share a consensus regarding their core values and beliefs. The functionalist perspective is a useful tool for describing society and identifying its structural parts in both milieu and moment. It provides a big picture of the whole social life particularly as it finds expressions in patterned recurrent behavior and institutions (2005:79).

The functional approach is therefore concerned with how the parts function to contribute in sustaining and maintaining the stable social unit. To view a literary text whether written or spoken from the functionalist perspective is to admit that the text like other social institutions is created to serve a social function. It is from this line of argument that this approach becomes relevant to our analysis of how the image of the woman can be represented through the proverbs collected from Nso, Mbum and Idoma oral communities. The proverbs are said in the languages of the people and language transports culture and all it stands for because it is through language that our imagination reaches expression. Nso, Mbum and Idoma proverbs have functional value because as an aspect of language proverbs house and transmit a people,s collective socio-cultural experiences, philosophical views and ideology.

In 1957, H. Paul Grice’s article titled “meaning” discussed the ways in which meaning, derived through communication is inherently different than meaning that one will derive naturally in the world. He sees meaning as a form of cooperative between participants in addition to the proportional forms the utterance may represent. The implication here is that there is a difference between what is spoken and what is meant. Relevance theory combines both linguistic and non-linguistic modes and is about cognition as well as communication. The main question here is “how do we work out what other people are trying to achieve by communicating with us. Here one needs to be careful with terminology when considering a sentence, proposition, utterance, code” (p.42). In relevance theoretic analysis, there is a description between encoded and inferred communication, which distinguishes between semantics and pragmatic relevance theory from Grice’s model and looks at how we manage to “mean more than we say” (p.46).

Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilsons’ strand of relevance theory which is the framework for understanding the interpretation of utterances is apt in the analysis and discussion of proverbs because they are uttered verbally and are loaded with metaphors. In this way their understanding and interpretation in context transcends the semantic rendering of the object used as a communicative sign.

Relevance theory based on the model developed by Sperber and Wilson as a cognitive theory of communication which attempt to explain all forms of communication, both implicit and explicit assumes that the salience of stimuli in communication acts influences the hearer's interpretation of a speaker's utterance. The salience stimuli or relevance can range from word choice to intonation and context or anything that may affect the interpretation of utterance, especially when they are incomplete or when they deviate from a more literal reading.

In 1960 the philosopher Paul Grice made a dramatic breakthrough in relevance theory. In exploring and critiquing Grice's work Sperber and Wilson define relevance in a more radical way. Relevance theory build on Grice's approach both with regard to understanding the nature of different kinds of an account of the pragmatic principles which guide interpretation is apt in the analysis of the proverb texts since the message needs different dimensions of interpretation to bring out the performer's intended meaning in context.

Deidre Wilson and Dan Sperber (2002) based relevance theory on the definition of relevance and two principles of relevance: a cognitive principle (that human cognition is geared to the maximisation of relevance), and a communication relevance that utterances create expectations of optimal relevance, but according to Sperber and Wilson (1986), "relevance theory is a cognitive psychological theory. In particular, it treats utterance interpretation as a cognitive process. (2

Geographical Location of Nso

Nso is found in the North West region of Cameroon. Its division is Bui which constitutes one of the largest and densely populated ethnic groups in Cameroon. More than four fifth of the Nso people are farmers. Beans, maize and potatoes are cultivated both for subsistence and commercial purposes. The men mainly occupy themselves with farming, hunting expedition and the tapping of raffia wine. They are also weavers, blacksmiths and carvers.

The Nso society like many others in Africa assign social, economic and political roles to members of the society based on biological differences and not capability and ability. In occasions and ceremonies, women are seen serving food and attending to the men and children. They assemble the different types of food, prepare and arrange in various groups depending on the occasion. However, with conferences organized nationally and internationally regarding the rights of women, some of them have become very assertive, revolutionary and vocal on issues that border on the marginalization and oppression of the women in the African society in

particular and the world as a whole. This is clearly demonstrable in the selected proverbs treated in this paper.

