

Venturing Into Feminist Consciousness: Portrayal of Women in Selected Akan Proverbs

Abstract

Proverbs are normally classified as terse, succinct popular sayings. They are also perceived as memorable statements that are full of insights, veracities and scruples. They also embody traditional perceptions and sensitivities in a figurative, static, and easy to memorize format. This is why elders are chiefly concerned with their faithful transmission down the generations (Mieder (2004). Again, proverbs are philosophical products of careful observations. They may be drawn from the behaviour pattern of animals, scrutiny of social events as well as a contemplation of the lives of people. They are also the embodiment of the philosophy of a group of people. This study explores how the linguistic features of Akan proverbs contribute to the understanding women's role and place in society. The aim is to examine and explore traditional portrayals of Akan women. Using the Negofeminism theory, ten Akan proverbs about women are critically examined. The argument is advanced that though the specific contexts that necessitates the use of a particular proverb influences its meaning, a careful scrutiny proves that Akans tend to present women as Negofeminist in some of their popular proverbs. Most of the proverbs can be interpreted as stating and implying the complementary role of the woman. The conclusion is drawn that such representations of the woman belie the portrayal of the African woman as a beast of burden. Again, the notion that Negofeminism is a theory that informs the lived experiences of the African woman is firmly established in these proverbs.

Introduction

One unique feature about proverbs is that they are not meant to be understood literally. Their inherent meanings can only be deciphered through a careful analysis. They are normally used in ordinary conversations because that is what provides the context for analysis. Proverbs in Akan traditional societies are multifarious. They can be categorized into social, historical, feminist, and religious. This is why proverbs covers all aspects of people's lives. It is an embodiment of their wisdom and philosophy of life This validates the authenticity of the spoken word especially within cultural communities. For language is the principal channel through which culture can be transmitted and preserved. Language therefore enables a particular group of people to know themselves, their culture and their world view. The identity of a group of people can only be preserved when they speak their language. This is why it is possible to deduce the philosophies of a group of people from oral literature like proverbs. It is the view of Ong (1982:2) that people in primary oral cultures who are untouched and affected by any form of writing do learn a great deal without an attempt at conscious formal study. Some of their sayings actually betray the rich deposit of wisdom inherent in them. This may be because their source of knowledge emanates from acute observation of their varied environment. Indigenous people with rich oral cultures have devised innovative ways of preserving and transmitting their cultural values. Repetition, mastery of the various ways proverbs can be used, assimilation of prescribed formulaic materials and the active involvement in ceremonies and rituals are some of the ways that guarantees the preservation of culture. Sometimes their perceptions of life are derived from what they learn from nature. Ong (1982) emphasized that oral cultures rely upon certain features that are relatively easy to remember to memorize important aspects of culture. This is why proverbs are particularly important because its usage ensures an appreciable level of knowledge in cultural issues.

Most African societies were oral before the advent of colonialism. This implies that they developed their own linguistic features for the purposes of preservation. Perhaps this explains in part, why the dominant mode of cultural transmission is verbal. Nwanko (2015) emphasizes the absolute necessity of language in predominantly oral cultures. Societal norms and values are handed down through language (Nwanko, 2015:54). According to Nwanko, proverbs therefore serve as one of the transmission processes. Every aspect of a people's culture can be transmitted through proverbs. This current study focuses on how women are depicted in selected Akan proverbs. Since it is possible to deduce philosophical wisdom from proverbs, popular depictions of women will unearth traditional gender debate. It is a known fact that most African societies are patriarchal in nature and orientation. This is why there are a lot of proverbs that celebrate and extol the virtues of masculinity. Such proverbs often ascribe an inferior position for women. In essence then, they are only to be heard and not seen. Collins (1996) also estimates that proverbs are important in traditional African societies because it becomes a rhetorical tool in the hands of men to achieve hegemony and control. Through proverbs, the message is communicated to women that it is men who are privileged to occupy central positions of economic and cultural importance. This is one way men succeed in objectifying women and curtailing their social-cultural influence (Collins, 1996). It is through such traditional verbal art forms like proverbs and folktales that gender differences are established. Interestingly, there are Akan proverbs that actually celebrates the uniqueness of women; their particular skills of adoption in 'hostile environment' have been praised in these proverbs. While Collins' assertion might be valid to an extent in certain cultures, it must be noted that other cultures also create a system of gender balance and equitable distribution of power between men and women through their proverbs. Embedded within such 'women

celebrating' proverbs are the very tenets of Negofeminism which attest to the fact that women are more than capable of holding their own in the midst of oppressive socio-cultural structures.

