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## WOMEN AGAINST WOMEN: THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF HAUSA PROVERBS

**Abstract:** Proverbs are widely known to be sayings which convey the feeling of the inner mind in some metaphoric presentations. This study discusses Hausa proverbs (in rivalry) from the feminist and sociolinguistic perspectives. Ten Hausa proverbs are presented, translated into English and analysed using sociolinguistic parameters of when, where, why and who uses the proverbs. Women in polygamous homes are rivals to one another. Their rivalry originates from the fact that they owe their loyalty to the same man. Each wife sees the other as a block to the “total” pleasure she desires from “their” husband. Even though they may have accepted the situation of sharing the man, they still find ways to express their inner feelings of pains against each other by employing the use of proverbs, which is a metaphoric way of expression, without realising they also puncture the image of the entire female gender, the image which women should all guard jealously.

**Keywords:** Africa, co-wife, co-wifeness, feminism, Hausa, husband, indirection, language, marriage, oppression, proverb, polygamy, rivalry, sociolinguistics

### **Introduction**

Proverbs are metaphoric expressions presented with some hidden meanings, and are given to convey some feelings or ideas. Proverbs embellish speech and give weight and more meaningful presentation to the expression. Various scholars have attempted definitions of the word proverb. Krikmann (1994:123) defines it that “proverbs are metaphorical descriptions of certain situations”. In his own definition, Mieder (1985: 119) says:

A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.

Mieder also refers to a proverb as “a short sentence of wisdom”. Each of the definitions above pertinently expresses the proverb as a conveyer of messages in very apt form and loaded with wisdom.

This paper discusses the use of proverbs by women against women in the Hausa community of Nigeria. The Hausa community is well known to be polygamous in nature. This makes it possible for women to be together as co-wives in marriage. Co-wives because they are married to a common husband to whom they all owe their loyalty, love and faith in marriage. When women are together in this condition, certain issues crop up between them. Some of such may be positive, while others may be negative. The negative ones may lead to quarrels or hatred for one another. In the course of quarrels, or even in times of discussions, the tendency is for the woman to issue statements in metaphors to convey some message of her inner mind.

The Hausa language is spoken in many cities in Nigeria, most commonly in the Northern areas. It is a language that is also spoken in other parts of Africa outside Nigeria. Furniss (1996: 2) reports that:

The Hausa language is spoken by more than 50 million people in Nigeria, Niger, Northern Ghana and in communities from Kaolack in Senegal, to Kano, Katsina and Sokoto (generally North-Central and North Western Nigeria) and the South strip of the Republic of Niger, with Hausa communities and minority groups in Northern Ghana and many towns and cities from Senegal to Sudan.

In most Hausa speaking areas, the dominant population is of the Islamic religion. Since Islam is a religion that allows for up to four wives for a man at a time, most women in Hausa communities find themselves as wives to one man. Being wives to the same man makes such women rivals to one another. The usual practice is for the man who is the husband to the wives to treat them with equality, giving equal attention being of paramount pride for himself. This responsibility assumed by a husband is well acknowledged in Idoma land too where a wife is expected to derive the necessary comfort and attention from the husband as conveyed in

some Idoma proverbs. One of such proverbs is presented by Amali (2000: 17):

*Idoma: Itodo kanoo lebe ebe buje  
Anoo lotu k anoo ce ta  
Uhugbo onya ano.*

English: The porcupine says:  
I have every part of my body in thorns  
But I have left open my chest  
Because of my wife.

The clear chest of the porcupine for the sake of its wife despite all the thorns on its body emphasizes the importance attached to a wife in the life of the man. Love, however, cannot be equally shared among wives. There's the natural tendency for a husband to love one wife more than the other. So each wife sees the other as a rival and someone who deprives her of the total love and attention she desires to enjoy from the husband just as the porcupine gives to its wife. The husband may wish to create an atmosphere of equal treatment to each of them, and promote peaceful living, but the inner feeling of rivalry between the wives may only be natural. Where there is more than one wife in a Hausa home, there is usually an agreement reached in carrying out household chores. This includes cooking for the husband and having to spend the night with him. The period for each wife on these duties may be as agreed upon on consensus by the wives and their husband. Since these are women now brought under the same roof by one man, the sane thing to do is for them to appreciate and be loving to each other. However, this is most often not the case. The women merely tend to tolerate one another to keep their stay together on a slim interaction. They therefore find ways of attacking each other directly or indirectly. This is a point where the usage of proverbs comes into play. Women are generally viewed as "axis of evil". This opinion is also present in some areas of Yorubua land as Oyesakin (1982:19) attests:

A woman according to Ifa is an embodiment of evil-rivalry, jealousy; avarice, witchcraft and insinuation are part and parcel of a woman. The tragedy of it all is that women do easily succeed in the devilish devices.

