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The Derogatory Portrayal of Women in Proverbs of Esan People of Nigeria

ABSTRACT. This paper adopts interpretive and descriptive approaches in the study of derogatory Esan proverbs targeted against women in the Esan indigenous society of Nigeria. The aim is to reveal whether the content of such anti-women local proverbs in Esan are valid or anachronistic in the light of the indigenous knowledge that proverbs are ideally known to convey, and judging by cultural and modern realities. Esan people are a tribe in Edo State of Nigeria and the three researchers of this paper are native speakers of the language. We harvested Esan proverbs through our public interactions with elders, and young and old adults in both rural and urban Esan communities. Our study reveals, amongst others, that the contents of derogatory Esan proverbs with women as subjects are not valid statements, but are products of centuries of enduring patriarchal systems insensitive to cultural and modern realities evidencing the numerous virtues and accomplishments of Esan women. The paper finally affirms that the anti-women local proverbs are part of the traditional structure that has fought the success of the thoroughbred modern agitations for female empowerment and the quest for gender equality.

KEYWORDS: Derogatory Esan proverbs, women oppression, indigenous culture, patriarchal system, female empowerment

Introduction

Proverbs, their use, function and what they represent in contemporary Africa have become a subject of vigorous scrutiny in contemporary African studies. In almost every African tribe, the ability to interlace proverbs in oracy is not a common feat. It is, perhaps, this thinking, which led to a renewed investigation of African proverbs, and this is evident in the works

of Mokitimi (1997), Avoseh (2012), Sefa (2014) and Aluede & Bello (2022) where they examined proverbs as the Voice of the People, as Theoretical Frameworks for Lifelong Learning in Indigenous African Education, as African Indigenous knowledge and the Institutional and Pedagogic Relevance for Youth Education and as a lead into African spirituality. The use and relevance of proverbs in indigenous parlance are not peculiar to African people alone. For example, Lubis (2018, p. 10) remarked that:

A Proverb is widely known in any society and is relatively much used although a proverb is normally inserted into a conversation or a discourse if the meaning of the proverb is relevant or will support the truth of the speaker's idea in the conversation or the discourse. For example, seeing a son behave like his father English speakers would say "An apple falls not far from its tree" or Indonesian speakers would say a drop of water from the roof will surely fall into the ditch which has a similar meaning to the English proverb.

Germane as African proverbs are in daily living and cultural communication among the peoples of Africa, one curiously finds a corpus of proverbs which pejoratively portrays women in many societies. For example, in the North, South, East and West of Nigeria, no community is left out of this negative portrayal of women in proverbs. Among the Esan people of Edo State in Nigeria where these writers are from, there is a humongous collection of proverbs that casts a derogatory gaze at women, which instigated the intellectual inquiry of this paper. Why is this negative depiction of women in Esan proverbs so? What status is the Esan woman accorded in her traditional society? Is gender equality attainable here? In this era of unconventional expression of sexuality such as transgenderism and hemophilic identities, are these proverbs not anachronistic and presently unnecessary? It is within this background that this study attempts to provide answers to these questions. The main objective of the study is to analyse the negative depiction of women in Esan proverbs to enable us to interpret the image of women in the Esan traditional society against the backdrop of contemporary realities.

Locale, Methods and Materials of the Study

In this study, the ethnographic method of inquiry to elicit data and provide answers to the questions raised in this work was used considering the

topic of investigation. We modified the technique due to inspiration from an Esan proverb, which states: “It is the leopard’s cud that can scratch the leopard’s forehead”—meaning, any animal which the leopard sees immediately turns its prey except its cud. In this study, women were, therefore, deployed to conduct interviews, carry out observations and also serve as interlocutors because they are best suited in this circumstance to interrogate their gender on a woman’s privates and dispositions. Twenty-five Esan proverbs were collected. This amounted to a total of fifty. To help the reader, understand the content and contextual meanings of the proverbs, they were first translated into English before analysis.

