



## Women vs Mothers in German, Yoruba, and Igbo Proverbs: A Paradoxical Worldview

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### Abstract

According to a German proverb, a country can be judged by the quality of its proverbs. This suggests that proverbs serve as a reflection of a society's value system. This study examines the relationship between language, gender, and culture by analyzing the representation of women and mothers in the proverbs of three distinct cultural groups: the German, Yoruba, and Igbo peoples. Although extensive research has been conducted on the role of proverbs in shaping cultural identity, there remains a gap in understanding how different categories of women, particularly mothers, are valued across linguistic and cultural contexts. To address this gap, the study adopts a qualitative approach, analyzing more than seventy proverbs collected from secondary literature, including journal articles, books, and online materials. The findings indicate a consistent pattern across all three cultures, in which society attributes greater respect and honor to mothers compared to other categories of women. As a result, proverbs often depict motherhood with a level of reverence and sensitivity that is not necessarily extended to women in general. These insights contribute to discussions on gender representation in language, highlighting the cultural significance of motherhood as a respected social role across diverse linguistic traditions.

**Keywords:** Comparative linguistics; cultural values; mothers; proverbs; sociolinguistics; women

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in proverbs can be traced back to the earliest Sumerian cuneiform tablets and the philosophical writings of Aristotle (Mieder, 1997). Proverbs, the nuggets of popular wisdom that are expressed in the form of succinct sayings, are important and frequent elements in ordinary conversation in many cultures (Mascolo & Stammberger, 2024; Crystal, 1997; Ghafoori & Elyas, 2023; Lajul, 2024).

According to Adedimeji (2003), in most parts of Africa, expressions in a speech are not considered rich and intelligent except when they are duly laced with proverbs; He opines that this explains why “a traditional African would constantly punctuate his speech with appropriate proverbs and aphorisms to drive his point home. The ability to sum up ideas and experiences in captivating and succinct expressions has always been considered a sign of native intelligence, linguistic competence, and cultural erudition”.

There is a preponderance of studies on proverbs both from the African perspective as well as from other parts of the world (Hand 1937; Sabban and Wirrer, 2013; Mieder 1997, 2004; Adedimeji 2003; Liu 2013). Some works have also viewed proverbs from the perspective of gender (Oduyoye 1979).

In the different languages under study for example, a lot of work has been carried out on proverbs, either as compilations of proverbs or specific studies on different aspects (Sheba, 2006; Simrock, 2011; Ibemesi et al., 2021; Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1990; Nwadike, 2009). A few others have investigated the construction of female identities via proverbs (Emeka-Nwobia & Ndimele, 2019; Oha 1998; Aleke, 2021; Nurminen, 2008; Raji-Oyelade, 1999). Still, others have carried out contrastive studies on the representation of women in proverbs of different languages (Gökay & Yücel, 2019; Koniuszaniec, 1999). One of the most comprehensive studies in this area is Schipper’s (2006) extensive research which explored women in proverbs from around the world. With a collection of more than 15,000 proverbial expressions from more than 240 languages and at least 150 countries from all continents, the work deals with all the aspects that women’s lives have in common based on physical characteristics and real or imagined behavioral characteristics. In her analysis, she observed general similarities between proverbs from widely different parts of the world.

This paper seeks to examine the interrelationship between language, gender, and culture by investigating the value placed on women versus that placed on mothers in the proverbs of the German, Yoruba, and Igbo people. It postulates that although quite several researches carried out on German, Yoruba, and Igbo proverbs about women show that most are replete with examples of patriarchal oppression, there is an ironical twist when it comes to proverbs about mothers. This study therefore aims to examine textual proverbial representatives of women and mothers/motherhood in proverbs in the three languages/cultures and questions the usual belief that the feminine gender is usually portrayed in negative terms in all the languages/ cultures under our study. The submission is that society shows more respect and honor to mothers than wives and other categories of women, and is therefore often more careful when it comes to the portrayal of mothers and motherhood in proverbs of the three cultures. This shows a big contradiction to the usual demonization of the feminine gender in proverbs.