If the statement above is something to go by, it is therefore easy for women to evolve various approaches to carrying out their plans. Since women are not known to be good fighters in the physical use of arms, their main weapon is the word of the mouth. Rivalry, it would seem is a natural phenomenon in women. The idea of sharing one man as co-wives to him may not go down well with them. As such, proverbs are employed by women against women. Remarks are made by one wife to upset the other. Amali, (1984: 32) aptly puts it that:

Proverbs as an expression of idea in lucid and thoughtful language are charged with various interpretations. In this case, it is a linguistic matter, the ability to express ideas in clothed language.

The idea is for one to say what is intended without going at it directly. In this light, expressions are coined with hidden meanings. The meanings of each proverb have to be sought in deep thinking. They can be used to criticize one another. This point is similarly observed by Dathorne (1966: 70) when he says of the proverb and the riddle:

The riddle presents a mental problem. The proverb is a criticism of life. Both are products of the popular mind and therefore both reflect prevalent attitudes. But while the riddle is hardly more than a form of entertainment, the proverb is more serious and has didactic intention.

The use of proverbs in speech can therefore not be overemphasized. For the effectiveness of proverbial expressions, Amali (1984:32) says that “proverbs also illuminate complex and crucial problems”. In a situation where women go against women as co-wives to the same man, certain Hausa proverbs put in a good fight for the user. It is a known fact that proverbs may be used as either positive or negative expressions. As such where a woman goes against another woman, the tendency is to use proverbs, which may have negative effects on the mind of the addressee. This observation is well put by Grobler (1994:94) thus:

Proverbs are used with the intention to create a favourable relationship between addresser and addressee regarding a

given matter. Negative proverbs, on the other hand, may be used with the intention of reprimanding or reproving, or even insulting: it thus signals a negative relationship between addresser and addressee.

Speech is a major communication medium. It enables us to express our feelings and emotions. Where it requires being strong and carrying more weight in meaning, proverbs may then serve as a good tool. Norrick (1994: 20) can be said to hold a similar view when he says: "Like any other utterance in a language, a proverb conveys an attitude or feeling along with the statement it makes".

We present ten Hausa proverbs in this paper which are used by women against women as co-wives. Each proverb is presented in Hausa and translated into English. They are analysed bringing out the sociolinguistic parameter of each, highlighting the when, where and how of usage.

#### ***Theoretical framework***

There are diverse viewpoints on feminism perspectives. This is mainly so due to the nature of and position of women in different societies. For example Karl Marx's feminist theory believes that capitalist economy focuses upon the institutionalized forms of inequality between men and women within the society. Radical feminists believe that man is enemy to woman because patriarchy as a system favours the male, ignoring the female. To support this view, Lovenduski (1993:7) assert "that gender is the fundamental division in society and the major determinant of power relations". The liberal feminists believe in the existence of physiological and biological differences between the sexes but do not consider these as hindrances to equality between the sexes. The liberal feminists (as a group of women) are out to create awareness within societies on the need for women to have the freedom to choose their roles. The socialist feminists struggle for women's liberation, which they believe, is essential to the liberation of all oppressed people. The conservative feminists (mostly women) desire to preserve their traditional institutions, badly affected by inertia. The Amazon feminists reject the idea that certain characteristics are inherently masculine or feminine and therefore uphold and explore a vision of heroic womanhood.

On the opposite side of the above mentioned feminists' studies are Gracia (1962), Nkere-uwem (1997), Chinwezu et al. (1990), and Mohammed (2004), who believe that women hold so much powers to make a difference in any society. This group of feminists, predominantly those accepting the Amazon feminist theory, rejects the idea that women are passive, weak and helpless. According to Chinwezu (1990:9), woman's power is the "invisible six-seventh of an iceberg compared to the visible one-seventh which is the man's". The Amazon feminists believe that since women hold so many powers, they can very easily effect a change to their own lives. In fact, scholars like Mohammed (2004) hold the view that because women have so much powers, they oppress their fellow women.