Theoretical Framework

African feminisms hold the assertion that at its core is the transformation of existing gender relationships. Ultimately, African feminism aims at complementarity, "the need for men and women to complement one another and build one another up. The secret of peaceful living nestles in this idea" (Adimora-Eziegbo II). Nnaemeka in 1995 took the debate of African feminisms a step further by propounding a new term "Negofeminism." This is derived from "feminism of negotiation." This theory of "Negofeminism" implies the 'necessity of challenging given facts (like gender relations) by negotiating, a universal concept which is at the heart of many African societies (Signs 29: 357). She adds an interesting new dimension to the concept of 'no ego feminism', which is to be understood as a critical allusion to white Western Feminisms' arrogance, imperialism, and power struggles. In effect, Nnaemeka proposes a feminism that is based on negotiation, one that gives ample room for women to fearlessly articulate their needs without fear of reprisal, with men as partners. There is the assertion of the self without resorting to hatred of men, penis envy, the non-acceptance of African traditions, the fundamental rejection of marriage and motherhood, the favoring of lesbian love and the endeavor to invert the relationship of the genders.

This theory of Negofeminism is relevant to the current study because it supports the notion of 'liberated' African/Akan women as it maintains that "what is at stake is the issue of agency, subjectivity, and power, the power to name oneself, one's location and one's struggle." (Signs 358) One other relevance of the theory lies in the fact that it validates the privileged position women hold in traditional African/Akan societies. She does not exist nor function as a mere appendage of

the man. Even in the midst of the gendered environment, she more than holds her own. Finally, this theory is significant because it upholds the notion that “[t] here must be a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women and defined by them for themselves” (Signs 2004: 359);” this is an idea that rises to prominence in the selected proverbs.

Proverbs in Akan Traditional Society

Mpere (1992) chronicles the interesting history of the Akans. He asserts that the Akans are a unified group of people who speak different and similar language in Ghana. The Akan ethnic group in Ghana consist of the Akyem, Akuapem, Asante, Fante, Akwamu, Denkyera, Twifo and Assin. Most of their ceremonies and customs are similar. For instance, the Akyem, Asante, Akuapem and Bono celebrate the Ohum festival. Most of their social and political institutions are also similar. They make up 45% of the total population of Ghana. It is believed that they all belonged to the Bono clan before splitting up and settling in different places.

The fact has already been established that African ethnic groups are historically oral societies. This implies that there is an over-reliance on oral modes of transmission. There is the focus on imageries and sounds rather than written words (Foley, 1986:19). Traditional Akan society was one of orality where there is the dominance of sound and talk. Traditional linguists or family heads were responsible for the transmission customs. They also doubled as oral historians who narrate the stories of origins, wars, customs, ritual and ceremonies among others (Kolawole, 1999:21). In a typical Akan family, it is common to see elders gather the young people and children around the fireplace at night and narrate the stories, histories, and events that made them a proud and memorable people (Healey, 2004: ix). It is through these verbal arts that Akans are able to pass on their convictions, legacies, standards, and other vital information to the younger generation. Among the Akans for instance, these forms of verbal arts are extremely important and effective

means of communication, which have provided succeeding generations wisdom and vital clues about life in general.

