

**‘HER MARKET HAS CLOSED’: CRITICAL RETHINKING OF GENDER
STEREOTYPES IN SELECTED IGBO IDIOMS**

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Abstract

The paper takes a survey of Igbo idioms on gender to ascertain how these canons of cultural wisdom and philosophy represent the sexes. A total of ninety-six idioms, thirty-six about men and sixty about women, were analyzed using Lakoff's (1993) conceptual metaphor theory which sees one entity as ontologically related to another in a kind of cross-domain mapping, causing semantic tension in their interpretation. The observed encodings tend to cast individuals in strict, highly limiting gender categories and stereotypic positions. Our findings also revealed that gender stereotypes in these idioms appear to be polarized on the positive-male, negative-female metaphors as evidenced in the conceptual schema of perpetuator-terminator, owner-property, buyer-commodity, unlimited time-limited time, provider-consumer, sower-nurturer stereotypes, terminologies formulated on the bases of the observed conceptual mappings. These gender categorizations tend to position women in the domestic and repressed sphere leaving the public and liberal operating space to the males, seemingly negating the postmodern concepts of gender equality and women empowerment. The work argues that these idioms have become clichéd in the present age because of their conventional stable forms and need to be recontextualized to expunge these apparently rigid polarizations that may hinder the harnessing of human optimal potentials.

Keywords: idioms, gender, stereotypes, gender equality, metaphor, cross-domain mappings.

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Introduction

The current global concern on gender equality and women empowerment (UN MDGs Fact Sheet 2013; Asiabaka 2012) raises vital questions on how different cultures construct gender. The fact that gender equality and equity have become twin topics of serious debate and their attainment in most cultures especially in the developing nations such as Nigeria is becoming illusory informs the inclusion “gender equality and women empowerment” as the fourth item in the eight-point agenda of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). A cursory observation of the systems of orality in the Igbo culture, especially Igbo idioms, would lead to the confirmation that the culture of patriarchy has found a permanent niche in these folk expressions regarded as canons of wisdom, philosophy, value systems and oratory skills. It thus becomes evident that societal values encoded in and transmitted by these expressions will remain tenaciously entrenched and perpetuated because of their highly stable and fixed formats. An idiom remains the same in form and meaning and any change leads to distortion of form and meaning of such cultural expressions. It is owing to their stable nature that they may lead to the formation of stereotypes, and in the case of the topic of focus of this paper, gender stereotypes.

This study was motivated by the fact that the majority of previous scholarship in this area had concentrated on the representation of gender in Igbo proverbs. Few of these works had looked at idioms as one of such equally highly productive rhetorical and hegemonic devices for perpetuating gender stereotypes. In his work on proverbs, Hussein (2005) asserts that proverbs are among the social bases for the exploitation, denigration and exclusion of women in Africa. He identified areas of systemic biases as denial of women's psychological, material and social existence outside men, objectification of women, portraying them as sex objects, as inferior to men as well as emphasizing hegemonic masculinity among others. In the same vein, Oha (1997) relates his study to the semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs. Using the politeness principle, he identified Igbo proverbs that are face-threatening to women as against those that are in affinity with their face wants and notes the preponderance of the face threatening proverbs over the face preserving ones in relation to women. Oha argues that the expression of the anti-woman bias in Igbo culture suggests patriarchal inferiorization of womanhood. He sees a strong masculine presence in Igbo proverbs which imposes its interpretation in the Igbo discourse.

Other works by Nakhavaly and Sharifi (2013) studied Persian proverbs and noted deep-rooted gender-based ideology encoded in them. Whereas Oha's study concentrated on those proverbs that are face-threatening to women, these scholars identified Persian proverbs that are face-threatening to both sexes. They claim that though Persian is not gender-marked just like Igbo, their study revealed a number of proverbs (179 of them) that contain elements of oppression against women and equally face threatening to men. They claim that these proverbs portray women as “evil and capricious, the root of disaster, inferior and worthless beings while men are avaricious, absolutist and cruel” (Nakhavaly and Sharifi 2013: 197) and conclude that when people speak, they do not just utter linguistically, they speak culturally and ideologically and that Persian proverbs reflect gender-biased ideology in Iranian society.

It is worthy of note that the last work discussed above presented a different scenario in the hitherto positive-male and negative-female representation reported in the majority of works on gender encodings in systems of orality. I have also observed that none of these works have

focused on idioms as another oral tradition that encode gender biases in the form of stereotypes which is as potent and highly rhetorically persuasive as proverbs (Ezeifeke, forthcoming). The present writer aims to fill this gap. Our concern in this paper is to showcase the various gender stereotypes encoded in the selected Igbo idioms.

Idioms in Igbo culture are opaque encodings of cultural norms, presuppositions, wisdom, philosophy and canons of behavior. They differ from proverbs in that they are figurative words or phrases that collocate with other literal expressions in sentences in which they occur. The role of idioms in enforcing gender stereotypes relate to its strong cognitive and emotive potentials in establishing a relationship between one domain of meaning and another through association, comparison or resemblance, what Lakoff (1993: 215) refer to as “cross-domain mappings in the conceptual system”. This ontological relationship makes them metaphorical in nature and causes semantic tension in their interpretation (Charteris-Black 2004).

The word “stereotype” is described as “an exaggerated belief associated with a category”, its function being to justify and rationalize human conduct in relation to that category (Hewstone and Giles, 1997:270). They are seen as cognitive categories formed in an effort to classify and simplify the world in ways that reduce the complexity of information and thus facilitate information processing. By so doing, real and imagined categories are imposed on the world. As Hewstone and Giles (1997:270) quoting Lippman (1922:1) put it; stereotype is “the distinction between the world outside and the pictures in our heads”.