The Nso people cherish their culture and traditions and these institutions are headed by a traditional administrator known as 'Fon'. He is assisted by sub-chiefs known in the Nso oral culture as Shufaáy or Fai. These are quarter heads that assist the Fon in the day to day running of the administration. In addition to these are the regulatory authorities called the Nwerong and Ngiri that discipline deviants in the society and check the excesses of the Fon. These sacred societies are for men only demonstrating the male dominance of such a society. Geographical Location of Nso

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The Mbum

The Wimbun live in an area of 30 x 45km. They are located in the Nkambe plateau of Donga and Mantung Division in the North West Region of Cameroon. According to the 1987 population census, the Wimbun tribe has a population of more than 200.000 people out of the 300.000 inhabitants of Donga and Mantung Division. The Nkambe plateau, which lodges this semi Bantu group, has an area of 507km². It is situated between latitude 6⁰20 and 6⁰40m North and longitude 10⁰25 and 11⁰ 20 East. It is almost triangular in shape. On the North and North West of the plateau are found the Mbembe (Tugun) and the Njari. To the North West are the Nchatey and Noni ethnic groups. To the South is the Nso tribe and the East, which falls into a plain is occupied by the Bamum.

Mbum land consists of a high undulating plateau with moderately high isolated hills. The land is a water shed between two basins of the Benue and Sanaga and is drained by swift flowing streams from the main tributaries of Donga and Katsina Rivers and the River Mve of the Sanaga Basin. The plateau is covered with both artificial and natural vegetations. The Mbum land is interspersed with deep broad valleys, which for the most part contain rivers, streams, raffia and kola nut trees. Extensive arable agriculture is practised in low-lying areas while livestock farming and tea cultivation are practised in the highland areas. The latter is in Kakar in Ndu.

The Nkambe plateau has an average temperature of about 20⁰C per annum. It has two major seasons – the rainy and dry seasons. High land settlements like Kakar, Ndu, Binka, and Nkambe experience a very harsh cold in the mornings and evenings of both seasons, while low land settlements like Tabenken, Kup, Taku, Mbot and Luh enjoy relatively warm climate. The plateau experiences the highest rain fall in the North West Region because of its height, which is 1500m to 2, 46m. The Mbum population is largely rural and farming is their principal occupation.

Their major food crops include maize, groundnuts, beans, plantains, yams and sweet potatoes. Their main cash crops are Arabica coffee and kola nuts. Tea production is the consequence of their encounter with the colonial administration. It is considered foreign. It constitutes a major economic activity in this area of the nation. The natives of this part of the nation engage themselves in other minor activities such as tapping and hunting. They also weave raffia bags, baskets, mats and make bamboo beds, chairs and benches. Their main commercial centre is Ndu, which is one of the major food producing areas in Cameroon.

The Idoma

The Idomaland lies in the South of the River Benue. It has a population of about four million inhabitants, that occupy the area of land located within the broad valley of the Benue river and the Cross River basin. The main trust of the land is a contiguous belt of territory which stretches from the Southern banks of the river Benue to the North fringes of Igboland. The territory lies between latitude 60 degrees and 30 degrees north and longitude 80 degrees East and covers a total land area of approximately 5.955 square kilometers. The Idoma are bounded by the river Benue to the North, by parts of Igbo and Ogoja lands to the South, by the Tiv Igede lands, to the east and by Ijala land to the west. From <https:kwekedee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/.../> Susan Peters writes: “Idoma people; ancient warriors, expert hunters and one of the most artistic ethnic groups in Nigeria”

The researcher was present in the field and was very close Nso and Mbum in different villages, during different occasions among varied social groups. Smith et al have it that: “The participant observation is by no means simple. There are four different ways of handling it and one of them comprises a continuum of four main roles: complete participation, participation as observer, observer as participant and complete observer” (110). Consequently, the participant observation method drew the researcher closer to her informants and performers and this offered a favourable climate for the interview method.

