

## **Women Forbidden from ‘Climbing Tall Trees’: Insecurity and Biological Asymmetry in Urhobo Sex Proverbs**

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### **Abstract**

Insecurity and asymmetry in all their ramifications are ideological. They are also inherently communicative processes that are largely constructed and enacted through language in various institutional discourses. In Urhobo, sex proverbs copiously couch the ideological conceptualizations of the male-female biological asymmetry. Studies on Urhobo proverbs dwell largely on functional applications and documentations of the proverbs, thereby overlooking their ideological underpinnings. Therefore, in this article efforts are geared towards investigating and unravelling ideologies that have been habitualized in the semantic and pragmatic structures of the Urhobo sex proverbs. The intention is to throw open the patterns of relationship between the male and female participants in the society in relation to sex matters and power. Twenty six Urhobo indigenes (6 males and 20 females), who are competent in the socioculture and language were successfully interviewed to elicit Urhobo sex proverbs. Proverbs that contain the following lexical items: penis, virgina, to make love or to have sex are purposively selected and subjected to critical discourse analysis (CDA). The main assumption of CDA is that language is both the site and the stake in the struggle for power and domination. Findings show that in the Urhobo sex proverbs, there is asymmetry in access to sexual relations between the male and female. Although the sex proverbs do not always refer to copulation, they are often employed as powerful instruments to dominate and instil fear in the female participant. Consequently, patriarchal discourses are further entrenched in the society.

*Key words:* Biological asymmetry, semantic and pragmatic structures, penis, virgina and critical discourse analysis

### **Introduction**

In many African socioculture, women are kept away from arduous physical and mental tasks. The belief behind their exclusion from such activities is that they are generally and congenitally ill equipped for such tasks. It is therefore considerable that there is sex role asymmetry which

is rooted in biological asymmetry between the human male and female. Biological asymmetry presupposes that in all human populations, there are consistent morphological, physiological and demographic differences between the sexes. Many of these are related to bisexual reproduction specialization, and include differences in chromosomes, hormones, reproductive physiology, anatomy and musculature, neurological functioning, patterns of growth and rates of natality, morbidity and mortality (Conover 1988; Emama & Maledo, 2018). The biological asymmetry complexly connects to the ways different societies assign meanings and senses to concepts (cf. Hampsher-Monk 1992; Goddard 1998; Emama 2017) and subsequently generates symbolic asymmetry, which gives rise to instrumental asymmetry- that is, the asymmetry of social roles on the basis of sex or gender.

“Climbing tall trees” as a sex role has a great deal of meaning associations. It connotes courage, great mental acuity, physical alertness and skills. Generally, these attributes are symbolically and stereotypically assigned to men, while their opposites are seen as female features. Sequel to that, roles that demand either great mental or physical exertion or both are socioculturally viewed as the man’s jobs. Examples are: being heads of states, governors, professors, engineers, scientists, contractors and polygamists. The opposite of polygamy, which is polyandry, is scarcely practiced in many sociocultures. Therefore, “climbing of tall trees” metaphorically couches ascending to socioculturally elevated position/s, whereby one gains a great deal of admiration. In the caption *women forbidden from climbing tall trees...* there is obfuscation of the agent of the action. If anything, women alone cannot forbid themselves from “climbing tall trees”, although many may instinctively shy away from such tasks. The agent of the action is the patriarchal society, which ultimate form is capitalism. Capitalism as a political economic ideology has two major features: first, the capitalists believe that money is all in all and life is all about making money. Second, the capitalists believe in the principle of survival of the fittest. Consequent to these two beliefs capitalist societies promote greed, injustice, corruption and various forms of asymmetries in favour of the dominant group or individual (cf. Ogbimi 2006: 65). Within the capitalist society whereby patriarchy is operational, the man is seen as the head of the family. The family as a patriarchal unit organizes a number of persons, bound and free under the

paternal power of the head of the family (Engels 1948: 57). The patriarchal family is based on the supremacy of the man; its express aim is the begetting of children of undisputed paternity, so that in due time they will inherit their father's wealth. Sequel to that, the first-class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of asymmetrical power relations between man and woman in both monogamous and polygamous marriages, whereby the man is at the centre of all family events, while the woman is at the periphery. Subsequently, the offspring of both sexes are stereotypically socialized within the structure of the patriarchal order. In Urhobo<sup>1</sup>, the male-female biological asymmetry is reminiscent in sociocultural phraseologies, particularly proverbs. The Urhobo sex proverbs for instance copiously couch conceptualizations of male sexual freedom and dominance. Therefore, this write-up sets out to critically investigate the conceptualizations, which have been habitualized in the socioculture with particular reference to the Urhobo sex proverbs.

