

Gender Stereotypes in Selected Igbo Proverbs
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Abstract

This paper investigates observed encodings of gender stereotypes in Igbo proverbs, the obvious pigeonhole effects of these stereotypes on male-female operational spaces, and how the fixed formats of these proverbs present them as taken-for-granted, impermeable for deconstruction and recontextualization. Drawing insights from sexism, critical discourse analysis (CDA), conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) and critical metaphor analysis (CMA), the paper analyzes different sets of gender-related Igbo proverbs in four selected source domains: lineage perpetuation/inheritance rights, domestic sphere, marriage, and leadership/social privileges – with gender categories as target domains. CMT was deployed to predict the underlying conceptual metaphors encoding the stereotypes while CMA explains their pragmatic implications and rhetoric potentials through a corpus-based approach. The various inequities and inequality encoded in these stereotypes are viewed in relation to critical language awareness of power structures which are the concerns of CDA. The findings show a preponderance of male stereotypic dominance in all the domains: positive-male, negative-female semantic and operational spaces, fixity of gender roles, male as norm, perpetuation of the patriarchal order and naturalized subordination of women and hence raise consciousness on possible revision, recontextualization or jettisoning of these sexist expressions to temper their debilitating potentials to optimum human resource development.

Keywords: stereotypes, Igbo proverbs, conceptual metaphor, sexism, gender discrimination, critical discourse analysis, critical metaphor analysis.

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Stéréotypes de genre dans quelques proverbes igbo

Résumé

Cet article étudie les encodages de stéréotypes de genre observés dans quelques proverbes igbo, les effets visibles de la marginalisation causée par ces stéréotypes sur les espaces opérationnels hommes-femmes et dans quelle mesure les formats fixes de ces proverbes les présentent comme des éléments pris pour acquis et imperméables pour la déconstruction et la recontextualisation. Tout en s'inspirant du sexisme, de l'analyse critique du discours (ACD), de la théorie de la métaphore conceptuelle (TMC) et de l'analyse critique de la métaphore (ACM), cet article analyse les différents groupes de proverbes igbo liés au genre dans quatre sources de domaine précises: les droits à la pérennisation de la lignée/ l'héritage, la sphère domestique, le mariage et les privilèges liés au leadership ou à la vie sociale – avec les catégories de genre comme des domaines cibles. Nous avons déployé la TMC et l'ACM respectivement pour prédire les métaphores conceptuelles fondamentales encodant les stéréotypes et pour expliquer leurs implications pragmatiques et les potentiels rhétoriques à travers une approche à base de corpus. Les différentes iniquités et l'inégalité encodées dans ces stéréotypes sont considérées par rapport à une prise de conscience critique linguistique des structures du pouvoir qui sont les sujets de l'ACD. Les conclusions montrent une prépondérance de dominance stéréotypée des hommes dans toutes les sphères: l'homme considéré comme l'agent de permanence des propriétés fermières, l'homme considéré comme le propriétaire, l'homme considéré comme le fournisseur et l'homme considéré comme un être rationnel et supérieur; tandis que la femme est considérée comme un signe avant-coureur d'extinction des propriétés fermières, un appendice, une consommatrice, une propriété, un être avec un esprit instable et un être inférieur, pour ne mentionner que quelques exemples, créant ainsi des stéréotypes de genre qui légitiment et perpétuent la discrimination de genre, ce qui affecte la performativité de genre. Cet article met en lumière les points suivants: l'homme considéré comme un être positif, la femme considérée comme un être négatif, la fixité des rôles, l'homme considéré comme une norme, la pérennisation de l'ordre patriarcal et la subordination naturalisée des femmes. Par conséquent, cet article renforce la prise de conscience sur une révision possible, une recontextualisation ou l'abandon de ces expressions sexistes avec pour but de diminuer leurs effets potentiels négatifs sur le développement optimal des ressources humaines.

Introduction

As an insider, active participant, and indigene of Igbo society on the one hand, and an educated career woman, wife, and mother on the other, I have observed the gender encodings in some Igbo proverbs with keen interest. One of the proverbs that triggered this interest is: *Ili nwanyi adighizi n'obi nna ya* (a woman's grave is not in her father's homestead). This obviously innocuous rhetoric was deployed to strategically dispossess the rightful female heir of her inheritance and to transfer it to a distant male relation, an incident which led me to a number of questions on why the Igbo culture should institutionalize, legitimize, and perpetuate this obvious injustice on the grounds of sex differences, how proverbs have strategically been recruited as ideological apparatus for this perpetuation, and the stereotypic schema evoked by the fixed formats of these proverbs.

Igbo refers to both the people of, and the language spoken in, South-eastern Nigeria with a population of about 32 million or 18% of Nigeria's estimated 177 million (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook, Wikipedia, 2016). The core Igbo speech community is located mainly in five states – Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi, with some speakers found in Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, and Akwa Ibom states. A number of factors about the Igbo social and cultural set-up may provide a background to its values and belief systems, and also give insights into the image and event structures evoked in the proverbs sustaining gender stereotypes. As a participant observer, these may be obvious in these areas:

1. Igbo culture: It does not recognize any sovereign leadership (*Igbo enweghi eze*). It is a classless society with the man as the supreme head of each family.
2. Kinship organisation: Igbo as a patrilineal society traces genealogy through the male. Consequently, “matrilineal” as a concept is an empty word in most parts (except Oguta, Abiriba, and some parts of Ebonyi), useful only to the extent that it provides a contrast for the

patrilineal. Continuity of the lineage therefore rests on the male in most Igbo communities and paternity rights are also the man's prerogative.¹

3. Patriarchy is the norm. Women are predicated on men as either sisters, daughters, wives or mothers, Matriarchy is a dummy expression except perhaps in relation to female deities (Amadiume, 1987).

Proverbs in Igbo society are the embodiment of Igbo wisdom and their philosophy of life. The meanings they encode are regarded as fixed and absolute truths. It is this fixedness and truth attributes that are the concern of this work, especially as it affects proverbs that relate to gender roles and relations. Above all, proverbs are evidence of oratorical skills as their apt use has profound rhetorical effects. According to Achebe (1958:5) "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (translated in Igbo as *Ilu bu mmanu e ji eri okwu*). The abstract nature of proverbs makes them special art for sages as there is usually no one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning. A person is adjudged wise or foolish by the aptness of the proverbs he/she uses such that in Igbo, one does not 'say' a proverb, one 'throws' it (*itu* – with high-high tone; some dialects use the term *itu* 'carve' with high-low tone). When a proverb is 'thrown', the wise will 'catch' it, decode the meaning and use it to solve life's problems while the foolish will be confounded. One who cannot discern the meaning of a proverb is considered a fool (*ofeke*). This assertion is buttressed by these proverbs:

A turu ilu ka o gbaa ofeke gharii, o si ka a kowaara ya – A proverb is thrown to confound a fool, and he/she asks for an explanation.

