



Review Article

RE-IMAGINING THE FEMALE BODY, DISABILITY, AND PARENTING IN AFRICAN ORAL LITERATURE: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

African oral literature, comprising folktales, myths, poetry, songs, and proverbs, is a vital medium for transmitting cultural values across generations on the African continent. However, critical analysis reveals that many oral narratives propagate limiting stereotypes regarding women's bodies, sexualities, disabilities, caregiving roles, and leadership capabilities, often reflecting and reinforcing patriarchal, ableism, and anthropocentric ideologies inherited from colonialism. Through this paper gender and other biases encoded within African oral traditions are revealed, same with strategies for re-visioning problematic elements to promote gender equality, disability justice, environmental ethics and human rights. The paper further uses extensive textual examples and perspectives from African women, disabled folks, and African earth communities to delineates discriminatory themes related to female physiology, virginity, rape, menstruation, disabilities, marriage, and motherhood. The paper also reveals how oral tales often portray women's bodies and sexualities in ways that justify control by fathers, husbands and other male authorities. Disabled characters are frequently depicted as cursed, pitiful or evil, while leadership and wisdom are confined to able-bodied male elders, framing nature as a resource for human exploitation rather than a living community. To challenge these biases, the paper outlines creative approaches for rewriting problematic narratives, including composing empowering children's tales centered on African women leaders, artists and healers; sharing inspirational biographies of historical African women who subverted patriarchal norms; utilizing multimedia inclusive storytelling platforms to uplift marginalized voices; and facilitating community-based oral history projects that re-center gender fluidity, interdependence with nature, and precolonial wisdom traditions.

Keywords: African Folklore, Disability, Gender Equality, Gender Stereotypes, Oral Literature, Social Change

INTRODUCTION

African oral tradition constitutes a culturally vital medium for passing down communal knowledge, values and history across generations. Through diverse literary forms including myths, folktales, epic poetry, proverbs, riddles and songs, these narratives transmit moral lessons, social norms, and collective memories [Okpewho \(1992\)](#). Oral tradition remains essential to constructing cultural identity and community, even as many African societies adopt written and digital communication. However, rigorous examination reveals that aspects of oral literature frequently encode and perpetuate patriarchal ideology, limiting women's autonomy, capabilities and dignity in both symbolic and material terms. As Obioma [Nnaemeka \(2005\)](#) stresses, "the foundations of African oral tradition are fundamentally patriarchal" (p. 30). Myths and folktales abound with female stereotypes, while idioms

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normalize the control of women's sexuality and reproduction. All these, ultimately, preserve the richness of oral heritage and, at the same time, wrests interpretive authority from hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Re-centering African women's voices and experiences within oral storytelling promises more equitable power relations at individual, communal and societal scales. As [Nnaemeka \(2005\)](#) argues, "The revalorization and transformation of oral tradition along feminist lines are imperative for the reconstruction of the image of women in African oral literature" (p. 30). This cultural regeneration constitutes a vital, decolonizing praxis.

PATRIARCHAL THEMES IN AFRICAN FOLKLORE AND MYTHOLOGY

Folktales and myths comprise a beloved body of African oral literature, narrated during evenings and ceremonies to entertain, educate and enculturate community members. However, rigorous scrutiny reveals that gender stereotypes are pervasive within these lively narratives.

According to [Lindfors \(2015\)](#), female characters in African folktales are often relegated to narrowly circumscribe domestic duties and deferential, one-dimensional roles serving their male counterparts. Archetypal representations include the docile, dutiful maiden patiently tending household tasks while awaiting marriage; the submissive wife whose existence revolves around pleasuring her husband; and the nagging, irascible mother-in-law who makes endless demands on daughters-in-law. Animal trickster tales likewise frequently portray masculinity in terms of physical strength, wit and intellect, whereas femininity equates to naiveté, gullibility and weakness.

Mythology similarly propagates problematic archetypes of African women as untrustworthy, hypersexual, irrationally emotional and conniving. For instance, legends of the Bachwezi dynasty in Uganda portray women as possessed by uncontrollable carnal lust, vulgarity and guile [Semambo \(2015\)](#). The infamous Buganda myth of "Nambi and Nambere" blames humanity's loss of immortality on a wife's disobedience of her upright husband, framing women as untrustworthy villains responsible for male downfall [Semambo \(2015\)](#). Gender biases still pervade origin stories like that of the Kikuyu people in Kenya, whose folklore holds that the first woman arose from the ribs of the apical male ancestor Gikuyu, imbuing females with derivative and subordinate status from the outset [Mwangi \(2009\)](#). Tales claiming men alone possess bravery, physical prowess, wisdom and self-control function to indoctrinate females and males into accepting patriarchal power hierarchies as part of the natural order. Until recently, few members of oral societies questioned the validity of such gendered tropes.

