

Social Construction Of Masculinity And Femininity As Portrayed In Nzema Proverbs

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Abstract: *The study examines the ways Nzema proverbs as part of their culture, stratifies men and women. That is, how men and women are perceived in their relation to one another and to social obligations through a critical examination of the Nzema proverb as a genre of oral literature and enhancer of culture. The selected proverbs were examined from a gender construction conscious perspective to explore the needs, interests or values behind distinguishing men and women. Data were gathered from one published source in Nzema language titled Nzema Mrele nee be Ngilenu by Quarm and Kwesi (1998), other proverbs were collected through interviews with native speakers. Also, my knowledge, experience, and introspection as a native speaker were brought to bear on this study. Evidence from data on the study shows that masculinity and femininity are constructed differently in Nzema proverbs, as it reveals the society's aspiration and desire to social order by presenting patriarchy as a stable part of that social order for the building of a solid nuclear family, contrary to suggestions in previous African oral literature scholarship that women are presented as oppressed and men as oppressors. Overall, it is undeniable, basing on the Nzema proverbs that the differences between men and women are socially constructed on the basis of biology for humanity purpose.*

Keywords: *proverbs, culture, masculinity, femininity, gender differences, social organisation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The study aims at analyzing the role of proverbs as creating and perpetuating gendered culture. It therefore examines traditional views on the perceptions and roles of both men and women in selected Nzema proverbs with the intent of determining whether any gender biases exist in the way men and women and their roles are portrayed in this literary genre. For instance, in a study conducted by Anderson (2012; cited in Mubarok, 2017) on how proverbs deal with the relationship between and characterization of men and women in a peasant society in Northern Sweden, he reported that, the gender conceptions found in the proverbs form a system of gender hegemony (practices that supports masculine superiority and feminine subordination. Anderson (2012) cited an example that in the 'marriage market' that is, when looking for a marriage partner, women in Northern Sweden are the chosen whereas men are the choosers. He thus classifies men's

position in this 'marriage market' as active and women's as passive.

Wang (2012; cited in Mubarok, 2017) also conducted a survey on sex discrimination in English and Chinese proverbs and reported that both languages exhibit a 'gender-biased ideology', for men are considered superior to and stronger than women.

In a cross-cultural study on how masculinity and femininity are depicted in proverbs, Hussein (2005) concluded that, "African proverbs perpetuate gender legacies and ideologies; they associate maleness with respect, firmness or strength while associating femaleness with meekness, indignity, inconsistency and powerlessness."

These and other studies on how masculinity and femininity are portrayed in proverbs seem to suggest that globally, women are relegated and are deemed unimportant. Such male superiority and female subordination is thus seen as

the idealized relationship between men and women – a point which this study refutes.

The researchers, therefore, are of the view that, the differences between masculinity and femininity should remain, but be inspired through societal needs and must be configured in each culture so that society is not plunged into chaos.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study seeks to investigate the construction of masculinity and femininity in Nzema proverbs. Theoretical accounts using the concepts of man and woman in interpretations of gender relations have a tendency towards universalising male domination and female oppression in most sectors of life. Thus failing to recognize cultural variations but holding onto the assumption that relations between men and women are the same all over the world, may be a misnomer (Nibafasha, 2013). There is the need therefore to investigate the gender situation in Nzema society in its own respect. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, little has been done in gender as an area of academic discourse in Nzema. Most of the previous studies in Nzema proverbs, and oral literature as a whole, have never specifically had gender power relations as their focus. The present study therefore seeks to cover the identified scholarly gap: the proverb, as a lasting aspect of human culture, is used in this study as a literary indicator of how the Nzema culture perceives men and women as they relate to one another and to social obligations. These proverbs are worth studying because they help to understand the roots of a contemporary issue. The exploration of male and female attributes in Nzema proverbs will no doubt enrich the understanding of how men and women are stratified socially in Nzema culture.

III. RESEARCH GOAL

The goal of the present study is to analyse how masculinity and femininity are constructed in the Nzema proverbs, using a social construction of gender framework.

IV. DEFINITION OF SOME KEY TERMS

FAMILY: husband and wife formally married and living together, with or without children.