Being close to the consultants and performers through participant observation methods the researcher formulated open-ended questions that enabled her to obtain fresh data and interpretation from Nso and Mbum people. The interview method whose significance is clearly stated by B.R. Burgess when he writes: “interviews give the opportunity for the researcher to probe deeply to uncover new clues, open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure vivid, accurate inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience” (107).

The interview method helped the researcher to generate insights into how consultants and performers see their world. Large numbers of Nso and Mbum people were engaged in discussion in order to have confidence that the responses obtained can give a comprehensive image of the woman in these communities.

Regarding the Idoma culture the researcher relied largely on the collected proverbs of Professor Idriss O.O. Amali. She carefully read through Amali’s collected proverbs and their translations and selected those that reveal the way the Idoma woman is read by her society. Amali’s devoted collection and translation of Idoma proverbs and explanations of some cultural aspects of the people’s perception of the woman aided in the analysis of the texts. The availability of this research work relieved the researcher from the financial stress of travelling to Idoma land. It equally rescued her from the problem of translation. Professor Amali is an Idoma who is devoted and committed to collecting and analyzing proverbs and relating them to different areas of Idoma cultural life. The Idoma proverbs selected for this study are from a repertoire that Amali has collected under the title “The Image of Women in a Traditional African Society: A case Study of Idoma Proverbs on Women.”

Textual Analysis

Women as Farmers

The Nso oral society perceives a woman as one whose responsibility is to work on the farm and feed her family. This perception of the woman is vividly captured in proverbs such as:

Nso: Lumen dzətav, a wiíydzəkisoó.

Translation: A man is a house and the woman is a hoe.

The basic understanding in the socio-cultural perception of the Nso woman is that she gets up very early in the morning, prepares food for her husband and children and goes to the farm, where she spends the whole day and returns at dusk. Every young woman who marries is given a farm, which she is expected to till and produce crops such as maize, cocoyam, beans, yam, groundnut, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava etc to feed her household. The performer uses the metaphor of a hoe to describe a woman in the Nso oral community thus bringing out her role as one whose responsibility is to feed her family, relatives and neighbours while her husband provides shelter.

The performer focuses on the hoe in depicting the expectation of society from the Nso woman. The “hoe” is her tool which implies that if she is unable to handle her hoe, she can lose her personhood as defined by the Nso culture and philosophy. The image of the “hoe” represents the fact that as woman living in the Nso oral community you may know how to perform other important tasks but your specific identity as defined by the social construct is that you must have a farm on which you cultivate crops to feed your relatives. If a woman in this social unit fails to perform this singular task, she is seen as irrelevant in context and irresponsible.

The performer in the performance of the above Nso proverb employs the techniques of contrast and symbolism. There is a contrast between “a house” that symbolizes a man and “a hoe” that stands for a woman. The contrast in the image of the hoe and that of a house captures the image of a society in which culture and ideology assign roles based on anatomical differences. The metaphor of the house and that of the hoe define the context of the performance and identifies a proverb as specifically Nso because in the Nso community women are responsible for tilling the soil to cultivate crops which they use to feed their families and share with their neighbours. This proverb points to the central role of the Nso woman as defined by their cultural philosophy. She is the “hoe” and this specific character makes her an indispensable element of her community. The “hoe” as used in this performance is particularly significant in the context of

the Nso oral culture because the Nso people practise farming and their economic survival largely depends on it.

Reading the voice in the performance of this proverb the audience notices how the woman has grounds to confront an issue that frequently dominates Nso ideology and belief which is the postulated universality of male dominance which usually leads to unequal access to social prestige and power. The metaphor of the hoe in the proverb text further provides evidence of the role of language in transmitting and reproducing societal relations through the linguistic expression of entrenched cultural symbols which communicates people's perception of reality in their world. What this proverb insinuates is that the image of the woman can best be understood when we pay attention to a culture's organization of economic and social functions. The parallel presentation of the man and woman marked by their economic tools provides a synthesis of ethnographic and historical data concerning the roles of women and men in the context of the Nso oral culture. Here structural relations are revealed through the definitions of the man as a "house" and the woman as a "hoe". These definitions have great consequences for the ways that women and men in the Nso community participate in their households and community activities.

