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Viewing gender through the eyes of proverbs: Reflections of gender ideology in the Akan and Swahili societies

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we compare gendered proverbs in the Akan society of Ghana and Swahili society of Tanzania, focusing on convergences and divergences in their worldviews on conceptualisation of gender roles and functions. Our analyses of data from written and oral sources within the theoretical concepts of gender ideology and intertextuality establish that largely, gendered proverbs in Akan and Swahili are convergent and express similar gender ideologies. Gendered proverbs in the two societies typically refer to females, and even when they mention males, they often critically expose the subjugation of women in relation to male superiority. The main divergent feature between gendered proverbs in Akan and Swahili societies is the perception of females as sex objects and the use of explicit expressions of sex organs and sexual acts by Akan proverbs. In contrast, Swahili gendered proverbs rarely address sexuality, and when they do, they do so discreetly by implication.

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1. Introduction

The proverb is one of the well-researched genres of textual studies. Nevertheless, it continues to be the subject of many scholarly studies from various disciplinary perspectives including Sociology (Asimeng-Boahene, 2014), Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Diabah and Amfo, 2015), Cultural Studies, Literature (Hussein, 2005, 2009; Jayawardena, 2015) and Philosophy (Gyekye, 1975) among others. Although it is generally perceived as a universal genre, in its definition, it is referred to as being traditional or cultural. The *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Speake 2015) defines a proverb as ‘a traditional saying which offers advice or presents a moral in a short and pithy manner’. Mieder (2004:4) defines it as ‘a concise statement of an apparent truth which has, had, or will have currency among the people.’ Storm (1992:168) states that proverbs are ‘based on accumulated experience and transmitted from generation to generation; they reveal many hidden aspects of a people’s culture and way of thought.’ Proverbs reflect the realities of the moral fibre of the societies they belong to, and although they may be cross-linguistic to some extent; they are not universal. Many scholars, in defining proverbs from African perspectives have defined them in a way that portrays them as distinct from those of the rest of the world. Ssetuba (2002: 1), for instance, states that ‘the proverb is regarded as a noble genre of African oral tradition that enjoys the prestige of a custodian of a people’s wisdom and philosophy of life.’

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Proverbs in various languages are numerous and can be subcategorised under several groups, such as those that contain animals; humans; objects; instruments; and professionals. Although gendered proverbs may not form high percentages of the repertoire of the proverbs of particular societies, they have been the focus of many scholars such as Schipper (2006), Diabah and Amfo (2015), Yusuf (1997), and Hussein (2009). Gendered proverbs refer to proverbs in which males or females are represented explicitly or implicitly. Although most African languages are not gender sensitive with regards to their grammar, perceptions of gender with regards to roles and functions are historically significant. The portrayal of masculinity and femininity in proverbs, therefore represent a society's perceptions of males and females from various perspectives based on the gender ideology that pertains in it.

Proverbs are said to be figurative and metaphoric (Finnegan, 1970:380); however, Schipper (2006: 28) points out that some proverbs are direct and literal statements, and this applies to gendered proverbs. The fact that the literal meaning of some gendered proverbs may or may not have a direct bearing on males or females does not nullify their representation of real-life perceptions and ideologies (Schipper, 2006). In other words, the perception of gender in a particular way is conveyed in a proverb literally or figuratively. These perceptions are embedded in the history, culture and traditions of a society.

Significant studies on gendered proverbs in the literature include Yusuf's (1997) article, which examines sexist analogies in English and Yoruba proverbs and how women are implicitly compared with a range of non-human items including objects, animals, plants, food, and trouble in them. Schipper's (2006) 'Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet' discusses proverbs from many parts of the world, which explicitly or implicitly mention women. In this study, Schipper (2006) establishes that such proverbs tend to portray women in similar ways irrespective of their geographical location.

Akan and Kiswahili belong to the NigerCongo language family of Africa. However, they belong to different subgroups. Dzahene-Quarshie (2016) has established some similarities between the two languages in the way they encode inalienability grammatically through 'possessor promotion' (See Dzahene-Quarshie, 2016). On the basis of "the possibility of a shared cultural and historical experience in the distant past", Kambon and Dzahene-Quarshie (2017) compare parallel and near parallel Twi¹ and Kiswahili proverbs employing the framework of the "People Proximity and Proverb Similarity Matrix". This Matrix measures the level of similarity of parallel proverbs in terms of Conceptual/Semantic, Contextual, and Lexical Syntactic/Structural similarities with Biological, Cosmological, Cultural and Environmental proximity to indicate the extent to which the two societies have similar perceptions as reflected in proverbs. The analysis of data confirms the hypothesis that "The closer these dimensions of proximity are to each other, the greater the degree of similarity between proverbs." Thus the PPP Matrix demonstrates that the Pan-African connectedness and unity of worldview and culture that exists among the Akan and Swahili societies are still demonstrably similar in a variety of dimensions, despite the significant geographical distance between them. This study focuses on the convergence of Kiswahili and Twi proverbs.