### 1.1. Conceptual background

#### 1.1.1. Overview of Proverbs in Igbo, Yoruba, and German

Different attempts have been made by researchers to define proverbial expressions. For instance, Mieder (2004) defines proverbs as “short, generally known sentences of the folk that contains wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and that are handed down from generation to generation”. Emeka-Nwobia and Ndimele (2019) consider proverbs to be sacred metaphorical words that are infused with wisdom. They are channels of intergenerational cultural transfer and transmission of indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage, values, spirituality, cosmology, and the essence of the owners of the language. According to Schipper (2006), proverb definitions generally emphasized four main characteristics: “its concise

fixed artistic form; its evaluative and conservative function in society; its authoritative validity; and its anonymous origin". She defines proverbs as "short, pithy sayings ingeniously embodying an admitted truth or cherished belief".

### **1.1.2. Functions of proverbs**

According to Mieder (2004), proverbs fulfill the need for humans to summarize their experiences and observations into nuggets of wisdom that provide ready-made comments on every imaginable context, be it personal relationships or social affairs. Among the Igbo, proverbs are regarded as the palm oil with which words are eaten (Achebe, 1994). Emeka-Nwobia and Ndimele (2019) citing Fakoya (2007), notes that in Yoruba, proverbs are the vehicle of thought that is used to extract truth in obscure and elusive situations. Nwadike, (2009) opines, that proverbs have the function of commenting on and correcting the behavior of human beings of all ages.

African proverbs generally have been observed to possess educational and communicative power due to their application to the validation of ethics, procedures, and beliefs in the teaching of both the old and the young (Nwadike, 2009). This function is not limited to African societies alone but also extends to other nations and peoples all over the world, although proverbs are believed not to be used in the West as often as in Africa (Sabban and Wirrer, 2013; Schipper, 2006). For example, the result of a small survey carried out by Nurminen (2008) submitted that the older generation of Germans knows more prejudiced proverbs better than the younger generations but hardly uses them, whereas modern proverbs including sayings and current slogans are known and used by the younger generation. Nurminen (2008) posits further that such prejudiced proverbs do not describe truth as is known by the newer generation. However, the fact remains that prejudices continue to live on in the older proverbs, even when they are no longer being used actively (Nurminen, 2008).

### **1.2. Purpose of study**

The study aims to examine the representation of women and mothers in the proverbs of the Yoruba, German, and Igbo languages and cultures by analyzing their textual occurrences and contextual usage. Additionally, it seeks to investigate the common belief that the feminine gender is often portrayed in negative terms within the proverbs of these three linguistic and cultural groups. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide deeper insights into how gender roles and societal values are reflected and reinforced through proverbial expressions. The following are the questions which are expected to be answered through this study:

1. How are women portrayed in German, Yoruba, and Igbo proverbs?
2. Do all proverbs of German, Yoruba, and Igbo portray women and mothers the same way?
3. Is it true that the feminine gender is majorly portrayed negatively in German, Yoruba, and Igbo proverbs?

## **2. METHOD AND MATERIALS**

### **2.1. Data collection**

Data was collected chiefly from documented sources, that is, from purely secondary literature: journals articles, books, and internet sources (see for example Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2024; Unuabonah & Akinwotu, 2024; Oyekan, 2005; Yusuf, 1996; Sheba, 2006; Raji-Oyelade, 1999; Balogun, 2010; Falaju, 2017; Asiyanbola, 2007; Ibemesi & Ezeorah, 2021; Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1990; Nwadike, 2009; Emeka-Nwobia & Ndimele, 2019; Aleke, 2021).

Over seventy proverbs in different categories and in the three languages and cultures were identified from these sources and used for the analysis. German abounds in proverbs about women of all ages, so that out of a large number of them a selection had to be made for this study. The proverbs in German were translated by the researchers themselves, who are all fluent in German. Most of the Igbo proverbs were explicit in their mention of woman 'nwaanyi'- or mother 'nne', while others differentiated women according to age 'nwaagboghọ - 'young

woman', 'ogeri' 'woman of marriageable age' or 'agadi nwaanyi' 'old woman'. Furthermore, a total of 20 "mother-phoric" names were collected. Most of the names are sentences construed with the copulative verb "to be", thereby producing an existential predicate from 'nne' and an adjective that best describes, for the name-giver, the mental image of mother derived from one's personal experiences. Most of the collected data on Igbo proverbs already had glosses in English, but corrections were made, where necessary, with the assistance of Igbo language specialists. These were also of help in ascertaining the denotative and connotative meanings of the proverbs.

The Yoruba proverbs were sourced from the works of various authors who have researched extensively on Yoruba proverbs about women and the feminine gender in particular. Many of them were translated into English by most of the authors and these translations were often adapted where they correctly translated. Only in very rare cases of divergent views were the translations done by the Yoruba specialist in this research team.