### **Question Statements**

What ideologies have been habitualized in the semantic and pragmatic structures of Urhobo sex proverbs? What kind of relationship do the conceptual meanings of the proverbs show among the participants?

Gender is a social construct which defines the sociopolitical, economic and religious roles on the basis of sex. It is an inherently communicative process that is constructed and enacted largely through language in various institutional discourses. Stereotypes about how men and women speak reveal insights into attitudes about what men and women are like or what they are supposed to be like according to the norms of a particular socioculture. Many sociocultures have phraseologies that indicate gender hierarchies in which men are more highly valued than women and women are stereotyped as stupid, overly talkative, and fickle (Romaine 2012: 1-18). The sensory perceptions and

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<sup>1</sup> .Urhobo is both the language and the people who speak it. The population of those who identify themselves as Urhobo is about three million and are predominantly resident in South-South geopolitical zone in Nigeria. As a language, it belongs to the Niger-Congo family of West African languages. As a people, Urhobo lends credence to the Great Bantu Migration. See the following authors for details: Orite 2003; Ubrurhre 2003; Darah 2005; Ojaide and Aziza 2007.

natural logic of experiences constitute foundational factors in gender stereotypes. Take “up” and “down” and the vast cluster of associations around each of them, and the two as a pair, as instances. There is a strong bias in favour of “up” – perhaps because guardians and parents are up and children look up to them from infancy to adulthood. Heaven is described as “up”, while hell is “down”. The head and the heart are “up”, the genitals and excretory organs are “down”. Subsequently, in the sociocultural dominant metaphor of sexual relations, the male is “up”, on top of the female, as the sky is above the earth. Hence the metaphoric cluster of male-power-reason-good-light is opposed to the cluster of female-weak-irrational-wicked-dark. By a further metaphoric arithmetic light or fair skin is superior to dark skin, which supports the racist classifications that attend on the ideological valuations of colour (Kress 1989: 71).

Sequel to that, it is noticeable that gender is not just about biological and sociocultural differences; it involves power. Power in its intricate relations involves coercion, institutionalized authority, which often play out in the form of linguistic discourses, and which especially involves asymmetry. This is because two individuals, in this case, the two different sexes do not have power in the same capacity. For example, evolutionary biology suggests that animals inherit those characteristics which ensure that they will transmit as many of their genes to the next generation as possible. It is to both the man and woman’s advantage to produce as many surviving children as possible. But men and women differ in one critical respect – in order to produce a child, men have the capacity to invest a trivial amount of energy. A man can conceivably father an almost unlimited number of children. On the contrary, the woman can give birth to and raise only a limited number of children. It is to her advantage to insure that those few children she conceives survive (Clark III and Hatfield 1989: 40). Perhaps, that accounts for why men are more eager for sex than women; women set limits on such activities. And in all societies, women copulate as a service to men, not vice versa (Clark III and Hatfield 1989: 41). Due to such observable sexual behaviours of both men and women, institutional discourses arise to conceptualize them. In Urhobo socioculture for instance, one often hears the proverb *oboro ovo hwe osbo* (one virgina kills the penis). In the proverb, the virgina is metaphorically used as a symbol to connect to a great deal of

implicatures associated with the female sexual behaviours, which do not necessarily refer to the virgins. Subsequently, with such discourses one sex politically exerts myriads of control over the other. Implicitly, sexual politics exists. By politics is meant power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. Millett (1969: chapter two) suggests that sex is a status category with political implications. In her polemical theory of sexual politics, she puts across the following core assumptions: that sexual politics obtains consent through the socialization of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role and status; that as regards status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in male, inferior in the female; that patriarchy as an institution is a social constant so deeply entrenched as to run through all other political social and economic forms, whether of caste or class feudality or bureaucracy, just as it pervades all major religions (cf. Plantenga 2004: 45) and that patriarchy exhibits great variety in history and locale. With those assumptions Millett totally overlooks the power of nature and demonstrates nurture as the only relevant characteristic in the socioculture and cognitive development of both sexes. She also ignores the inequalities that arise from historical struggles. Nevertheless, although social structures tend to reproduce themselves, inequality is also always the result of historical struggle rather than being inevitably social.