¹ In Amadiume's (1987) *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, women with certain attributes in Nnobi community take on masculine roles by marrying wives, but only in order to bear children to propagate their father's lineage – and not theirs as women – in the case of childlessness.

A tuoro omara, o mara, a tuoro ofeke, o fejie olu/o fenyé isi n'ohia – Throw a proverb to the wise and they understand, but throw it to the fool and they break their neck/~~they~~ fling their heads into the bush.

Ofeke amaghi mgbe e kere nku ukwa – The fool does not know when the booty is shared (because he/she did not 'catch' the proverb calling for it).

Onye a tuoro ilu kowaara ya, ego e jiri luo nne ya furu ohia – When a proverb is thrown to, and explained for a person, the mother's bride price is a waste.

On the other hand, one who shows proficiency in 'throwing' proverbs is extolled: *O bu nna gi muru gi* – 'You are the true child of your father'. This tendency of assigning responsibility of a child's foolishness to the mother and wisdom to the father is one of the many stereotypes interrogated in this study. Thus proverbs are recruited in male-female references as ideological tools to project certain versions of reality. This characteristic makes them good candidates for the present study.

Gender stereotypes

Of all the definitions of the word *stereotype* in literature, that of Watson and Hill (2006: 276) seems the most apt to our conception of gender stereotypes: "to stereotype means to pigeonhole, to thrust into tight slots of definition which allow little adjustments or change". Gender stereotypes are thus seen as fixed, taken-for-granted, culture-specific, simplistic, and impressionistic generalizations about gender attributes, differences, and roles of individuals and groups based on distinctions of biological sex. They could be positive or negative, and sometimes, regardless of evidence to the contrary, they tend to cast people in apparently irreversible moulds, and thus are known to rarely communicate accurate information (Cliffnotes, Wikipedia online; Hewstone & Giles, 1997).

Conclusions from findings also show various forms of stereotype ascribed to women and men speech styles – prestige norms-vernacular, rapport-report talk, hedges-unmitigated, topic support or backchannel-topic development, non-interruption-interruption, status-solidarity, cooperation-competition, dependence-independence, intimacy-aggression, intuitive-analytical, submissive-dominant, emotional-rational, receptive-assertive, and passive-active, among many others (See Holmes, 2008; Curry *et al*, 1997:235; Malmkjaer, 2002; Eckert, 1997:217-218; Cameron 1998). These stereotypes polarize female-male attributes along subordinate-dominant binaries. In as much as this work sees such binary stereotypic definitions of male-female attributes, the ones identified are not so much associated with speech styles of the sexes as with linguistic representations relating to the use of proverbs in the Igbo culture and how these proverbs tend to set limits to gender performance.

In the African context, existing literature consistently points to the positive male-negative female linguistic representation. Oha's (1998) study of the semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs finds that women are construed as foolish, weak, jealous, evil, unfaithful, dependent, frivolous, and seductive, while men are construed as rational, independent, and superior, and that this devaluation is face-threatening to women. He claims that proverbs imbue a kind of permanence to this negative image construction but is silent on how to subvert it. Hussein's (2005) work in selected gender-related African proverbs shows how these proverbs indoctrinate boys and girls respectively into dominant masculinity and subordinate femininity. He asserts that proverbs are among the social bases for the exploitation, denigration, and exclusion of women in Africa. He identifies 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. Nakhavaly and Sharifi's (2013) study of Persian proverbs also identifies elements of semantic derogation, sex discrimination, and misrepresentation of women in the studied expressions.

These studies agree on the fixity of proverbs, their inherent sexist connotations, and their tendency to sustain gender stereotypes. The questions raised in the study are: what stereotypes do these proverbs project about men and women? How relevant are these stereotypes to present day state of women enlightenment and their place in the Nigerian socio-political milieu? What do these encodings imply to the issue of gender parity? Is there a need to deconstruct, revise, and recontextualize the fixed wordings of some of these proverbs?

Theoretical framework

Proverbs in this work are treated as figurative expressions, also called creative, poetic or novel metaphors as different from conventional metaphors, in line with Lakoff's "Contemporary theory of metaphor" (1993) and Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Thus conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) is one of the theories used in this work alongside critical discourse analysis (CDA), critical metaphor analysis (CMA), and insights from sexism, one of the targets of feminist campaigns. The synergy of the first three approaches in the analysis of metaphor has been confirmed by Charteris-Black (2004). These will be discussed briefly in the following sections.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) is a cognitive approach to the analysis and interpretation of metaphor credited to Lakoff and Johnson (1980). They see metaphor not as a factor of language but of thought and that the whole of everyday language use is pervasive with metaphor. For instance, Lakoff's (1993) illustration of LOVE IS A JOURNEY and its metaphorical entailments as *We've come to the crossroads, This relationship is heading nowhere* and other such expressions map experiences from the domain of love (target domain) onto that of a journey (source domain). They see most of everyday expressions as illustrations of this kind of cross-domain mappings in the conceptual

system. Drawing from this theoretical framework, I have recruited CMT to determine the cross-domain mappings of these gender-related proverbs and the image-schema structures they evoke. Lakoff (1993: 229-234) has classified proverbs (as well as personification) as ‘novel’, ‘poetic’ or ‘image’ metaphors, as against conventional metaphors, because whereas the former evoke what he termed “generic-level knowledge schema”, the latter construe “image-schema structure”; where the former is regarded as “one shot metaphor” (1993:229) which maps only one image onto another, the latter maps many concepts from the source domain onto many corresponding concepts in the target domain.

In further explaining the generic level knowledge schema, that is, the analogy drawn between the knowledge structure expressed by the literal interpretation of the proverb and its metaphorical interpretation, Lakoff (1993: 233-234) illustrates with a Persian proverb “Blind blames the ditch”. Using the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor, Lakoff explains a whole range of general knowledge schemas that are drawn from to account for the specific case stated in the proverb. This general knowledge structure is said to consist, among others, of causal, temporal and purpose structures including the event shape – that is, image-based inferences about the event as persistent or instantaneous, completed or open-ended, and so on.