Theoretical Framework

There is a nested relationship between language and thought globally although the intensity may differ. At different points, the relationship between language and thought has been investigated by scholars of different persuasions. It is generally believed that language is a symbolic tool that we use to communicate our thoughts as well as represent our cognitive processes. This study is contingent on the linguistic relativity hypothesis re-echoed by Goksun, (2020), which holds that the language we speak changes our perception of the world and shapes our concepts. In short, language does not only pass across as a medium of communication, it is also a window through which the collective mindset of a people can be perceived. This theory is aptly a good premise for this study in the sense that beyond speaking a language for the sake of communication, we see a people’s construct of their worldview and cultural beliefs. We assert that the negativity against feminine gender in Esan proverbs is a sub-textual manifestation of pervasive gender bias and segregation in Esan traditional society, which the contemporary/modern Nigerian reality is struggling to erase/displace.

Proverbs and their Functions

Africa is rich in a variety of ways, including natural resources, manpower, and culture. Within the framework of culture, there is a wide range of heritage in religion, music, dance, art, architecture and oral literature. In the realm of oral literature, we find the immensely rich world of sto-

ries, fables, recitations, songs, poetry and proverbs (Mokitimi, 1997, p. vii). Writing further, Mokitimi says that many proverbs are catalysts of knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, ethics and morals. They provoke further reflection and call for deeper thinking (Mokitimi, 1997, p. viii). No doubt, all over Africa, proverbs have a pride of place. In an attempt to encapsulate its functions, one can safely say that their roles are utilitarian and didactic. Discussing Esan proverbs specifically, Ebhomielen (2017) noted that African proverbs (Esan inclusive) are a medium of entrenching African indigenous knowledge and morality. If African proverbs are conduits for propagating knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, ethics and morals, one may wonder how and at what point they became tainted with amoral content and some of them laced with so much negativity about women. While this search is outside the remit of this current study, the portrayal of women as weak, subjective, irresponsible, unreliable, gullible, inferior and wicked is observably part of the devices of the male folks who believe that they occupy impeccable and inviolable status in the cultural and political echelon of the society. The constant look at women from male lenses of superiority and chauvinism is what, perhaps, has begotten the creation of a large body of derogatory proverbs against women in Esan. Subsequently, we argue that rather than denigrate womanhood in proverbs, its users should look out for those other apt ones, which could serve as alternatives to the dyslogistic ones and at some other points do a critical examination of the proverbs as they exist in the current socio-cultural milieu of the people. However, before we proceed, it is important to first of all discuss the subjective theory in literature because this study is hinged on it.

Subjectivity in Orature

By the term, orature, we mean the oral equivalent of literature—a collection of traditional folksongs, stories, etc., that is communicated orally (Oxford Dictionary of Contemporary English). Proverbs are part of folklore and a prominent constituent of orature. Proverbs in Esan have for many centuries been orally transmitted. It is just recently that they are beginning to receive scholarly attention and this is evident in the works of Ebhomielen (2017), Aluede & Bello (2022), to mention a few. The word ‘Subjective’ describes something that is based on a person’s opinion, biased influences and individual experiences, instead of objective facts derived from empirical findings. In literature, the ambiguous portraiture of female characters

by some male writers and the phallic nature of men's writings has proved a matter of concern to female writers in Africa. For decades within African writing the issue of silencing was interrogated particularly as it addressed the muting and marginalization of black women by male writers through the script of patriarchy, which men follow (Smith & Ce, 2015). Has much been achieved in this trend? As it is in Nigeria in general and Esan in particular, this ambiguity in the portraiture of women is yet to be corrected. For example, North, South, East and West of Nigeria, evidences abound of proverbs about the portrayal of women in the pejorative sense. These biased creative experiences are aptly captured by Olarinmoye (2013), Dickson & Mbosowo (2014), Ezeifeke (2017), Yakubu (2018), Emeka-Nwobia & Ndimele (2019) and Onukawa (2021). While issues about male selfhood is presented in a biased manner, which favours or exalts masculinity or the male image, those of womanhood suffer distortions with a high measure of subjectivity. This tendency is noticeable in Esan stock of proverbs.