## 2.2. Analysis

The selected proverbs were clustered into different categories based on recurring themes. They were subsequently subjected to close reading to unearth the different shades of meanings.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Negative Construction of Women in German, Igbo, and Yoruba Proverbs

All the three societies and cultures mentioned above are patriarchal in varying degrees, and according to feminist linguists, this pejorative and derogatory construction of women in patriarchal cultures aims at alienating and debasing them to continue the dominance of men as the powerful members of the society (Koniuszaniec, 1999; Emeka-Nwobia & Ndimele, 2019; Karakaya, 2016). This may be the reason for the preponderance of proverbs which depict women in a very negative light in such societies. As the analysis will show, proverbs and their variants on themes found in one culture often exist in others. According to Schipper (2006), researchers agree that standard patterns exist in the attribution of status and the division of labor between men and women, although things are changing nowadays. This is because, in virtually all societies and cultures, men fare better than women. Schipper (2006), quotes:

*"Men exercise more power, have more status, and enjoy more freedom. Men usually head the family, exercise considerably more force in legal, political, and religious matters, take alternative sexual partners, may often take more than one wife, have greater freedom in the choice of a spouse, usually reside near their kin, and have easier access to alcoholic beverages and drugs. Women, on the other hand, are often segregated or avoided during menstruation, must often share their husbands with one or more co-wives, are blamed for childlessness, and are often forced to defer to men in public places. Child rearing is the only domain where women regularly exert more influence than men".*

The Igbo and Yoruba proverbs portray the husband as the lord and master of the wife, who owns her and all that she possesses. A woman without a man is as good as nothing and cannot fulfill her essence in life. Such women are often looked down upon by society and may even be seen as possessed, with a spiritual problem, or be looked upon as witches. Women are thus regarded as inferior beings often acquired to fulfill the man's physical, emotional, social, and sexual needs. Even her vagina is no longer hers but solely to be used to satisfy her husband's will at all times. This is one of the reasons it is impossible in these two cultures for a wife to claim that her husband raped her.

In the German proverbs, women are depicted as soulless without a husband, liars, talkative, promiscuous, and always desiring to have the last word. Furthermore, they outwit even the devil and are promiscuous. In the following section, we present in a summarized form the categories of proverbs in the three languages which portray women in a negative light.

### **3.1.1. Women's need for a husband; the wife as a husband's possession**

#### **3.1.1.1. German**

1. Ein Weib ohne Mann ist ein Leib ohne Seele. (A woman without a husband is like a body without a soul).
2. Eine verheiratete Frau besitzt nichts außer ihrem Ehering und ihrem Haarband. (A married woman owns nothing apart from her wedding ring and her hair band).
3. Lieber einen Mann ohne Geld als das Geld ohne einen Mann. (Better to have a poor husband than to be rich without a husband).
4. Eine Frau ohne Mann ist eine Rebe ohne Pfahl, eine Flasche ohne Stöpsel, ein Schloß ohne Klinke. (A woman without a husband is a vine without a stake, a bottle without a stopper, a lock without a handle.)

#### **3.1.1.2. Igbo**

1. Onye nwe nwaanyi nwe ihe ya (He who owns a woman, owns her possessions).
2. Mma nwaanyi bu di (A husband is the beauty of a woman).
3. Nwaanyi lelie di ya, ike akpoo ya nku (If a woman disdains her husband, her vulva will dry up).
4. Nwaanyi tochaa, a naghị ajuzi onye muru kama a juwazie o bu onye na-alu (Once a woman has attained maturity, one no longer asks who is the father, but rather who is the husband).

#### **3.1.1.3. Yoruba**

1. Oko l'olori aya (The husband is the head of the wife).
2. Eni to l'eru lo l'eru, (The owner of the slave (wife) owns her property).
3. Akesan lopin Oyo; ile oko nibisinmi obinrin (Akesan is Oyo's boundary, so a husband's house is a woman's final destination).
4. Bi a ba ti fa obinrin fun oko, a Oko fa obo idi re tii (When we give a woman away in marriage, we give her vagina along with her).

### **3.1.2. Women as inferior, weaker beings, powerless, vulnerable, and gullible**

In this subcategory, women are represented as weaker beings, both physically and otherwise, as vulnerable and gullible. Some of the proverbs describe the transient nature of a woman's beauty.