This study aligns with the two extremes of feminists' studies; that women are oppressed by men and that women oppress fellow women. However, another important aspect that this paper reveals through the study of Hausa proverbs is that women in polygamy are passive-aggressive in nature who transfer patriarchal domination onto their co-wife as a form of challenge.

The passive-aggressive nature of co-wives revealed through the use of proverbs and some sociolinguistic parameters say no speech is entirely free of its situation, because part of its meaning will be implicit, supplied by the background knowledge of the participants (Edwards,1976). The real linguistic fact is the full utterance within its context or situation, that is who says what, when, where, why and to whom (Bashir 1997).

#### ***Data presentation and analysis***

It is pertinent at this point for us to present the co-wife Hausa proverbs, their English translations and analysis. These proverbs were collected from some women elders within the Hausa community in the course of discussion with them for the purpose of collecting data.

1. *Tawa ta same ni, kishi da gala-gala.*  
I am finished, co-wifeness is like one legged jogging.

This proverb can be effectively used where a woman has been an only wife to her husband. The husband then marries an additional wife to join the first wife in the house. Co-wifeness generally is

seen as a threat to womanhood in a home so where a wife finds herself in co-wifeness, she is threatened and sees herself as losing favour from the husband as presented in the metaphoric use of the “one-legged jogging”. In her lamentation, she expresses the whole idea as finding herself in troubled waters just as others elsewhere may have been experiencing. When used, the proverb clearly declares to the other wife her unwanted presence and presents her as evil. Jogging is regarded as an unserious event, so where a person jogs on one leg, it is even more unserious and imbalanced. Co-wifeness here is related to jogging on one leg. The co-wife sees herself as imbalanced to face the challenges of co-wifeness in marriage. This proverb can also be used in a hopeless situation because co-wifeness is also seen as a bad or a hopeless situation.

2. *Iya sauka lafiya, uwar kishiya ta hau kura.*  
 “Good luck”, a co-wife’s mother takes a ride on a hyena.

A wife wishes the mother to a co-wife a safe journey on a hyena ride. A hyena is a dangerous cannibal and so definitely cannot give anybody a safe ride. Where a person has climbed on its back, it is certain that she would be eaten up by it. The death of the mother would definitely be painful to her daughter, who incidentally is a co-wife to another woman. Since there’s rivalry in co-wifeness, a co-wife derives pleasure in the pains experienced by her co-wife. The proverb may therefore be used where a co-wife feels she has given good riddance to an evil thing, person or situation in her home. Such a situation or evil thing is one she is comparing to the co-wife.

3. *Ba kuka na ba, uwar kishiya ta mutu.*  
 It is none of my business when the mother of a co-wife dies.

Even in the death of a co-wife’s mother, the other wife is not bothered and sees the issue as none of her business but rather a blessing. A co-wife may present this proverb in the course of making the other wife know that their stay together as co-wives is of no significance to her. It may also be used when she wants to make it known to the co-wife that she has no business what so ever with her in whatever situation. Another instance where it can be used is in a discussion where a woman feels that the issue being

discussed has nothing to do with her. Having nothing to do with her is juxtaposed with not being affected by the death of a co-wife's mother.

4. *Zama da kishiya sal tilas.*  
Only compulsion can make one live with a co-wife.

Living with a co-wife is seen as arising only by compulsion. This refers to a bad case. The proverb is used when a woman finds herself in a difficult situation and refers to such as having to stay with a co-wife. Again, this reminds us of the issue of women being against each other in rivalry as co-wives, with bad situations or happenings likened to being in co-wifeness.

5. *Saduada, shawara da uwar kishiya.*  
Total submission, a close discussion with a co-wife's mother.

Where there's a problem and you have no hope, you give up in face of the situation. Discussions or advice-seeking can only be done with a loved one who, it is assumed is in a position of giving proper advice genuinely. Where a woman finds herself in a needy situation and no other is available for her to consult, she ends up with her co-wife's mother as a last resort. This last resort may not yield her the desired result because a co-wife's mother is not referred to as a loved one. This proverb may be used in discussions to indicate the extent of the hopelessness of a given situation.