We discuss how gendered proverbs in Akan and Swahili (henceforth AKASWA) characterise and depict the position, identity, role, and status of men and women in the respective societies, focusing on their convergent and divergent ideas, perceptions and conceptions within the theoretical concept of intertextuality and gender ideology. We chose these two frameworks because intertextuality, which deals with how texts dialogue with other texts through incorporation and recontextualisation of some elements of the texts (Fairclough, 2004:17), is useful for the comparative analysis of proverbs from the two societies. Gender ideology, is a useful framework, which aids in understanding the perception of gender and gender roles in these societies that characterise the content and contexts of the proverbs in our data. The study establishes that although Kambon and Dzahene-Quarshie (2017) demonstrates that often proverbs in Akan and Swahili are parallel or near parallel, they are largely convergent and can be described as intertextual in their use of similar metaphors that portray gender ideologies, which are also largely convergent in the way they depict men as superior and women as subservient. At another level a claim can be made for intertextual relationships between the two sets of AKASWA texts where both the content of the texts and the cultural contexts are concerned. However, the study also establishes a sharp divergence between Akan and Swahili proverbs when it comes to proverbs that express sex organs and the act of sexual intercourse explicitly. While several of such proverbs exist in Akan, none was found in Swahili (See below for discussion).

In terms of the contexts, although mainly drawn from written documents, personal experience shows that these proverbs are widely used in speech and writing. Several AKASWA writers and speakers may refer to them depending on the topic under discussion.

1.1. Cultural and historical backgrounds of the Akan and Swahili societies

The Akan society is one of the major ethnic groups in Ghana and Ivory Coast. In Ghana, they form about 47% of the population according to the population and housing Census of 2010. Their kingdom has been one of the strongest in West Africa from the seventeenth century (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). They follow a matrilineal lineage and succession within a patriarchal system. In other words, per Akan culture, children inherit from their mother's lineage not from their father's lineage. However, the male child, not the female inherits his maternal uncle. Thus, males always come before females. For instance, the son of a man's sister inherits him, not his son or daughter. Although males hold positions of authority within the society, and therefore always come before females, females also wield considerable power. Although sometimes portrayed in

¹ Twi is an alternative term for Akan in Ghana. Akan is a more general term which includes dialects of the language in Ghana and Ivory Coast. Twi is a dialect of Akan spoken in Ghana.

a negative way in that while some proverbs present women as powerful, as it is women who give birth to men, some also present women as using their sexual prowess to overpower men (Diabah and Amfo, 2015). In addition, the Akan society expects women to submit to and respect their husbands (Diabah and Amfo, 2015).

The Swahili ethnic group live mainly along the East African coast and interior. Gower et al. (1996:255), note that the Swahili community is a mixed one because from the sixteenth century, 'the coast received peoples from diverse areas and cultures, including Hindus from India Muslims and Arabs from Oman and Hadhramaut, and African slaves from the interior of East Africa.' From this perspective, we can consider the Swahili society as a combination of African, Asian and Arabic cultural diffusion (Gower et al., 1996; Mazrui, 2007).

The Swahili society follows a patrilineal system within a patriarchal one. Gower et al.'s (1996) account of the status of East African women in the nineteenth century indicates that the adoption of Islam by the East Africans indeed strengthened patriarchy in the region. For instance in Islamic tradition the initiation of divorce is largely the preserve of the husband. Men could divorce much more easily than women. Traditionally, men are regarded as the heads of the family, as well as breadwinners while women are seen as subservient to men; in charge of domestic chores.

Thus, the two societies practice male superiority from a matrilineal and a patrilineal one respectively.