FEMINIST: anyone who advocates equal rights for women. The campaign is backed by the idea that women, irrespective of their sex, have equally valuable and valid contributions to make to the world and therefore ought to have equality of opportunity.

GENDER: the way in which man and woman are stratified, what one does or the way one behaves as a man or woman, and the way they are evaluated by a society. In other words gender is about masculinity and femininity in this study.

GENDER EQUALITY: While remaining biologically different as a man and a woman, gender equality means

having the same rights and duties, opportunities, mutual respect for each other and affirmation of one another in their difference.

GENDER IDEOLOGY: cultural beliefs and the worldview about women and men in society.

GENDER POWER: authority exercised by one gender over the other.

GENDER RELATIONS: the way men and women regard each other or behave towards each other and to social obligations.

MAN: An adult male person who is either in a formal relationship or not.

ORAL LITERATURE: non material component of folklore, that is, folklore expressed in words such as proverbs, folksongs, folktales, riddles, and similar categories.

PATRIARCHY: a form of social organisation in which the father is the head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line.

SEX: The natural, physical and biological differences between men and women.

WOMAN: An adult female person who is either in a formal relationship or not

A. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This section gives the general overview and provides some definitions of proverb by some scholars. In this section also, we discuss the importance of proverbs to the Nzema society.

a. PROVERB AND ITS FUNCTIONS

Many African societies have codified their various social constructs in different forms of folklore in order to educate, to correct or socialise their members (Nibafasha, 2013). This assertion seems to correlate with what Dundes (1980) had said in his argument that items of folklore continue to exist in a given society because they play a great role in the internal construction of that society as they 'reflect or refract' the culture of a people. Since cultural practices and norms give rise to the existence of social constructs, people act as if these social constructs exist and because of people's subjective agreement, they do (Nibafasha, 2013). Any oral piece as non material component of folklore encapsulates and manifests the beliefs, worldview, wishes, desires and fears of the people in which it occurs.

Durkheim (1933; cited in Mubarok, 2017) defines a proverb as 'a condensed statement of a collective idea or sentiment relative to a determined category of objects'. Durkheim's definition shows that, proverbs are the sole property of the society; it is not owned by an individual. Thus, it is considered the collective view of the community which is a reflective of communal thought and takes precedence over individual preferences and opinions.

Finnegan (1970) defines proverb based on some general characteristics as, "a saying in more or less fixed form marked by 'shortness, sense and salt' and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it." The truth of proverbs though popularly accepted, may not always be absolute as aspects of culture are subject to change.

Finnegan (1970) cites examples of proverbs across African cultures. For example, among the Tonga, “the strength of the crocodile is in the water”; which implies that man is strong when his kinsmen help him. “No fly catches for another”, which underscores the importance of self-help.

Similarly in Nzema, the proverb “When a woman rears sheep, it is the man who determines how much they are to be sold”, has a counter one that says, “A woman does not rear sheep for a man to determine the price.” These and many other proverbs depict a variety of social issues past or contemporary.

This is in accordance with what Yusuf (1997; cited in Adeyemi & Opeyemi, 2014) said that, “the truth presented in proverbs is not logical, priori or intuitive truth: it is often an empirical fact based upon and derived from the people’s experience of life, human relationship and interaction with the world of nature.” Generally, a proverb expresses a shrewd perception about everyday life.

Finnegan (1970) further posits that, “in many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs.” She observes that proverbs are used to advise, rebuke, or shame another person into complaisance, comment or persuade, add colour to every conversation, and that they may be a particularly suitable tool of communication in situations and instances of conflict. According to her, proverbs use figurative language which is based on various motifs such as similes, metaphor, hyperbole, irony, sarcasm, paradox, comparison of people with animals and other inanimate objects as a way of ‘hitting the proverbial nail on the head’ of the addressee when one is communicating, and all these stylistics of proverbs and their functions are as well embedded in the Nzema proverbs.

In the view of Dundes (1980; cited in Nibafasha, 2013), a proverb is “a traditional saying that sums up a situation, passes judgement on a past matter, or recommends a course of action for the future.” This definition emphasises the power of proverb as able to solve problems and predict the future.