A critical aspect of feminist criticism of patriarchy is the subjective portrayal of women. Subjectivity is closely intertwined with ideology and sexuality. Female subjectivity encapsulates the subjective portrayal of the physical, mental, spiritual, and communal lives of the female gender in a patriarchal society. It also explains the gender relations between men and women in a patriarchal society. In patriarchy, unequal power relations place men at the upper rung of the social ladder over women, and folklore is among the social tools used to sustain the status quo (Okin, 1998; Kaufman, 1999). Consequently, Volpp (2001) remarked that sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, age, and nationality, among others, are used in patriarchal societies as bases of difference and oppression against men to some extent, and against women to a large extent. To fight anti-feminist moves, Eke & Njoku (2020, p. 151) opine that: Many variants of feminism have been branded over time and that has given feminism a multiple identity. One of the new revelations of feminism in recent times is 'Afropolitan Feminism', a branch of African feminism [...] conceived to deal with the story of African women in the homeland and the diaspora trying to assume the status of world citizens (metropolitans) to de-emphasize their origins. To what extent these movements have achieved their set goals is not within the remit of this paper. However, in most Nigerian communities, not much has been achieved. Even the female folks are often heard and seen seemingly aligning with men to utter anti-feminist/anti-woman proverbs in social gatherings—a possible cultural self-enslavement mentality, which may take a longer time to deal with. In Esan of old, under the guise of spirit or ances-

tral manifestation, a masquerade could warn an alleged erring woman, call her names, and pronounce judgments on her, which must be obeyed in the community. Contrastingly, it is the men who perform such roles as masked ancestral spirits. The question is: are the males above the law? If women's excesses are procedurally checked, how are the males' checked? There is this air of superiority enveloping all the men in the community and it is this thinking which has underpinned their opinions of women as weaker vessels, and they are thus perpetually relegated. The foregoing exposition is important so that we can see how some Esan negative beliefs of women have been transmuted into folklore, folksongs and proverbs—proverbs being our primary concern.

Esan Women in Proverbial Lore

Proverbs occupy a very important position in the lives of the people of Nigerian ethnic groups. And its functions cannot be over-emphasized. For example, while examining its attributes in Northern Nigeria, Yakubu (2017, p. 44) remarked that:

In pre-Islamic Hausaland, proverbs encapsulated the people's history and philosophy of life. This was more so because the people could not read and write. Their history and beliefs were stored and coded in some special people's mental capacities. They [were] then transmitted orally within various literary genres, proverbs inclusive, whenever the need arose.

Whether pre-Islamic era or not, proverbs still have their unique value even in contemporary Hausaland and by extension other Nigerian cultures. To date in Esan land, their proverbs are repositories of their indigenous knowledge resources which contain their beliefs/ philosophies and which integrate all aspects of human endeavours. In these proverbs, we find the people's construct about God, their neighbours, life, living, death and many other subjects. In all of these, women have played outstanding roles. For example, in Esan, we hear stories of great women who have played godly roles and saved the land from catastrophes. No doubt, proverbs are meant to correct, admonish, teach, reinforce one's cultural beliefs and at some other points deride. It is, however, appalling that while there appears to be no significant number of proverbs which deride men, we find effortlessly quite an impressive collection that deride and harshly judge women.

Negative Construction of Woman in Esan Proverbs

In this research, we would like to refer to construction as a generally conceived notion or belief within a given culture. Therefore, to talk of the 'negative construction' of Esan women, we mean the damaging, undesirable or unfavourable evaluation of Esan women as captured in the texts of selected Esan proverbs. Verbal assault and violence against persons are not perpetrated by men alone in today's world. For example, Plonka (2020) affirmed that violence touches different spheres of our lives and different environments. He talked of five forms of violence which are physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and a failure to take proper care of both the physical and emotional needs of someone. In his account, he also said that men usually hide the fact of being abused out of fear of public stigma. Since men often take younger females as wives, ageist tendencies often set in on account of dwindling finances, physical fitness, and social relevance, to mention a few. According to him, some women often latch into such conditions to pay spouses back for previous misdeeds of several decades ago.

Below, we present different kinds of proverbs. They are calibrated under different themes that tend to disparage Esan women and the proverbs are further interrogated to elicit their pejorative components. These will be discussed under six sub-headings, which are: women as tale bearers and unreliable beings, women as incompetent folks and ever dependent on men, women as sex objects and satirizing their bodies, women as inferior species and as poor thinkers and selfish beings.

1. Women as Tale Bearers and Unreliable Beings. It is not all Esan proverbs that depict women as tale bearers and unreliable beings that are presented here but only a representative number to avoid superfluity; likewise, those selected under other categories.