Across many Akan ethnic groups in Ghana, proverbs and other verbal means are crucial since they function as important methods for the transmission of oral culture and values. These verbal channels open the floodgates of Akan philosophies, beliefs systems, and wisdom. Proverbs are the most concise of the various verbal folklore genres (Mieder, 2004:1). They are an important oratorical force in the numerous channels of communication. They are often sourced from universal occurrences. Perhaps this explains why there is no speech or language in which they are not found (Kolawole, 1999:8). Perhaps the most important function of proverbs is that they satisfy the innate human need to recapitulate experiences and observations into memorizable hunks of wisdom that provide tailored comments on relationships and social concerns (Mieder,2004:1). Thus, proverbs are believed to communicate reliable or trustworthy qualities, which give life and meaning to the socio-cultural activities within any given human community (Kolawole, 1999:9). This explains the pervasiveness of proverbs.

Ghanaian folklore is rife with frequent use of proverbs for rhetorical and persuasive purposes. When these proverbs are used, they achieve various communicative effects. Beyond the enormous, condensed wisdom they convey, they make meaning facile and conversations interesting. They may be witty, funny and very meaningful. Proverbs have for centuries, been a part of indigenous Ghanaian consuetude, and they have always been used in conversations, music, poetry, litigation (argumentation) and other uses of language.

Nature/Structure of Akan Proverbs

A proverb is marked by certain linguistic features. These characteristic features ought to satisfy a widely accepted criterion. For instance, it should be expressed in its complete and comprehensive form. They must be well constructed statements that follows strictly the rules of grammar. The linguistic items employed should be meaningful and coherent. This explains why they have an unalterable fixed style and structure. It should be generated from a specific context but it does not necessarily need that textual context for its meaning.

Taylor (1962) estimates that in order to accurately identify and describe the proverb, there is the need to pay attention to its peculiar features. This is because he thinks there is need to concentrate on a strict definition of a proverb. Perhaps Noah's structural definition of a proverb may be suitable for the structure of an Akan proverb. He affirms that a proverb is composed of a terse statement, which differs in structure. Verbally it is represented as a means of experiential, traditional, and philosophical declarations (Noah, 1996:95).

Most Akan proverbs are concerned with the illogical or contradiction. They may reflect sarcasm or include an irony. There are times when they are structured as parables or presented as rhetorical questions. Normally it involves a deliberate exaggeration that is not meant to be regarded literally (McKinney, 2000:239). This is what gives proverbs their dual verbal functions. It could be both a criticism and kind advice (Leach, 1949:22). An example of such proverb is **the stick that is used on Takyi is reserved for Baah**. This roughly implies that what goes around definitely comes around. Akan proverbs can be inferential, hypothetical, confirmatory, pragmatic, mythological and delusory. This shows the complex nature of Akan proverbs (McKinney, 2000:239). Therefore, a proper understanding of the Akan proverbs is necessary for an appreciation of not only the Akan oral tradition but also Akan beliefs, attitudes, and points of view.

It will not be far from wrong to assert that since proverbs are context induced and situation specific, their structure varies greatly depending on available variables. Some are emotional and poignant; others are wordy and winding; still others are laconic and succinct. Their compositions often vary depending on the imbedded theme. Sometimes they are metaphorical as in comparing similar attributes and characteristics. Other times, animals are personified and are endowed with human attributes. In whatever form or shape they assume, every aspect of socio-cultural, religious and economic life is captured. It is the opinion of Yankah (1989) that Akan proverbs are understood in context and discourse. This point is further given credence when Yankah states proverbs are strictly context-dependent. He states that it is important to explore them in terms of how their meanings emerge in situation of use. Yankah affirms that the context is necessary for the complete understanding of proverbs.

Negofeminism in Akan Proverbs

It is imperative to note that proverbs are not spoken in plain language. In Africa, most songs have proverbs in them (Kyilleyang, 2009). He observes that the Akans of Ghana and the Angas of Nigeria use proverbs in their songs. These people use proverbs in their songs to express their views on certain happenings in society which cannot be openly expressed in plain language. It is popular among the Akans to engage in insinuating songs among members of a family, wives in polygamous marriages, clans and villages. For example, a woman who quarrels with her husband or another woman may resort to the use of songs to disgrace him or her. It is interesting to note that some Akan proverbs focus on women and their role/space in society. These women centered proverbs indicate traditional perceptions of women and how they are supposed to maximize the gendered space to leverage an appreciable level of significance. Louis expresses the view that proverbs can be regarded as both rhetorical and linguistic instruments that are utilized to regulate people's

behaviour. It could also be a tool for opening up the culture of a particular people to outsiders (Louis, 2000:117). This is why it is possible to infer the preferred women activism in Akan proverbs. Proverbs, aside its aesthetic and figurative features, also present a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. In the case of the Akan, some proverbs point to the Negofeminist stance of ‘traditional women’ and how the adoption of that attitude greatly aids them in carving a niche of relevance.