Because like proverbs, idioms are realized as metaphors, their interpretation involve cognitive association between what Lakoff (1993: 215) would refer to as “source domain” and “target domain”, the terms we have adopted in our theoretical framework which will be discussed in the next section. For instance, the idiom that forms part of our topic has the Igbo version: *Ahia asula ya* ‘Her market has closed’. This idiom specifies the cross-domain mapping of WOMAN IS A COMMODITY (conceptual metaphors are usually represented in uppercase) and construes a female human person as an article of trade displayed in a market. This commodity has a time limit within which it is to be sold (before the close of the market), and it should be enticing to the buyers otherwise it will be rejected as is the case with the person represented in the idiom. This idiom also construes marriage as a market transaction where suitors “buy” their wives at a price (note the Igbo customary bride price). It is such idioms that relate to gender conceptualization and stereotypes that are subject of this study.

Thus, most of the identified gender stereotypes in Igbo idioms seem to be metaphorical or metonymic. As strong persuasive devices, their cognitive and emotive impact on the culture is profound and their meanings in the selected idioms tend to acquire stable and legitimate status such that they are taken as cultural norms. They are taken as unquestionable conventions of behavior and conduct. In this work, metaphor will be treated both as lexical entailments at the linguistic level, and as a cognitive phenomenon at the conceptual level where one conceptual frame or schema encompasses a number of lexical entailments or collocations in line with Charteris-Black’s critical metaphor analysis (2004). The relationship between the cognitive, linguistic and pragmatic dimensions of metaphor in institutionalizing certain cultural meanings is discussed fully in our section on theoretical framework which established the synergy between conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), critical metaphor analysis (CMA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Theoretical framework

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As has been pointed out earlier, the work adopts a synergy of critical discourse analysis (CDA), conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) and critical metaphor analysis (CMA) to the analysis of idioms. CDA is rooted in the reproduction and contestation of power and ideology in social institutions. Fairclough (1995: 136) points to the “commonsense normalcy of mundane practices as the basis for the continuity and reproduction of relations of power”. This assertion is evident in the way systems of orality such as idioms hide asymmetries and dominant ideologies that keep fostering and legitimizing gender hierarchies in the Igbo culture. Fairclough, quoting Giddens (1991) also argues that contemporary society is “post-traditional”, meaning that traditions have to be justified against alternative possibilities rather than being taken for-granted and that;

people's self identity, rather than being a feature of given positions and roles, is reflexively built up through a process of negotiation... Relationships and identities therefore increasingly need to be negotiated through dialogue, an openness which entails greater possibilities than the fixed relationships and identities of traditional society... (1995: 137)

The above assertion calls for the debunking of any view that advocates the fixity of gender categories, as a thing one is from birth, a fixed label cast on an individual for all times with little or no possibilities for change. Regarding gender categories as fixed negates the postmodern view of performativity (Butler, 1990) that sees gender as fluid, negotiable and as an action one performs as different contests allow, “what you do rather than are” (Ruberg, 2011: 8). Striking a balance between these two views of fixity-fluidity on gender has been the preoccupation of the different feminisms and feminist campaigns that gained renewed interest since the 1960s as gender reform, gender resistance and gender rebellion feminisms (Lorber 1998).

CMT is credited to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By* and extended in Lakoff's (1993) “contemporary theory of metaphor”. This theory sees the impact of cognition in the organization of knowledge. Metaphor is seen as one of the most effective ways of organizing cultural knowledge in memory. Lakoff (1993) claims that metaphor is not a factor of language *per se* but of thought, where one entity is transported from its base etymological source to a novel and abstract target, what Lakoff (1993: 245) referred to as “cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system”. He identified two domains of this cognitive transferences, namely, “source domain” and “target domain”. Concepts in a source domain are lexicalized using terms from the target domain in the conceptual frame (usually presented in uppercase letters): X IS/AS Y or TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN. The following examples are commonly cited (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 4): ARGUMENT IS WAR where the target domain, 'argument' is expressed using lexical items from a completely dissimilar source domain, 'war', as in: *Your claims are indefensible. He attacked every weak point in my argument.* Another example cited by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 7-8) is TIME IS MONEY (TIME –Target domain, MONEY –source domain) as in: *You are wasting my time. This gadget will save you hours. How do you spend your time?*

A third example is one extensively discussed in Lakoff (1993): LOVE IS A JOURNEY using the such metaphorical entailments as: *Look how far we've come. We can't turn back now. We'll just have to go our separate ways. We're at a crossroads. This relationship is not going anywhere*

Here the ontology of a JOURNEY is mapped onto the abstract concept of LOVE to produce a rich understanding of such a relationship. He represented the individual mappings of

the conceptual metaphor of LOVE AS JOURNEY as follows: the lovers=the travelers, the relationship=the vehicle, events in the relationship=the journey, progress made=the distance, the difficulties encountered=the obstacles, the goal of the relationship= the destination. According to Lakoff, these mappings from the source domain to the target domain are not arbitrary, but grounded in everyday experience and knowledge.