Furthermore, no system of domination would work without activating the agency of the dominated to assist in maintaining those conditions. Sequel to that, domination is a process that must be continually reactivated through the agency of individuals and institutions (Einspahr 2010: 7). If anything, culture is not seen as something fixed or static. It is rather acknowledged that culture as well as gender are socially constructed and hence they are subject to change (van der Hoogte and Kigma 2004: 49). However, the change depends on the interaction among people in sociopolitical and economic power and not on mere introduction of progressive laws or policies. The reason is that, no matter how draconian or progressive a law or policy may be, if it is not supported by the general will of the people, the law or policy is bound to crumble. Therefore, the possibility of critical investigation of the historical contingency of current social relations and actions is opened up to be challenged and be transformed. Subsequently, Urhobo sex proverbs

can be seen as both naturally and historically developed sociocultural and cognitive constructs that reflect the society's ideological stance in both socio-political and sexual matters.

### **Conceptual framework**

Insecurity and asymmetry in Urhobo sex proverbs arise from the sensory perceptions of the sociocultural environment and the natural logic of reason in both the male and female sexes. The perceptions are conceptualized and enacted by the human agents and patriarchal socio-political and cultural institution through the linguistic structures of the people (within which sex proverbs are operational). Sex within the Urhobo ethnic group is a status category with political implications. Furthermore, sex being political embodies a power-structured grid whereby the male dominates the female and at the same time, the dominance is reinforced by the Urhobo public consensus.

### **Methodology**

Twenty six Urhobo indigenes (6 males and 20 females), who are competent in the socioculture and language were successfully interviewed to elicit responses with regard to sex proverbs. Efforts were made to elicit data from equal number of both sexes (50 males and 50 females), but the males often submitted clichés that tell off the female genitals instead of proverbs. Only six (6) out of the fifty interviewed male Urhobo indigenes gave sex proverbs. The women appeared to have understood the question better. Twenty females out of fifty reproduced Urhobo sex proverbs upon interview. However, the asymmetry in the number of respondents underpins the view that the proverbs are ideological, for their conceptualizations are shared by both sexes within the Urhobo socioculture. As an illustration, although the proverbs predominantly propagate the male dominance, the women also conceptualize them as part of their Members Resources. Proverbs that contain the following lexical items: penis, virgina, and to make love or have sex, and which reoccurred up to three times from the different respondents were selected. The reoccurrence of the proverbs suggests that they have been habitualized. The lexical items appear either within clause or clause complexes. The critical discourse analysis of Fairclough (1995; 2001), which has a sociosemiotic slant is used to investigate the submerged ideologies of the sex proverbs.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

1. Urhobo sex proverb: Erivwin mu ayuworovwe ro gbe ofanrhiẹn.

Gloss: Ancestor holds housewife that commits adultery.

Translation: The ancestors will punish a woman who has sex outside her marriage accountable.