In what he terms “the invariance principle” which holds that “metaphorical mappings preserve the cognitive topology (that is, the image-schema structure) of the source domain in a way consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain”, Lakoff (1993:215) claims that this invariance principle applies equally to conventional as well as novel metaphors, that is, TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN conceptual mapping. Thus, in this study, gender categories are considered the target domains while the abstract entities and events linked with gender categories in the identified areas of operation are the source domains. We should note here that the terminologies for these conceptual mappings, as used in this work, are from the author’s intuition as they emanate from the analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is geared towards the deconstruction of ideologically biased discourses and bringing up for scrutiny linguistic representations that are repressive (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2005). Since sexism is an aspect of linguistic repression (Cameron, 1998) and most of the selected proverbs appear to be among the covert linguistic usages that may mask subtle asymmetries and repressions, especially against women, CDA has been used as a linguistic means of emancipating those oppressed by dominant discourses and bringing up such expressions for scrutiny and deconstruction. Insights from CDA will serve to focus on the power structures construed by the proverbs and how these create asymmetries that tend to be discriminatory, thus reinforcing gender inequality and inequity. CDA perspectives will provide a ground to question these sexist expressions and create awareness for their possible deconstruction and recontextualization.

Critical Metaphor Analysis

Critical metaphor analysis (CMA) combines insights from CDA and CMT to offer a pragmatic explanation of the rhetorical potentials of texts using a corpus-based approach. Charteris-Black (2004:31) defines a corpus as

...any large collection of texts that arise from natural language use; in a linguistic context, it is in contrast to other types of text that were invented specifically for illustrating a point about language. The notion of attested language is very important in corpus linguistics and implies that data are not invented for the benefit of a model but rather that the model emerges from large and representative samples of language. Other than this, there are no constraints on corpus composition nor are there any constraints on corpus size; these are determined by our purposes in designing the corpus in the first place.

On the strength of the above assertion, I make the claim that the selected proverbs have most, if not all, the characteristics of a corpus and thus provide authentic data for analysis of gender stereotypes. Proverbs are said to be

powerfully persuasive and emotive and a corpus-based analysis of the conceptual schemas they evoke can reveal their potentials to shape the way reality is framed (Charteris-Black 2004). Thus, by applying knowledge from critical linguistics, cognitive linguistics and corpus linguistics, we can explain whether these proverbs contribute to the construction of gender in Igbo culture and the ideologies they project, the thought processes they evoke in terms of the image-schema structures and cross-domain mappings, and how these affect gender divisions of labour and the assignment of roles and expectations in the culture. Such explanations will bring into perspective the naturalized and commonsense limits and fixed roles assigned to individuals by the stereotypes encoded in the proverbs so that we can properly assess their gains in this age of global enlightenment on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Sexism

Part of feminist awareness has been to point out linguistic representations that tend to denigrate, discriminate against, and assign subordinate positions to the sexes, especially women. Such repressive and discriminatory language use has been described as sexist language. Lakoff's (1975) *Language and Woman's Place* argues that women are socialized from birth into a "woman's register" deficient in content and reinforcing their subordination. Dale Spender (1980) was among the early radical feminists that argued for the existence of sexism in the English language. The dominant position of the masculine gender in language has led these scholars to argue that language is man-made, and that there is only one gender – the masculine norm; feminine being a deviation from the norm. Others claim that it is only the feminine gender that can correctly be termed gender; "masculine is the generic, coterminous with human" (Mills 1998:66). Mills, quoting Monique Wittig, asserts: "There are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine; the masculine not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general".

The works of Okonkwo (1977) and Emenanjo (2015:25) provide enough evidence to the fact that the Igbo language is not morphologically-marked for

gender, as in for instance English; see the *waiter-waitress*, *hero-heroine* pairs; nor is there any difference in masculine-feminine pronouns and other linguistically gender-marked expressions like the generic references. It could therefore be argued that, being genderless, the Igbo language is not inherently sexist. However, certain usages, such as proverbs, tend towards sexist representation, especially subtle discrimination, denigration, semantic derogation and inferiorization of women. It is the contention of this paper that such textual representations should be a matter of concern as they create artificial (even if culturally defined) limits to the operational spaces of women and men. It is for this reason that these proverbs are studied to bring up for scrutiny their debilitating potentials in optimal human development.

Methodology

The work adopts a qualitative approach to the identification, classification, interpretation, and explanation of Igbo proverbs according to their male-female references; the stereotypes associated with them are predicted from their underlying conceptual metaphors. These stereotypes are labelled by the author as they emanate from the analysis. Sources of textual data include participant observation and proverbs texts related to gender, such as Ogbalu (1978), Ezeobah (2005), Spears (2005), Ndubisi (2008), and Nwadike (2009). Participant observation enabled me to recruit intuitive knowledge and subjective perception which are welcome advances to social research as opposed to the rigid objectivity of psychometric research (Nunan, 1996:54). Thus, the author depended much on reflexive accounting of indexical elements in the culture as encoded in the proverbs. Such reflexive accounting was also a handy tool in predicting the conceptual metaphors that embody the identified gender stereotypes, and the various cross-domain mappings. Interview data from five respondents, two chosen from the urban, two from rural, and one from an academic setting were also used. In all, a total of eighty (80) proverbs, translated in the nearest English equivalents, were used for analysis.

Data presentation and analysis

Analysis was focussed on the general and specific knowledge schemas that are evoked by the identified proverbs and the conceptual mappings of gender categories across domains of inheritance/lineage perpetuation, family circle, marriage, and social power/privileges. Thereafter, the entailments/inferences to be drawn from these proverbs and the stereotypes they encode are accounted for.

Inheritance/Lineage Perpetuation

Proverbs relating to inheritance and lineage perpetuation evoke such conceptual frames as ‘survival’, ‘continuation’, ‘loss’, ‘closed road’, ‘deserted homestead’ and ‘overgrown with weeds’ with respect to gender, drawn from the lexical field of ‘permanence’ and ‘extinction’. The following proverbs seem to construe MAN AS PERMANENT HOMESTEAD and WOMAN AS EXTINCT HOMESTEAD stereotype.

- (1) *Ama nwoke koro na-ada okpuno:* (A compound lacking males turns into a deserted homestead (one overgrown by weeds))
- (2) *Onye nne ji ya na nwanyi bu otu nwa:* (One who has a woman as his only sibling is an only child).
- (3) *Ama choro ichi echi na-amu soso nwanyi:* (A homestead threatening extinction begets only female offspring)
- (4) *Ili nwanyi adighi n’obi nna ya:* (A woman’s grave is not in her father’s homestead).
- (5) *Onye akpacharaghi anya oge o na-aju ihe nwunye ya muru, o juo “o muru ole”?* (If one does not exercise restraint in asking about the sex of his newborn baby, he will inadvertently ask “how many did she get?”).

This last proverb equates the delivery of a baby girl to the delivery of twins which, before the coming of the Christian missionaries, was not welcome news. Then, twins used to be thrown away as “abomination babies”.