6. *Kishikumallon mata, in ya matsa sci an harar.*  
Co-wifeness is nauseatic, once it churns, it must be vomited.

Co-wifeness is something that is very much detested by women, it is only tolerated. The hatred attached to it is obvious and anything detested is likened to co-wifeness. Where a woman is angry over something, she may use the proverb above to describe her hatred or anger for it.

7. *Ba zafi barkonon taro a idon Kishiya.*



It is not hot to blow a penny's worth of pepper into the eyes of a co-wife.

Due to the hatred for a co-wife, there is lack of feeling or emotions for her. Even a small particle of pepper is very painful to the eye, so it is expected that a penny's worth of pepper would be much more painful. Yet in co-wifeness, it is seen not to be painful. The proverb above can be used where there's no feeling for any pain that someone you do not like or love may be undergoing.

8. *Yaya na iya da abinda ya gagari wuta inji kirshiryar konanniya.*

What can I do to what has defied fire,  
says a co-wife to a burnt partner.

Fire is hotter than co-wifeness, yet a co-wife defies it and gets some burns but is not burnt to death. So if a co-wife can defy fire, what else can be done about co-wifeness. This proverb clearly portrays the tolerance with which co-wifeness is taken. The proverb can be used when a person finds herself in a hopeless situation; she resigns to that fate because she has no other way.

9. *Da zaman banzar gwamma aikin Kishiryar ko tsine maka aka yi ka samu.*

It is better to help with a co-wife's work than stay idle,  
even if you are cursed, at least one has some reward.

Anything done to tolerate co-wifeness is not appreciated. This proverb equates any work done in co-wifeness as a curse but goes further to state that it is better than to remain idle. Though the work is unappreciated, there would be some reward in the hereafter. The proverb may be used in a discussion where one finds a situation to be better than nothing.

10. *Allah ya suturi bukui inji Kishiryar mai Kusumbi.*

God forbids (does not like) the one with a protruding back,  
says a co-wife to a hunch-backed mate.

This proverb is used as sarcasm to a co-wife who is hunch-backed. It can be said by one co-wife to the other or by another individual in favour of one co-wife against another co-wife. The proverb po-

sitions the user as being in a better condition than that of the co-wife. It also belittles the co-wife who is hunch-backed. This proverb may also be used where a co-wife deems herself better in social, economic or any well being. She uses it to tell the co-wife she's better off.

### ***Summary***

The use of proverbs in co-wifeness is an important area where women constantly oppress their own kind. Women oppression therefore begins in the home. In all the ten Hausa proverbs analysed, it is clear that they are used to constantly bring pain and misery upon the lives of other women. The theme of hatred is very glaring as in examples (2) and (7). The choice of words shows aggression and oppression as in examples (8) and (10), situations where a co-wife is accused and abused over a thing she cannot change – the co-wife has been burnt (8) but is it her fault? She is accused of being a hunch-back (10), is it her fault?

There is also the theme of disgust as in examples (4) and (6). Co-wifeness is nauseatic (6) and only compulsion can make one to live with a co-wife (4). Hopelessness as a theme keeps on occurring in the proverbs as in examples (5) and (10), where discussion with a co-wife's mother entails losing hope (5), while helping a co-wife leads to being cursed (10).

The passive nature of women runs through all the proverbs – where the struggle is to win the love of the husband by subjecting the co-wife to all evils. Rather than take revenge on the husband for whatever harm he does or shows, women turn their revenge on their fellow women. Is it the co-wife's fault that they have to live together? A notion of women in polygamy is to be "better" than their co-wives.

### ***Conclusion***

From the above discussion and the proverbs analysed, it is clear that the battle of women against women particularly in a polygamous home is a continuous one. It is reflected in many sectors of our daily living. This paper has presented the battle from the point of co-wifeness with Hausa proverbs as the weapon in the battle. A co-wife may not necessarily be engaged in a quarrel with her co-wife, but a battle exists, as she is unhappy with having a co-

wife. She employs the use of proverbs to charge at her partner, insult, challenge, belittle her or direct sarcasm at her.

It would seem that it is a man's world; women are on the losing side. This notion builds some worry in the women so when they find themselves together as co-wives, they seek to fight the problem. They are antagonistic to each other and there's suspicion on all fronts. This study finds proverbs about co-wifeness to be an unfortunate tool in the violence of women against women.

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