- i. Olo nai ho no ve – A secret, which should not be divulged,
A i ta ma okhuo – is not told to a woman.
- ii. A i ri okhuo si uman non i ve – A woman is not expected to be admitted into secrecy lest the secret be exposed.
- iii. Ramunde okpea nin ako ghae, ọle zele okhuo i ta ese nin ozeva le lu na len.

Because of the same man who is being shared that is why a woman does not tell of the good deeds that her mate has done for her. These prov-

erbs listed in this category and translated help to illustrate the fixed notion in the racial memory of the Esan patriarchal socio-cultural system that women are natural gossip, unreliable and incapable of keeping secrets. This is not an exaltation of womanhood but denigration in a male-dominated society where contrastively most men, including the high and the mighty, attribute their successes to their mothers and adore their mothers more than their fathers.

2. Women as incompetent Folks and Ever Dependent on Men. This category of Esan proverbs declares women as incompetent and indolent. It is another negative portrait of women in the linguistic culture and collective mindset of the people, which erroneously demeans their worth and essence in the Esan worldview no matter the numerous facts of their great exploits, hard work, diligence and personal achievements surpassing those of the male folks in the indigenous culture.

- i. Re igho mẹn, re igho mẹn, ọle okhuo ta. Ọ bha lẹn igho i nọghomin na rẹ kuan – Give me money, Give me money. This is the mantra of a woman. She knows not that money is difficult to truly make.
- ii. Okhuo ha yu, When a wife dies, a i nọ ọdọ le ebe ọ fi ya na lẹn. her husband is not asked what his wife left to beinherited.
Ọdọ okhuo ha yu, When a husband dies, a kiha nọ ebe ọdo fi ya. his wife will be asked what her husband left to be inherited.

3. Women as Sex Objects. The male perception of women as sex symbols is a universal cultural reality, expressed in language and other symbolic forms. Esan proverbs capture such reality as well and portray women as the gender with an insatiable appetite for intercourse as seen in the examples below.

- i. Aho mẹn, Mate me,
aho men, mate me,
ọle okhuo lẹn lẹn. That is what a woman knows.
Ọ bha lẹn ekuẹ She does not know that the penis
nọghọ okpea udonmin. take time to get erect.
- ii. Ọdọ okhuo i yu. A woman's husband never dies.
Aba eni ibhokhan yu. It is the children's father who dies.
- iii. Ọnọ ri okhuo bhi udu It is he who is on a woman's chest
ọ le ẹhi ọle. That is her guardian angel.

The second example under this category is not true. There are quite a lot of women who have chosen not to remarry at the death of their husbands. This proverb is unmindful of such realities. Observably, Esan proverbs that portray women as sex objects are a cultural relegation and negation of women's sexuality, created and reinforced by the male folks. In African traditional societies, it is the male's selfish and verbal tool to suppress women's sexuality, to drive repressions in them and hold them slavishly bound to their male groins. Ironically, the men in African traditional societies, as it is in the Esan cultural reality, are more promiscuous than the female folks judging by the unbridled polygamous nature of the men.

4. Satirizing the Woman's Body. Physiological and anatomical characteristics of women, their mental dispositions and habits, etc, real or imagined, are subjects of criticism in some Esan proverbs, some of which are listed below. The underlying motivation of the speaker may not be to deride nor compliment, but to provide appropriate speech fillers or a convenient idiom to drive home a contextual message in any speech event. The point, however, is that, the unpleasant or derisive description of the female or girl body alluded to in such speech event is derogatory.

- i. A i gbe okhuo ba No woman is ever crucified because
edin khuere. her private part is too loose or watery.
- ii. Ekhọ i lu edin omobọ, A little girl's vagina is never shy,
eji ghon len ole da yanlan it is displayed freely anywhere.
- iii. Edin obhokhan It with a toddler's vagina
le a re mu osi owanre that one knows how adults will probably look like.
- iv. Okhuo yi odọ le ukpekuẹ tiẹin A woman taunts her husband for
having a small penis
ọ yelea ọle zede mon hiehie but she has forgotten that she does not
have at all.
Amẹn i ka bhi edin se Fluid cannot be so scarce in a woman's vagina,
ọ bha se ekuẹ re kha. that it will not be sufficient for the penis to
bathe itself.
- v. Eba re nyan omọ It is what can be used to pamper a child
ọ le a re nyan omọ. that is used to pamper a child.
Okhuo i nye edin bhi otọ No woman spreads out her vagina nin omọ
ha ghe. for her child to watch.