**Context:** Used in warning the woman from indulging in sexual immorality, such as adultery.

**Embedded Ideology:** Sex is an act mostly performed in secret, people scarcely see people in the act, though one can infer what a man and woman could do under certain circumstances, through their paralinguistic exchanges, mood and verbal exchanges, if observed. Since it is pretty difficult to apprehend a woman having an extra marital affair, the society goes beyond the physical and intellectual level in relation to the control of the sexual behaviour of the female members of society. Sequel to that, it involves the extra mundane in order to instil fear in the female participant. Thus, it is the ancestors that expose and punish the woman who is involved in extramarital affair. The ancestors in the African mystical world are dead members of the society who were of good behaviour during their life time. The Urhobo refer to their dead elders as *ekpako ri kpo ri* that is, the elders who have gone home (Okpako 2011: 75). It is a very strong belief among the African people in general and in Urhobo in particular that the ancestors influence the fate of men and women. Therefore, if a man or woman finds favour before them one's labour would yield bountifully (Achebe 1958). By bringing in the discourse of the ancestors in the control of the sexual behaviour of the female participant in the society, a very powerful approach is engaged in the social and psychological life of the woman. Subsequently, the Urhobo patriarchal society employs all avenues within its reach to firmly control the sex life for the female participant. The fear instilled in the woman complexly connects adversely to the woman's sociopolitical worldview and helps to keep her under the firm control of the man's sociopolitical and economic ideology.

In contradistinction, the same society suggests an ideologically dissimilar proverb in relation to men:

2. Urhobo sex proverb: Oshare ro mu ehware bre toon.

Gloss: Man that carry intercourse last not.  
(sexual)

Translation: A man who makes love indiscriminately does not live long.

**Context:** Used to warn the man to keep away from indiscriminate sex.

**Embedded ideology:** In the sex proverb, a bias can be noticed in favour of the male participant. The sexual behaviour of the male participant is not under the surveillance of the ancestors or a force larger than him. He is rather in charge of his sexual behaviours and is responsible for his actions in the act. Besides, the use of the term ‘indiscriminately’ is ambiguous in the context of application, for it is unclear if the male participant is involved in extramarital affair or not. In addition to that, being ‘indiscriminate’ in sexual relations suggests the opposite – discriminate. Implicitly a male participant can be discriminate in sexual relation with as many female participants as possible and yet live long. Subsequently, since the proverb is unspecific as regards the circumstances of the act, it could be argued extensively, that the society is silent on the male participant’s extra marital relation besides allowing him to discriminate have as many female sex partners as possible. In addition to that, the bias in favour of the man suggests that the custodians of the Urhobo pantheon are predominantly males. Sequel to that, discourses that safeguard the man’s interests are produced and this ties into power, both politically and socioculturally.

3. Urhobo sex proverb: Ohoro n̄r̄h̄e osh̄o gh̄w̄e.

Gloss: Virgina cause penis death.

Translation: Virgina is the cause of the death of the penis.

**Context:** Used to connote, that the woman causes the man’s death.

4. Urhobo sex proverb: Ohoro ̄vo h̄we osh̄o.

Gloss: Virgina one kills penis.

Translation: One virgina kills the penis.

**Context:** Used to mock monogamists and at the same time encourage polygamy and male sexual freedom.

5. Urhobo sex proverb: Ohoro ̄yen ufi r̄e a kpare h̄r̄h̄e osh̄o.

Gloss: Virgina is trap that is set wait penis.



Translation: The *virgina* is a trap set for the penis.

**Context:** Used to suggest that although the man is aware of the expenditure and dangers involved in having affairs with the woman, nevertheless the man delves into the adventure.

6. Urhobo sex proverb: *Ne awanre rhe oyen ohoro vwọ bere idọkie.*

Gloss: From ancient come is *virgina* was cut division.

Translation: It is right from the origin that the *virgina* has a division.

**Context:** Used to suggest that the woman causes disagreement among male-friends, once she is brought into the folk.

**Embedded Ideologies:** The existence of the *virgina* and its actions invariably, the woman is socioculturally viewed pejoratively. That one *virginal* kills the penis is a premise that lacks clear deductive argument. And that the death of the penis or erectile dysfunction is caused by the *virgina* is a fallacy. There is element, though subtle suggestion of violence in the description of the female participant metaphorically designated as the *virgina*. If the *virgina* kills it portends that it possesses certain weapons, which enables it to kill. The picture of killing is treated in association to the bearer of the sex organ – the female participant. It is also on account of the socioculturally perceived violent nature of the woman that she is described as a trap, but the use of the pronoun “for” to relate its action to the man, penis suggests a positive intention. Perhaps, to mean that the *virgina*, the woman attracts the man to herself for marriage or procreation. Nevertheless, traps usually connote securing possession of something through beguilement of pleasure or witchcraft. Deceit is inherently appropriated to trap. In the same vein, the concepts of witchcraft, deceit and beguilement of pleasure are commonsensically associated with the female participant. Under violent situations, divisiveness, that is, separation into parties are also noticeable. Violence begets confusion, anarchy, irrationality and hopelessness. Therefore, to further entrench male dominance, proverbs such as ‘the *virgina* confuses the penis, and ‘it is right from the origin that the *virgina* has division’ are reconceptualized and reinforced through continual application. Thus, the female participant is socialized to believe that her being conceals certain negative tendencies such as witchcraft, deceit, irrationality, confusion, anarchy and hopelessness. In order to balance out the negative