Though CMT has been used to account for the cognitive incongruities between two dissimilar entities, it has been seen as lacking pragmatic relevance. It has failed to account for the motivations for the choice of metaphors in authentic rather than contrived data. Critical metaphor analysis (CMA) has been postulated to take care of the reasons for the choice of particular metaphors by language users, their persuasive potentials, rhetorical appeals and their ideological motivations by appealing to the synergy of critical linguistics, cognitive linguistics and corpus linguistics (Charteris-Black, 2004). Whereas critical linguistics studies the ideological motivations of certain idiomatic usages, cognitive linguistics identifies the cross domain mappings that cause semantic tension and incongruities while corpus linguistics provides authentic corpus for the studying such usages. An example is Charteris Black's (2004) study of conceptual metaphors in the US political manifestos which revealed such conceptual metaphors as POLITICS IS CONFLICT (p.70) and POLITICS IS RELIGION (p. 84).

Idioms in Igbo culture thus provide the authentic corpus for the analysis of the cross-domain mappings of gender categories and the motivations for their choice in the gendered social order. The ultimate aim would be what Fairclough (1999 NP) regards as critical language awareness, which has become a necessary variable in our textually-mediated contemporary society; to scrutinize texts and discursive practices to determine their motivations and ideological positions.

Methodology

As has been explained in the last section, idioms seem to manifest as figurative expressions and belong to what Lakoff would call "novel metaphors". They construe an entity in terms of another and specify the cross domain mappings from the base metaphorical source to the literal target domains. We shall regard as metaphorical all linguistic expressions that tend to cause "semantic tension in their interpretation" (Charteris Black, 2004: 21). By this we mean those usages that tend to construe one gender category in terms of another completely dissimilar domain of use as encoded in the selected idioms. We have identified four of these domains: lineage perpetuation, family/domestic domain, marriage/conjugal rights and social power/leadership. The gender categories - man and woman - and their social constructions in these domains as encoded in the idioms that constitute our corpus will be our point of focus. A total of ninety-six idioms were collected through participant observation and interviews. All gender-marked idioms that were available to the writer at the point of writing this paper were used for the study. These were translated by the author to their nearest English equivalents and subjected to conceptual metaphor analysis (Lakoff, 1993) to interpret the cognitive-semantic mappings of these idioms in the Igbo conceptual system. These conceptual metaphors are derived from a set of linguistic metaphors encoded in the sample idioms. The conceptual metaphors are presented in uppercase in the analysis to differentiate them from their linguistic entailments. Thereafter, their emotive and ideological underpinnings are explained in line with Lakoff's (1993) conceptual metaphor analysis and Charteris-Black's (2004) critical metaphor

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analysis. The implications of the choice of these idioms on gender conceptualizations in the Igbo culture as well as for critical discourse analysis are discussed.

Analysis and Discussion

Idioms relating to gender are observed to be located in the following social and cultural institutions that have been mapped out for the present study:

- Lineage continuation
- Family/domestic sphere
- Marriage and conjugal rights
- Social power/leadership

We shall take these one after the other to describe the cross-domain mappings in each cultural setting with gender categorization.

Lineage continuation

The following idioms have been identified as related to the domain of lineage perpetuation and seem to conceptualize this domain on the permanence-extinction or perpetuator-terminator and hope-despair stereotypes with reference to men and women respectively.

- (1) *Nwoke ahu gbanwuru ihu ka onye nwunye ya muru nwanyi.* ‘That man wears a frown like one whose wife gave birth to a female child’.
- (2) *Ama nna gi chikwee* ‘May your father's homestead close’ or ‘overgrow with weeds’ (either by bearing female children or by the death of the male ones).
- (3) *Agburu anyi gburu ichi chie ozo* - ‘Our lineage carved their faces and took titles’. This idiom is normally used to refer to affluent and powerful lineage.
- (4) *Ama choro ichi echi bu so nwaanyi ka o na-amu.* ‘An extinction-hungry homestead is one that begets only female offspring’

The idiom in (1) likens the frown on a man's face to that of one whose wife has been delivered of a female baby. This presupposes that the hopeful expectation is for a male to be born, who in the Igbo culture, is the only hope for the perpetuation of the lineage. The birth of a female thus portends the extinction of the homestead and hence a moment of despair. Even when it is the female that gives birth to the male, she does not produce offspring in her lineage except in rare occasions when she is customarily kept in her father's house to procreate in the event of an absence of an heir. That is why the curse encoded in (2) is ominous and may lead to a serious fracas between interactants.

Women are hardly positioned in the roles of title-taking and face-carving, so the reference to lineage in (3) is implicitly reference to men. In (4), the reference to female offspring as the harbinger of extinction of a homestead is also explicit. The stereotypes these idioms seem to encode are: MALE AS PERPETUATOR OF LINEAGE, FEMALE AS TERMINATOR OF LINEAGE, MALE AS HOPE for the permanence of the homestead. FEMALE AS (harbinger of extinction of the homestead, hence, of) DESPAIR.

Family/domestic circle

In the family circle, a number of idioms encode gender stereotypes. These have been categorized using these terminologies the present author has coined as she reflexively ponders on the data: head-shoulder, pillar/support-appendage, financier/consumer, sower-procreator/nurturer, sexually aggressive-sexually loose. These binaries seem to be polarized along positive-negative stereotypes for men and women respectively.

Head-shoulder metaphor. The sexual division of labor in the family positions the man at the head while the woman is regarded as the shoulder as in these idioms:

- (5) *Nwoke bu isi ezi na ulo.* ‘man is head of the family’
- (6) *E si n’isi bupu, ubu eburu.* (implicit) ‘if the load leaves the head, the shoulder takes over’

The idioms in (5-6) indicate the gender hierarchy in the Igbo family set-up. In (6), the implication is that it is only when the head is no more, as in absence occasioned by death or ill-health, that the shoulder can exercise control in the family. The idioms in the following sections buttress other gender stereotypes which tend to place man at the apex in this domain.