In investigating the origin of proverbs, Okpewho (1992), posits that a careful study on origin of proverbs has revealed that there are three basic sources of origin: folktales, comments on actual historical experience, and well-considered observation of various aspects of the natural environment as well as general human affairs and conduct. Whether the proverbs are taken from the world of animals or of people, or from the weather and the physical landscape, they ultimately reflect in the lives of a particular group of people and their fate in the world.

Okpewho (1992) considers a proverb as “a piece of folk wisdom expressed with terseness and charm.” He further explains each of the key terms in his definition as follows: ‘the terseness’ implies economy in the choice of words and sharpness of focus while “charm” conveys the touch of literary or poetic beauty in the expression. “Folk wisdom” refers to the fact that every proverb must have started its life as the product of the genius of an individual oral artist. But it ends up being appropriated by the whole community (the folk) (Okpewho, 1992).

Asante (2002; cited in Mubarak, 2017) also suggests that (Akan) proverbs are “often an expression of some fact of life

deduced from careful observation. They may be thus considered a set of cultural heritage, which is reflective of the communal thought regarding an issue at stake”.

From the researchers’ standpoint, the above definitions of proverb hold true. Proverbs are relatively short, brief statements which are used in daily activities to admonish, educate and entertain people. Proverbs are a form of verbal art handed down from generations to generations in oral tradition.

Furthermore, some proverbs can contain the narrative history of a group of people and their way of doing things. They are therefore not the sole proprietorship of an individual but the whole society.

B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

a. BACKGROUND TO THE FRAMEWORK

As Nibafasha (2013) rightly admits, “Sex differences may be traced right from the beginning of humankind as illustrated by various legends and other elements of traditions from various societies about the origin of human beings.”

To add to his view, sex can be alluded to the scripture at Genesis 1: 27 of the Bible. Sex therefore is a natural phenomenon but the way sex differences have been manipulated through the assignment of rules and roles to people on the basis of sex is what brings the gender issue (Nibafasha, 2013). In trying to theorise the relationships between male and female as an academic discourse, various gender theories have been developed; Biological determinism, Feminist, Labour paradigm, Cultural determinism, Social construction of gender, just to mention a few. The later constitutes the framework of this study which serves the vein of the topic under study.

b. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER FRAMEWORK

In this study, Nzema proverbs are analysed through the lens of social construction of gender framework. Although the Nzema proverb deals with other concerns, the construction of people into male and female roles is the target for the present study. Notwithstanding the fact that proverbs can be used in various situations, the analysis mainly uses a gender conscious tone of this genre.

The construction of gender theory helps to posit that gender is an invention of society and therefore mutable. However this mutability is not automatic because as it is said, once a social construct is set, it becomes useful in a way or another. “Gender is culturally constructed hence the gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (Nibafasha, 2013).

This suggests that gender is not dependent on whether one is male or female. It has to do with social and cultural defined roles.

The social construction of gender framework further helps to explain that there is no essential, universally distinct character that is masculine or feminine. This is in line with De Beauvoir’s (1949) famous assertion that: one is not born, but rather becomes either a man or a woman. For him, one is not

born 'woman' or 'man', but is born with biological predisposition to become one.

According to the proponents of this theory, behaviours are influenced by a range of factors including class, culture, ability, religion, age, body, shape and sexual preference. It discusses how the biological basis to the differences between the female and male sexes does not explain their lived differences and inequalities in society. These differences are only a result of social construct intending to establish order (Nibafasha, 2013).

It is important therefore to analyse selected Nzema proverbs, through a gender social constructionist approach, to unearth how masculinity and femininity are socio-culturally constructed in Nzema society and how this construction adapts to modern environment.