#### **3.1.2.1. German**

1. Eine Frau ist ein halbgebackener Mann (A woman is a half-baked man).
2. An Weibern liegt keine Macht (Women have no power).
3. Mit Hunden fängt man Hasen, mit Lob die Narren und mit Geld die Frauen (One catches rabbits with dogs, a fool with praise and women with money).
4. Frauen haben lange Kleider und kurzen Mut (Women have long clothes and short courage).

#### **3.1.2.2. Igbo**

1. Nwaanyi na-amaghi aha di ya ga-ama ya ubochi agwo batara n' ulo ha (A woman who does not know the husband's name, will know it the day a snake enters their house).
2. O naghị adi mma agbachaa oso ka nwoke, ebie ya ka nwaanyi (It is not good to end a race like a woman, after running like a man).

3. Nwaanyi di ka ọkọkọ, a na- eji ọka aghogbu ya (A woman is like a foul, corn is used to lure her).

4. Nwoke chọọ idina agbọghọ, ọ gwa ya okwu ọlọlọ (When a man wants to sleep with a girl/woman he will propose to her).

5. Nwaanyi bụ akwụkwọ ndụ di n'ubi, di ya bụ mgbodo ya (A woman is a flower in the garden, her husband is the shield).

### 3.1.2.3. Yoruba

1. Ki obinrin to ato rin, ki okunrin to ato rin, ka wo eni maa l'omi leyin ese ju ara lo (allow a woman to pee while walking and a man to do the same and let's see who has water at the back of his/ legs).

2. Awo Egungun l'obinrin le se, awo gelede l'obinrin le mo, b'obinrin foju koro, oro a gbe (A woman can only boast of being in the Egungun and gelede cults if she tries the oro-like a man would- she will be doomed).

3. Etí lobinrín fi ńgbóhùn Orò (A woman can only hear about the oro cult- she dares not participate).

4. Obinrin to ge gi ni gbo oro, o di a ge mo (Any woman who dares to fell a tree in the oro forest -like a -man would- will not leave to repeat her action).

5. Bi obinrin ba mo ejo re lebi, kii pe lori ikunle (A woman that easily accepts to be at fault will not stay long on her knees - during interrogation or while being punished).

6. Obinrin o ni gogongo (A woman has no jugular -no strength /stamina).

### 3.1.3. Women as mentally inferior/stupid beings

Even though Yoruba women are seen to be inferior to their men (Oladele Abiodun Balogun) they are hardly portrayed as stupid in Yoruba proverbs rather, they are often portrayed as wickedly cunning and dangerously crafty which is considered to be a danger to men hence the I warnings against women's cunningness in Yoruba proverbs. However, in Igbo and German proverbs such proverbs abound.

#### 3.1.3.1. German

1. Frauen haben langes Haar und kurzen Sinn (Women have long hair and „short “sense).

2. Eine Frau ist klug genug, wenn sie so viel Verstand hat, unterzutreten, wenn's regnet (A woman is intelligent enough if she has enough sense to get out of the rain).

3. Die Weiber haben einen vielfältigen Rock und einen einfältigen Kopf (Women's skirts have many folds, but they are simple-minded).

4. Fürwitz Ist Jungfrauen wenig nütz (The curiosity of young women is of little use).

5. Männer sollen reden, Frauen schweigen (men should speak while women keep quite).

#### 3.1.3.2. Igbo

In the first three examples below, women's mental inferiority is shown by the result issuing from their inability to train animals, for example, dogs and goats.

1. Nkịta nwaanyi zụrụ na-atagbu mmadụ (A dog trained by a woman bites people to death).

2. Nkịta nwaanyi zụrụ na-ata akwa (A dog trained by a woman eats/steals egg).

3. Ewu nwaanyi nwe zụrụ onwe ya (A goat trained by a woman trained itself).

4. Okoroobia n'eche-echiche ka nwaanyi anaghi a bụ nwoke (A man who reasons like a woman can never be a man).

### 3.1.3.3. Yoruba

These proverbs show the belief that a woman's wisdom is a danger to the man.