Pillar/support-appendage metaphor. The husband is conceptualized as the stronghold of the family. He is seen as pillar in these idioms:

- (7) *Dibulo.* ‘the stronghold of the house’
- (8) *Ide ji ulo.* ‘the pillar of the house’
- (9) *Nwoke bu ogidi ji ulo.* ‘the man is the support of the household’.

Just as in the head-shoulder metaphor, as the pillar and stronghold of the family, the identity of the wife is predicated on that of the husband. As a result, it is believed that she is an appendage to the husband. A woman whose husband dies is believed to have met with great misfortune because she has apparently been severed from the source of her life. She is therefore called these metaphorical names:

- (10) *ajadu* ‘widow’(no equivalent word for a man whose wife is deceased as ‘widower’ in English).
- (11) *Nwanyi isi mkpe.* ‘A woman with a mourning head’ (a shaven, ash-strewn head).

In the traditional Igbo society, *ajadu* connotes a sordid and bleak solitude for a woman who has lost her husband. *Igba mkpe*, “the period of mourning”, was usually one whole year, and in this one year, the woman will not take a bath, nor wash her mourning clothes. In fact, the word widow conjures up the image-schema of someone who is dirty. She was not allowed to go out or cook or do any household chores. She will shave her hair, remove all ornaments and carry a short knife. These were supposed to ward off her spirit husband who would be repelled by her dirt, smell and the knife she carried, because it is believed that once a spouse dies and the traditional rites of severing the bond between the couple has been performed, there is no more such bond so that the woman can remarry. Ironically, there is no similar word for males whose wives have died in Igbo culture and no similar ceremony confines a man mourning for his wife. Though these practices are changing with some drastic modifications occasioned by enlightenment and education, these idioms still persist and have remained acceptable as parts of certain orders of discourse (Fairclough, 1995).

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A number of other idioms also show how the Igbo discourse legitimizes the dependence of a wife’s individuality on the husband's identity. Consider these idioms:

- (12) *Mma ogori bu di/nwa*. ‘A wife’s beauty is her husband/a child’
- (13) *Uche ogori bu uche di ya* . ‘A wife’s thought is her husband’s’ (that means that a woman has no thoughts of her own)

The stereotypes illustrated by the foregoing idioms include: HUSBAND AS PILLAR (of household), WIFE AS APPENDAGE (of household).

The breadwinner/provider/financier versus consumer/enjoyer/preserver metaphor.

The sexual division of labor on the family circle is richly represented in the sampled idioms. The husband is socially constructed as the financier or breadwinner of the family. The idioms that exemplify this are as follows:

- (14) *Ezi na ulo* - ‘family’ literally means ‘outside and home’ (means implicitly that the husband operates outside the home to fend for his family while the wife operates within the home to cater for the family nourishment).
- (15) *Itu ari (Itu ahi* – dialectal variant) – no direct English equivalent would be found for this idiom but it means ‘making food available on a daily basis’.
- (16) *Iku nri ubochi naano* – ‘Procuring food for four market days’. The husband is expected to provide enough food for his family every day of the four Igbo market week (*Eke, Ori, Afor, Nkwo*). A husband who can accomplish this feat is regarded as the real *macho* man.

The stereotypes HUSBAND AS PROVIDER, HUSBAND AS BREADWINNER and HUSBAND AS FINANCIER are exemplified in the above idioms.

On the other hand, the wife is regarded as “consumer” of the husband’s wealth. Her stereotypic role is to keep the husband’s house, cook his meals, enjoy as much of it as she desires, and bear his children. So once married, following the traditional payment of bride price, the man establishes propriety of the wife. Her new title becomes predicated on her husband's name and she begins to “eat out of her husband’s hand”.

- (17) *Iri aka di* – ‘Eating from the husband’s hand’.
- (18) *Oriaku* – ‘Consumer of wealth’.

Her husband’s name is *Okonkwo*, she becomes “*Oriaku Okonkwo*”. These roles ascribe to the wife the stereotypic identity of WIFE AS CONSUMER/ENJOYER (of husband's wealth). Modern westernized women have strongly resisted this stereotype encoded in their marital title of *Oriaku* (‘consumer of wealth’) on the grounds that they too bring in wealth that is being consumed. This is a feminist perspective where women are reacting to a socially constructed negative stereotype and are modifying language to expunge offensive ones. The results are the new tags women want to be associated with such as *Odoziaku* - ‘Preserver of wealth’, *Obuteaku* –‘Bringer of wealth’ and *Okpataaku* – ‘Procurer of wealth’. These traditional feminist undercurrents illustrate the desire of women for a complementary role of husband and wife as financiers and lead to the modified conceptual schema WIFE AS PRESERVER which challenges the previous stereotype. Note also the exaggeration in the idioms referring to women as BRINGER OF WEALTH which makes this stereotype a marked case for a woman in that role.

In reaction to the stereotypic role of passive consumers of wealth without contributing her quota to family upkeep, the *Inyom di* 'fellow wives of the kindred' lampoon their peers who decide to be passive towards fulfilling their role of at least helping in providing condiments for the bulk food provided by the husband. They are indicted with these idioms.

(19) *Dabiri chebe di* – 'Lie back and wait for the husband' (to buy food).

(20) *A hugh di ma anwuru oku asuna* - 'No husband, no smoke' (from the hearth).