Finnegan (1970:381) points out that proverbs are well represented in Africa, especially in the South Bantu, Congo and West Africa areas, which by implication include the Akan and the Swahili ethnicities. That both societies cherish the use of proverbs is evident in the large collections of proverbs, and many scholarly works, which investigate different aspects of proverbs (Diabah and Amfo, 2015; Agyemang et al., 2015; Appiah et al., 2007; Wamitila, 2010; King'ei and Ndal, 2009). In both Akan and Swahili societies, proverbs have played a vital role in the past and continues to do so today. One's knowledge of proverbs and his/her ability to use them appropriately is equated to one's level of competence in the language. Proverbs are still used in the daily lives of the people of these two ethnicities. In the Akan society where a chieftaincy system continues to be an integral part of society, the chief's palace remains an important court of arbitration for members of society under a particular chief's jurisdiction. It is one place where proverbs come alive regularly during arbitrations. During traditional ceremonies such as marriage, child naming, funerals as well as ordinary conversations, proverbs are used (Agyemang et al., 2015:19). With respect to the media, in recent times the influx of Akan medium FM radio stations has also played a vital role of language invigoration and through this avenue Akan proverbs are heard constantly during social programmes as well as reading of the news. The same applies to Akan TV stations where Spanish tele-novellas have been translated through voice-over-dubbing into Akan. The use of proverbs in these Akan versions of telenovelas is noticeable. Thus, the use of proverbs is very much an integral part of the Akan society. Agyemang et al. (2015:19) state that "Akan proverbs are popular in advertising and promoting business, some media programmes and naming of businesses". Nevertheless, proverbs that explicitly mention sex organs or sexual acts are used more discreetly and not without being preceded by the required apologetic expression 'sebe', which can be interpreted as 'excuse me to say' Agyekum (2002). Kambon and Dzahene-Quarshie (2017: 119) state that:

A major feature of proverbs is their deployment in contexts other than those in which they originated such that they relate to the situation at hand by means of analogy to the original situation referenced directly. As such, proverbs exemplify the concept of cognitive economy. In other words, one proverb can be used in various contexts without imposing upon the speaker the necessity of coming up with new constructions in each new instance in which an analogous reply is necessary.

Similarly, proverbs are also an integral part of the Swahili society. They are used on a daily basis in conversations, in the media, and they are used as titles of movies and inscribed in the famous *Kanga* cloth of East Africa. AKASWA proverbs are usually metaphoric. However, often their literal meanings depict the cultural ideologies of the ethnicities from which they emanate.

1.2. Methodology and data

Fifty-eight (58) proverbs from Akan and Swahili, 31 from Akan and 27 from Swahili, which explicitly or implicitly refer to females and males, were gathered and sorted according to the themes of gender they address, such as marriage, gender roles, and beauty and power. The sources of data for the Swahili proverbs are King'ei and Ndal (2009) and Wamitila (2010) and those for the Akan proverbs are Appiah et al. (2007) and Diabah and Amfo (2015). In addition to these, three proverbs, two for Swahili and one for Akan, respectively, are from the authors' native speakers' competence. Although naturally-occurring data would have been ideal for the study, we reckoned that it would be challenging to capture a significant number of gendered proverbs in speech. We indicate the page and number references of the proverb and indicate the examples from authors with 'Author'. In examining the similarities and differences between Akan and Swahili gendered proverbs, our main research questions are; (1) How is gender portrayed in Akan and Swahili proverbs? (2) To what extent can the portrayal of gender in the two languages be considered intertextual? (3) In what ways are they divergent?

1.3. Theoretical concept of intertextuality

Intertextuality is one of the fundamental theories, which attempts to understand literature and culture in society. Julia Kristeva coined the term in the 1960s in her reformulations of the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism. In Kristeva's words, "every text is constructed as an 'intersection of textual surfaces', 'a mosaic of quotations', the 'absorption and transformation of

another' (Kristeva, 1980; 66 cited in Alfaro, 1996: 277; Duff, 2002: 58; Lesic-Thomas, 2005: 1; Koutsobina, 2008: 67). The framework argues that authors do not create their texts from their original minds, but rather compile them from pre-existing texts. So that, as Kristeva writes, a text is 'a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text' in which 'several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralise one another' (Kristeva, 1980: 36 cited in Allen, 2000: 35). She argues that text is not a unilinear entity but a heterogeneous combination of texts. Thus interpretation should take into account the relation between text, and society and culture; texts cannot be detached from the social or cultural intertextuality, which constitutes the backdrop from which a text is created. Intertextuality deals with the materialisation of a text from the social text and its perpetual existence within society and history (Raj, 2015).

Fairclough's (2004) definition of intertextuality is particularly useful for this study. He states "texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualise and dialogue with other texts". He argues that what is said in a text is always said against the background of what is unsaid or what is made explicit is always grounded in what is left unsaid. Thus, the proverb regarded as a form of intertextual text is usually linked to a number of texts such as thoughts, norms, social ideologies or concepts of the society from which it comes. At another level, Fairclough (2004:40) regards intertextuality as constituting "the presence of actual elements of other texts within a text. Taking these two levels of description of intertextuality into consideration, we deem it appropriate for undertaking the kind of analysis this study requires. This is because on the one hand the proverbs discussed in the paper are created against a background of perceptions about gender in the societies from which they originate. On the other hand, we demonstrate how proverbs in the two societies are intertextual to the extent of using common elements within some gendered proverbs and thus reflecting similar dynamics of gender ideologies in the two societies. At the same time, these proverbs are understood intertextually within the context of perceptions of gender independently in the two societies. As suggested by Agbemebiese (2016:7–8), to comprehend the ideological underpinnings of power roles and knowledge in gendered proverbs, one should reckon the complex relationships between discourse, intertextuality and context of use of the proverbs. Other studies on proverbs that have employed the framework of intertextuality include Manyawu (2012) and Jinadu (2009). Jinadu (2009) for instance, in discussing the theoretical constructs of intertextuality considers the relationship between intertextuality and proverbiality by citing Arabic and Yoruba proverbs and relating them based on some assumed stereotypes embedded in them that make them parallel to some extent.