1. Bi obinrin ba gbon lagbon ju, pempe laso oko ree mo (A woman's wisdom is detrimental to her husband's progress)
2. Okunrin o gbodo gesin obinrin. (A man must not follow a woman's advice/be controlled by a woman)
3. Pa mi nku, o se ori be n be s'oko (a murderous woman argues/ contends with the husband)

### 3.1.4. **Women as untrustworthy and unreliable**

Especially Germany is replete with proverbs that describe women as untrustworthy. Here are a few of such proverbs:

#### 3.1.4.1. German

1. Fürstengunst, Aprilenwetter, Frauenlieb und Rosenblätter, Würfelspiel und Kartenglück Wechseln jeden Augenblick (April weather, woman's love, rose leaves, dice, and card- luck, change every moment).
2. Einer Frau muss man nicht alles glauben (You don't have to believe everything a woman says).
3. Frauen sprechen die Wahrheit zwar, aber immer nur die Hälfte, nie gar ganz, vollständig (Women do speak the truth, but only half truths, never the whole truth).
4. Frauen verschweigen alle Geheimnisse, die sie nicht wissen (The only secrets women keep are the ones they do not know about).
5. Wer seiner Frau ein Geheimniss mittheilt, kann noch nicht lange verheirathet sein (A man who tells his wife a secret must not have been married for long).
6. Wer einem Frauenwort vertraut, der hat auf Sand gebaut (A man who believes a woman's word says, has built on sand).

#### 3.1.4.2. Igbo

1. Onye jiri nwaanyi buru ibu bu isi-adighi aju (Any person who uses a woman (as a pad) in carrying a luggage is carrying the luggage without a pad).
2. Eri ago mere umunwaanyi agbala afufu onu (The habitual denial of favors they receive is the reason women do not grow beards).
3. A na-emere nwaanyi, o na-emere onye di ya mma (One would be doing good to a woman and she would be doing good to whoever she (truly) loves).
4. Okorobia nwaanyi na-afuru oja aghaghi inwu (The young man whose praise flute is blown by a woman will die).

#### 3.1.4.3. Yoruba

1. E ma finu han f'obinrin (Never confide in a woman).
2. Obinrin o see f'inu han (A woman cannot be confided in).
3. Omugo ni i b'obiriin mule, Ijo obinrin bo mawo lo baje (Only a stupid man takes an oath with a woman; the day a woman knows the secrets of a cult, that cult is destroyed).
4. "Oriṣà jẹ́ kí n pé méjì" obinrin ò dénú (The woman's prayer to have a co-wife/ rival is not sincere).

### **3.1.5. Women as talkative and gossip**

Connected to the above-presumed trait of women is that of their talkativeness: they are perceived as gossip, who love speaking especially about their fellow women. German is replete with such pronouns:

#### *3.1.5.1. German*

1. Wenn zwei Frauen zusammenkommen, wird die dritte in die Hechel genommen (When two women are together, they will gossip about the third).
2. Der Frauen mund schweigt nicht ein halbe stund (A woman's mouth does not keep quiet even for half an hour).
3. Die Frauen platzen, wenn sie schweigen sollen. (Women burst when they have to keep silent).
4. Ein Frauenzimmer und ein Fisch sprechen so viel als zwei Männer. (A woman and a fish talk more than two men.)
5. Alte Weiber und Frösche quaken viel. "(Old women and frog's squawk.)
6. Eine Frau fragt mehr, als hundert Männer beantworten können. (One woman asks more questions than hundred women can answer.)
7. Die Frauenzungen sind länger als Frauenröcke. (Women's tongues are longer than their skirts).

#### *3.1.5.2. Igbo*

7. Nwaanyi abụọ kwurụ ije, asiri emee ha atọ (When two women set out for a walk, gossip becomes their third companion.)
8. Asiri guba nwaanyi, o banye amarachaa ajuba (When a woman wants to gossip, she starts asking questions about what she already knows).
9. Asiri guba nwaanyi, o bulie ekwo oku ya (When a woman wants to gossip, she brings out her fire platter to go fetch fire tongues).
10. Nwoke lụchaa ogụ nwaanyi enwere akụko (The man does the fighting, while the woman tells the story).

#### *3.1.5.3. Yoruba*

1. A benu mimu bi abe (Her lips are as sharp as knives).
2. E ma je ka finu han obinrin; ibi ti oju re o to, enu re de ibe (We shouldn't confide in a woman, her mouth moves further than her eyes).

### **3.1.4. Women as sexual objects**

The proverbs in this category objectify the female body as a source of pleasure for men as well as a representation of their vulnerability, promiscuity, and weakness.

#### *3.1.6.1. German*

1. Fische und Frauen sind am besten am Sterz (Women and fishes are best in the middle).
2. Frauenfleisch ist leichter zu bekommen denn Kalbfleisch (It is easier to get a woman's body than veal).
3. Eine Frau, die sich schminkt, zeigt an, dass sie zu vermieten ist (A woman who puts on makeup is indicating that she can be had for a price).
4. Das Weib betrügt den Mann, und wenn er Augen hätte wie ein Wagenrad (The woman can cheat the man even if he has eyes like a wagon wheel).