Family/Domestic Sphere

The following metaphors can be deduced from proverbs about gender roles and expectations in the family or domestic domain: Pillar versus Support/Appendage, Financier/Breadwinner versus Consumer/Glutton, Caretaker/Public versus Caregiver/Domestic.

The Pillar-Support/Appendage Stereotype

Man as Pillar

- (6) *Dibulo bu aka ogori na-ehii n'isi.* (The pillar of the household (husband) is the hand that holds the wife's head).
- (7) *Oke osisi daruo ala, umu nnunu, eju ohia.* (When a great tree falls, the birds will scatter in the bush – (i.e. when the husband dies, the family will collapse).
- (8) *Ihe nwoke bu n'isi kariri ibu* – (What a man is carrying on his head is more than a load; a man carries heavy responsibilities)

Woman as Support/Appendage

- (9) *Nwanyi ezubeghi oke ruo mgbe o gadoro nwoke aka.* (A woman is not complete until she is hooked to a man).
- (10) *Ogori enweghi di enweghi olu uka* – (A woman without a husband is without a voice)
- (11) *Nwanyi lelia di ya, ike akpoo ya nku* – (If a woman relegates her husband to the background, her buttocks will dry up/will get thin).
- (12) *Nwanyi chupu di ya, isi eruo ya ala* – (If a woman sacks her husband, her head will soil in earth and grime).
- (13) *Ogori dabeere n'ahu di ya ji mma egbuwa okwu.* (A woman leaning on her husband's body breaks words with a knife; that is, a wife who is assured of her husband's support talks without fear).
- (14) *Anaghi abu ajadu na ntoru, kama o bu onye di ya nwuru, o buru ajadu.* (One is never a widow by age, one only becomes a widow at the demise of her husband).

It should be noted that the word *Ajadu* (a woman who has lost her husband) has no male equivalent in Igbo language, as obtains in the English 'widow-widower'.

The Financier-Consumer Stereotype

The identified proverbs assign the responsibility of providing for the family's upkeep: feeding, clothing, shelter and education of children, to the husband. The wife on the other hand is construed as consumer, exemplified by the title of *Oriaku* (Consumer of Wealth). Closely linked to the consumer metaphor is the schema of woman as 'glutton'. A number of proverbs exemplify this financier-consumer stereotype.

- (15) *Anu kwuru n'oku, nwanyi ejebe ozi ezighi ezi* – (When meat is roasting on the hearth, the woman becomes overzealous to run unsolicited errands).
- (16) *Onye choro ka nwunye ya rubere ya isi, ya sugbuoro ya otu ozu anu* – (One who wants his wife to be compliant should slaughter an animal for her).
- (17) *E siwe esiwe, a huba ahuba ka nwanyi ji erigbu di ya* – (Cooking and roasting at the same time makes a woman render her husband bankrupt).
- (18) *"Nna anyi nna anyi" ka nwanyi ji erigbu di ya* – ("My Lord, my Lord" is a woman's strategy for liquidating her husband).
- (19) *Onu uto si na ya gbuwe nwanyi, na ya agaghi emere ya ebere* – (Sweet tongue said that if he begins to kill a (gluttonous) woman, he will not have any pity on her).

The following present the woman's insatiability and ingratitude in spite of all that she may be provided with by her husband:

- (20) *E richaa a goo mere nwanyi agbaghi afo onu* – (Eat and deny makes a woman not to grow beard – because her appetite is insatiable which makes her to always demand for more).

The supportive role of the woman in the family circle is encoded in the next proverb in (21) and applies when a woman co-provides for family upkeep:

- (21) *Nwanyi toghaa "Oriaku" o zaba "Odoziaku" ma o bu "Osodieme"* (When a woman overgrows the name *oriaku* (consumer of wealth), she becomes *odoziaku* (preserver of wealth) or *osodieme*" (husband's co-doer).

In the case where a man cannot provide for the family, rather than blame the man, in the proverbs, the woman takes the blame for being boastful about it. Consider these proverbs below:

- (22) *Nwanyi tuo ari, akuko eju ogbo* – (When the wife provides food, she will peddle stories in the arena; that is, she will be boastful about it).
- (23) *Onye nwanyi na-enye nri, ngwe na-egwe ya afo* – (For the one who is fed by his wife, enzymes grind his stomach; that is, he suffers irritating guts).
- (24) *E chekwube ogori, e rie n'ime abali*. (Depending on the wife to provide food results in eating late in the night).

The Caretaker-Caregiver Stereotype

The Caretaker-Caregiver stereotype inherits the Financier-Consumer/Preserver according to Lakoff's (1993) inheritance hierarchy because, just like the Financier/Preserver, this stereotype assigns public caretaking roles to men while those of women encompass the mothering, nurturing, cooking, and caregiving roles. This stereotype is exemplified in these proverbs.

- (25) *Nna turu ari ka o zuo mana nne webilatara ka o fodu echi*. (Father provides food to satisfy the family but mother rations it to last till tomorrow).
- (26) *Nwoke waa ohia kuta nri, nwanyi awaa ngiga site ya*. (A man forages the bush to provide food, a woman forages her ingredients' basket to cook it).

Because cooking is regarded as the exclusive preserve of women, men involved in it are represented as either not married or effeminate or irresponsible.

- (27) *Okokporo sibe nri maba osu, ego nwanyi adila ya n'aka*. (When a bachelor is cooking and sighing, the bride price is in his hand/he has got enough bride price for a wife).
- (28) *Okokporo jejurugwo, ntu ututu nokwa na-eche ya*. (The overnight ash on the hearth waits patiently for a loafing bachelor).²

² Because he has no wife to remove it for him, anytime he returns from loitering about aimless, he has to perform the womanly chore of removing the overnight ash from the hearth before he can cook.

- (29) *Nwoke muta iga n'ite ofe nwunye ya kuru ofe n'asoghi nwunye ya anya, nwunye ya amuta igbanye aka n'ukwu agwa di ya okwu.* (When a man belittles himself by going to take soup from his wife's pot without minding his wife's feelings, the wife will learn to talk to him with hands akimbo).

Marriage/Conjugal Rights

The following conceptual mappings can be drawn from proverbs that convey the male-female roles in the marriage institution: Buyer versus Commodity, Owner versus Property, Unlimited time versus Limited time, Love/Hate versus Understanding/Learning, Sexually Aggressive versus Sexually Passive/Loose, Beauty as Wealth versus Beauty as Physical Adornment.

The Buyer-Commodity Stereotype

Igbo culture prescribes a customary bride price to be settled by any man who wants to take a wife. One of the conditions for eligibility in marriage is that the man has got enough money to pay for the wife's bride price, which could be exorbitant in some areas like Imo State. This custom therefore construes marriage as a mercantile transaction which costs money to the buyer and brings in money to the seller. The cost of the 'commodity' may be burdensome on the 'buyers' as symbolized in these proverbs.