One popular Akan proverb is *the hen is very much aware of daybreak, yet she waits patiently for the cock*. Normally, this proverb will be used in a situation where men’s claim to power and control is inferred. It can also be used to denote a prescribed position for women; one that indicates a subjective role. This explains why the proverb succinctly captures the gender debate in traditional Akan society. It clearly delineates both the role and place of women in relation to the man. Regarding their roles, women are very much aware of ascribed responsibilities. Just like the hen, women are endowed with the same capabilities as men. Their Negofeminist stance comes to the fore as their ability to know when to be silent and when to be vocal becomes established. If silence is conferred with performative action, then it implies women are endowed with wisdom to be selective. This does not in any way imply that the women are subjected to any form of abuse or degradation. It is actually this skillful ability to be comfortable around patriarchal seats of power (choosing to be silent) that shows the ability of women to engage in a meaningful interrogation with men as worthy partners. Men, just like the cock who crows to herald day break, go about their culturally assigned duties. In such discharge of obligations, women do not feel threatened in any way. This is because there is a difference between ‘being silent’ and ‘being silenced.’ The former is a choice (like the hen in this context) and the latter is forced and therefore counterproductive. It is also interesting that the man does not intimidate the woman in any aspect. Women, deciding to

be silent on their own means they have the opportunity to draw on hidden sources of strength to engage in meaningful interaction with men. The created atmosphere is permissive because men's egos are not bruised so they are much more accommodative. This is where women can be said to be displaying the tenets of Negofeminism. The conviction that silence goes with speech while action implies inertia is valid. What women (hen) actually do is not to tip-toe around the aggressiveness of men (cock). They deliberately put themselves in a position where the avenue is created for peaceful negotiation and collaboration.

Closely related to this proverb is, *a silent woman is a gift from God*. It is again important to understand the contextual meaning of silence among the Akans. According to d'Almeida (1994), '...women's expression has been limited to specific artistic forms.' This means that there are certain artistic expressions where women are not expected to play active roles. This reality is true of Akan communities where the strategic employment of silence serves as an effective ploy. This means silence, when harnessed properly, creates the avenue for inner creativity. As stated earlier, the kind of silence that is considered productive in Akan societies is the kind that is self-imposed. The fact that it is self-imposed implies there is room for women to draw upon an inner strength to channel untapped energies towards a useful venture. This is why the Akans say a silent woman is a gift from God. Her kind is rare since women are mostly known to be vocal especially when it comes to issues, they are passionate about. She knows how to collaborate and calm raging nerves especially in the heated midst of confrontations. If silence is equated to reflection, then it stands to reason that women who employ it to a gainful end are heaven sent. A silent woman is a gift because she respects boundaries and is not induced by established traditions to engage in forceful 'noises' with the hope that it might mitigate desired change. Women's capacity to effectively weigh silence

as a weapon especially in negotiation imply they own the ability to name their own struggles and define their relationship to it.