Any woman called by these derogatory names by members of the extended family would be expected to wake up and strive to contribute her quota to the family sustenance.

Marriage/conjugal rights

The marriage institution is another domain where idioms are effectively used to construct gender stereotypes. This is evident in the following areas:

The buyer-commodity metaphor. Some idiomatic expressions construct the conceptual frame of WOMAN AS COMMODITY for trade and MAN AS BUYER. This mercantile metaphor is hinged on the customary bride price paid on the head of a woman by her betrothed before she is given out in marriage. Thus, the woman as a commodity displayed in a market represents, as soon as she is bought and paid for, the source of wealth to her father's house. This transaction equally signifies loss of wealth for her would-be husband. The amount of bride price determines the worth of the bride. This stereotype brings forth these idioms.

(21) *Akirika nwanyi bu udu ya* 'A woman's worth is her bride price'

(22) *Nwa nwanyi bu aku a ga-eri ehe o bu.* 'A girl child is wealth kept on reserve (for the bride's family)'

(23) *Aku nwanyi bu ego e riri n'obi ocha.* 'Bride price is wealth expended with joy (for the husband)'

This mercantile act is transacted and a compromise reached in the price to be paid. This transaction is called;

(24) *Ika akirika or Iru aku nwaanyi* 'Canvassing for price'.

The mercantile metaphor tends to bring about the Owner-Property metaphor in the inheritance hierarchy (Lakoff 1993).

The owner-property metaphor. The following idioms tend to portray the stereotype of HUSBAND AS OWNER.

(25) *Onye nwe ulo.* 'The owner of the house'

(26) *Oga.* 'Lord'/'Master'

(27) *Di.* 'Husband' (power holder of the marriage)

The wife is represented as the man's property in the idioms below with the schema of WIFE AS PROPERTY.

(28) *Onye be m/Nwanyi m.* 'The person of my abode'/'My woman'

(29) *Onye ulo m.* 'The person of my house'

(30) *Nwanyi m mere ego n'isi ya.* 'The woman on whose head I paid a bride price'

(31) *Nwoke ahu doro mbu ohuru.* 'The man made a new acquisition'

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A woman does not own any property or any inheritance because she herself is traditionally an inheritable property. When the husband dies, plans will be made in the husband's immediate family for an eligible male who will “inherit” her. After the period of mourning, a young widow may be transferred to any eligible sibling of the husband in a ceremony culturally recognized for that purpose. This "wife inheriting" culture is encoded in these idioms:

- (32) *Ikuchi nwanyi*. ‘inheriting a wife’/‘taking over ownership of a wife’
(33) *Itughari mmanya n’isi nwanyi*. ‘Re-enacting the traditional palm wine ceremony on the head of an inherited wife’

This last idiom refers to the wine carrying ceremony where the bride and groom drink together to seal their marriage bond. This ceremony referred to in (36) is meant to counteract this covenant to enable the new husband to take over without being haunted by the spirit of the dead husband.

If a marriage hits the rocks, the bride's family pays back the bride price in a ceremony encoded in this idiom.

- (34) *Ikwu ngo/nga*. ‘Paying back the bride wealth’

Limited-unlimited time metaphor. In the Igbo cultural milieu, a woman must marry within a given age, when her beauty is at its prime to be able to attract a man. A girl is enjoined by the following expressions to marry on time because time does not wait for any woman:

- (35) *Oge nwanyi na-agafe agafe*. ‘A woman's time has expiry date’.
(36) *Ije di nwere mgbe*. ‘The journey for a husband has a specific time’.

A woman who passes the age of marriage without getting married is branded with these idioms.

- (37) *Otonakanne*. ‘Stuck to her mother’s hand’ (as rejected commodity)
(38) *Okpokwu* – ‘Stationary object’
(39) *Ahia asula ya* ‘Her market has closed’/‘She has been rejected by the market’.
(40) *Nna ga-anu* - ‘Father will marry’.

These idioms, one of which forms part of our topic, reinforce the mercantile stereotype already illustrated. The woman is portrayed as a commodity of trade which has been rejected by the buyers because her time for marriage has elapsed and she has become stale. She is therefore no longer eligible for the seemingly compulsory marriage "journey" (*ije di*) and so becomes a stationary object that is stuck to her mother's hand; her father will then become her husband. These idioms extend the market metaphor and tend to construe women as wares literally displayed for men to sample and choose from.

A man on the other hand is not limited by time in marriage. An unmarried man (*okokporo*) can marry at any time. He is an eligible bachelor so long as he has his wealth. The famous Zik of Africa married his last wife at the age of seventy, an age which is unthinkable for a woman to talk about marriage. Thus, we can justifiably say that in Igbo marriage, TIME IS LIMITED for the woman but for the man, TIME IS UNLIMITED.

Furthermore, the term *okokporo* has less, if any, negative connotations than *otonakanne* or *okpokwu*. When one says;

- (41) *Ona-esi okokporo*. ‘He is cooking loneliness’.

This means “he is a bachelor” and evokes compassion rather than scorn based on the fact that the man has to cook his meals himself since he has no wife on the one hand; and on the other hand, the

condition, rather than making him an object of ridicule, places the man on the list of prospective eligible bachelors.