As [Lindfors \(2015\)](#) concludes, while lively and entertaining, conventional folktales thus "reflect a highly patriarchal social order" (p. 148). Their biases have far-reaching impacts, constraining African girls and women from actualizing their full human potential. Contesting such narratives is imperative. As [Nnaemeka \(2005\)](#) stresses, "The worldview celebrated in these oral narratives need to be reconstructed to reflect women's ideal being and presence in society" (p. 37). Writers and storytellers must proactively compose new tales centered on strong, intelligent and courageous heroines.

PATRIARCHY, PURITY AND THE FEMALE BODY

Customary African folklore and myth also propagate highly problematic patriarchal themes regarding the female body and sexuality. Oral narratives frequently position women's physiology as an inherent source of impurity, vulnerability and necessity of male control.

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, myths depict menstrual blood as dangerous pollution. For example, the Bakongo people of central Africa uphold elaborate taboos against menstruating women touching food, crossing ancestral altars, or engaging in intimacy, lest they endanger communal wellbeing [Janzen \(1982\)](#). Women are confined to menstrual huts throughout their periods, barred from domestic life. Folklore also associates menstrual discharge with affirmation of female power, and thus taboos suppress women's power and sexuality [Mikell \(1997\)](#).

Folktales likewise emphasize policing female virginity until marriage. Legends graphically warn that brides who are not virgins on their wedding night will suffer terrible consequences, from public shaming to death [Mberu and Pongou \(2016\)](#). This mythologizing exclusively values women's chastity and fidelity, denying female autonomy over their bodies.

Moreover, rape myths are disturbingly ubiquitous within oral tradition. A Makhuwa tale from Mozambique recounts that the rape of a village girl by a chief engendered sprouting of mango trees, framing sexual assault as a benign, generative event [Junod \(1913\)](#). Other stories blame and vilify survivors. In societies where such tales circulate, shunning and silencing raped women remains tragically common.

Through these motifs, oral literature normalizes the objectification and control of female bodies, and erasure of women's consent. Creatively contesting such myths is vital to promoting gender justice. As [Nfah-Abbenyi \(2005\)](#) advocates, "African women writers and critics of oral literature must continue to debunk, through their writings, the myths that help to keep alive the systems of gender inequality" (p. 4). Storytelling focused on female sexual empowerment and fulfillment provides a regenerative counter-discourse.

DISABILITY, MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

In addition to limiting gender norms, African oral tradition frequently discriminates against individuals with disabilities. Folklore themes engender ableism, denying agency and full community inclusion.

Derogatory idioms like “*agyanwuna*” (“the lame one”) in Akan languages of West Africa reflect disablist attitudes [Amuzu \(2019\)](#). Disability is widely feared as an ominous omen or divine curse. Consequently, girls and women with disability— especially those with mobility, cognitive or sensory impairments – experience shame, exclusion and restricted life chances.

Reproductive stigma proves especially acute. Womanhood is idealized around marriage and motherhood roles, rendering disability antithetical to African femininity [Obianwu \(2018\)](#). An ableist Igbo proverb states “*Oburunanya asi n’anya nwoke, nyereelu aka ikpe n’elu*” (“if a woman challenges a man, ask her to urinate upwards”), portraying women with disabilities as deviant and inferior to males. Folk beliefs that disabilities transmit intergenerationally further reveal eugenic prejudices against women with disability reproducing.

Artists and authors must boldly contest oral narratives propagating such discrimination. New stories conveying the dignity, capabilities, beauty and rights of all people, including women with disability, are imperative for just societies.

MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD AND GENDERED PROVERBS

Across diverse African societies, pithy proverbs function as authoritative sources of communal wisdom and morality. However, critical examination exposes patriarchal double standards embedded within many oral sayings concerning marriage and family roles.

Several proverbs impose a gendered sexual double standard. For example, the Kinyarwanda saying “*umugore ni igiti cyikomoka ku murima uwo ariwo wose*” (“a woman is a tree that can grow on any farm”) expects women’s absolute fidelity, yet excuses male infidelity [Sommers \(2012\)](#). This precipitates gender inequality within conjugal relationships.