Another proverb which is popular among the Akans is *excellent beads do not rattle*. This is used especially when there is the need to drive home the ideal qualities of women. It is possible to equate ‘beads’ in the proverb to women because it is an ornament of decoration for them. Women normally wear it around their waist, arms and legs as a fashionable traditional accessory. It is sometimes worn to show one’s position in society. The Akans believe that a woman who wears beads around the waist is likely to pleasure the husband the most in bed. It is thus an object of femininity. In effect, it works as an aphrodisiac as it enhances sexual pleasure for both men and women. This is why there is room to speculate that the ‘beads’ refer to women. Again, quality beads do not generate unnecessary noise. It is often felt and not heard. Thus, it can be roughly translated as an exceptional woman does not engage in needless confrontations. This proverb differs slightly from the previously stated ones because there is a caveat. Ideal women are so confident in their skin that they know ‘noise’ can be disruptive. This is why they only engage in a form of ‘rattling’ that is guaranteed to achieve a desired result. This is the true essence of womanhood. The argument of Obioma that is advanced in ‘Negofeminism’ advocates for feminism of negotiation. It thrives on the tenets of collaboration, compromise and negotiation depending on the context. That these very elements of engagement are captured in this very Akan proverb where the use of needless force, personified as rattle, is not encouraged. Hence, Obioma’s assertion that for feminism to be effective in indigenous cultures, there is the need to adopt a recurrent cultural feature as an effective weapon of engagement is valid. This is why proverbs, which are philosophical sayings, are important. They name and define the boundaries of women’s

activism. This particular proverb is also linked to the previous ones since it drives home the effectiveness of silence as a weapon of engaging in equitable gender advocacy.

There are also instances where certain proverbs indicate the place and role of both men and women in traditional society. This becomes an accepted norm and as adherence to it peaks, perfect peace and balance is maintained and gender equity is restored. One of such proverbs is, *if you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done ask a woman*. This implies both man and women are aware of their responsibilities and boundaries. The man is supposed to be vocal and assertive while the woman is expected to accomplish delegated tasks. There is no room for an intersection where rivalry will spark off. Traditional Akan societies recognize the specific role of the woman. Women were committed to such domestic roles like cooking, keeping the house clean, taking care of the children and tending the farm her husband has cut out for her among others. There are also ceremonial duties women are expected to undertake. For instance, she is expected to assist in the various rites of passage of especially the girl child. These are traditional rites that usher the adolescent child into adulthood. Among the Akan for instance, *Bragro* is a predominately women affair. This is an important traditional function where girls who have menstruated are taken through rites that usher them into womanhood. Even in instances where rites like excision is solely conducted by women, it is still the men who indirectly, in the name of their sacrosanct male principles, oversee it to fruition (Barry). Elderly council of old women will meet and lay down regulations as to when and why ceremonial rituals should be performed. This is because women are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring survival and continuity of family lineages. This is why women are often blamed if a marriage is not producing children. The burden of 'shame and annihilation' must be borne by she alone. While men engage in the institution of social systems that would ensure the thriving of patriarchy, women are expected to do the actual

carrying out. The far-reaching consequence of this might be that women only exist as mere appendages of men. This performative condition traditionally ascribed to women also provides a fertile ground for them to bond on a much personal level. This is where their Negofeminist stance is acted out. Again, d'Almeida (1994) opines that those traditional women are feminists because 'women, regardless of their class (and even if some classes are privileged), are all subject to patriarchal law based only on their gender. As such the "female condition" becomes a rallying point where a strongly advocated solidarity among women is imperative.' The 'female condition' d'Almeida refers to among the Akans can be inferred in the proverb. Women are the ones expected to carry out the whims and caprices of men. It is actually in the carrying out of 'cultural responsibilities' that women are presented with the opportunity to display their Negofeminist position. In negotiating for a 'space' to have a say in affairs that concern them, they often decide to be collaborative and suggestive instead of violent and force. It is only in this that they can militate for peaceful co-existence. It must be noted that the kind of silence patriarchal systems and structures impose on women does not in any way negate or frustrate her collaborative efforts. She is aware that the situation has to be dealt with in such a way that will not estrange men. This is why the ascribed role of carrying out tasks is carried out with dexterity and precision. It is one of the mediums she can capitalize on to negotiate for recognition. By extension then, the woman is hopeful to be active in a balanced society which will eventually evolve from the chaotic confusions of values.