The oral literature of local people is context sensitive and thus identifies community members within their cultural and social settings. Women as this proverb demonstrates are the backbone of the economic advancement in the context of the Nso tradition as well as the sub-Saharan African region in general.

Middleton et al (1994) have remarked that,

Women constitute 60 percent to 80 percent of agricultural workers in Africa; they have been coca producers in Ghana, rice formers in Liberia, and maize farmers in Kenya. Yet women work has been undercounted and undervalued in official demographic and economic statistics. This is in part due to definitions of economic activity: unpaid work on family land is statistically "invisible" labor. Moreover, with the change to a cash economy, men gained a monopoly, which is significant if one supports the position that women's contribution to the economy correlates with their status (252)

The contention here is that women are at the heart of agriculture in African societies but due to their biological distinction their contribution is not seen as important to the growth of the economy. It is culture and ideology that condition the way the Nso community perceives a woman and not what she does. The way society perceives the woman provides a locus for

imaginative expression. Among the Nso as the contrast between the “hoe and the “house” illustrates, a woman’s world is not just domestic. It encompasses a more general responsibility of feeding of the household for the image of the “hoe” as used in this performance points out that her place is in the fields. Therefore, a Nso woman is an economic unit of production. Though burdened with social and cultural handicaps, the Nso woman is gifted with energy as read through her association with the “hoe”. She is creative, and most importantly plays the most central economic role that has become crucial to the social and cultural stability of the Nso community in particular and the Cameroonian society in general.

In every occasion people depend on her sacrifices such as provision of food for their well being. The significant role of the contemporary African woman is also brought out through the Mbum oral performance thus

Bsò vii bàabb̀ỳnge, yebaa ce à laabb̀ỳnge.

Men’s secret society hates women but eat corn fufu that they prepare.

In the performance of this Mbum proverb, the word “bàa” (hates) has as subject men’s secret society and its object is women. The word “hates” that is directly associated to women is charged with a particular force which portrays the condition under which the woman lives in the Mbum community. The contrast in the words “hates” and “eat” brings out the disregard that men have for women’s role in the Mbum oral culture. Women cultivate and cook for men to eat but they are discriminated against and hated just because they are women.

Among the Mbum like the Nso, the woman plays an important role in her family and in her community as a whole. One of such significant roles of the woman is that she fights against hunger; first by tilling the soil as the Nso proverb illustrates and by preparing the food gathered from the fields to feed her community. This Mbum proverb reveals that wherever men gather, either to celebrate or to mourn, women are responsible for their well-being because they prepare food for them to eat and be happy.

Though Nso and Mbum men assert authority over women and their communities and their dominance is idealized and justified through culture and ideology, proverbs on women counter men’s prerogatives because women control the economy since they are in charge of the farm and the household. This performance defines gender roles and relations in the three communities under reference in this study. These gender roles interact with their culture and traditional practices to reveal the people’s identity.

The performance further validates the fact that language plays a key role in maintaining and producing social gender relations. Therefore, performance may function to question and transmit ideas about the roles that women and men perform, the rights they have in relation to each other, and the values associated with their activities. Thus, proverbs play a key role in transmitting the cultural message on how people live and perceive each other because they harbour ideas that comprise culturally shared and acceptable models of gender. The images of the “house” and the “hoe” in the performance of this Nso proverb and the verbs to “eat”, “hates”, and the expression, “food they prepare” in the Mbum performance illustrate the fact that gender roles are converged in subtle ways through language by words and expressions that label men and women or describe their activities.

Women as Mothers and Wives

The Idoma oral tradition highlights the image of the woman in the family emphasizing her role thus:

Enolenoonmoole ole le tuuco

When mother of the house leaves, the house, the house sprouts dirt.

