

“The Negative Images of Womanhood in Selected Hausa Proverbs”

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Résumé :

Cet article décrit les images négatives de la féminité à travers certains proverbes Haoussa. Il vise à analyser quelques comportements socio-culturels du sexe féminin dans la société Haoussa. Toutefois, les Haoussas perçoivent les proverbes comme l’un des genres oraux le plus quotidiennement utilisé pour l’enseignement traditionnel. Ces proverbes mettent en lumière la fragilité supposée des femmes ainsi que des traits sociaux tels que le commérage, la trahison, l’égoïsme, l’hypocrisie, la jalousie et la lâcheté. Pour ce faire, la méthode qualitative est adoptée pour garantir la pertinence de l’étude. En Afrique, et spécifiquement dans la société Haoussa, les proverbes sont utilisés comme des messages codés et des discours de sagesse, employés

pour remettre en cause les mauvais comportements des individus. Les résultats de cette recherche mettent en évidence l'utilisation de ces proverbes par le peuple Haoussa pour instruire, mettre en garde ou critiquer les caractéristiques attribuées aux femmes.

Mots clés : image, négatif, féminité, Hausa, proverbe

Abstract:

This article describes the negative images of womanhood through some selected Hausa proverbs. It aims at analyzing some expected socio-cultural attitudes of female gender within Hausa society. However, the Hausas perceive proverbs as one of the most daily used oral genres for traditional teaching. Thus, such proverbs serve to examine the fragility of women and their social characters such as gossip, betrayal, selfishness, hypocrisy, jealousy, and cowardice. Therefore, the qualitative method is applied to conduct this research well. In Africa, particularly in Hausa society, proverbs stand for encoded messages, speeches of wisdom and short statements used for challenging one's identity, gender or characters. In fact, the results of this research vehemently demonstrate that Hausa people employ these selected proverbial phrases to instruct, caution, or criticize women's characters.

Keywords: Image, negative, womanhood, Hausa, proverb

Introduction

Hausa¹ proverbs serve as vehicles for social and cultural critique, playing a significant role in traditional education within African societies. Convincingly, Moumouni Zoungrana (2015, p. 89) states that, “proverbs are channels for preserving secular values used for educational and didactic purposes. They constitute a showcase truth from which, we can grasp the vision of the world of peoples”². This article explores the negative portrayals of women through a selection of Hausa Proverbs issued for expressing common truths and giving advice. In this regard, the Hausa proverbs are regarded as scales used for measuring female gender’s behaviors.

Additionally, Hausa people employ such proverbs in their daily discussions for various purposes such as for humor, entertainment, criticism, fostering unity, promoting social cohesion, and traditional education amongst women and their communities. In this regard, Isidore Okpewho (1992, p. 226) sees proverbs as “a store of wisdom and philosophy which is fraught with rhetoric, humor and poetic values”. According to Asabe Kabir (2018, p. 116) “proverbs are employed not only to entertain, but most often to buttress a point and to give an argument the cloak of general acceptability”. In other terms, lots of the Hausa people’s behaviors, especially women’s ones are judged according to socio-cultural norms and conceptualizations. Consequently, negative portrayals of women are perpetuated through the utilization of selected Hausa proverbs, reflecting and reinforcing existing stereotypes and prejudices.

In Hausa land, proverbs also stand for effective instruments or powerful weapons wisely expressed for the mastery of language, transmission of culture, establishment of justice amongst people and mostly for the pedagogical purposes. Illustratively, R. D. Abrahams (1973, p. 117) proves that:

a proverb is a short and witty traditional expression that arise as part of everyday discourse as well as in the more highly structured situations of education and judicial proceedings. Each proverb is a full statement of an approach to a recurrent problem. It presents a point of view and a strategy that is self-sufficient, needing nothing more than an event of communication to bring it into play.

As shown, Hausa proverbs are therefore tools for promoting peace and traditional education. Apart from their positive contributions for the emergence of Hausa society, women are contrastively expected to be a danger because of their multiple intimidations made against men. In this case, some

¹ A Chadic language belonging to an Afro-asiatic family spoken in west Africa by Hausa people from Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Sudan etc.