A woman may be in possession of gun powder but it is the man who can best utilize/fire it is another proverb that points to the delegation of authority and power in the hands of men. Gun powder is a substance of power and control. This is why women are not expected to handle it. It seems there is no open contest for power and control in traditional Akan society. Women know

and respect their boundaries. They operate within these assigned boundaries with caution and precision. Outside their spheres of influence, they skillfully engage men to achieve their desired end. It is clearly not an open contest for who is really in control. This proverb reflects Negofeminism because it shows who is really in control. The woman actually buys the ‘gun powder.’ She has become the epicenter of hegemony and control. This assertion of the woman as an empowered being is also supported by Nnaemeka (2004) who notes that this flexible permissible gender system allows women “to assume positions of wealth, power, and authority which, under strict gender definition, will have been the preserve of men.” (p. 357) This fact is contrary to popular opinions of women’s suppression in African societies as well as popular depictions of women in literary works. This power that the woman wields is however not an inducement to engage in suppression. The Akan woman understands that for power to be truly effective, it ‘must’ be deposited in the hands of those ‘traditionally mandated’ to control it. By engaging in the subtle art of compromise and accommodation, it is possible for the woman to have the man as a willing ally without making him feel antagonized. This is very much like what Emecheta affirms in her views on what should constitute African feminism. In a way, Emecheta’s opinions can be denoted as ‘liberating spaces within patriarchy.’ Making reference to a popular feature of traditional society which is polygamy, she explains her claim to liberty even in the midst of what is often considered a restrictive union. She avows that ‘in many cases, polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside her family for feminism.’ (‘Feminism’, 178). The liberation Emecheta refers to can in a way be compared to the woman who hands over gun powder she has bought to her man because it is socially not judicious of her to handle such substance of masculine power. In Akan societies, real power really resides in the bosom of the woman. She has to find creative

ways around patriarchal landmines so the scorch from detonation will be assuaged; just like the gun powder handed over to the man for safekeeping.

This particular proverb is interesting on many fronts. It shows the relational link between men and women. The proverb, *man's authority might be expansive but it ends in the groins of a woman*, explains the systems of beliefs prevalent in traditional Akan societies. It shows that women occupy spheres of power and influence and this helps them maintain a voice (Amadiume, 1987). The possible social context that is likely to necessitate the usage of such a proverb is when men are cautioned against excessive display of masculinity or women are being conditioned so they become aware of their innate power. One distinctive aspect of the proverb is the fact that it shows the very nature and form of the kind of power women held in their societies. It authenticates the disparity Chinweizu (1990) makes between male power and female power. He is of the view that in traditional Igbo societies, like most patriarchal societies in West Africa, women are indeed a force to reckon with. He argues thus:

Generally then, whereas male power tends to be crude, confrontational and direct, female power tends to be subtle, manipulative and indirect. Whereas aggressiveness is the hallmark of male power, manoeuvre is the hallmark of female power. And where man is the great physical aggressor, woman is the great psychological maneuverer. From a male-entered point of view of what power is, it is easy to be misled into thinking that a female form of power does not exist at all; and even when female power is recognized, it is easy to dismiss it as power of an inferior type, just because it is not hard, aggressive or boastful like the highly visible male form. (Chinweizu 1990)

Men are normally under the ‘illusion’ that because women power does not manifest itself in a crude aggressive way, it indeed does not exist at all. The proverb proves and legalizes the kind of ‘sublimely cloaked power’ available to the woman. The groins of the woman imply her site/scene of fertility and procreation. This is where her feminine power as the nourisher of the clan nestles. It is therefore interesting that this very location diminishes or cuts short male power. This can be interpreted from different perspectives. It states clearly the nature and form of male power; aggressive, expansive and domineering. However, the woman’s designation as the cradle of fertility more than matches raging male authority. The woman is very much aware of this and often capitalizes on that to leverage both allure and control. This is where Negofeminism comes in as women can be negotiated with because of what they represent or ensures; posterity.