tendencies, the woman is given names that connote piety, grace, meekness, truth, peace and joy with the belief that the meaning of the name, which is its power will come what may be manifested in the woman's life.

7. Urhobo sex proverb: O vwo obo wọ hworhẹ ohoro tee ọrhen royen  
ji gbon.

Gloss: It have what you wash virgina long not odour it  
smell.

Translation: No matter how often the virgina is washed the smell  
persists.

**Context:** Used to communicate that the woman is congenitally  
problematic.

8. Urhobo sex proverb: Ohoro hohọ omora rẹ o kpoo.

Gloss: Virgina like sore that it heal not.

Translation: The virgina is like a sore that never heals.

**Context:** Used to mean that it is pretty difficult to satisfy the woman.

**Embedded Ideologies:** Sordid terms are used in the description of the virgina in order to make the woman feel socioculturally and physically insecure. Such descriptions denigrate the female being and make her feel lowly. The use of such maxims has adverse effect on the psyche of the woman. The social insecurity triggered off in the psyche of the woman makes her feel that she needs support from whatever imaginable angle to solve the problem of the congenital smell and sore. Thus she resorts to all manners of cleanliness, piety, modesty, use of beautification cosmetics, and fashionable appearances. The intention would usually be to look good, but beyond the intention is that the female being works relentlessly to win the approval of men. Subsequently, there is a visible asymmetrical relationship between the male and female participants in the society, whereby conceptualizations are reinforced in favour of the men through the use of gender metaphoric<sup>2</sup>. In reality, the virgina is not the only place that has smells in the human body. The skin, the genitals,

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<sup>2</sup> . Used as a concept in translatorial action to designate the feminine nature and the masculine nature of target and the source texts respectively. See Chamberlain 1998.

the armpit and anus all have varying degrees of smell. Such parts of the body that are common to the two sexes could as well serve as concepts for building such proverbs. But they are not used, because the proverb represents and propagates a certain ideology – that of male dominance.

In furtherance of the male dominance ideology, the socioculture commonsesically adopts another proverb.

9. Urhobo sex proverb: Aghwanre oyen e vwo sivwi ora osho.

Gloss: Wisdom is it used treat sore penis.

Translation: Injury or sore on the penis is treated with care.

**Context:** Used to indicate that sensitive issues should be handled with utmost care.

**Embedded ideology:** The eye is even more sensitive than the penis, and might be used in contexts to also suggest that certain sensitive issues should be handled with a great caution. But that is not the case in the socioculture; in contradistinction, the injury of the virgina is described as hopeless and inherently irredeemable. Therefore, one notices a kind of asymmetrical relation in favour of the male. While the female sore or injury should be abandoned since one cannot possibly do anything about it, the one about man should be treated and in the process of the treatment, a great care must be exercised. Invariably more attention is to be given to the male folks than the female folks. Subsequently, there is asymmetry in the ascription of relevance to male and female participants in the socioculture.

10. Urhobo sex proverb: Ēse wo ru kē ohorō h̄oh̄ō ēse wo ru kē ēkpa.

Gloss: Gift you do for virgina like gift you do for fool.

Translation: A gift given to the virgina is just like a gift given to a fool.

**Context:** Used to connote that the woman is often unappreciative.

**Embedded Ideology:** In the proverb above, the female participant is metaphorically presented as lacking intelligence and good judgment. Therefore, empowering women economically and otherwise would not be worthwhile.