The sex-biased proverbs in Igbo and Yoruba tend to be explicit and graphic, leaving little to the imagination:

### 3.1.6.2. Igbo

1. Ụtọ nwaanyi di n'ukwu ya, ụtọ nwoke di n' ego di na-akpa ya (The worth/most enjoyable thing in a woman is her waist; the worth of a man is the money in his pocket).
2. Agboghọ mara mma anaghi alụ otu di (A beautiful young woman does not marry only one husband).
3. Ọtụ nwaanyi ajadụ bu ọtụ mmadu nile (A widow's private part is for all men).
4. Ogeri na-aya ọya, ọtụ ya ọ na-aya? (If a woman is sick, is her private part sick too)?

### 3.1.6.3. Yoruba

1. Gbogbo obinrin lo ngbese; eyi to ba se tire lase ju laraye n pe l'asewo (All women are promiscuous, but it is the excessive one that is named a whore).
2. Bi a ko baje ki omode o doko, ara re kii bale (If a young lady is prevented from having sex, she is restless).
3. Oko ile kii j'obinrin l'ọju, afi bo ba do tita (The penis at home never satisfies the woman, unless she fucks one outside her home).
4. Obinrin ii gbe ibi to m a ròọ l'orun n (A woman never remains in her place of comfort).
5. Ope l'obinrin, eni ti o ba mu igba de ibe lo n gun un (Women are palm trees, whoever goes with a climbing rope can climb them).

### 3.1.5. Women as evil beings

The last category of proverbs portrays women as evil, even to the point of being worse than the devil:

#### 3.1.7.1. German

1. Frauen haben keine Seele (Women have no soul).
2. Die Frauen sind über den Teufel (Women are above the devil).
3. Mit den Frauen kann der Teufel sich nicht messen (The devil cannot compete with women).
4. Wenn eine Frau denkt, so denkt sie Schlimmes (When a woman thinks, she thinks evil).
5. Frauenlist geht über alle List (A woman's cunning trumps all cunning).
6. Ein altes Weib ist dreimal schlimmer als der Teufel (An old woman is three times worse than the devil).

#### 3.1.7.2. Igbo

1. Nwaanyi bụ njọ ala (A woman is the evil of the land).
2. Ajọ nwaanyi bụ nka di ya (A bad woman is the reason her husband ages).

#### 3.1.7.3. Yoruba

1. Obinrin bi mo fun ni ko ni ko ma se ku pa ni (That a woman bears a child for a man doesn't stop her from killing him.)
2. Okunrin ti ko ku, obinrin re ni ko tii paa (If a man is not yet dead, it is because his woman has yet to kill him).
3. Koto aye, koto obinrin, ati koto iku, okan o yato (The pit dug by the world, the one dug by a woman, and the one dug by death: they are all the same. The world, women, and death are equal).

### **3.2. Mothers in Igbo, German, and Yoruba Proverbs**

As opposed to women as wives, lovers, and other feminine representations in the three languages and cultures under study, mothers have been observed to stand out positively in proverbs. In the three languages and cultures, mothers are presented with accolades that often go beyond the human. For example, the Yoruba refer to the mother as “Orisa” - mini-God in the proverb “Orisa bi iya ko si” (There is no deity like the mother) and “wura” - gold in “Iya ni wura, baba ni diigi” (The mother is gold, the father is the mirror).

Obiorah and Okafor (2019) show that many names for the girl-child in the Igbo culture are construed from “nne”, mother, and from adjectives depicting the qualities of mothers in their families and beyond. Such names include: Nneka (Mother is Great/Mother is Supreme); Nnebundo (Mother is Shade/Security); Nnebuisi (Mother is the Beginning/ Important) Nnekasị (Mother is the Greatest); Nnebuike – (Mother is Strength). Similarly, Dipio (2019) concludes her findings on African motherhood proverbs thus: “Life and culture are organized around the mother who is prized highest of the categories of womanhood. She represents the ‘gift economy’”, which ensures mutuality since it is “based on the circulation of gifts”. The proverbs portray her as a gift to the family and the community at large. She is associated with all things that enhance and add quality to life.