The importance of marriage in an Igbo woman's life evokes other conceptual metaphors such as those I call: WOMAN IS A BIRD OF PASSAGE, MARRIAGE IS A JOURNEY, MARRIED IS HAPPY, and UNMARRIED IS SAD. These metaphors are exemplified by these idioms:

- (42) *Nwanyi bu unere a mawatara na mba.* 'A wife is a banana sucker got from a distant land'.
- (43) *Nwanyi bia o ka.* 'A woman comes in (to a homestead) and multiplies'.
- (44) *Nwanyi bia o kuru ekwu.* 'A woman comes in (to a homestead) and usurps the hearth'.
- (45) *Ije di bu ngwugwu, ihe onye toghetere, o were.* 'The journey for a husband (marriage) is a parcel, when one opens it, one takes what one sees'.
- (46) *Nwanyi aluru ohuru si na ochi di ya nonu ekweghi ya fukee oku.* 'A newly married wife said that the laughter in her mouth prevents her from blowing the embers in the hearth'

In (42) marriage for a woman is a sojourn to a new territory where she goes and multiplies (43) (note the procreator stereotype), and also usurps the hearth. It is in the hearth that the power of the woman is recognized as exemplified by (44) above. She takes over this domestic domain which is stereotypically her domain, while the man caters for the external/public domain.

The idiom in (45) calls to mind another conceptual metaphor MARRIAGE IS A PARCEL (for both partners) with unknown contents. It may open up bitter or pleasant experiences for the sojourner or the host. The couple must learn to accept whatever possibilities the parcel opens up for them and look up to these unknown possibilities with optimism. In (46), the conceptual schema of MARRIED IS HAPPY is exemplified.

The sower - nurturer metaphor. The husband is portrayed as having the power to sow the seed of life. The man is said to "plant his seed" in a woman. The idioms that illustrate this are:

- (47) *Mkpuru mbu m* - 'my first seed' (My first child)
- (48) *Ikunye mkpuru mbu* - 'planting the first seed'.

Even in the English language, the image of HUSBAND AS SOWER is exemplified in the adage where a man engaged in irresponsible sexual escapades is said to be "sowing his wild oats".

On the other hand, the woman's ovaries that give life are called "ifuru nwa" (baby flower), or simply "flawa" (the corrupt word for "flower") referring to a woman's menstrual flow.

- (49) *Ifuru nwa* - 'flower of a child'. (menstrual flow)

This "flower" is supposed to bring forth "fruits".

- (50) *Mkpuru nke afo* - 'the fruit of the womb'.
- (51) *Ikwapu ifuru nwa* - 'wasting the flower that forms the child' (this is said when a woman refuses to get married and is wasting her ovaries monthly through menstruation).

A woman is also said to form and nurture the baby in her womb as well as when it is born using such idioms as:

- (52) *Ikpu nwa.* - 'Forming/Moulding a baby' (in the womb)
- (53) *Ikpicha nwa* - 'nurturing a baby'

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(54) *Izu nwa* - ‘rearing a child’

The sole aim of marriage in Igbo culture is to have children especially male ones that will carry on the family name. A wife is the only means to this end and childbearing is the only role that gives a wife legitimacy and honor in her husband’s house. These expressions illustrate this stereotype.

(55) *Mma nwanyi bu nwa* – ‘The beauty of a woman is her child’.

(56) *Ihunanya di n’etiti di na nwunye bu ka a muta nwa* – ‘Love between husband and wife is for the purpose of childbearing’.

The importance of procreation as a woman’s role in the family is so profound that the daughters of the kindred (*umuada/umuokpu*) have a song in form of a prayer that the land into which their sister is married will bless her with children).

(57) *Ka anyi je ga lelee ada anyi mara mma* 2ice ‘Let us go and see our beautiful sister 2ice

<i>Ada Umueze mara mma ee.</i>	The daughter of Umueze is beautiful e e e
<i>Ada anyi mara mma</i>	Our daughter is beautiful
<i>Ala o biara ije di</i>	Let the land into which she’s married
<i>kunyekwa ya nwa/bunyekwa ya oche</i>	Hand her a child/give her a seat
<i>Ada anyi mara mma ó ó ó ó ó ó</i>	Our daughter is beautiful o oo ooo’

A woman's position in her husband's house is confirmed as having stabilized as soon as she bears a child, especially a male child. That is why the song is imploring the land into which the bride has gone for the marriage sojourn to give her a seat in her husband's house by “handing her a baby”. After this prayer, the *umuada*, will call on the husband to go ahead and “harvest babies” from “the fertile birth pot”, that is, their daughter.

(58) *Ogo m nwoke manye aka n’ite omumu* - ‘My inlaw, dip your hands into the birthpot and harvest babies’.

The woman's womb is referred to as a birthpot, likened to a nursery flower pot where babies are nurtured and tended before birth. This reinforces the “sower” metaphor, where the man sows in a fertile land (the womb) to harvest babies. This confers the stereotypic role of WIFE AS BIRTHPOT, WIFE AS PROCREATOR/NURTURER/CAREGIVER to the woman in the Igbo family setup.

The sexually aggressive/loose metaphor. A man's sexual impropriety is seen as a mark of sexual vigour, likened to animals with exceptional physical strength. For instance:

(59) *Nwoke ahu gbera igbe agu* – ‘The man did a lion’s crawl’. (that is, he sired a child for another woman who is not his wife)

(60) *Okeke bu mkpi na-agbara oha ewu* - ‘Okeke is a buck that impregnates for the public’.

(61) *O bu eunu* – ‘He is a ram’ (referring to a sexually aggressive man).

On the other hand, sexual impropriety on the side of a woman is presented as blame, a mark of infidelity and sexual immorality. For instance:

- (62) *Nwanyi a bu nkita* – ‘That woman is a dog’ (sexually loose)
- (63) *Nwanyi a bu akwunakwuna* – ‘This woman is a walk-about’ (prostitute). (A man is never referred to as “akwunakwuna”. There is no Igbo equivalent term for a man who is sexually loose).