Additionally, proverbs differentiate the parental duties of mothers versus fathers. An Igbo proverb declares “*Nwa nwanyi bu nwa nna ya*” (“a child belongs to its father”), privileging men’s authority over offspring, whereas mothers assume the daily burdens of infant care, discipline and provisioning [Mbiti \(1977\)](#). Nigerian feminist scholar [Madunagu \(2005\)](#) contends such sayings must evolve towards equality, stating that “Any child is the child of its mother and of its father” (para. 5).

While retaining the sagacity of oral wisdom, reforming proverbs to align with human rights principles can ameliorate gender disparities. Artists must creatively shape language towards justice.

WOMEN, LEADERSHIP AND SUBVERSIVE ORAL NARRATIVES

Across the African continent, women remain starkly underrepresented in formal political leadership, stymying gender equality and women’s empowerment. However, pioneering African women have shattered glass ceilings to excel as visionary leaders in hostile contexts, despite oral narratives discouraging female authority. Their successes underscore women’s capabilities to excel in high office when unfettered by traditional patriarchal prejudices.

Proverbs across Africa explicitly denigrate women’s leadership acumen. For example, an Igbo proverb declares “*Dike n’agbata obu nwanyi*” (“Leadership does not befit women”), asserting that females inherently lack capacity to govern [Chilaka \(2012\)](#). In Botswana, the Setswana saying “*Ga nke di etelelwa ke manamagadi*” (“Cows cannot be led by a female”) conveys that women cannot effectively lead at any level, public or private [Mogwe \(1992\)](#). Such idioms socialize females and males into internalizing beliefs in masculine political dominance.

However, trailblazing women like Wangari Maathai of Kenya, Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Malawi’s first female president Joyce Banda have shattered myths about female leadership through their courageous, transparent tenures. Their successes underscore women’s capabilities when unfettered by traditional biases. Artists celebrating such inspiring heroines through story and song can help normalize women’s authority.

Oral narratives likewise subtly question patriarchal norms. Folklorist [Ogude \(1999\)](#) analyzes Yoruba trickster tales following a clever, defiant female protagonist named Ajapa. Her antics expose and subvert hypocrisies underlying gender inequality. Ogude argues such stories constitute “gendered metaphors encoding resistance” to patriarchy’s coercions (p. 57). Although subtle, subversive motifs yield cracks in unjust structures. Oral artists must amplify such emancipatory messages.

STRATEGIES FOR RE-IMAGINING ORAL LITERATURE

Transforming the gender biases entrenched within African oral tradition constitutes an immense but imperative undertaking requiring collective action. Diverse creative strategies hold promise for re-visioning problematic folklore in rights-affirming ways.

Writers can compose empowering children's tales featuring courageous heroines, conveying messages of gender equality, consent and autonomy. Artists can translate these into lively cartoons and animated films to engage youth. Performing artists must stage dynamic dramas in schools and villages celebrating strong female leaders and friendship between girls and boys.

Folklorists should trace and compile biographies of inspiring African women – leaders, inventors, healers, warriors, etc. – for integration into the oral canon. Local griots can share these biographies through lively story-song during community gatherings. Musicians ought to feature female vocalists and foreground women's struggles within activist lyrics. Poets must reject images of female subservience and create verse uplifting women's power.

Everyday citizens should challenge unethical folk expressions through social media activism such as hashtag campaigns. Digital spaces provide forums for contesting traditional prejudices. Ultimately, reshaping language and narrative arts necessitates inclusive grassroots participation by women, girls, men and boys.

One exemplary initiative is the nonprofit NGO FEMRITE (Feminist Writers of Uganda), which conducts workshops supporting Ugandan women in writing fiction, drama, and memoir expressing self-determination and exposing gender oppression (Kiyimba, 2008). Since its 1995 founding, FEMRITE has published anthologies of member writing to popular acclaim, fostering feminist consciousness and women's creative authority. Such literary activism provides a model for African women collectively remaking oral arts.

HARNESSING MULTIMEDIA PLATFORMS

While revising oral narratives, advocacy efforts must also creatively harness modern media including television, radio, social networks, music and literature to hasten feminist social change. New media constitutes a vital space for conveying empowering stories and spotlighting ongoing rights violations.

For example, Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o leveraged her Academy Award platform to discuss colorism, self-confidence, and natural Black beauty for African girls [Lindfors \(2017\)](#). Pioneering Nigerian author Flora Nwapa penned accessible novels celebrating independent women pursuing fulfillment on their own terms [Larrier \(1995\)](#). Contemporary African women writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie command global readership, affirming women's complexity. Such voices provide aspirational role models unconstrained by retrograde oral tropes.