V. DISCUSSION OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN THE SAMPLE PROVERBS

As mentioned earlier, the discussions in this paper are based on data collected from both printed and non-printed sources, mainly from a book of Nzema proverbs and interviews with native speakers. The proverbs were then put into nine (9) categories according to various themes that were found relevant to shed light on the ways men and women are perceived in the Nzema community. These include: proverbs related to women's beauty and physical appearance, proverbs that portray women as dependent, proverbs that emphasise hegemonic masculinity, proverbs that project women as physically and psychologically weak, proverbs that convey women as supportive, proverbs that convey complementary roles of women, proverbs that encourage women empowerment, proverbs that convey women as showing genuine love and proverbs that portray women as intelligent.

A. PROVERBS THAT CONVEY WOMEN'S NATURAL BEAUTY AND PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Women are generally judged by their appearance (Mutunda, 2016). According to Belfatmi (2013), beautiful women "are generally believed to be more open-minded, more intelligent and are better accepted by society." He adds that, the physical attractiveness is presumed to be the most important criterion to qualify for marriage. This suggests that whether a woman is intelligent or not, she should be beautiful.

This stereotype as Mutunda (2016) observes, is reproduced in Lunda proverbs, in which symbolism is used to depict women's physical beauty and therefore are likened to irresistible fruits such as 'ikondi' (banana) and 'ntamba' (sweet potatoes).

Among the Nzema however, such symbolic comparison does not feature much. The beauty of the woman is directly contrasted with that of the man; that women are by far naturally beautiful than men. This is clearly evidenced in the following proverb which says: *raale mɔɔ anwo enye fe fee la, ɔtela nrenyia* ('An ugliest woman is more beautiful than a man'). According to this proverb, the only criterion a woman is chosen by, as a wife, lays in her physical beauty.

The semantic import in this proverb is however that, Nzema women are naturally beautiful than men so that the ugliest among the women is even more beautiful than the most handsome man.

Stressing the beauty of a woman, another proverb reads: *raale mɔɔ enle kpale la, ɔtela abaaba* ('A woman who is not beautiful is better than a scarecrow'). In this proverb, the man is directly likened to a scarecrow. This does not however suggest that Nzema men are ugly by default, but that the women are generally good looking physically. It tries to define beauty in the prerogative of women.

As much as some proverbs stress the beauty of a woman as essential criterion for marriage, there are others that warn men not to be deceived by women's outward appearance as seen in the following proverb: *benganvo raale na beagya ye* ('Do not marry a woman base on her appearance'). This proverb emphasises the inward beauty of a woman which lies in her heart but reflects in her character. This proverb is in line with the English expression: "All that glitters is not gold." This implies that a beautiful woman is not always perfect; she could be lazy, ill-tempered or wicked. In other words, beauty is deceitful. This proverb serves as a warning to men not to be deceived by the outward appearance of a woman. It is evident from these proverbs that beauty in women has negative connotations, and that men should not be seduced by it.

B. PROVERBS THAT CONVEY WOMEN AS DEPENDENT

These proverbs represent women as dependent on men for material provisions. These include financial or material support and finally require them to submit to their husbands. As a result, they become dependent on men for their material needs as shown in the following proverb which says: *nrenyia a kposa maa raale di a* ('It is the man who chews for the woman to eat'). In other words, no matter who a woman becomes or achieves in life, she will still fall on the man for support, including food. And for men to chew for women, it metaphorically likens women to a toothless baby and therefore portrays the inadequacy in women.

Another proverb that stresses the dependency of women is: *ereladane kponde bolo ali a, ɔse ɔɔ yeamaa ɔ ra* ('When a mother wants to eat rice kenkey, she says it is for her child'). This proverb tends to portray women as beggars in their own home. For why must a mother lie in order to get something to eat? Is it as a result of the man not being responsible or that he is wicked? Indeed, in most cultures including Nzema, fathers only cared for their children and neglected the mother. The mother only eats from the food she cooks and never asked for anything else. Therefore, for the woman to ask from the man something, she has to do it in the name of her children. The proverb partially demonstrates how cruel men are sometimes.

These proverbs in a way tend to remind women to continue in their subordination in the society. It is therefore ideal for the woman to show submission to the man (especially in marriage) by allowing him to 'lead', including making final decisions. These proverbs therefore tend to derogate the efforts of feminists in their fight for gender equality.