We derive from these idioms the conceptual schema of MALE AS SEXUALLY ACTIVE and FEMALE AS SEXUALLY LOOSE.

A number of idioms that buttress the active-loose stereotype also portray WOMAN AS SEX OBJECT for the man’s enjoyment. For instance:

- (64) *Ikodiya* ‘Her husband's cup’ (lover)
- (65) *Utediya* ‘Her husband’s mat’ (comforter)
- (66) *Agiri* (no direct English equivalent but means “lover” used mostly of an illicit sexual relationship).
- (67) *Osikapa e siri mma mma di ka nwanyi a lutara ohuru*. ‘Well-cooked rice is like a newly married wife’ (comparing the enjoyment of a delicious meal (rice) to the enjoyment of a newly married wife)

Beauty as wealth versus beauty as physical adornment metaphor. A man’s respect is predicated on the amount of wealth he displays and not by physical attraction. This schema gives the conceptual frame of MAN'S BEAUTY IS WEALTH. Thus ugliness is not a bad attribute to a wealthy man. A wealthy ugly man is a more eligible husband for a beautiful bride than a handsome pauper.

- (68) *Mma nwoke bu ego*. ‘Man’s beauty is his money’ (for an ugly wealthy man).
- (69) *Nwokeadinjo* ‘A man is never ugly’ – a nick name for an ugly wealthy man.
- (70) *Nwoke ahu ji ihe ya* ‘That man is holding his “thing” ’ (his wealth)

On the other hand, WOMAN’S BEAUTY IS PHYSICAL ADORNMENT as seen in these idioms. Her physical beauty enhances her attraction to a would-be suitor.

- (71) *E nenebe ejeghi oru*. ‘An object so captivating as to distract one from going to work’.
- (72) *Mma nwanyi bu njicha* ‘A woman's beauty is her physical adornment’
- (73) *Oyooyo* ‘a very fine object’
- (74) *Nwaanyi ahu wara ihu*. ‘That woman’s face is finely shaped’
- (75) *Nwanyi a bu anyanwu ututu*. ‘That woman is early morning sunshine’

Social power/leadership rights

The power-powerless metaphor. Some idioms used in reference to males are prefixed by di-meaning “possessor of extraordinary strength”. Examples are as follows:

- (76) *Dike* ‘a man with exceptional strength’
- (77) *Diji* ‘a strong and talented yam farmer’
- (78) *Diogu*. ‘a warrior’
- (79) *Dimkpa*. ‘a strongly built/hefty/heavily built man’. A man who has shown exceptional prowess in doing something great
- (80) *Dingba*. ‘a great wrestler’
- (81) *Dinta*. a great hunter’

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(82) *Dioka*. ‘a great carver’ (of face marks - "Igbu ichi" - used to show manliness)

On the other hand, most idioms stereotype woman as inferior in reference to men. They are at times derogatorily referred to as “objects” as typified in these idioms.

(83) *Ihe tukwu ala anyu mamiri*. ‘A thing that stoops to pass water’.

(84) *Ihe gbara mpara anyu mamiri*. ‘A thing that spreads her legs to pass water’

These idioms refer to the woman’s culturally prescribed position when urinating which is either to stand and spread her legs or to squat down. These positions are regarded as inferior to the man’s posture of standing erect to do the same act.

Furthermore, a woman is culturally regarded as a necessary evil, a nuisance that the man must contend with. These idioms exemplify this stereotype:

(85) *Ume mere nwoke*. ‘A thing that is man’s undoing’

(86) *Nwanyi/ihe nyiri nwoke*. ‘A thing that confounds the man’

These idioms thus exemplify the superior-inferior stereotype with reference to men and women.

The wise/foolish metaphor

These idioms exemplify the wise-foolish metaphor:

(87) *Otochalu* ‘The oldest of them all’ – as in “Gaa juta otochalu Awka” - Let’s find out from the oldest of them all in Awka.

This idiom, almost always used in reference to men more than women, shows that an aged man in Igbo culture is a source of wisdom, one to be consulted for answers to puzzling questions. Again in *Ugwuoba* (a clan in Enugu State) terminology, the think-tank caucus is known as:

(88) *Nze na Awo* ‘the titled and the grey hairs’ (mostly referring to men and hardly women)

Whereas the above idioms image MAN AS WISE, the following convey the WOMAN AS FOOLISH stereotype:

(89) *Uche umu nwaanyi bu kpololo* ‘Women’s reasoning is a one-directional road’

(90) *Uche nwanyi bu uche umuaka* ‘A woman's reasoning is a child's’.

In Igbo culture, a woman, both young and old, is stereotypically foolish. A wise wife is thus very rare to find such that the idiom below eulogizes such a rare quality.

(91) *Nwanyi maara ihe bu okpu eze di ya* ‘A wise wife is her husband’s crown’.

An old woman, far from possessing wisdom as the image of an old man conjures up, is construed as foolish, always ailing, with arthritis and falling teeth.

(92) *Eze agadi nwanyi* – ‘the teeth of an old woman’ - used to refer to a malformed corn cob with a sprinkling of grains.

(93) *Ukwu di m ka nke ogo m nwanyi*. ‘My hip is like that of my aged mother-in-law’ (used to refer to a painful hip caused by old age arthritis).