- (30) *A na-acho aku e ji aluru okokporo nwanyi, ndi di ime ana-amu nwoke nwoke.* The wealth to marry a wife for the bachelor is not in sight, yet those that are pregnant keep bearing male children.
- (31) *O bu ihe ji okokporo alughi nwunye jikwa ndi luru otu alughi nke abuo.* What is preventing a bachelor from marrying a wife is equally preventing one who has one wife from marrying the second.

Thus, reference to a wife's role in her husband's house is often in terms of the "wealth" metaphor and also on a 'profit and loss' basis. For instance,

- (32) *Onye a tuoro ilu kowaara ya, ego e ji luo nne ya furu ohia.* If a proverb is thrown to someone and explained, the mother's bride price is a waste.

This "commodity" may depreciate with age.

- (33) *A luta agbogho, a chupu agadi.* When a new bride is married, the old will be discarded.
- (34) *E lewe agadi nwanyi anya, o dika e jighi ego luo ya.* Looking at an old woman, it would seem as if money was not paid on her head.

The Owner-Property Stereotype

The mercantile metaphor assigns ownership rights to the buyer while the commodity bought becomes the possession of the owner in what has been called the Owner-Property stereotype. This stereotype is exemplified in these proverbs.

- (35) *Onye lutara nwanyi mara mma na-enwe anya ano, ma o bughi otu ahu, ihe mmadu aghoro ihe onye ozo* (A man who marries a beautiful wife must have four eyes, otherwise his property may become another's/~~may change hands~~).
- (36) *Kporo kporo ka mma n'anwuru, o rughi n'ikporo nwanyi onye ozo.* ("Take, take" is better with snuff but not applicable in taking another man's wife).

It is common belief that a woman at the demise of her husband wishes to be "taken over" or "inherited" by her husband's male sibling.

- (37) *Nwanyi di ya nwuru si a na-agba izu maka olili ozu di ya, si na-agbakwa maka onye nkuchi.* (A woman whose husband had died said that as plans for the burial are going on, plans for inheriting her should also be included).

This last proverb presents a woman as 'inheritable property' and assigns the responsibility of the desire to be inherited on the woman, thus divesting direct responsibility from the ideological apparatuses that enforce this practice.

The Limited-Unlimited Time Stereotype

Marriage in Igbo culture is seen as a woman's certificate to legitimacy, to social recognition and respect. A woman considers herself lucky if she happens to get a proposal of marriage in her prime when her beauty is still blossoming. This proverb encodes the joy of a newly married girl.

- (38) *Nwanyi a lutara ohuru si na ochi di ya n'eze ekweghi ya afuke oku.* (A newly married wife said that the joy in her teeth prevents her from blowing the fire).

When she is unlucky not to get a husband in her prime, she is stigmatized with proverbs construing that her 'market has closed', i.e., she is no longer eligible

'to be bought'. These proverbs extend the "buyer-commodity" stereotype and beget the conceptual schema MARRIED IS LUCKY/HAPPY, UNMARRIED IS UNLUCKY/UNHAPPY. Conversely, a man's time for marriage does not have any such covertly prescribed limits.

- (39) *Agbogho gafee onye mu, o banye na onye na-alu ya.* (When a lady passes the age of 'whose daughter?' she enters that of 'whose wife?')
- (40) *Agbogho ahia suru si na ndi luru di lutara ofogeli.* The woman whose market has closed said that the married ones got only never-do-well husbands.

The Ram – Dog Stereotype

A man's sexual improprieties do not carry as much semantic derogation as those of a woman. The ram metaphor portrays the man as sexually aggressive, a welcome trait for an eligible bachelor, while the woman's dog metaphor presents her as sexually loose.

Man as Ram

- (41) *Aturu muru ebunu gba aka nwa* (An ewe that begets a ram is without an offspring [because it will always wander off in search of females])
- (42) *Ebunu laa azu, o bia ogu* (when a ram retreats, it comes back with more aggressive fight [said of a man's physical and sexual prowess])

Woman as Dog metaphor

There is a contradiction to how the Igbo culture construes a woman's sexual life. Whereas the culture expects the woman to be sexually passive and submissive to the man's advances, she is always suspected of infidelity, while the man's infidelity is usually construed as being in his nature as a polygamous being and is never linguistically stigmatized, as evidenced in these proverbs.

- (43) *Nwanyi ahu bu nkita* (that woman is a dog [i.e., the woman is wayward]).
- (44) *Ihe nwanyi muru ka o na-ekuputara di ya* (what the woman delivers is what she presents to the husband [usually said when the husband is doubtful of the wife's fidelity]).

- (45) *Nwoke na-etu onu na ya muru nwa, nwanyi ewere obi na-apiako onye bu nna nwa* – (When the man is boasting that he sired a child, the mother will harbour the image of the father in her heart).
- (46) *A chowa imata onye bu nna nwa, a juo nne nwa.* (If one wants to find out the father of a child, one should ask the mother).

Hate versus Blame

As the owner of the woman and everything about her, the man has the prerogative to treat his property as he wishes. He has the prerogative to hate his wife or love her, while the wife has to strive to learn and understand her husband's disposition, to earn the husband's love, and to avoid being hated.

- (47) *Nwanyi di ya kporo asi anaghi esite ya n'ofe uto.* (A hated wife does not earn her husband's love by cooking delicious soup).

The woman also seems to take the blame for the man's or family's downfall.

- (48) *Ebe nwoke dara, nwanyi no na ya.* (Where a man falls, a woman is present).
- (49) *Nwoke jiri nwanyi buru bu isi efu* (A man using a woman as a carrying pad is carrying on a bare head – a woman cannot be depended on in times of need).

On the other hand, a woman has no right to hate, rather should learn her husband's disposition and endure his hate, as exemplified in these proverbs:

- (50) *Uzo e si enweta obi nwoke bu site n'afo ya* (The way to a man's heart is through his stomach [advice to newly-married wives]).
- (51) *Onye di kporo asi, omumu akasie ya* (A hated wife is consoled by her offspring)

The Beauty as Wealth Versus Beauty As Adornment Stereotype

Whereas the man's 'beauty' is judged by the amount of wealth and affluence he has garnered for himself, which will guarantee his eligibility to pay the bride price for a wife and equally provide for his family, the woman's beauty is judged by her physical adornment, her passport to marriage. The word *ogaranya* (wealthy person) is usually associated more with males than females, as seen in the following proverbs.