² Les proverbes sont des canaux de conservation et de transmission de valeurs séculaires utilisées dans un but pédagogique et didactique. Ils constituent une vérité vitrine à partir de laquelle on peut saisir la vision du monde des peuples. (my translation)

proverbs are invented and expressed by those men to reveal such negative portrayals of feminine gender. Thus, Ahmed Salwa (2005, p. 20) argues that:

People tend to express their feelings and convey educational messages to youngsters and youth through their proverbs. They console, criticize, express their frustration, and even justify their wrong behavior and judgment by quoting one or another proverb. Sudanese, like their fellows in other Arab societies, are known for their tendency to justify their negative attitudes towards women and authorize their behavior by relying on proverbs, which of course are created by men themselves

As far as Hausa proverbs are dealt with, many researches about female gender or gender bias have been conducted by African, European, and Asian writers including Kabir Asabe (2005, 2018), Alou W. Sani (2020), Chinua Achebe (1958), Abassi Kiyimba (2015), Toukour and Allagbe (2021), Finnegan Ruth (2012), and Petrova (2019), to cite but a few. However, despite the abundance of scholarship on such a literary production, there remains a gap in the research that warrants further exploration. This article therefore builds upon that existing research to investigate how Hausa proverbs are employed to reveal or depict negative behaviors of women in the society.

1. Statement of the Problem

The current study seeks to explore the negative portrayals of womanhood in Hausa proverbs. Proverbs as parts of human cultures are evidently regarded as literary indicators employed to depict and perceive the images of women in Hausaland. According to Zaynab Abdulkarim and Halima Abdullahi (2015, p. 27), ‘Hausa proverbs give answers to recurrent problems; these proverbs are also used to revive history, to develop language, to entertain and to educate.’ Many critics have dealt with Hausa proverbs, but few researches have been made about women’s negative socio-cultural images. In fact, this paper importantly fills such gap as the selected Hausa proverbs are deployed to help people discover women’s attitudes or qualities. This investigation of female attributes undoubtedly enriches the understanding of how women are negatively portrayed in Hausa proverbs. But, the idea here is to prove the relevance of using the selected proverbs in the perspective of discouraging women to abandon negative behaviors in the community.

2. Significance of the Study

This paper is worth studying since it discusses women’s nature, qualities and attitudes within Hausa society. The research carries out daily debates about gender issues in accordance with the usage of Hausa proverbs. It consists of teaching women’s behaviors and their socio-cultural expected roles. Furthermore, it will contribute in promoting traditional values, particularly Hausa proverbs expressed to reveal some hidden characters of womanhood.

3. Research Questions

The following questions serve as guide for this research. In this subsection, the former socially indicate some negative characters of women in Hausa proverbs. (i) How do Hausa people portray women through Hausa proverbs? (ii) How do women view themselves through proverbs in Hausa society? (iii) Do these portrayals really reflect women's images or attitudes in Hausa societies? This paper aims to provide comprehensive and satisfactory responses to the above research questions.

4. Aims of the Study

This article is made for analyzing how people negatively portray women in their societies through the use of Hausa proverbs. It aims at showing the ways women view themselves as dominated gender in traditional and patriarchal societies, especially in Hausa communities. Finally, this research figures out how Hausa proverbial expressions reflect women's characters or socio-cultural attitudes within Hausa communities.

5. Methods and Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative method. The data were collected from Hausa native speakers living in the village of Faska³. A limited number of proverbs portraying womanhood negatively are collected, interpreted and explained by me according to the socio-cultural perceptions. In modern and contemporary society, the Hausas are indeed familiar with oral traditions; particularly proverbs. Such familiarity is noticed through their artistic activities. Therefore, each proverb is translated literally or equivalently. Briefly, all the selected proverbs are followed by their contextual, social or cultural analyses.