This proverb reflects the basic role of the Idoma woman who wakes up early and keeps the house and its surrounding clean. The absence of the woman from the household is announced by the presence of dirt and the unattractive nature of the compound. This implies that the Idoma woman is a symbol of hope, neatness and joy. The repeated use of the word house in the performance enhances the significant role of the woman giving the proverb poetic texture. The use of house and dirt in this proverb is metaphorical. The house that sprouts dirt in the absence of a mother symbolizes a combination of negatives that can befall a household when the mother is not. “Dirt” can be read in this performance as the moral problems that may be identified in children who lack the constant counselling and directives of their mother. Such children feel lonely, hungry and depressed and all these can provoke other social ills such as stealing and prostitution in the community. Idris O.O. Amali in his “The Image of Women in a Traditional African Society: A Case Study of Idoma Proverbs on Women”, writes: “The role of women in catering for the wellbeing of the family and the training of the child to fit into the social, economic, political and religious life of the society is a great contribution to the growth and continuity of the Idoma traditional society” (27). Therefore, every society depends mostly on the sacrifices of the women to move forward.

The idea in this Idoma oral performance emphasizes that of the Mbum where the performer also highlights the pivotal role of women. In the Mbum performance, the woman is presented as one

who cooks food for men to eat. Here she is also a victim of culture as a result of her femaleness. This is deduced from the performance through the use of the word “hate” whose subject is “men”. The noun “women” is the object of the verb “hate” while the action to “cook” is performed by them (women). What this action verb communicates is that “women” are reliable elements of the society because they ensure food supply. “Food” is the center of life. It can therefore be concluded that among the Nso, the Mbum and the Idoma people, the woman is the pilot of life. If she abandons her role, people can die of starvation, hunger and malnutrition.

This Mbum performance questions certain cultural practices and mentalities about women. The verbs to “hate” and “cook” as used in the performance communicate the fact that culture influences the way women are perceived in the society. The verb “hate” here brings out the image of a society with a patriarchal undertone. Men may enjoy the food but take the act of cooking for granted because culture believes that cooking is a woman’s identity and not a sacrifice.

The ideas brought out in this Mbum proverb is evident in the following Idoma performance.

E kanyaomekwu gen odimagwu a

They say women do not see the masquerade but who delivered the masquerade?

This rhetorical question points to the significant role of the Idoma woman. The performance portrays the absurd nature of some cultural practices which tend to ignore women’s contribution to the progress and continuity in the community. The proverb highlights one of the fundamental problems women face in the Idoma society because of their anatomy. It reveals that in this society women are forbidden from seeing masquerades. The rhetorical question puts emphasis on one of the significant roles women play in the Idoma community. They are the ones who give birth. The masquerade is the son of an Idoma woman. Given this function, the performer seems to suggest that the woman owns everything in the society including the masquerade. Therefore, society depends on the woman to have masquerades.

This idoma proverb that is clothed in a rhetorical question provides avenues for a clearer appreciation of the role of the woman. What this performance seems to communicate is that no matter the age and its level of technological advancement, the significance of oral literature in human society can hardly really dwindle. Okoh commenting on the indispensable role of oral literature in the society remarks thus:

Literature can instruct us enormously, providing us with knowledge regarding the wider world, physical, psychological, religious, and cultural canvas of man. Such delighting and instructing provides a soothing, pleasurable means of learning, passing on information, or making us more sensitive to our world. (2008, p.3)

Okoh's opinion that literature provides a soothing and pleasurable means of learning is relevant to the above Idoma proverb which communicates the woman's significant role in the community in a humorous manner. This makes the learning pleasurable. It brings out the ironic representation of the Idoma woman who gives birth to a masquerade and is forbidden to see.

The proverb further questions certain aspects of the Idoma cultural practices in relation to gender. The rhetorical question "who deliver the masquerade" makes a criticism of the Idoma perception of a woman. The proverb reveals that this practice is absurd. The performance can be used as a medium to call the society to reason and to see clearly.

