

International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies
(LALIGENS), Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 8 (1), Serial No 17, February, 2019: 92-103
ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v8i1.9>

**Anthropo-Linguistic Place of Women in the Igbo Society:
Illustrations from Igbo Proverbs**

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Abstract

In the Igbo world-view, women are seen as second class and subservient beings. This paper investigated the assertion and further inquiries the rationale behind the contention using Igbo proverbs as a yardstick. Through observation of native speakers' speech events, deliberations with some Igbo native speakers and the researcher's intuitive knowledge, data for the research were collected and analyzed using critical discourse analysis. After the analysis of data, some of the findings were that in Igbo cosmology, women are not equal to men; men are more equal than women. Therefore, the Igbo philosophy which is mirrored through their proverbs, places women in a position less than that of the men. Because proverb as an oral tradition is transmitted from one generation to another, the position of women in the Igbo society transcends from past to the present and to the future. It is the position of this paper that despite so many agitations by women to elevate their position, women will continue to be seen as less important until the psyche and orientation of the Igbo people about women are changed.

Introduction

From the time immemorial, Igbo culture has its defined and definite position about women. Women generally in the culture are seen as subservient beings. This could be seen in different facets of the culture. In a patriarchal society, a woman has no inheritance from her family, even in widowhood practices, women are being maltreated and some are banned from inheriting their late husbands' property. Some nutritious parts of animals like gizzard are left for only men

while the bony parts like the waist are left for women. There is male preference in sex selection of children. All these and more make women to play the second fiddle, to be second class and inferior to their male counterparts. According to Malmkjer (2002, pp. 302-304) ... it has been observed by many feminists and some linguists that men and women are spoken about differently, and it is often claimed that the language is discriminatory against women.

Based on the above-mentioned parlance, this study is poised to investigate the rationale behind the status of women in the Igbo society. The study will not look into all the cultural practices against women. It will focus on how the Igbo philosophy through proverbs views women. The research will go beyond collection of Igbo proverbs, but will examine how some Igbo proverbs formed the bedrock of giving the women their stand in the society. The study will also highlight the importance of language in cultural transmission. It will investigate how through language especially oral tradition (proverbs) a particular belief is transmitted from generation to generation. It will interrogate the power of proverbs in status placement as it concerns female folks. Some Igbo proverbs that concern women will be collected and interpreted. Due to the fact that the study is on linguistics aspect of the culture, otherwise known as anthropo-linguistics, some basic questions that come to the mind about the relationship between language, culture and women as Holmes (2013) put them are: How is language used to refer to women? What message does the language used about women convey about their status in the community? Can a language contribute to the maintenance of social inequalities between women and men? Answers to the above questions will be seen in the illustration of collected data. The data will be collected through personal interactions with some Igbo native speakers and the researcher's intuitive knowledge of the language. The analysis will be done using critical discourse analysis.

This work is divided into sections; the first section is the introductory part where the background, the purpose of the study and the methodology for data collection and analysis were discussed. There will be explanation of some key concepts in section two. In section three, some Igbo proverbs that relate to women will be x-rayed and analyzed. The last section is the summary of the findings, and the conclusion.

Explanation of Some Key Concepts

Some basic concepts in the study such as proverbs, Anthro-po-linguistics, Language, Society and Women will be explained here.

Proverbs

Proverbs are words of wisdom which enshrined the Igbo belief, norms, values, and totality of their world-view. They are intelligent words used for advice, admonishment, encouragement, etc.

In support of the above, Nwadike (2009, p. 57) in quoting Egudu (1977) said, Proverb is said to be a tool for linguistic expression and compositions for the purpose of rhetorical adornment and persuasion. Nwadike continues that it is said that proverbs are the kernels which contain

the wisdom of the traditional people. They are the philosophical and moral expositions shrunk to a few words and they form a mnemonic device in societies which everything worth knowing and relevant to day-to-day life has to be committed to memory. The phraseology of many of Igbo proverbs has been influenced by our natural environment which in turn influences our cultural attitudes and systems of value. Igbo proverbs are drawn from the wide gamut of Igbo cultural experience which includes folklore, beliefs, values, attitudes, perceptions, emotions and the entire system of thought and feelings, Igbo flora and fauna, and natural elements. Ugonna (1974 in Nwadike) says that proverb is a kind of mirror which reflects human experience.