Activists also utilize online platforms to mobilize against sexual violence. Social media enables African women's experiences of harassment and victim-blaming to be heard through hashtag campaigns like #MeToo, #MyDressMyChoice, #JusticeForUwa, and #StopRapingUs. The website Her Zimbabwe collects accounts of gender oppression from Zimbabwean women and girls. Harnessing multimedia storytelling will be vital to entrenching new, equitable social norms.

PRESERVING CULTURAL ESSENCE WHILE REFORMING TRADITIONS

A delicate balance must be struck between preserving the profundity of oral heritage and reforming problematic traditions to align with contemporary human rights values. Oral literature contains timeless wisdom and moral lessons warranting thoughtful safeguarding. Yet nostalgia should not justify maintaining narratives that degrade human dignity and contravene constitutional guarantees of non-discrimination.

As Isidore [Okpewho \(1992\)](#) elucidates, orality's power stems from dynamically adapting folk knowledge to evolving societal contexts and needs. The same creative genius generating ancient myths can remake them for modern realities characterized by gender democracy rather than patriarchy. This upholds positive ancestral values while eschewing unjust elements.

Rather than attacking traditions from outside, the aim is restoring narrative authority to African women long silenced and marginalized. Their lived experiences and priorities must crucially reshape limiting tales. Inclusive, participatory storytelling allows culture to flourish while shedding the restrictive husk of patriarchy. As [Nnaemeka \(2005\)](#) stresses, "The worldviews, values, and aesthetics embedded in these oral narratives need to be reconstructed and transformed to reflect women's ideal being and presence in society" (p. 37). Reform must come through local, organic processes to genuinely transform hearts and minds.

IMPLICATIONS OF REFORMING ORAL TRADITIONS

Challenging the patriarchal norms crystallized within African oral literature holds radical implications for actualizing women's rights and dignity in the region.

At the individual level, alternative narratives can positively shape female and male self-perception, relationships and behaviors. More empowered personal identities and partnerships may emerge.

Within families and communities, new oral stories promoting gender equality could help normalize equitable parenting roles, reproductive justice, and women with disability inclusion. Stigma surrounding menstruation, sexuality and rape may diminish under transformed social discourses.

Broader results encompass improved educational access for girls, safety for women from gender violence, women's economic participation and leadership across sectors from local to national scales.

Ultimately, reforming the building blocks of culture promises accelerated progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals by dismantling entrenched barriers to African women's empowerment. Fulfilling their human rights remains impossible while folktales still portray women as less than fully equal. This underscores the urgent need for collective storytelling that re-authors the future.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated how African oral literature frequently encodes patriarchal ideology that subordinates and stereotypes women and girls. Discriminatory folklore themes surround female leadership, sexuality, family roles and more. Diverse strategies to reinvent problematic myths, legends and proverbs through grassroots cultural innovation and modern media are imperative.

Alternative narratives conveying gender equality, inclusion and human rights must take root at the heart of African communities to profoundly reshape gender power relations. As agents of cultural production, ordinary citizens have a vital role in contesting and transforming regressive tropes through their micro-level daily interactions.

Ultimately, oral narratives constitute a crucial front where African women's struggle for liberation from constrained traditional roles, towards new horizons of possibility, continues to unfold through tenacious creativity. This paper has proposed solutions centered on inclusive oral storytelling that retains the richness of indigenous heritage while restoring dignity to all.

EPILOGUE: THE WOUNDED WOMAN

I am a woman,
And I am more than enough.
I am a Woman,
So I am a capable.
The sweetness behind
The Vagina comes within,
The happy woman.
The softness of the breasts
Comes with scars untold,
Untold to judgmental society,
Untold to the biased society,
Untold to patriarchal society,
Untold to the nation without liberty law,
The law that never takes action.

Adolescent girls resort to suicide,
Suicide to end the pain,
Pain inflicted by men,
Men who read,
Who read primitive folktales,
Folktales, folktales, folktales.
Folktales that deem the light,
That dim the lights of women.
Proverbial view has brought more blindfolds,
Than the street lights.
Street lights only reveal the wicked,
Not the wise.
Proverbs open wounds,

Rather than heal the soul,
Souls are electrocuted,
Electrocuted by myths,
Electrocuted by sayings,
Electrocuted by quotes,
Electrocuted by African oral literature.

Touch not the anointed,
Touch not the woman,
Touch not the African Queen.

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