The message in these proverbs on women is that culture and ideology can be modified and redefined to reconstruct society. The voices in these proverbs counteract dominant male perspectives and point to a new direction in community cohesion. The idea here is that women are the principal actors in the advancement of humanity. The performance further brings out the weaknesses and limitations of the ideology that places men at the centre and women at the margin. Through their role as people who till the soil and prepare food for men, they occupy the centre stage in community development

Ncòm wíyí dzè wán.

A woman's colour is her child.

From the viewpoint of the Nso culture and ideology, a woman is one who has children. Women without children are reminded of through the above proverb that they are insignificant, valueless and void of self-fulfilment. This perception of the woman in the Nso oral culture lays a foundation for interesting and beautiful literary creativity as the voice in the performance strives to put forward the situation for review by the audience. The performance of this Nso proverb contributes to the ongoing debate on gender inequality and the marginalization of women from the perspective of the Nso oral tradition. It highlights the derogatory atmosphere that characterizes the life of a Nso woman who is childless. The performer seems to call for a change of perspective on the part of the Nso oral culture, ideological construct and the definition of a woman. The performer is sensitive and resilient and through that proverb he/she believes that a

new definition of the woman will provide an enabling environment for effective development which will put the Nso community on the trajectory of growth and improved quality of life.

The Nso proverb cited above highlight an attitude in the Nso oral culture, which puts forward the question of childlessness in marriage with its attendant problems. The woman is stigmatized, devalued and objectified. The performance reveals that the traditional Nso society views a marriage without issue with utter dismay and ridicule. Through this performance the audience understands that among the Nso people when a couple is childless, the woman is the one who is invariably blamed and thus subjected to all sorts of indignities. One of the messages communicated in this performance is that society must change its attitude towards the woman, marriage and motherhood. The proverb exposes the Nso culture and ideology on the issue of marriage expectation to criticism and close examination. What it seems to suggest through the savage images of “woman’s colour” and “her child” is that contrary to Nso ideology and cultural construct of the image of the woman, self-fulfilment cannot only be achieved through child birth for there are different ways of living one’s life fully and fruitfully. What the proverb insinuates through these images is that women should rise up and reject all social shackles since they play a crucial role in community development.

It further seeks to suggest that a woman’s failure to have children should not constitute an excuse for her exploitation, oppression, discrimination and stigmatization, which subject her to mental agony. The expression “her child” brings out one of the difficulties confronting women in their relationships with their husbands and their environment in the Nso patriarchal society. As a result, the agony of childlessness leads the wife to depression caused by complex psycho-social and psycho-emotional distress. The above performance validates the relevance of oral literature portraying the image of the woman in African oral communities, since it brings forth sensitive contemporary social and gender related issues for debate thereby initiating space for an inclusive dialogue where both men and women voices will be heard.

Historically, Nso women typically feature in discussions only when topics such as marriage, family and food production and distribution are concerned. In marriage, they are seen as objects of exchange and baby manufacturers and when they fail to produce children they lose their personhood according to the Nso perception of the image of the woman and become a woman without “colour”. The above Nso proverb that put forward the issue of childlessness among the Nso people is terse and loaded. This perception places such a woman out of the set and she becomes an element whose other qualities and endowments are neutralized by the image of barrenness and colourless existence, which she carries as a stigma.

For a woman to achieve self-fulfilment, she must fit into the baby-making role else she finds herself on the margin. The Nso oral culture sees a woman without her own child as a colourless one. The performer in the above performance refers to a child as a woman's "colour" in the Nso oral culture. This makes it clear to the audience that a person's natural biology as female is not enough for her to be accepted by the Nso oral culture as a woman. In addition to her physiology, she is expected to attend womanhood in the context of the Nso culture by becoming a mother. Motherhood is therefore what gives her the "colour" as a woman living within the community and accepted by the Nso culture.

Women as Domestic Servants

This significant role of the woman in the society as illustrated by the Nso and Mbum proverbs is equally emphasized in the Idoma oral performance thus:

Anyeoleanyaonma

Anya ainookwoonma bi

Women are the home, women are the fence

Women are the poles that hold the fence.