6. Theoretical Framework

Hausa proverbs are suitable means for portraying the attitudes of women in correlation with social analysis. The theoretical insights drawn from this study is sociolinguistic approach that stands for a suitable approach to analyze each proverbial expression. According to R Wardhaugh (2006, p. 1), sociolinguistics is the science which studies "[...] the relationship between language and society or of the various functions of language in society [...]". Precisely, such an approach is used to tackle the contextual situations on which proverbs are expressed to the audience. In addition, sociolinguistic is meant for examining or analyzing the selected Hausa proverbs according to their contexts or situations. It in fact involves the context, functions and socio-cultural meanings and styles of proverbs. For Toukour and Allagbe (2021, p. 30), the sociolinguistics is the view that language is a

³ It is the name of the village where I collected the proverbs under study.

social phenomenon and that is closely tied up with the social structure and value systems of society''. Moreover, Nikolas Coupland and others (2016, p.31) state that, ''in sociolinguistic theory, however, preferences for some spoken styles over others are worthy of critical examination [...] speakers manipulate their speech styles throughout their lives and in the local detail of their speaking activities''. As far as Hausa proverbs and women's characters are dealt with in this study, it is worth mentioning that language and society are completely indissociable. Toukour and Allagbe (2021, p. 30) prove that ''proverbs are language features whose analysis can provide a full insight into the culture or social structure of the speech community in which they are used''. Therefore, each proverb is followed by its translation and analysis in accordance with the Hausa socio-cultural expectations over womanhood.

7. Contributions of the Study

By the end of this article, the following contributions are expected:

- ✓ Preservation, promotion and valorization of Hausa proverbs.
- ✓ Opening a gate for future scholarly researches.
- ✓ Conveying socio-cultural depictions of women's characters through Hausa proverbs.

8. Thematic analyses of the selected proverbs

This article deals with negative images of womanhood in Hausa proverbs, illustrating how women are portrayed or criticized through the use of these expressions. In this case, the selected proverbs depict women as jealous, unconscious, talkative, weak, childish, witches, wicked etc. But this section is basically categorized into themes according to the socio-cultural perceptions of female gender amongst the Hausas.

8.1 Women as co-wives

In Hausa society, jealousy is one of the predominant negative characters of women. Besides, many Hausa proverbs convey that jealousy is dedicated to female gender. In fact, women are culturally made for quarrels in many Hausa households. As a matter of illustration, the following Hausa proverbs depict women as jealous wives within Hausa community.

Sabka lahiya kishiya ta hau kura

(Gomma, 19/04/2020 in Faska)

Translation: Safe journey, a co-wife mounts on a hyena.

Analysis: This proverb is about women's jealousy in Hausa households. It is ironically expressed to a co-wife being carried by a hyena. Such a proverb is used to demonstrate wives' wickedness and envy regarding their egos in the marriage life. In fact, the Hausas rely on this expression to carry out the atrocity and complexity of women living in polygamous families.

Kwashe kayanki (senior wife) gani nan zuwa

(Rakia, 23/03/2017 in Faska)

Translation: Take your luggage, I am coming.

Analysis: This proverb depicts women as a source of social disorder. A new bride generally uses this sentence to initiate conflict to a senior wife. Thus, the engaged young ladies express it to intimidate challenge their future co-wives in order to leave the households before the former's arrival.

Kilinbibi gaida uwar kishiya da kwana

(Safiya, 23/03/2017 in Faska)

Translation: nonsense, greeting a co-wife's mother.

Analysis: The current proverb implies that women dislike greeting their co-wives' mothers because of their jealousy. It suggests a prevalent attitude of disrespect and envy among women in the Hausa community, particularly directed towards their co-mothers. This is one of the main reasons why Hausa mothers are not fond of visiting their daughters in their households. In sum, women use it to convey their naughtiness, jealousy and unsociability amongst many others.

Harara baya kashe ɗan kishiya

(Sadikou, 22/03/2017 in Faska)

Translation: looking angrily at a co-wife's son cannot kill him.

Analysis: This phrase states that a co-wife's son cannot be killed because of injuries. It also indicates that jealousy is noticed between co-wives and their step sons. The latter are hated, mistreated and often bewitched by their mothers' co-wives. The present proverb shows that co-wives' jealousy concern sons. Finally, the Hausas employ the former to criticize the co-wives' jealousy and misbehaviors regarding their innocent step sons.

Dibara kahwa [inji kishiyar gurmunya]

(Gomma, 22/03/2017 in Faska)

Translation: Experience is foot [Said a woman to her handicapped co-wife].

Analysis: This proverb denotes a disrespectfulness of handicapped co-wives. They undergo socio-cultural mistreatment or humiliation in the Hausa society, particularly within certain households. In this context, the absence of feet symbolizes a lack of experience for a co-wife. In brief, women use this sentence to demonstrate their arrogance, wickedness and lack of compassion towards their handicapped co-wives.