Nwankwere (2007) quoted Ukaegbu (2006) as saying that proverbs have been viewed as the mirror that reflects human experiences in all entireties. They have also been described as the key to Igbo worldview.

Kanu (2015) notes that the proverb is an integral element of the African culture and undoubtedly a strong base in African traditional system. It is a living stream where the philosophy and religion of the African people are preserved. The centrality of proverbs in African oral tradition is manifested in the frequency of their use by Africans in conversations, speeches, instructions, judgment, drama, arguments, storytelling, in fun making. Okoli (2012, p.22) quoted Peter (1971) as saying that the proverb is an integral part of Igbo language, an indispensable tool in authentic discourse. It embodies mature seasoned philosophy and wit. Proverb is short and makes for good retention. It functions as advice, a teaching device, insult, praises, lament or allusion. These various uses which a proverb serves make it enjoy current usage and its presentation to date lies in its form and the different functions it fulfils.

Concept of Anthro-linguistics

Anthropological linguistics is the subfield of linguistics and anthropology which deals with the place of language in its wider social and cultural context, and its role in making and maintaining cultural practices and societal structure.

According to Grosscup, anthropological- linguistics examines the relationship between language and nonlinguistic aspects of culture. It is concerned with the expression of culture through language. It is the culturally situated study of human language. Anthropological linguistics is the interdisciplinary study of the role of language in the social lives of individuals and communities. It is a field of study devoted to the mutually constitutive relationships among language, culture and society.

Anthropological linguistics studies the relationship between language and culture; it usually refers to works on languages that have no written records, <https://www.britannica.com/science/anthropological-linguistics>

That aspect of anthropology that studies linguistics is coined anthro-linguistics.

Language, Society and Women

Language used for men is different from that used for female. Paltridge (2006, p. 32) in her book *Language and Women's Place* proposed what she called 'women's language'; that is, a use of language that is different from 'men's language' or, rather, what she termed 'neutral language'. This language, she argued included features such as the use of overly political forms, the use of question tag, rising intonation in declaratives, the avoidance of expletive, a gender use of diminutive and euphemism, the use of more hedges and mitigating devices, some indirectness and the use of particular vocabulary items, such as 'adorable', 'charming' and 'sweet' (women's language) versus 'great', 'terrific' versus 'cool' (neutral language). The use of language, she argued, made women's language tentative and, coupled with the use of demeaning and trivializing terms for women, works to keep women in their place in society. These differences she argued, were the result of, and reinforced, men's dominance over women.

Language is very fundamental in the understanding of man and his social life. It is a unique attribute which enables human beings to learn, think creatively and develop socially. Language is used to transmit people's culture. Studies have shown the adverse effect of bad use of language on people.

Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2003, pp. 482-487) when comparing how the society sees actions of a man and that of a woman postulate that a businessman is aggressive; a business woman is pushy. A businessman is good on details; she is picky.... He follows through; she does not know when to quit. He stands firm; she is hard.... His judgments are her prejudices. He is a man of the world; she is been around. He is not afraid to say what is on his mind; she is mouthy. He exercises authority diligently; she is power mad. He is closemouthed; she is secretive. He climbed the ladder of success; she slept her way to the top.

Fromkin, et al continue that the discussion of obscenities, blasphemies, taboo words, and euphemisms shows that words of a language are not intrinsically good or bad, but reflect individual or societal values. In addition, one speaker may use a word with positive connotations, while another may select a different word with negative connotations to refer to the same person. For example, a person may be called a terrorist or a freedom fighter depending on who is doing the calling. A woman may be a castrating female or may be courageous feminist advocate, again depending on who is talking. The words we use to refer to certain individuals or groups reflect our individual nonlinguistic attitudes and may reflect the culture and views of the society. Language reflects sexism in society. Language itself is not sexism, just as it is not obscene, but it can connote sexist attitudes as well as attitudes about social taboos or racism. Nonlinguistic aspects of society may influence our interpretation of meaning of words.