The German proverb “Mutter ist der Name für Gott im Herzen und auf den Lippen kleiner Kinder” – Mother is the name of God in the hearts and on the lips of children- also conveys divine qualities on her. This quasi-divinity of mothers is succinctly described by Schipper (2006):

*“Mothers are put on a pedestal, and choruses of sweetly glorifying voices start singing in proverbs about mothers. The mother is set apart as the most valuable representative of womankind, and even of humankind, in endless songs of praise. She is adored as a divinity – she is the presence of God – or at least as a superhuman being, and a source of endless love and impeccable selflessness”.*

From the foregoing, therefore, it is evident that generally, a (good) mother is often regarded as a special being, and almost infallible. This explains why a man will be ready to kill if his mother is insulted or portrayed as evil. However, this same man will not waste time calling his wife names at the slightest provocation, even when such a woman is already a mother to someone else. One may explain this ironic situation by suggesting that perhaps while the man sees the wife as an external force, he regards the mother as internal and part and parcel of him. The mother is often a source of pride and affection to the man. No wonder, there is hardly anyone who wants to be called a bastard. This may not be far from the fact that such labeling may mean that such a person’s mother (the man’s pride) has been “dethroned” from the position of “deity” to that of a weak, imperfect mortal of lesser virtues and values.

Even though mothers are held in very high esteem, it has been observed that proverbs about mothers are fewer in all languages and cultures than those of women generally. In this section, we present proverbs in the three languages in which the mother is portrayed positively as a sacrificial caregiver, provider, nurse, role model, defender, and sympathizer among others.

### **3.3. Mother as a sacrificial caregiver, provider, and nurse**

A mother is often regarded as a caregiver, her body is a source of healing to ailing members of her family, and as such she is the lifeline of her family. Her generosity and sacrifice know no limits, as she even forfeits her meal for her children. Children feel cherished and treasured by their mothers so much so that they tend to deny that any other woman can compete with her, for example in preparing delicious meals. It is when she is no longer alive that her children get to understand the meaning of hunger. Furthermore, she is concerned for the well-being and safety of her children, even when she no longer feels in control over the events or situations her children are, or might become involved in.

#### **3.3.1. German**

1. Mutterliebe ist die beste Medizin. (Mother’s love is the best medicine).

2. Muttertreu ist täglich neu (Mother's loyalty is new every day).
3. Mutterliebe kennt keine Grenzen (Mother's love knows no boundaries).
4. Wer keine Mutter hat, hat kein Zuhause (If you don't have a mother, you don't have a home).
5. Mutter ist die beste Köchin (Mother is the best cook).
6. Die Mutter ist der einzige Engel, der uns auf Erden begleitet (The mother is the only angel who accompanies us on earth).

### **3.3.2. Igbo**

1. Ahụ nne bụ ọgwụ (Mother's body is medicinal).
2. Nwata ga-iji agurụ ehie mara ihe ọnwụ nne bụ (The import of the death of a child's mother dawns on her when she goes hungry at lunchtime).
3. Nne mụrụ ụmụ anaghị eri nri (A mother with children does not eat).
4. O nweghi onye na-asị na ofe nne ya siri dị njo (No one says that the soup prepared by their mother is not delicious).
5. Nna m weta ka e rijuo afọ, nne debe ka anyị rie echi (Father, bring to satisfy immediate hunger, mother, keep aside so that we shall not go hungry tomorrow).
6. Nwata mụta iri elu, nne ya amụta ibe akwa (If a child learns to climb, his mother learns to cry).
7. Nne ọrụ our ma ụmụ rie nri (Mother works a lot so that the children may eat).

### **3.3.3. Yoruba**

1. Abiyamo kii gbo ekun omo re ko ma ta ti were (A mother does not hear the cry of her child and refuses to respond).
2. Abiyamo kii rin ko sanwo aha (A mother does not walk without a drinking bowl for the child).
3. Iya lo ni ojo eyi to soro ori omo, baba lo ni ojo ayeye (The mother bears the cross on those hard days for the child; the father presides on festive days).
4. Orisa bii iya ko si, ta ni je se bi eni to bini lojo to ba nira (There is no god like the mother, who will behave like one's mother on the day of suffering)?
5. A mo-on-pon bi iya o si, iya omo nii mo omo toju (No one can back a baby like the mother; only a child's mother knows how to care for her child).
6. Aye kii ha adiyeko ma de ibi aba re (No obstacle prevents a hen from getting to its eggs).
7. Iya la aide baro omo lojo aburu (The mother is the child's comforter in difficult times).
8. Abiyamo a soja gbooro Gboro (The mother's "backing" clothes a very long) The "Oja" is the name for the clothes used for carrying the child on her back). It signifies support, protection, and nursing of the child by the mother).
9. Eni ti ko ni iya kii da egbo eyin (a motherless person doesn't get a sore on his back).