Conclusion

We have so far presented a number of Igbo idioms that construct as well as reflect the gendered social order in the Igbo cultural milieu. From our analysis, a number of conceptual metaphors in the form of stereotypes have been unraveled to explain the gender ideology in this cultural setting which cut across a number of domains. In the domain of lineage perpetuation, we identified idioms that express the desirability of a strong male presence in ensuring permanence of homesteads. The idioms in this domain convey the stereotypical gender construction of permanence/extinction or perpetuator/terminator schema. In the family setting, the sexual

division of labour construct male roles in the public sphere while the female is consigned to the domestic. The metaphorical encodings in the idioms construct gender polarizations along head-shoulder, pillar-appendage, public-domestic, provider-consumer (and more recently provider-preserver/procurer), sower-nurturer, sexually active-sexually loose and sex initiator-sex object lines. Perhaps it is in the marriage institution that the idioms encode the desirability of an even more prominent male presence, since in this institution, the man takes the initiative to contract a marriage and pay the dowry, while the woman had to wait for him to propose and take her away from her maiden home into her marital home. This status quo makes a woman a sojourner in her husband's house and confines her to a position where her identity is predicated on her husband's personality. She changes her maiden name to her husband's and becomes completely linguistically subsumed to him in all references. A number of stereotypes emanate from idioms from this domain of marriage and conjugal rights of marriage partners some of which have been identified as buyer-commodity, owner-property, unlimited-limited time, active-passive polarizations. In addition, other conceptual metaphors in the inheritance hierarchy of owner-property conceptual metaphor include conceptualizing a woman as a bird of passage, marriage as a journey; man as host and woman as sojourner. Also obvious from these idioms are the schema of married as happy and unmarried as sad for the woman and marriage as a parcel for both partners.

In the area of leadership and social rights, these idioms also confer prominence to the male in terms of the superior-subordinate/inferior, powerful-powerless and wise-foolish polar categorizations. Women in Igbo culture seem not to occupy leadership positions in these represented domains. They are referred derogatorily as 'a thing that stoops to urinate, a thing that spreads her legs to pass water', and these idioms are usually invoked by men to emphasize their superiority over impudent women who dared to overstep their gendered domains and infiltrate the men's sphere. Men are also imbued with wisdom in these idioms while women's thoughts and reasoning are portrayed as fickle, foolish, not to be taken seriously and as one-dimensional. The social effects of these strict gender categorizations as encoded in these idioms are multifaceted. First, they have tended to cast individuals in apparently irreversible social moulds with the result that people think and act in accordance with these stereotypes in line with Halliday's (1978:2) assertion that "people tend to behave in accordance with the stereotypes to which they are consigned". Second, they also show that gender as a social construction in the Igbo culture tend to prescribe gender behaviors and roles in fixed operating spaces using these idioms. Given this scenario, gender is therefore a thing one is, one's fixed identity conferred on one by the gendered ideologies of the patriarchal social order prevalent in the culture. According to Mills (1998, quoting Simone de Beauvoir, 1949), one is not born a woman (or man) but becomes so by social construction. Mills' (1998) argument that human language as it is has not captured the authentic and unique sentence of the feminine gender is apt in the study of Igbo idioms that encode gender.

These stereotypes seem to suggest a social system ordered along androcentric, essentialist and patriarchal worldviews where sexism is not transparent in the forms of the language such as morphology (as in waiter-waitress), or grammar (as in generic he/man), or in conversation styles (as in report-rapport talk) as is the case with the English language (Wareing, 2000); but are opaque metaphorical encodings that form semantic and experiential gestalts, presuppositions and encyclopaedic knowledge of the Igbo culture. Sexism in the Igbo culture seem to be the product of cognitive, semantic and pragmatic domains of language use which emanate from the culture

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of patriarchy as a prevailing social arrangement while concepts like *matriarchy* or *matrilineal* lineage are simply dummy expressions with no practical relevance.

The observed gender stereotypes seem to place feminist awareness in Igbo culture in the borderline between first-wave and second-wave feminism where women still struggle for basic rights, where gender is a thing one becomes rather than, as in third-wave feminism, an action one performs as different contexts dictate (for detailed discussion on waves of feminism, see Lorber 1998; Mills 2003). We argue that they disempower rather than empower and that they are ideological apparatuses for gender inequality. As our data reveals, the Igbo educated women's covert and feeble resistance finds expression in trying to reword some idioms that would otherwise ascribe to them the shadow of the male image. An example is the move from consumer to preserver of procurer of wealth. These undercurrents of feminist resistance percolating at this grassroot level show that these stereotypes cause social dissatisfaction that are seeking for redress but lack the enabling social structure.

This work is therefore an endeavour at consciousness raising which is the hallmark of all research efforts in CDA. This research model, described as the linguistic means of those struggling against oppression in its linguistic forms, has been appropriated in this work to speak for those who are oppressed by these idioms, especially the female gender who seems to get the cutting edge of these expressions. The work is calling up these idioms that encode gendered asymmetries for scrutiny with a view to addressing their apparently innocuous and stable formats and unveiling their ideological potentials in limiting the sexes from performing their optimum in various spheres. The work has implications for all stakeholders: the media, language teachers, educational planners and all users of the language to work in concert to recontextualize these expressions and expunge the ones that have become irrelevant or clichéd in the current global agenda of gender equality and women empowerment. We argue that the era of male chauvinism is past and as has been argued by Mey (2001:313), “man-made language is a historical accident and not a natural condition that cannot be changed”

Funding Acknowledgement

The manuscript for this publication was prepared with the support of an African Humanities Program (AHP) Fellowship, established by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and supported financially by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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