Holmes (2013) asserted that sexist language is one example of the way a culture or society conveys its values from one group to another or from one generation to the next. Language conveys attitudes. Sexist attitudes stereotype a person according to gender rather than judging on individual merits. Sexist language encodes stereotyped attitudes to women and men. In

principle, then, the study of sexist language is concerned with the way language expresses both negative and positive stereotypes of both women and men.

According to Omenukor (2008), gender sensitivity was very high in Igboland. In virtually every sphere of life, boys and girls, men and women had their roles and knew what was expected of them. Boys were brought up to see themselves as the future heads of the family and to see themselves as superior to the girls. A boy's father would employ every means of coercion and hardship reasonable enough to ensure that he removes all traces of softness or any womanish traits from his son. According to Emeka-Nwobia (2008) men are viewed as demigods in Afikpo cultural society. A woman irrespective of her education and societal attainment is expected to silently yield to her husband's will and dictate, even when it is not convenient to her. Any woman who dares challenge her husband's authoritarian nature or insists on her own view is called, 'nwoke nwaanyi' - man woman. This oxymoronic expression can best be explained with words like "stiff-necked", stubborn, disobedient, obdurate, untamed and wild woman. The culture of the people does not raise an eye brow at a man having more than one relationship, that is, having an extra marital relationship. It is seen as an expression of brevity and virility. A woman on the contrary is abhorred from doing so and even when she complains of her husband's illicit love affair, she is cautioned by elderly women not to do so.

Ibhawaegbele (2012) stated that gender is a cultural concept which refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female and the relationship between women and men. It determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or man in a given context. In most societies, there are marked differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken as well as decision-making opportunities.

Umeh (2012, pp. 281-284) quoting Fischter (1977) highlighted that language is very fundamental in the understanding of man and his social life. It is a very important aspect of any culture, and it is acquired by people through the process of interaction. Language is the bedrock of human learning. It is a unique attribute which enables human beings to learn, think creatively and develop socially. Studies have shown the adverse effect of bad use of language on people.

Umeh stated that in Igbo man's opinion, the word "nwaanyi" means *nwa nyiri nne na nna ya* (A child who is difficult for the parents to control). Myths, legends, folktales and proverbs in Igbo present women as a good for nothing better than any other property. There is this Igbo mythology about a woman which goes thus: a husband and wife gave birth to a female child and this child became too stubborn for them to control, then, the parents heat a spoke in the fire and used it to pierce the ears, so that she can listen to instructions. It is from this myth that woman is called "nwaanyi" meaning a child that is uncontrollable. As if that was not enough, another man came to ask for her hand in marriage, then, the father of the girl quickly told the man that he (the father) is tired of her, that is why he pierced her ears, so if the man can manage her, he should take her, and the man now said he will endure her excesses and the husband is called "di" a short form of "ndidi". The first evidence of an Igbo woman's marginalization is the loss of identity as Miss----- and now Mrs -----.

Chiegboka, (2007) writing on the reasons for the ecclesiastical dispositions on women exclusion, stated that owing to his obligation to maintain fidelity of Petrine office, safeguard the venerable apostolic tradition and to remove further obstacles in ecumenical movement, Paul VI (1976) wrote to the Anglican Communion in unequivocal words on the stand of the Catholic Church concerning women ordination saying: she holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the sacred scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from men; the constant practice of the church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his church.