Man's Beauty as Wealth

- (52) *A napu nwoke ihe o ji ama mma, mma ya aruo* (If you strip a man of his beauty (wealth), his beauty dims/despoils [meaning if you remove a man's source of income, he becomes a nobody]).
- (53) *Nwoke adighi ka o na-adi, e were nkata kunyere ya nri.* (When a man is not as he should be, he will be served food in a basket [i.e., he will be ridiculed by his wife]).

Woman's Beauty as Physical Adornment

A woman's physical beauty is her credential to marriage and attraction to the opposite sex. Physical beauty is her only means of being socially relevant and acceptable. So a woman spends a lot of time and money on physical adornment.

- (54) *Agbogho jiri ohu ukwu waa eze, o ga-achita ole n'ochi?* (A maiden who spends a bundle of cowries to carve her teeth, how much will she get by her laughter?)
- (55) *Nchiche bie agbogho imi, mkparita uka buzi naani nke ya na nna ya.* (A maiden whose face has been disfigured by smallpox has only her father to engage her in conversation [because no man will have anything to do with an ugly woman]).
- (56) *A dighi ebu onya di n'ihu eti agbogho* (With a sore on the face, one does not become the belle).

Leadership Rights/Social Power/Privileges

The proverbs encoding allocation of social power and privilege seem to assign to men more power and more rationality as against women, who are placed in powerless positions, and seen as foolish, more emotional, and more talkative. We have grouped these conceptualizations in these pairs of stereotypes: Powerful-Powerless; Wise-Foolish, and Taciturn-Chatter/Gossip.

The Powerful - Powerless Stereotype

Man as Powerful/Superior

The prefix *di-* and the word *eze* attached to a word signify exceptional power or strength or a man who is a leader respectively. The following lexical items

never refer to females – *dike* (superpower), *dimkpa* (superman), *dimgba* (super wrestler), *diji* (super yam farmer), *diochi* (super tapper), *dioka* (super craftsman), etc. Examples:

- (57) *A hu dike, e bie abia* (When a powerful man enters the arena, the drumming will be stopped [A man of honour commands respect]).
- (58) *Dimkpa taa aki, a hu ichere ya* (When a strong man eats palm kernels, the shells will be obvious. When a man of worth undertakes a venture, the results are usually noticeable).
- (59) *A gbawo dike izu, a gbaa ya ugboro abuo.* (If you sidetrack the powerful man in any decision, you will take the decision twice [Important decisions are not taken in the absence of important people]).
- (60) *E lewe eze anya n'onu, o dika o jighi ya nuo ara nne ya.* (Looking at the king's mouth, it would seem as if he never suckled his mother's breasts).³

Any man who behaves contrary to the superior-subordinate stereotype is stigmatized as effeminate. This misgendering puts such men in the same subordinate position as women.

- (61) *O dighi mma a gbachaa egwu ka nwoke, e bie ya ka nwanyi.* (It is not good to start dancing like a man and end like a woman [A true man exhibits strength by perseverance]).

Woman as Powerless/Inferior

Proverbs that illustrate women's inferior position in Igbo culture include:

- (62) *Ala nga nwanyi bu eze, ala nke ahu alaluola* (A land where a woman is king is doomed).
- (63) *Okeke nwanyi di nti njo* (A woman answering *Okeke* [a man's name] is bad to the ears).
- (64) *E jide anu egbe n'aka, a juwa na nwanyi o na-erikwa ya.* (Kite meat should be handy before deciding on whether a woman eats it).⁴
- (65) *Oke osisi daruo ala, nwanyi aria ya elu* (When a great tree falls to the ground, a woman climbs it. When a great man falls from fortune, lesser mortals make fun of him).

³ The king's mouth looks so majestic that one would think he never used it to suckle his mother's breast at infancy.

⁴ This calls to mind the taboo forbidding a woman from eating kite meat.

- (66) *Nwanyi a kunyere usurugada o na-agba amaghi na usurugada bu egwu mmanwu* (A woman who dances to the beat of “usurugada” should realize that “usuruagada” is a masquerade dance).

The Wise – Foolish, Rational-Emotional Stereotype

Grey hair is regarded as an epitome of wisdom associated more with men than women. Some proverbs that illustrate this include:

- (67) *Nze na awo bata n'okwu, okwu ebie.* (When the titled and the grey hair come into a conflict, the conflict ends).

The elderly man is taken as an intermediary between the living and the dead as shown below. *Okenye* (elderly) here may refer equally to women and men, but in this context, it implies men.

- (68) *Okenye kwaa ehem, e gewe nti ububo ndi mmuo* (When the elderly coughs *ehem*, one anticipates a discourse with the ancestors).⁵

Woman as Foolish/Fickle-minded/Emotional

A number of proverbs illustrate this stereotype.

- (69) *Anya mmiri umu nwanyi di ha n'obe aka* (Women carry their tears on their palms. [Because of their inability to withstand rational reasoning, they easily resort to tears]).
- (70) *A zuoro nwanyi uwe ohuru, o gaa okwukwa ozu onye di ndu* (If you buy a new dress for a woman, she goes for the funeral ceremony of the living).
- (71) *Nwanyi rijuru afo na-eji ukwu esonyere ibe ya nku n'oku* (A woman who has had too much to eat stokes another's (less privileged) fire with her legs). This goes to emphasize the “eating” metaphor associated with women.
- (72) *Okeke Oyoba si ya zichaa nwanyi ebe a na-akpu ara, ebe o soziri ya, o kpuo.* – (Okeke Oyoba [A mad man] said that his duty is to show a woman where to grow breasts, if they like, they should heed his voice or grow them anywhere they like).

Proverb (72) means that some women are so foolish as to grow breasts anywhere they like, including their armpits.⁶

⁵ The reference here is obviously to elderly men, because it is believed that a woman cannot commune with the ancestors.

Whereas the expression *agadi nwoke* (old man) positively stereotypes old men as sages, and repositories of wisdom and knowledge, the opposite - *agadi nwanyi* (old woman) negatively presents women as fickle, foolish, emotionally imbalanced, with falling teeth; thus conjuring the image of an ugly old hag, no longer capable of coordinating her thoughts, devoid of reason, and ailing.

- (73) *Agadi nwanyi m kunyere nwa, o si na eze adighi ya, ekunyere m ya nwa ka o tagbuo.* (An old woman whom I gave a baby to carry complains of aching tooth; did I give her the baby to eat?)
- (74) *Ana m asi agadi mechaa ati anya, o bu m ga-ata isi ya?* (Should I bother to tell an old woman to clean the secretion on her eyes; will I be asked to eat her head?)
- (75) *Agadi nwanyi daa nda ada naabo, a guo ihe o bu n'ukpa onu* (When an old woman falls twice, the contents of her basket should be counted [because left alone, she would not know they are depleting]).