8.2 Women as weak gender

This thematic section reflects the portrayal of women as cowardly or the weaker gender according to Hausa culture. Furthermore, it highlights how this perception of weakness contributes to gender bias and marginalization within the society. Ultimately, the Hausa people hold the belief that the female gender is inherently weak, as depicted by the following proverbs.

Abin da wuya an ba macce rikon kura

(Gomma, 19/04/2020 in Faska)

Translation: It is difficult to entrust a hyena to a woman for caring.

Analysis: In Hausa societies, women occupy a secondary role in decision making, physical activities and hardworking. This proverb indicates a gender bias and discrimination against women. Such a proverb is expressed to carry out the fear, fragility and weakness of women to perform difficult tasks.

Ba wuya barawo a hannun mata

(Gomma, 19/04/2020 in Faska)

Translation: It is not hard, a thief in the hands of women.

Analysis: This proverb suggests that a thief feels at ease when kept by women. It however shows the absence of danger for a thief in women's hands because of their fragility and nonchalance. This proverb may also be deployed to convey the leniency of women in decision-making. So, the proverb is employed to challenge women's power and bring out their fear.

8.3 Women as bad educators

In Hausa cultural perspectives, education plays a vital role in defining human beings, particularly women. In some African societies, especially Hausa ones, despite their huge contributions in education, many Hausa proverbs criticize and judge women as unable to educate well because of their fragility and weakness. The following proverbs describe women as untrusting educators within Hausa land.

Aikin banza macce horon macce

(Gomma, 19/04/2020 in Faska)

Translation: Useless work, a woman educating a woman.

Analysis: The aforementioned proverb defends the incapability of women in educating women. According to the Hausa cultures, people prefer men as educators than women. In fact, the proverb indicates that women are not good educators because of their submissiveness, neglectfulness and fragility. Briefly, the proverb is expressed to question women's education in Hausa areas.

Mata masu hankalin yān yara

(Gomma, 19/04/2020 in Faska)

Translation: Women behave like children.

Analysis: The present proverb deals with women's capacity or way of reasoning within Hausa community. Therefore, they are compared to children. Moreover, according to this expression, women think, analyze, and argue as children do. Generally, the Hausas employ such a proverb to challenge women's faculty of discernment or comprehension.

8.4 Women as trouble makers

This part carries out women's implication in the social conflicts. According to this thematic analysis, women are the fundamental basis of social troubles in Hausa society. The ongoing proverbs illustrate how women are feared because of their terrifying characters.

Mata dangin shedan

(Gomma, 19/04/2020 in Faska)

Translation: Women are the family of Satan.

Analysis: This proverb is trying to show that women are evildoers in the Hausa society. They represent Satan, wrongdoers, and are the basis of all social conflicts. In addition, they are compared to Satan because of their bad characteristics and characters. This proverb warns people to not associate with women because of their dangerousness and social misbehaviors.

Sharri abokin Mata

(Amina, 17/08/2018)

Translation: Women are friends of evil.

Analysis: This proverb carries out how women are often associated with negative actions in Hausa society. Culturally, the Hausa associate women with hypocrisy, treachery, and betrayal. This proverb is said to remind one about the danger of being with women or to get rid of their evil. Finally, such a proverb is employed to convey women's destructive statement or action against someone.

9. Results of the research

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study was to explore and select Hausa proverbs that describe women negatively. The results show that proverbs are tools used for traditional education. However, the Hausas people employ proverbs in their daily discussions to reveal the identity and characters of women in Hausa community.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, proverbs are therefore short expressions or encoded messages employed by Hausa people to convey didactic lessons or warn people against any misconduct. They require oral skills, life experience and intelligence. This paper has succinctly dealt with how womanhood is attributed negative images through Hausa proverbs considered as effective means for moralizing and judging female gender. It however reveals women's qualities such as being bad instructors, jealous, evildoers, selfish, impatient, weak, to cite but a few and such indicators are found in some Hausa proverbs. The proverbs have significantly contributed to the depiction of women's negative portrayals and determination of their roles in the Hausa societies. And the use of such proverbs in the daily conversations of the Hausas credibly ensures the achievements of the paper's main objectives as well. The research has finally proven that proverbs as a part of language are indispensable for the study of human attitudes and characteristics in Hausa society.

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