Ezenweke (2012) quoted Tagwai (1997) as saying that in most African cultures, especially in patriarchal ones, a woman is regarded as a bona fide property of the man and subject to him. Daughters do not inherit their father's property unless there is no male heir, and in some places, after the death of a husband, the wife has no share of his property. A wife is still considered a stranger, no matter the glamour of welcome associated with the marriage ceremonies. Quoting (Metuh 1987), Ezenweke (2012) stated that women are represented by their husbands or brothers, this qualifies them as nameless actors on the stage of life. The children are the children of the man, and if any becomes a failure, the husband refers to him or her as the child of the wife. Fwangyil (2012) according to Ezenweke noted that women are subjected to male oppression and suppression at various stages of life. Unfortunately, female oppression is deeply ingrained in the culture of the society which ensures the continuation of the patriarchal control. This situation makes it impossible for women to seek ways of liberating themselves because doing so will tantamount to challenging the age long tradition, and custom of the people.

On the other hand, Ituma (2010) postulated that it is the selfish man at some point in history that will want to promote his masculine ego against the woman by introducing and perpetuating developments in culture that will position man in conflict with the woman in terms of women subjugation. That this alien to the African Igbo is shown in the way these ancient Igbo subjugating practices are rapidly giving way to the freedom assumed in the ancestor hood theory.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis is concerned with investigating how language is used to construct and maintain power relationship in a society. The aim is to show up connections between language and power, and between language and ideology.

Luke (2019) wrote that critical discourse analysis is a contemporary approach to the study of language and discourses in social institutions. Critical discourse analysis refers to the use of an ensemble of techniques for the study of textual practice and language use as social and cultural practices (Fairclough, 1992b). It builds from three broad theoretical orientations. First, it draws from poststructuralism the view that discourse operates laterally across local institutional sites, and that texts have a constructive function in forming up and shaping human identities and

actions. Second, it draws from Bourdieu's sociology the assumption that actual textual practices and interactions with texts become "embodied" forms of "cultural capital" with exchange value in particular social fields. Third, it draws from neomarxist cultural theory the assumption that these discourses are produced and used within political economies, and that they thus produce and articulate broader ideological interests, social formations and movements within those fields.

Critical discourse analysis, thus, employs interdisciplinary techniques of text analysis to look at how texts construct representations of the world, social identities, and social relationships.

Igbo Worldview about Women, illustrations from Igbo Proverbs

The semantic implications of some languages used about women are indications that the Igbo language is not fair to women. Holmes (2013, p. 301) said that there are a number of ways in which it has been suggested that the Igbo language discriminates against women. Most obviously, the semantics of the Igbo language proverbs describe women in extra ordinarily derogatory images. Some of the proverbs are:

- *Onye ji nwaanyi buru ibu bu n'isi nkiti* (He who uses woman as a pad for carry a load is carrying the load on a bare head)
- *Nwaanyi lelja di ya, ike akpoọ ya nku* (If a woman disregards the husband, she is in a serious problem).
- *Nkita nwaanyi zuru na-ata akwa* (A dog trained by a woman eats egg)
- *Nwoke luchaa ogu nwaanyi enwere akuko* (When a man finishes battle, women will tell the story)
- *Onye nwaanyi na-afuru oja, ji azu awu ogige ndi mmuo* (He who has a woman as his flutist, jumps the fence of the spirit with his back)
- *Nwaanyi bu ukwu nku, onye o nyibara ya tufue* (A woman is a bundle of firewood, whenever it is too heavy, it is thrown away)
- *Nwoke gba nkiti ya na nwaanyi ebinwue* (If a man keeps silent, he can live with a woman)
- *Eri ago mere umu nwaanyi agbala afu onu* (denying after eating made women not to have bears)
- *Ka e mesia nwaanyi bu asi* (If a woman says let it be later, it means a lie)
- *Oko nwoke n'aka nwaanyi emee ya onye iberibe* (When a man is bankrupt, the woman rubbishes him)
- *Nwoke nwaanyi na-enye nri no n'oke ahuhu* (A man who has a woman as a bread winner is in a serious trouble)
- *A na-emere nwaanyi, nwaanyi ana-emere onye di ya mma.* (As one lavishes on a woman, she lavishes on whom she prefers)
- *Asiri guba nwaanyi o bulie eju oku* (If a woman wants to gossip, she will want to fetch fire)