The Taciturn Versus Gossip/Chatter Stereotype

Men are stereotypically unemotional and are said to “swallow their sorrow” with groans while women are known to be vociferous, chattering, and in most cases talkative to the extent of gossip. Men are said to believe in action more than words.

Man as Taciturn/Rational

- (76) *Ebunu na-elo n'ude* (The ram swallows his sorrows in silent groans [extending the “ram” metaphor]).
- (77) *Ihe nwoke na-eme di ya n'obi* (What the man does is in his mind).

Woman as Gossip/Chatter/Emotional/Wicked

A woman is stereotypically a gossip and a talkative. She is also taken to be inherently wicked. These proverbs exemplify this.

⁶ This refers to false breasts which some women grow in their armpits because of hormonal disorders.

- (78) *Nwoke luchaa ugu, nwanyi enwere akuko* (When the man is done with fighting, the woman becomes the story teller).
- (79) *E gbuo ogoli ma onu, ozo ekwuchie* (If you kill your wife because she is mouthy, her replacement will start where she stopped).
- (80) *Nwoke ji uche ya hu ajo nwanyi, ya na oso a na-eme-* (A man with his wits runs for dear life at the sight of an evil woman).

Having come this far in our analysis, it is pertinent at this juncture to summarize the various stereotypes construed by the cross-domain mappings in the selected proverbs. The table below provides these stereotypes.

Summary of Stereotypes in the Studied Proverbs

MEN	WOMEN
PERPETUATOR/PERMANENCE	TERMINATOR/ EXTINCTION
PILLAR	SUPPORT/APPENDAGE
BUYER	MERCHANDISE/COMMODITY
OWNER	PROPERTY
PREROGATIVE TO HATE	RESPONSIBILITY TO EARN LOVE
UNLIMITED TIME	LIMITED TIME
BREADWINNER/FINANCIER	CONSUMER/PRESERVER/CO-PROVIDER
BEAUTY AS WEALTH	BEAUTY AS PHYSICAL ADORNMENT
PUBLIC/CARETAKER -	DOMESTIC/CAREGIVER
RAM	DOG
POWERFUL/SUPERIOR	POWERLESS/INFERIOR
WISE	FOOLISH
TACITURN	CHATTER/GOSSIP
-	GLUTTON

Discussion

Our analyses show the selected proverbs as ideological expressions of the social definition and construction of gender categories. They possess profound cognitive and emotive potentials as rhetoric of persuasion. Most of the

proverbs studied encode positive male and negative female semantic and operational spaces in the four domains studied. They reinforce the view that patriarchy is subtly encoded in these expressions, thus constructing asymmetries in the role relationships of both sexes. Furthermore, as was obvious from our analysis, these proverbs are obliquely realized as creative or image metaphors where one image from these cultural domains is mapped onto a particular gender category, as established by CMT, thus giving rise to the various stereotypes identified. However, they evoke the type of image-schema called “generic-level metaphors” (Lakoff, 1993: 231), an open-ended category of knowledge schemas that may be universal or culture-specific and requires an analogy to be drawn between such knowledge schema and gender categories.

Generic-level knowledge schema evoked by proverbs on lineage perpetuation relate to the knowledge of the Igbo values and belief systems which abhor extinction of a lineage. Igbo as a patrilineal society favours male offspring more than females because sons will perpetuate the family name, take over the family inheritance, and ensure that the homestead does not go into extinction. The presence of a daughter in a homestead does not ensure its perpetuation; she must eventually be given out for marriage. This generic-level knowledge evokes conceptual mappings and image-schema structure: Source Domain: Permanent Lineage; Target Domain: Male = MALE AS PERMANENT HOMESTEAD; Source Domain: Extinct Lineage; Target Domain: Female = FEMALE AS EXTINCT HOMESTEAD.

In the domestic sphere, the male-female binaries that appear obviously encoded in the proverbs include Pillar/Support versus Appendage, Breadwinner versus Consumer and Caretaker versus Caregiver. The generic-level knowledge schema of ‘pillar’ and ‘support’ are drawn from the domain of architecture where buildings are propped up by pillars and beams. This metaphor presents the male as the stronghold of the family, the physical and spiritual pillar without whom the family lacks morale and falls apart. The woman’s persona on the other hand is predicated on that of the man as

appendage and only provides support services to the man. The man is expected to be the caretaker and breadwinner of the family while the woman should be the caregiver and the consumer of the husband's wealth. The argument is that even in the changing circumstances, where women contribute to family upkeep, these expressions still remain fixed and unchangeable.

The mental images and knowledge schemas activated by proverbs relating to marriage and conjugal rights are drawn from the domain of commerce or market transaction. The generic-level knowledge schema about market transactions involves the presence of buyer/seller and commodity. It also entails the availability of wealth in the form of bride price or other media that are necessary for the 'purchase' of the commodity. The commodity must be enticing enough to justify the expenditure on the part of the buyer and also ensure revenue for the seller.

This buyer-commodity metaphor inherits two other metaphors: the owner-property and the unlimited-limited time metaphor. The buyer ultimately becomes the owner and the commodity his property. The man has the prerogative to hate his wife while the woman has the responsibility to earn the husband's love as exemplified in the proverb, *Nwaanyi di kporo asi anaghi eteta ya n'ofe uto* (A hated wife does not earn the husband's love by cooking delicious soup). Furthermore, just as the commodity has limited time within which it could be bought, i.e. before the end of the market day, a woman is marketable in her prime, otherwise she becomes stale and unacceptable to men, her 'buyers'. Thus this 'commodity' depreciates with age, and within a limited time becomes unmarketable.

Proverbs regarding leadership rights seem to uphold the positive-male and negative-female operational spaces for the sexes. For instance, the saying, "That land is doomed where a woman rules" is a translation of a popular Igbo maxim which creates a negative schema of women's capability to function in that sphere. To legitimise this stereotype, women are represented in these proverbs as foolish, gossips, fickle-minded, emotional, men's sex objects, and overly conscious of their physical beauty, while men are rational, taciturn,

powerful, sexually aggressive, and ambitious to acquire wealth. Though in the present political dispensation in Nigeria, women have shown their potential to function effectively in governance spheres—albeit excluded by the prevailing patriarchal social orders from some leadership positions—these proverbs still maintain their original fixed formats.