## Discussion

The involvement of the ancestors in controlling the sexual behaviour of the Urhobo woman as opposed to her male counterpart is asymmetrical and creates social tension, which may be seen as affecting only the female participant. But in actuality, it affects both the male and female participants in the socioculture. The tension may trigger off aggressive tendencies in the women, such as abstinence and may ultimately cause a great preponderance of them to withdraw from sexual act altogether. Such withdrawal is often connected to frigidity. Once a woman becomes frigid, due largely to sociocultural inequalities, further hypothetical tensions may arise thereby engendering security problems.

By latently approving sexual freedom for men as opposed to women as evidenced in the applications of proverbs, both the male and female are exposed to a myriad of sociocultural insecurity. There is a bias in favour of men in relation to sex act. This can be seen as exploitative, oppressive and degrading to the woman. Exploitation and oppression usually lead to revolt, which is one of the most difficult security problems to handle.

The presentation of the phenomenon of the female genitals in terms with negative semantic charges such as wound or gash portrays the uneasiness and disgust the female (genitals) arouse in the patriarchal society. Subsequently, nearly all patriarchies enforce taboos against women touching ritual objects such as war equipment, religious vessels and food. In the orthodox Christian churches for instance, women are scarcely ordained as priests. On the contrary, women may become nuns and subsequently be assigned certain pious functions that keep them away from positions of power. The inspiration of such sociocultural practice appears to lie in fears of contamination, usually sexual in origin as in “no matter how often the virgina is washed the smell persists” and “the virgina is like a sore that never heals”. In their function as domestic managers, females are required to prepare food. Nevertheless, as domestic managers may be liable to spread their inherent contagion through the food. The dilemma is generally solved in a bizarre illogical fashion by segregating the act of eating itself, whereby the male is served first or better. The male is usually served by the female. Often in the Urhobo socioculture, she is required to kneel down before the man to show respect in the process.

## Conclusion

Urhobo sex proverbs (ten) have been critically investigated to demonstrate their latent conceptualizations. The latent conceptualizations promote and propagate male dominance and thereby further entrench the patriarchal order. However, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the sociocultural and political situations of the world in general and Urhobo in particular have improved, due largely to globalization and democratization. For the women, that means the rise in democratic citizenry, which implies improved opportunities for education in general, employment, equality in sociocultural and political participations. Thus, there are women-pilots, women-ministers, women-professors and politicians nowadays. With the astronomical improvements in InfoTech, which is being reinforced by globalization and democratization, the life of the woman is tremendously mobilized. Thus, women crave for emancipation. By way of emancipation, women seemingly abandon their naturally assigned family socialization task, which maintains family balance. Although the woman's motherly love, care and submissiveness may not always be totally reinforced, it is ever essential both for societal and familial stability.

Nevertheless, one can imagine that the emancipation of women and their equality with men may be pretty difficult to attain as long as they function both as housewives and mothers. This is because in that way, they are excluded from productive jobs. The first step for female emancipation, which derives its inspiration from socialism, whose core assumption is that all humans are equal, would be the introduction of the entire female gender into the public service. This implies deletion of the chief feature of the family — economic unit of the society, which is more or less impossible. Therefore, female emancipation, from which Urhobo women are not excluded can only be relatively attained at personal levels, as so many women are already doing, for example the working class women. Besides, the economic unit is the basis of the capitalist power. Therefore, the disappearance of the economic unit is an indirect disappearance of capitalism and the stamping out of the patriarchal power. Nevertheless, capitalism is seen as the most popular socio-political and economic ideology in human history. Societies that practiced the opposite, socialism such as the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) crumbled, due largely to inherent ideological flaws, thereby underpinning the claim that capitalism is in the lead.

Subsequently, one can understand that the socialism inspired female emancipation and capitalism are at cross current with each other and only the stronger will emerge victorious. By and large, it seems that the biologically engendered asymmetry in the Urhobo socioeconomic and political culture (encapsulated in Urhobo sex proverbs) will persist, though it may alter to become sophisticated as an adaptation to the current global realities. For instance, Urhobo women elites still adhere to the indigenous Urhobo socioculture, despite the powerful influence of Christianity and Westernization.

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