### **3.4. Mother as a role model, teacher, and disciplinarian**

The mother is also regarded as a teacher and role model for her children. A task, in which she fails, becomes immediately obvious in the lives of her children. Hence, a bad child is often seen as a result of bad motherhood

perhaps because of the great influence the mother has on the child because she spends the most time with them from infancy to adulthood.

#### **3.4.1. German**

1. Die Hand, die eying Wiege wiegt, beherrscht die Welt (The hand that rocks the child, rules the world).
2. Ein Kind ohne Mutter ist wie eine Blume ohne Regen (A child without a mother is like a flower without rain).
3. Das Kalb folgt der Kuh (The calf follows the cow).
4. Die Tochter einer guten Mutter wird die Mutter einer guten Tochter (The daughter of a good mother becomes the mother of a good daughter).
5. Eine Mutter ist soviel wert wie hundert Schulmeister (A mother is worth a hundred schoolmasters).
6. Mutterhand ist weich, auch wenn sie schlägt (Mother's hand is soft, even when it hits).
7. Mutter sein heißt, kleine Füße hinter sich zu haben, die einem in große Fußstapfen folgen wollen (Being a mother means having little feet behind you that want to follow in big footsteps).
8. Wie die Mutter, so die Tochter (Like mother, like daughter).

#### **3.4.2. Igbo**

1. Nne ewu na-ata agbara nwa ya a na-ele ya anya n' ọnụ (When a mother goat is eating her fodder, the kid watches her mouth).
2. Ukwu nne ọkụkọ zọrọ ya anaghi egbu ya (If a hen mistakenly steps on her young one, it does not kill it).
3. Ọ na-adi mma nwata chọrọ inwụ, ya anwụọ n'aka nne ya (It is always good for the child that wants to die to do so in the hands of the mother).
4. Ọkụkọ hapụ kwom, o jiri gịni zụọ ụmụ ya? (If a hen does not cluck, how else will she feed her chicks)?
5. Ebe a na-adụ nwata nwere nne ọdụ ka nwata na-enweghi nne na-amụta ihe (A motherless child learns where a child who has a mother is being advised).

#### **3.4.3. Yoruba**

1. Abara fenfe l'abiyamo fi gbomo re lowo aje (A mother uses a gentle slap to save her child from the attack of the witch).
2. Omo buruku tiya e ni (A bad child belongs to the mother).
3. Owu iya gbon, l'omo n han (The child weaves the cotton prepared by the mother).
4. Ba mi na omo mi, ko de nu olomo (the mother's request for her child to be disciplined by another is insincere, she prefers to do so herself).
5. Eni ti ko ni iya kii da egbo eyin (A motherless child does not keep a sore on his back).
6. Iya nii de ni lade adeisi, baba nii deni ni gbangba (It is the mother who gives one a permanent crown; a father crowns one in the open).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the examples given in this work, it can be observed that there is a negative conceptualization of women in the proverbs in the selected languages and cultures under study namely German, Igbo, and Yoruba. However, the case is different when it comes to proverbs (and other sayings) about mothers and motherhood in the same languages.

Patricia, E.I., Christianah, O.O. & Eze, O.G. (2024). Women vs Mothers in German, Yoruba, and Igbo Proverbs: A Paradoxical Worldview. *Global Journal of Sociology: Current Issues*, 14(2), 23-37. <https://doi.org/10.18844/gjs.v14i2.9595>

It is also observed that although proverbs about mothers are fewer than those about women in general, these proverbs are full of reverence and praise as opposed to those about women which are mostly derogatory. One wonders then, whether the use of fewer proverbs about mothers is due to the position of reverence or divinity given to mothers in these cultures. It is, therefore, noteworthy that even in patriarchal societies, - here Igbo and Yoruba societies - the value placed on mothers is priceless and non-debatable. It can also be observed that all three cultures are expressive in their use of proverbs when it comes to mothers and motherhood, although a lesser number of such proverbs were found in Igbo.

The study concludes that the feminine gender is mostly portrayed negatively in proverbs referring to a wife, girlfriend/lover, or any other female, who is not considered a close relative of the speaker (man) as against the mother, who is seen to be a part and parcel of the speaker (man).

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