5. Women as an inferior Species. Sometimes, in Esan proverbs, women are regarded as inferior beings compared to their male folks as some of the examples listed below illustrate. It does not also matter to the Esan male speaker the correctness of any claims in the content of the proverb because he is jokingly relegating the women folk in a lighted-hearted speech event or local parlance.

- i. Okhuo non mon obọ A wealthy woman
dia bi okpea ni obọ gbele. is equivalent to a male pauper.
- ii. Ebo okhuo hi re hu ye No matter how huge,
la o fe ye, wealthy or influential a woman is
okpea hen oḷen. it is a man who climbs her.
- iii. Eji okpea re eto okhuo le Where ever a man leaves hair in the head
of his wife
ole adese uhomon is the centre of her head.

The first example here is an exaggeration because there is no way, even in Esan cultural reality, that a male pauper can enjoy equal status, respect and recognition as a wealthy female who would be his employer in her farms or trade. The male speaker resorts to proverbs with such hyperbolic allusions to derogate a woman's cultural, social and economic status to reinforce a dominant or subconscious belief in a male superiority or to vent his egoistic principle in normal conversations or parley with women. The hilarious second example under this category which asserts that no matter the financial status of a woman or physical built, a man climbs her during sexual intercourse is often said to command a woman's total submission to her husband or partner irrespective of her accomplishments. Anyway, any modern Esan man, who resorts to such proverbs in conversations, is aware that even a woman (diminutive or poor) can also climb on a rich or gigantic man in sexual intercourse.

6. Women as Poor Thinkers and selfish people. The Esan proverbs under this category deride the female folks as having a low mentality and self-centred when in fact the same male folks know that this is not exactly true of most Esan women who are known to be very supportive of their husbands and have sometimes been the breadwinners of some families.

- i. Ilo okpa okhuo ze: A woman reasons one-sided:
Oḍo le a yu, if her husband dies,

ọle ki bi ọdọ ọbhebhe. she will marry another one.
Ọ i wẹ ole a yu she does not say if she dies
ọdọ a re okhuo ọbhebhe . her husband will also marry another lady.

The view of Emeka-Nwobia & Ndimele (2019) in another context describing male relegation of women can be borrowed here to describe the motivation behind the Esan proverbs in this category when they said “women sometimes are constructed as supplanters capable of disposing their husbands and other members of their societies of their thing subtly. Sometimes they are constructed as using sweet tongues to dispossess their husbands of their belongings/valuables or sometimes constructed negatively as selfish folks capable of utilizing manipulative languages to make their husbands act otherwise (Emeka-Nwobia & Ndimele, 2019).

Conclusion

There are, indeed, many Esan proverbs that are anti-women, only a representative number has been selected for study in this paper. To answer why the contents of such proverbs are derogatory of women rests squarely on the nature of traditional African societies which have been essentially and largely patriarchal, and have subjected women to centuries of subjugation. Such experience gave birth to uncensored anti-women cultural mindsets and their attendant linguistic forms. The findings of this study have revealed that the content of these derogatory Esan proverbs does not portray the true reality of women. In most cases, the male speaker does not speak such proverbs because he is unaware of the numerous virtues of women which render such pejorative portrayal of women unfair, repugnant and uncomplimentary representations. The male Esan speaker of such proverbs, more often than not, sees himself in unconscious or thoughtless participation in a linguistic event in which such proverbs become a handy expression to buttress or illustrate a point rather than with an intent to vilify womanhood. This is not to say too that, there are no male speakers of Esan proverbs who also deliberately or consciously use such anti-women Esan proverbs to emphasise or reinforce the dominant belief in male superiority over women, to remind the woman about her place among the oppressed in the society.

The truth, however, is that the Esan woman, or women generally in the African society (traditional or modern), deserve better respect and

pride of place than she is portrayed in the corpus of derogatory Esan proverbs; likewise, in other ethnic cultures with similar traditional uncomplimentary linguistic slang against women. Esan men (young and old), and those from other ethnicities, can testify to the fact that women have won themselves higher recognition and honour to deserve equal recognition and respect with men. What years of female agitation for empowerment, justice and equality on the African continent will need to perpetually fight to succeed is the dominant and resistant patriarchal system which took its sustenance from the oppressive indigenous traditional authorities.

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