The Nso oral performance refers to the woman as "*Kitsám ké wòŋ*" or the pillar of society while the same image is perceived from the perspective of the Idoma as "home, fence and poles". This brings in the concept of context in oral literature. The various metaphors portray the image of the African woman from different contexts. The role of women in Idoma society has been compared, to that of pole in a fence. Without poles a fence cannot stand. The metaphor of the fence in the context of this performance represents a family or the community as a whole. The proverb highlights the role women play at any given occasion. What these images communicate is that society can comfortably lean on its woman. She is a significant element of the family and nation as a whole, as seen from the perspective of Nso and Idoma communities. Her constant counselling, direction and closeness to children make her an indispensable member of the community. This performance indicates the extent to which the spoken word can articulate the issue of gender which is one of the most debatable in the contemporary world.

The argument here is that without women, a society hardly moves forward. The idea put forward through this observation is that Nso, Mbum, Idoma women in particular and African women in general have challenged the patriarchal enterprise and social and ideological constructs that placed them at the margin through their pivotal activities in the development of their various

societies. The realization that the Nso contemporary woman is now a “man” stems from her indispensable role in the progress of her community.

Among the Mbum like the Nso, the woman is conceived and perceived as an element destined to spice and colour the life of a man. She is also expected to be his servant and remain a good woman because of her silence. This is exemplified in the following proverb:

Njeywe à kàcaasibyeenènduu e cu fayègen le ebo ye yùrboŋ.

If a woman serves food to her husband, she should sit by him so that he can enjoy the meal.

The Mbum oral culture and ideology construct a woman as a submissive being who must yield to the demands of a man. This proverb is performed to encourage a young woman to be obedient to her husband and be present by him always. It is also meant to encourage women not to be too mobile. The performance portrays her as a man’s cook and as his companion but the companionship is not on equal basis. It is the subordinate and master relationship. In the Mbum oral culture, a woman is conceived as one whose presence in the house at all times is indispensable. Her constant presence is significant to the well fair of her household and that of her husband but culture does not accord her the image she deserves as a result of the crucial role she plays in her family and the community.

On the contrary, she is perceived as a being that is lesser than a man. In the performance, she is presented as one who “serves food” to a man and at the same time as one who entertains. This implies that she lives her life for the man. The tone in the proverb is instructive. It places a rule to which a woman must respond. The expressions “serves food to her husband” and “should sit by him” reveal the pivotal role a woman plays in her household. She prepares food and ensures that her husband eats it.

From the voice in the performance, the verbs to “serve” and to “sit” have the subject “she” while to “enjoy” has the subject “he”. These three verbs can be used as a mirror to penetrate the internal relationship that exists between a woman and her husband in the Mbum community. The traditional Mbum community does not construct a woman as a significant element of the household despite her commitment to her role as one who prepares food, serves and sits for her husband to “enjoy”. Some activities of hers are not perceived as sacrifices made for the well being of her husband and the entire household but as her identity. The Mbum ideology and

patriarchal culture see the woman as that element of the society that is condemned to serve her husband and ensure his joy. This is a misconception of the woman and her role in enhancing progress and cultural continuity.

Women as Teachers

Mbum: Muunyàace e kejeshinjepmkuuyí ma e kelùṅe.

Translation: A young animal that follows its mother's footprints always survives.

On the other hand, the Mbum oral tradition as illustrated in the above performance sees the Mbum woman as an embodiment of all the positive values one needs to survive. This proverb is performed to encourage all the people in the Mbum land especially the youths to listen to their parents, elders and particularly to their mothers. The performer employs the metaphors of "the young animal, "footprints" and "mother". The idea here is that given all circumstances, the way to success lies in the advice received from a mother:

Mbum: Ade muugweembebo ma-muuka'.

Translation: A child can never fall from its mother's arms.

Mbum: Muukateboomika' banε ma be buumifoṅka'.

Translation: If a child does not sleep, its mother also stays awake.