- *Nwaanyi sie ajo nri, o si na o bu nke guru ya* (When a woman cooks a bad meal, she will say that that is what she wants)
- *O dighi mma i gbachaa oso ka nwoke i bie ya ka nwaanyi* (It is not good to race like a man and ends like a woman)

Illustrations

Some Igbo proverbs tag women as dependent on men, not reliable, careless, redundant, wicked, liars, fair weather partners, ingrate, troublesome, and lots more.

Not reliable

Women are seen as not reliable in the Igbo oral tradition. A proverb like; *Onye ji nwaanyi buru ibu bu n'isi nkiti* (He who uses woman as a pad for carry a load is carrying the load on a bare head) is a true manifestation of the claim. This is because one uses pad to make a load less burden unlike when carrying on a bare head. But this proverb shows that the pad which symbolizes a woman is equivalent to carrying on a bare hair, meaning that women are not reliable; they do not worthy the tastes.

Dependents on men

In the Igbo cosmology, women are dependents on men. It is men that provide everything for women, any woman who is loyal and respectful to her husband does not lack; all her needs are provided. On the contrary, any woman who disrespects her husband suffers a lot. This is why a proverb says, *Nwaanyi lelia di ya, ike akpoo ya nku* (If a woman disregards the husband, she is in a serious problem). This is because women solely depend on men for their needs in the Igbo society.

Careless

Women are seen to be careless and people who do not give attention to important things. For instance, *Nkita nwaanyi zuru na-ata akwa* (A dog trained by a woman eats egg). *Nkita* (dog) is a domestic animal that needs attention and carefulness during their training. When it is over pampered, it misbehaves. Any dog that eats egg according to Igbo tradition is not well trained. Because women are seen as being careless and reluctant in doing important things, they cannot train or handle things or people under their tutorage.

Redundant

Some Igbo proverbs see women as redundant, wordy and superfluous. This could be seen in a proverb like: *Nwoke luchaa ogu nwaanyi enwere akuko* (When a man finishes the battle, woman narrates the story). People who engage themselves in story telling are seen as lazy, less serious and redundant people. Fighting wars in Igbo tradition is to engage in a very serious and painstaking activity. But telling stories is for the lazy. This proverb attributes fighting wars to men and telling stories to women. This shows that in Igbo parlance, women do not contribute to meaningful things instead they are interested in talking and gossiping.

Wicked

There are some Igbo proverbs that portray women as being wicked. For instance, *Onye nwaanyi na-afuru oja ji azu awu ogige ndi mmuo* (He who has a woman has his flutist, jumps the fence of the spirit with his back). The proverb implies that when a woman directs an action, it must end in destruction. A flutist directs the dancing steps and the tune of the music.

To jump the fence of the spirit with the back means to dabble into a serious problem that can cost the victim's life. Therefore, a proverb that says that whoever has a woman as his flutist jumps the fence of the spirit with his back simply shows that women are very wicked and they can lead somebody to a doom.

Trouble Makers

Another proverb says; *Nwaanyi bu ukwu nku, onye o nyibara ya tufue* (A woman is a bundle of firewood, whenever it is too heavy, it is thrown away). This showcases women as troublesome. A bundle of firewood that is heavy is not palatable to the carrier, so, it is a burden and stress to him. Women are seen to be a burden that when they become unbearable, the carrier has to throw them away for relief.

Another proverb that sees women as trouble markers is, *Nwoke gba nkiti ya na nwaanyi ebinwue* (If a man keeps silent, he can live with a woman). This also implies that women are so troublesome that it is difficult for them to co-habit with men. According to this proverb, it is only a man with utmost self-control that can live with a woman; otherwise, there will be trouble everywhere.