C. PROVERBS THAT DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY EMPHASISE HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

According to Connell (2005), hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”

Schippers (2007) views hegemonic masculinity as “the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity and that by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”

It is explicit from the definitions above that; hegemonic masculinity legitimates the domination of men over women. This form of legitimacy is mostly supported by social institutions such as schools, religion, law, politics, and chieftaincy, just to mention a few.

In Africa, proverbs play an important role in reinforcing the cultural ideal of masculinity such as competitiveness, dominance, forcefulness, endurance, confrontation, self-reliance, and willingness to take risks (Hussein, 2005).

This is evident in the following proverb which says: *nrenyia le ekyi ze a befele ye nrenyia* (‘A boy though small in age, is still a man’). In other words, no matter the size or height of a male, he is a man. This proverb reinforces male dominance over females. A male person is regarded a man right from birth. In the Nzema setting, a young boy is accorded respect in the same way they would to a grown up man. An old lady going to farm feels safer even with her little grandson.

Another is: *raale tɔne adwobanenene na ɔndɔne etu ndumunli* (‘A woman sells tomatoes and not gun powder’).

Hitherto modern trends in the Nzema tradition, women were not allowed to join the ‘Asafo’, army, not to talk of gaining access to gunpowder. Women were regarded weaker vessels and therefore would not be allowed to take on responsibilities that required greater amount of energy and strength such as going to war. As a result, women never hunted (either with dogs or guns). This proverb nevertheless tends to suppress women from competing with the men.

D. WOMEN AS PHYSICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY WEAK

It is common knowledge that women are oppressed throughout the world. This is perhaps due to the fact that women are seen as ‘naturally’ weak. Particularly when a female adult engages with a young boy in a fight, the boy is encouraged to overpower the female adult because he is ‘a man’. The following proverb: *raale mɔɔ bo nrenyia la kɔkɔsele a bɔɔ ti anwo mgbɔleka a* (‘a woman who beats a man would have her head surrounded by crows’) serves as evidence. This proverb indirectly encourages men to subdue women in every respect.

As Nibafasha (2013) argues, “women are not weak. It is a matter of training.” Due to training and motivation, the contemporary woman can boast; “What a man can do, women can do and even better.”

In the Nzema culture, women were to ‘keep quite and listen’. They were trained to be silent especially in matters relating to adjudication. It was a common practice for the mother to call her husband to talk to his children. This seeks to suggest that when a woman talks, it is taken ‘half ear’, but when a man talks, it is taken ‘full ears’. This is because the woman was seen as not intelligent enough to counsel her own children. The proverb above also warns women not to engage their husbands with troubles as troublesome women, especially those who actually beat their husbands, do not get a better marriage, and sometimes not married at all.

The following proverb also stress the limitation of women’s intelligence; *raale ako ezene yee ze nrelebe a na te ɔ ti ɔ* (‘The wisdom of the woman lies in her womb/ stomach, not in her head’). In other words, the intelligence of the woman is limited to preparing good meals for the family.

This confirms what (Hussein, 2005) observes in Oromo proverbs, “Women make good dishes, but not good speeches.”

This also explains why before now, Nzema women were subjected to the kitchen and never given the opportunity to attain formal education, merely because they have IQ deficiency (according to this proverb). In the discussions that follow, we will see that this proverb lacks grounds.

E. PROVERBS THAT CONVEY WOMEN’S EXPRESSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE ROLES

One theme of proverbs is the existence of strong emotional connection between mother and her children. Another is that a woman is the source of humankind without which life is impossible (Egejuru, 1997).

The following proverb which says: *raale zo maanle bo* (‘The woman is a carrier of multitudes’), confirms the second statement.

According to Nzema tradition and culture, women are metonym of sight. Therefore a woman who does not give birth to female child is taken for a blind person. That is, ‘we see the world’ through women. Women are also seen as ‘homemakers’.

A good woman is the one who cooks regularly and always has food in her kitchen. The woman’s ability to work hard and keep her family together is what makes her an ideal woman. The following proverbs which read: *ereladane a ze ɔ mra anloa a* (‘It is the mother who knows what her children will eat’), and *ε ye enze wɔ debie a, ɔze wɔ aleε mɔɔ edi la* (‘Even if your wife does not know much about you, she knows what you eat’), underscore the above assertion.