The proverbs under study tend to reinforce the view that in Igbo culture, as in most cultures, androcentrism and patriarchy are entrenched and universal phenomena.⁷ These findings not only give credence to the existence of the male-as-norm ideology in Igbo culture and system of representation but also show the high premium attached to male roles and expectations while relegating those of females. Participant interview data confirm that some men may have been forced to become overambitious and engage in obnoxious economic ventures in order to meet societal expectations and thus may develop into what van Leeuwen (2011:121) calls “monstrous masculinity” identity. Similarly, the prescribed passive, subordinate and domesticated role into which these stereotypes have positioned women may create identity crisis especially among the educated ones who may want to aspire beyond the artificial limits set by gender categories.

The need for deconstruction and recontextualization

In spite of the apparent fixed formats of proverbs generally, I personally know that some Igbo proverbs which tend to have suppressive and life-denying connotations have been reworded to suit post-modern trends. For instance, the popular Igbo saying: *Egbe belu, ugo belu, nke si ibe ya ebena, nku kwaa ya* (Let the kite perch, let the egret perch, if anyone says no to the other, let its wings break) has had its final part reworded to “let it show the other where to perch” thus removing the underlying curse and imbuing the proverb with more

⁷ See Cameron’s (1998) collection of essays to which this work owes its inspiration and information.

humanity. It is thus possible that these apparently fixed expressions can be modified, just as Mey (2001:313) asserts, namely that “man made language is a historical accident and not a natural condition that cannot be changed”. For instance, the culture relating to lineage perpetuation has changed tremendously. Though patrilineal inheritance is still the norm, the homestead is no longer ‘transferred’ to collateral kin in the presence of a surviving female offspring. Thus, proverbs such as (3) and (4) ought to be expunged or replaced by *Uzo e ji nwa anaghi agba ataka* “the path leading to the homestead where one begets a child (both male and female) can never be overgrown by weeds”.

In the domestic sphere, proverb (20) is a way of deconstructing the consumer stereotype. The tag *Oriaku* (consumer of wealth) has successfully been replaced in many users’ stock of vocabulary with *Odoziaku* (preserver of wealth) or *Osodieme* (husband helper). The most explicitly feminist usage would prefer *okpataaku/obuteaku* (bringer of wealth). It is considered a misnomer these days to put the tag *oriaku* on an educated working class wife.

In the marriage domain, less emphasis on bride price can deconstruct the mercantile stereotype where husbands think that having ‘purchased’ their wives at exorbitant prices has conferred ‘ownership’ rights to such ‘property’. Bride price in most parts of Igbo culture—that is, physical cash, excluding other customary rites of wine, food, and incidental expenses—can cost as much as twenty to thirty thousand Naira (with the volatile exchange rate in the country, the Dollar equivalent may give a wrong picture). Such recontextualization has been approached legally and individually; legally by the Limitation of Dowry Law (Omonubi-McDonnell, 2003:96), which though not seriously enforced, has changed attitudes towards bride price. At the time that it was introduced in the 1960s, it pegged the quantum of bride price in the Eastern states at sixty Naira (Omonubi-McDonnell, 2003). This amount may be valued at thirty pounds at the time. The amount has undergone various revisions since then, and with the change of Nigerian currency to Naira in 1973, it is presently pegged at five hundred naira, approximately two Dollars

in the current exchange rate.⁸ Individually, most educated parents do not take any bride price; what they do is take a token of say, five hundred to one thousand naira from the twenty or thirty thousand Naira offered, while at the same time sharing incidental expenses in the customary rites with the groom. The “owner-property” stereotype has also been effectively deconstructed and recontextualized by the various endearments spouses address each other with, such as “*Nke m*” (Mine), “*Obi m*” (My Heart) and others which have effectively replaced “*Oga m*” (My Master) and “*Onye be m*” (my (human) possession).

Furthermore, proverbs that stipulate limits for individual’s eligibility for marriage ignore the individuality of women and their capacity to take decisions about how to live their lives. The stereotype presupposes that a career woman who decides to remain unmarried is “rejected by the market” as she is too old for “prospective buyers”. Such prescribed limits are psychological cogs in the wheel of women’s career pursuits in the educational and workplace spheres as they concentrate their energies on getting hooked to a man before the ‘market’ closes on them. Such women are usually socially stigmatized and semantically ostracised simply because they have not assumed their socially constructed role in the marriage institution – the role of a wife. Even when they aspire to this role, it only confers on them the stereotype of ‘appendage’ in spite of the social strata in which their positions would have rightfully placed them.

Stereotypes presenting women as inferior, wicked, foolish, and gossips create a schema that strategically excludes them from leadership positions and other social privileges. Such proverbs need to be recontextualized as the experiences of women leaders all over the world show them as more transparent, accountable, and honest. Leaders like the late Dora Akunyili, former Director of National Food and Drug Administration (NAFDAC), Ngozi Okonjo-Iwuala

⁸ The fluctuations in the foreign exchange rate in Nigeria make any accurate estimation of Naira-Dollar equivalence difficult.

of the World Bank, Virgy Etiaba, ex-Deputy Governor of Anambra State, Alele Williams, former Vice Chancellor, Winifred Oyo-Ita, the present Head of Service of the Federation, Kemi Adeosun, the Minister of Finance, and a host of others have proved that Nigerian and Igbo women can function even better in leadership roles and leave a cleaner record than male leadership fraught with corruption and human rights queries.

Finally, a lot can be done by women by repositioning themselves in systems of representation that inferiorize them. Since discourse can create as well as subvert particular versions of reality, women can take their destiny in their own hands and verbally deconstruct these sexist expressions, be they expressions used orally, in texts or in the media.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion suggests that some of the proverbs that encode gender are deployed to set artificial limits to gender performance, to put a ceiling on operational spaces of the sexes. Post-feminist theorists have likened gender to a change of clothes which are to be worn according to the needs of particular situation in line with Butler's performativity framework (1990). The work therefore recommends an androgynous post-gender culture which addresses gender construction in some of these obviously clichéd folk expressions with a view to consciously deconstructing artificial goal limits set by gender stereotypes as starters to achieving gender equity if not equality.

Furthermore, Nigeria is part and parcel of globalization and so is Igbo culture. Part of this global agenda is "gender equality and women empowerment", the fourth item in the eight-point proposal specified in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) initiated in 2000 (Asiabaka, 2012); and its replacement, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which came into effect in January 2016, an all-inclusive fifteen-year global seventeen-point agenda set up by the United Nations/World Health Organization to tackle the pressing problems facing our world by 2030, among which also is gender

equality. From all indications, Nigeria has keyed in into these worthwhile agenda by her earlier projection of ‘fifty-fifty gender equality by 2020’ (NTA news commentary, June 21, 2013). With the 2030 global deadline to improve life in a sustainable way through SDGs, the need to jettison these sexist and obviously hackneyed expressions in the Igbo culture for epicene ones becomes even more obvious.

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