One other proverb that points to the resourcefulness and indispensableness of women is **a home without a woman is like barn without cattle**. This proverb compares a home that is devoid of feminine presence to a barn with no animals. The comparative element heightens the absolute importance of the woman. What is really the essence of a barn that houses no cattle? It only exists as an empty shell. Thus, there is the need to understand the place/role of the woman in Akan society to be able to better appreciate this proverb. It is possible to examine this both conceptually and theoretically. Ngcobo opines thus:

In our male dominated societies, our oral traditions extolled the virtues of humility, silent endurance and self-effacing patterns of behaviour for our girls, while young boys received all the encouragement to go out there and triumph and survive. (81)

Ngcobo's assertion is valid because what she describes seem to be the daily lived reality of women in traditional societies. The different approaches that are adopted in the training of the boys and girls indicate society's perception regarding both genders. The woman is expected to be a model of societal expectations. The irony of the situation is that as girls/women are expected to uphold societal values, invariably there is a conferment of a position of honor. This also implies that without women, the values of society will be lost and relegated to the background. This is the place and role of women in traditional society. It is this very tenet that is captured in the proverb. Other researches that speak to the place of women in society often affirm that women are often oppressed needlessly in society. Again, women are not accorded the high level of respect they deserve as societal systems are manipulated in such a way that adherence to cultural norms paves the way for the channeling of patriarchal power and control. The argument also holds true that so long as women are custodians and transmitters of traditions and customs, the role they occupy is crucial. This means without them there will be a break in continuity. The implication of this is that, as the proverb asserts, the 'barn'(clan) will be without 'cattle.' (Substance and values). If this happens, then the clan is heading for extinction. This prescribes the sacred sanctified role of the woman. It is the very awareness of such a sacrosanct role that propels women into the engagement of subtleness. This is often capitalized on to exert influence 'from behind the scenes.'

Another proverb that points to the sacred transitional role of women is captured in **your affiliation to familial ties becomes severed the very day your mother dies**. This implies that our validation as members of a particular family is confirmed and maintained through our mothers. Akans have a system of inheritance that is matrilineal. This means any child

that is borne in marriage belongs to the mother and her people. This is why among the Asante for instance, succession to the throne is through the maternal line. Without mothers, familial ties are not secured. There are certain factors that must be understood about African societies in order to fully appreciate the very important role of women in Akan society. Ogundipe-Leslie explains this in detail. She affirms that:

Beyond ideological definition lies the fact that African societies are immensely different from those of the West, different in their political struggles, different in their social formations and different within details of life.

Ogundipe-Leslie's assertion is valid and makes an interesting contribution to the ongoing feminist discourse because it heaves to the fore the Negofeminist stance of women in Akan societies. The Akans recognize the woman as a human being. This recognition in itself is crucial because there is a certain level of 'elevation' for the woman. Most feminist theories underscore the importance of recognizing the woman to be worthy of all forms of engagement that is geared towards ensuring active representation in all issues concerning her. This proverb depicts the importance of women as her annihilation, through death or oppression, results in the loss or disconnection of her progeny. There is the need to infer the kind of affirmative feminist action women in Akan communities are sometimes encouraged to engage in. It can be deduced from the proverb that a woman should first know her place, this will lead to her placing value on herself and then finally being able to non-aggressively articulate her needs. This is why the conclusion is drawn in this paper that no ego feminism is women's best bet to better their living conditions.

There are also certain proverbs that defines the relationship that exists between a man and a woman. Such proverbs do not in any way look down on women. It shows a certain level of subtle relational equity that exist between both genders. An example of such proverb is **it is a woman who gives birth to a man**. Captured in this proverb is the very essence of womanhood in traditional societies. The proverb drives home the message of women's importance in ensuring continuity of posterity. It is important to understand the dynamics of gender construction and reconstruction in order to be fully appreciative of this particular proverb. Both Oha (1998) and Oluwole (1997) are of the opinion that the system of gender ideology that exist in African societies consist of the divergent shaping of the lives of both men and women. Their lives are structured or patterned after certain molds of behaviour. Both men and woman are thus placed in different social positions and patterns of expectations. Almost all African religious and ritual practices like naming ceremonies, proverbs and oral narratives among others have been effectively employed as a precursor to the mobilization of prevalent gender ideologies. By extension then, it would not be far from wrong to assert that traditional verbal art forms like proverbs, wise sayings, and folktales are instruments of ensuring gender roles and obligations. This may explain why many researches on proverbs often tilt to the conclusion that women are mostly portrayed negatively in proverbs. The argument still holds that proverbs, like other traditional verbal art forms, reflect gender perspectives among other themes. It would however be erroneous to conclude that all proverbs about women cast her in a negative light. This depicts the complexities that underscores gender categorization in certain rural African societies. This proverb for one delineates who exactly a woman is in relation to the man. The latter maybe the one who seems to be in control yet his source is rooted in the woman. This is because posterity resides in the bosom of the woman. The children often bear the name of the man but it is the woman who nurtures them. Among the Akans, a man