As stated earlier, women have strong emotional bond between them and their children. Even if the father neglects the children, the mother would do her best to cater for them. If for one reason the father dislikes one of the children, perhaps due to the child’s misconduct, the mother would take lightly with the child. This does not imply the mother condoning vices, but for her affection for the child. At least, she understands better the pains she endured before giving birth to the child. The proverb; *ε ze engulo wɔ a ε nli kulo wɔ* (‘If your father does not love you, your mother do’), is a true reflection of women’s love for their children.

Another proverb that highlight the supportive role of the woman is; *edane kpogya ɔ ra a, ɔse kɔ me nzi* (‘The mother

picks up her child and says, go to my back'). Insofar as it is the two (man and woman) who give birth to a child, the man also has equal share in carrying the child. But it is usually the woman who carries it until it weans. The man usually would feign that he is busy.

F. PROVERBS THAT SHOW COMPLEMENTARITY BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

According to Caplan (1989; cited in Hussein, 2005), gender may be both asymmetrical and complementary. Steady (1987; cited in Hussein, 2005) posits that a separate life is hard to live for men as well as women. She adds that in order to ensure the totality of human existence within a balanced ecosystem, male-female complementarity is necessary. The proverb: *ε ye enle kpale a ɔnreye ke ε ngome ela la* ('It would be better to have a troublesome wife than to sleep alone'), clearly establish the view that among the Nzema, men are meaningless without women. Another proverb: *nyinli anwo na bele wo a be da nuhua* ('If the male does not give birth but the female gives birth, it does not mar anything'). Obviously it is the male and female who together give birth to a child; however, it is the female (woman) who carries the child in her womb until it is born. The man cannot carry the child in his stomach; he has not got womb.

Furthermore, if for a certain reason a man could not impregnate his wife and therefore has no child, the children of his sister (nephew and nieces) would equally be his property.

G. PROVERBS THAT ENCOURAGE WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Among the many works done on proverbs relating to marginality of men and women, women are generally relegated and not empowered. As recounts (Hussein, 2005), "In Africa, proverbs are used to instigate men to power and control. It is viewed that becoming lax towards women and allowing them some sort of freedom is disadvantageous." He cites this proverb in Oromo to buttress his stance; "The lady, whose husband spoils her, slips from the tanned hide." Such proverbs discourage women emancipation, rather emphasise male chauvinism.

It is however interesting to mention that, the issue is not the same among the Nzema. The proverb: *raale nwu ye belemgbunli di a mrenyia koto ye* ('If a woman conducts herself in her queenship, men will bow before her'), encourages women not to think of themselves as inferior. That is, when they conduct themselves in a manner that is acceptable to society, men would respect them.

Many of the African proverbs portray women as sexual objects. Their value in marriage is to satisfy men in bed. This proverb however says it otherwise. The ideal woman must not roam begging for money from men, she has to work and learn to be self-reliant. It is only the lazy woman who will solely rely on the man for everything. This admonition is supported by the proverb which says: *raale mɔɔ anwo enye fe la a kɔ mrenyia elile a* ('An ugly woman is the one who will sleep with men for money'). As discussed earlier, a major quality of the Nzema women is her beauty which she must not trade for money. According to this proverb, it is only the ugly and lazy

woman who would not stay chaste until she is married. Therefore, a lady who was not initiated into puberty and married before giving birth was ostracised among the Nzema. She and the child were regarded unclean. The aforementioned proverbs seek to challenge women not to denigrate themselves to men in the society.

H. PROVERBS THAT CONVEY WOMEN AS FAITHFUL AND TRUSTWORTHY

Women are usually portrayed in proverbs as unpredictable, unreliable and untrusting. Proverbs which captures this negative perception of women according to Mutunda (2016) is found in Lunda proverbs. Example: "*mumbanda mbañala*" ('A woman is like a guinea fowl.') This proverb portrays women as unreliable with regard to sexual and marital matters. According to the proverb as Mutunda (2016) explains, women are promiscuous, ready to "hook up" with whoever they choose. The proverb therefore highlights the unreliability and selfishness of women, especially wives who are only interested in what they get from men, and for any reason, would leave their husbands for other men. Like many other proverbs, these proverbs are stereotypical; they consider all women as immoral and evil. Women are branded the same because of how some behaved in the past. Now, to talk of fidelity, the question is, is it only expected of the wife, but not the husband?