Liars

Some Igbo proverbs imply that women are liars; people who are not truthful. Examples of such proverbs are: *Eri ago mere umuunwaanyi agbala afu onu* (denying after eating made women not to have bears). According to this proverb, women will always deny when something is given to them. This is an attribute of a great liar. *Ka e mesia nwaanyi bu asi* (If a woman says, 'let it be later', it is a lie). From this proverb, it could be deduced that women cannot state the true position of something; when it is white, they say it is black, when it is right, they say it is left. This amounts to the vice of lying and dishonesty.

Fair Weather Partners

From some Igbo proverbs, women are said to be fair weather partners who make peace only when there is surplus in the hand of the man but immediately the man is bankrupted, they make nonsense of him and fathom troubles. This is evident in the proverb that says: *Oko nwoke n'aka nwaanyi emee ya onye iberibe* (When a man is bankrupt, the woman rubbishes him). In the Igbo tradition, a man is supposed to provide for his woman and if this is done, there is peace and tranquility, otherwise, the reverse is the case because women are fair weather partners as the proverb implies. The same interpretation can be given in a similar proverb which states, *Nwoke*

nwaanyị na-enye nri nọ n'oke ahụhụ (A man who has a woman as a bread winner is in a serious trouble)

Ingrates

Insinuation from the Igbo proverbs sees women as ingrates; people who are ungrateful and do not appreciate any benevolence given to them. The following proverbs show the manifestation of the assertion: *Eri ago mere umu nwaanyị agbala afu onu* (denying after eating made women not to have bears). *A na-emere nwaanyị, nwaanyị ana-emere onye di ya mma* (As one lavishes on a woman, she lavishes on whom she prefers). Another interpretation of this proverb is that women are way-ward and lavish the wealth of their partners on their illegitimate partners.

Not Straight Forward

Some Igbo proverbs see women as not being straight forward. They always have crooked ways. These proverbs are examples; *Asiri guba nwaanyị o bulie eju oku* (If a woman wants to gossip, she will want to fetch fire). This proverb implies that a woman pretends to want to fetch fire, whereas her intention is to go to gossip. This is a character of someone whose actions are crooked. Another proverb is; *Nwaanyị sie ajo nri o si na o bu nke guru ya* (When a woman cooks a bad meal, she will say that that is what she wants). This proverb is showing that women cannot own up to accept mistakes. Whenever they make mistake, they must look for covering up.

In the Igbo worldview, women are so weak, so inferior and are second fiddle in the society that no reasonable person would not want to associate with the name 'woman'. To do something like a woman is a curse. To associate an action with a woman is reducing the personality of the person. This could be seen in a proverb like; *O dighi mma i gbachaa osọ ka nwoke i bie ya ka nwaanyị* (It is not good to race like a man and ends like a woman).

The above illustrations are instances of how the Igbo culture uses language especially proverbs to lower the personality and integrity of women in the society.

Conclusion

It could be deduced from the data analyzed that the present status of women in the contemporary Igbo society did not fall from the blues. It did not start from this present generation, instead, it is an old-time practice that is as old as the Igbo culture itself. It is the Igbo philosophy which is enshrined in their proverbs that invigorated the belief. Holmes (2013) points out that these gender-related differences in speech patterns are acquired by children as they learn to speak, just as other gender stereotypes (how boys should behave and how girls should behave) and cultural values in general are learned along with language.

The language of Igbo proverbs is not fair to women. It derogates women. Despite all the agitations of women like Margaret Ekpo, Beijing women conference for gender equality, contributions of Oby Ezekwesili, Ngozi Okonjo-Iwuala, late Prof Dora Akunyili, etc. not much

headway is made because the above Igbo proverbs as oral tradition are transmitted from one generation to the other.

Also, the patriarchal society of Igbo community makes women to be less important. There is male preference in sex selection of children which is deeply ingrained in the culture of the society to ensure the continuation of patriarchal control.

The position of this study is that, it is the oral tradition like proverbs that kept women in their second-class position and it will be very difficult to be reversed because it has become part and parcel of the culture.

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