often does not have much say in the grooming of his own children. This is because of the matrilineal system of inheritance where children belong to their mother and her family. It is also possible to roughly translate the proverb to imply that a man is a man because of a woman. This again indicates a certain level of power and control on the part of the woman. It is this ‘cloaked power’ she wields and yet refuses to use it as a weapon of aggression that makes her a Negofeminist. She knows her worth yet accommodates and compromises around the ego of the man. In the end, she is able to earn her rightful place – the true source of strength – without recourse to needless antagonism.

Finally, **the welfare of every man depends to a large extent on the woman** is another popular Akan proverb that speaks to the Negofeminist position of women. This proverb is normally quoted when the need arises to drive home complementary role of women. The belief is upheld that the success of a man depends on the woman. This shows the need for collaborative approach if success is to be chalked and maintained. The concept of success in traditional communities encompasses all aspects of social, economic and religious life. The successful man therefore may be the one who manages to achieve a near-perfect balance between all three; he is at peace with the gods (religious), his crops yield a bumper harvest (economic) and his homestead is filled with healthy children of both sexes (social). The man needs the support of the woman to achieve all these enviable feats. She needs her not only to ‘fan his ego’ but also to ensure that he is successful in all his ventures. The glory and fame that comes from his success would be credited to them both as a team. This is why in most Akan societies, the saying is often repeated that it is a truly lucky man who has an industrious wife.

Conclusion

Women's portrayal in Akan proverbs authenticates the assertion of Ogundipe-Leslie. She asserts that;

African women have always been feminists in the sense that they have always been concerned with women's rights in society, their rights as a people. They also knew that they were members of a community and they always insisted on their rights, so there were indigenous feminisms ...They [women] always recognized that they were women and they had their own women's world and they did not want that world shattered. (12)

The proverbs analysed in this paper points to the feminist stance of women in traditional Akan societies. They are not in open confrontation with men. They are content living in a space of their own. In instances where survival and equality are threatened, women know how to negotiate for their needs in the midst of scarcity. Instead of confrontation and aggression, women often choose the path of collaboration and partnership. The man is not sidelined as a potential enemy; his inclusion in the quest for both equality and equity are essential.

Negofeminism is not manipulation. It does not seek to portray any innate scheming abilities of women. It is an implication that women have come up with creative ways to articulate their specific concerns without aggression or force. Some of the proverbs studied are indicative; they point to the fact that women are expected to behave in a particular way, like giving preference to the men and respecting their 'superior' society conferred role. Other proverbs are suggestive; they encourage women to know their traditionally determined place so they would rise to prominence. The portrayal of Akan women in these selected proverbs demonstrates their ability to inscribe and reinscribe themselves as subjects whose individualities, sexualities and partialities are acclaimed grounds. The proverbs prove that the s/place of women are constructed as treasured sites of subtle

power throbbing just beneath the surface. This is a clear indication that with the tools of negotiation, collaboration, compromise and no ego feminism, they would be successful in the attempt to force conversations centering around their inherent strengths and values. In the end, the ‘veil’ covering perceptions of women as inferior and weak is shredded and her true portrayal is unveiled; that of non-threatening collaborative agent advocating for peaceful co-existence. The proverbs analysed here in themselves does not portray a wholistic picture of women in Akan society. What she truly represents and what she can truly achieve far outweighs her portrayal in these proverbs. N’Diaye’s assertion is more than true for this reality;

It is important to distinguish -- and even to dissociate -- the image of the woman in the realm of representation from her actual role. It may be well that the actual role of the woman far exceeds the representation that we have of it (25)

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