The above Mbum proverbs see a woman as a symbol of protection. The child in the proverb symbolizes the present and the future. She is the source of the hope for humanity. The first proverb is performed among the Mbum when a friend or a close relative rescue another from a difficulty. It is also performed when someone presents their problems to those they think bear their burden. The image of the "mother" in the performance emerges from observable facts about the significant role she plays in protecting humanity. She protects both the present and its future. The role of a mother is vitally important to the growth of the community and its peace. The fact that "a child can never fall from its mother's arms" as stated in the performance brings out the enormous pressure that can face a woman as a "mother". The proverb highlights cultural expectations and standards for mothering. It further brings out the idea of intensive mothering, which portrays mothers as essential care givers. They put the child's need first and invest much

of their time, labour and intellect in their children and in their community. The Mbum woman protects the child always such that it “can never fall from its mother’s arms”.

The words in the proverb paint the picture of a mother’s tenderness and commitment in her duty as a primary care giver. The way she loves, cares and protects the child influences its relationship with the surrounding morally, psychologically and socially. This Mbum proverb which focuses on the mother brings out the pivotal role of women in the Mbum community. In their loving, gentle and tender heartedness they protect the nation’s present and guarantee its future. Contrary to the ideology and the patriarchal enterprise that see her sacrifices as her identity, the voice in the performance insinuates that she is a symbol of trust and hope. Her heart is so sensitive and tender that “a child can never fall” from her arms.

CONCLUSION

Proverbs reflect all aspects of African traditional life and people’s collective perspectives. They capture society and its beliefs, norms, mores, philosophical views more than other aspects of orature. Proverbs transport language and culture thereby mirroring the ideology of those who have them on their lips. Within the communities under reference, proverbs are means of significant commentary on the image of the woman as perceived in their social and cultural worlds. They are not only referential; they also encapsulate thoughts and emotions in a vividly synthesized and pithy form.

Like other elements of oral tradition of the people, proverbs select that which is most productive and artistic about a specific cultural setting. They represent a significant source of historical information and cultural insights that are unique to the Nso, Mbum and Idoma oral communities. Oral art forms come from the past and respond to the needs of every society at each stage of its historical evolution. The proverbs represent the image of the woman in the communities under reference in ways that influence the social aspects of courtship, marriage and family life.

As vectors of culture, proverbs transport the ideology and philosophy of the Nso, Mbum and Idoma oral people regarding the image of the woman. Among the Nso as seen above, the woman is represented as a farmer. Here, we observe that farming, as an activity is an area where the woman is placed under close examination to determine her ability and capacity in the context of the Nso oral culture. This view that represents a woman as a farmer is not only limited to the

three communities under study; for in Kenya, the Gikuyu oral tradition have it that: “The man may be the head of the home, but the wife is the heart”. As seen from above literature whether written or spoken has the potential to reshape social relations including the representation of the image of the woman in African oral communities.

Proverbs emanate from a culture’s immediate natural environment and embody the totality of ideas, concepts and values that characterize a society. As embodiment of people’s collective views, they define contexts in people’s cultures where women can be seen, evaluated and judged. Women in Nso, Mbum and Idoma are represented in their proverbs as domestic servants, wives, mothers and teachers. A number of activities affect the representation of the image of the woman in ways that create both equality and competition. Within households, men are regarded as heads while women have relevance as mothers, wives, cleaners and house keepers who are there to serve men, children and the community as a whole. In most cases when a woman is limited in any of the above, she loses her personhood and self fulfilment as seen in the examples of the Nso proverb analyzed where a woman without a child loses her colour.

The role women play is so vital that no society can evolve and develop without them. In the home which is the bedrock of society, she is a teacher, mother, caretaker and wife. The African society is fast evolving and changing but some basic assumptions about women have been slow to change, as many still believe that a real woman is a mother, a wife, domestic servant and a farmer.

Most African women still see marriage and child bearing as the only sources of self-fulfilment. This view is captured in proverbs which as an aspect language in given communities influence the way its members perceive and interpret their daily experiences and world view. Therefore, new proverbs need to be coined to suit the expectations of the modern society.

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