The following Nzema proverbs however paint a different picture: *raale kulo wɔ a, ɔnze ke ela fovole zo* ('When a woman loves you she does not mind whether you sleep at the rubbish dump'). According to the proverb, once a woman shows interest in a man and therefore marries him, she would never desert him for another man. The woman is not interested in the material wealth of the man, but the man's genuine love for her. In this proverb also, men are advised not to view their wives as looters and opportunists in marriage but as partners for development.

Another proverb which emphasises that Nzema women are predictable and trustworthy is: *raale engulo wɔ a ɔngulo wɔ nee kake* ('If a woman does not love you, it is because she wants to save you from being fined'). According to this proverb, the ideal woman would not like it that she marries and later divorce her husband after he (the husband) had spent on her. To save the man from this, she would simply decline the man's proposal that is, if she is really not interested in him.

In another instance, it was very and still, dangerous according to Nzema tradition, for a man to have a love affair with a married woman. If the man is caught, he is either made to compensate his rival and marry the woman or he is fined heavily. In either case, the man who fall victim is made to pay huge amount of money and sometimes expelled from the community. Since married women in those days had no specific denotation, it was up to the woman to tell any man who approached her to have her as his prospective wife or just to have sexual relationship with her. The proverbs above show that Nzema men have confidence in their wives; they would not cause adultery nor would they betray them (the husbands).

I. WOMEN AS INTELLIGENT

As Oboler (1985) observes, another stigmatisation on women is that they are foolish and unintelligent. He reports that among the Nandi, men are believed to be more intelligent than women. Women are thought particularly to be incapable of foresight and lack the ability to make and carry on sensible and realistic plans. For this reason, it is generally agreed that husbands should administer the family estate and wives for the most part concur with their husbands' plans. It is commonly believed that if a woman is made to manage a business, she would very likely make a mess of it (Oboler, 1985).

The following Nzema proverbs portray women on the contrary. The proverb: *raale enze nrelebe a oze ye fonvonwu nwo adwenle* ('Even if the woman is unintelligent, she knows how to prepare her *fonvonwu* (a kind of food)'). What this proverb seeks to put across is that women have their special capabilities; they cannot do everything. That does not however mean that they are incapable of doing anything. Another proverb that highlights the intelligence of women is: *raale le ye kodoka* ('A woman has her hiding place').

Despite the fact that the man is symbolic of security in the family, the woman has a special way of protecting herself and that comes with intelligence. The import of this proverb is that, women do not rely solely on the wisdom of the men. They necessarily have to listen to their husbands because they are the leaders in the family. However women possess wit that men do not. At least in the Nzema traditional governance system, it is the duty of the queen mother to counsel the king.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study sought to examine the role of Nzema proverbs in constructing masculinity and femininity. The societal construction of masculinity and femininity in Nzema proverbs reveals society's aspiration and desire to social order by presenting patriarchy as a stable, immutable part of that social order in the nuclear family, contrary to suggestions in previous scholarship that African oral literature presents women as oppressed and men as oppressors. It must be emphasised that Nzema society has values and traditions that influence the behaviour of its people. These values and traditions are codified and communicated in proverbs in different ways. Proverbs in Nzema are considered as a validation of their culture and as a guide to behaviour. Although proverbs may be highly believed, they ironically contradict each other without however nullifying each other's truth. It is therefore up to the user to decide which ones work for him/her when it is time to choose one proverb to use. This implies that society is not homogeneous. There is always contradiction in society. That is why the findings of this study illustrated both negative and positive attitudes of Nzema people towards women and men in general. In society, there is also resistance to change, the same as proverbs resist to alteration, because there are some values that members of a society cherish and therefore uphold.

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