1.4. Gender ideology and gender representation in African proverbs

Gender is a social construct; a concept that humans create socially through their interactions with one another, and their environments. However, it relies heavily on biological differences between males and females, that is, society 'ascribe particular traits, statuses, or values to individuals purely because of their sex' (Blackstone, 2003: 336). It has to do, not only, with biological differences, but also what is expected of a male or female in terms of the differences in their roles and functions, which partly stem from these differences. Gender has been defined as 'the organisation of the relationship between sexes or social classification into masculine and feminine' (Wanjiru and Kaburi, 2015: 121).

Hussein (2005:59) defines 'gender ideology as a systematic set of cultural beliefs through which society constructs and yields its gender relativity and practices.' Thus, it is contained in literary genres such as legends, narratives, myths and proverbs or sayings about what is expected of males or females in terms of conduct, roles and functions. Proverbs therefore to a great extent represent what is considered as desired and undesired behaviour of men and women.

Discourse on gender inequalities has been the subject of many studies worldwide, from the developed to the developing world. Women, for centuries, have been perceived as inferior to men. In the past, they were denied the right to vote, the right to education and the right to enter into some professions. Even though women have been fighting for equality with men for many decades, especially, in the developed world, gender equity has not yet been attained (Hussein, 2005: 59; Schipper, 2006:13). Factors, which, have contributed to this perpetuation of various forms of oppression and discrimination against women, include mainly perceptions, which are embedded in culture and religion (Hussein, 2005).

Although patriarchy has existed among Eastern African societies, factors such as the coming of Islam and later colonisation affected the status of females, depending on their geographic location and ancestry such as whether they were Arabs, Swahili or slaves. The Islamic culture, although patriarchal, in suppressing women through seclusion, veiling etc. gave them power in their role as leaders in their households. In addition, some African societies practised dual gender political and religious roles. Examples are the role of the Queen mother in the Akan society in Ghana, Egypt, Uganda, Ethiopia and Rwanda. Olasupo et al. (2012) establish that in the Yoruba society, for instance, men and women have equal status. There are male kings and female kings.

All the above notwithstanding, the changing phases of the status of women in the African society has not erased the perception of women as subordinate to men. Oral traditions such as folktales and proverbs, which depict women as inferior to men, have contributed to the perpetuation of female subjugation.

Against the background of the general gender ideologies in African societies, several studies on gendered proverbs in Africa discuss how these ideologies are manifested in proverbs through the representation of women and men. Studies such as Schipper (2006) demonstrate with the illustration of proverbs from many parts of the world, especially Africa that often women are represented negatively in proverbs. Gender representation in African proverbs often reflect African cultural ideologies, which include gender ideologies. Hussein (2009) interrogates the negative representation of women in proverbs. She illustrates her point with several proverbs that represent African women as subservient to men in some African countries,

namely Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan. She further explains that negative representation of women are regarded as constituting wisdom as the African patriarchal system “reinforce the myth of male superiority”.

Yusuf (1997) in his study on the sexist correlation of women with non-human in English and Yoruba proverbs establishes that proverbs in the two languages dehumanise women by portraying them as detestable as the objects such as animals, plants, food and trouble to which they are compared. Agbemebiese (2016) on his part, explains that the Ewe society of Ghana, similar to other African societies make phenomenological interpretation of everyday experiences. He states that linguistic resources such as proverbs are systematically used to perpetuate gender inequality. He cites the Ewe proverb ‘No matter how rich a woman could be, she cannot own a talking drum’ which implies that a woman’s space is defined to buttress his point. Some Ewe proverbs are embedded with provocative images of women and by their nature; they confirm societal norms and values about gender. It is also evident in these proverbs that often when men are mentioned in gendered proverbs, they are depicted as superior. It is also evident in these proverbs that often when men are mentioned in gendered proverbs, they are depicted as superior, but when the aim is to represent a man as weak; his weakness is expressed through the representation of him as a woman as depicted by this Kenyan proverb, ‘woman and an invalid man are the same thing’ Hussein (2009:102). Thus, man is to, superior, strong and powerful, as a woman is to, weak, frail and frivolous.

However, despite their often suppressive and derogatory insinuations about women, proverbs have also been used to depict them as powerful, brave and intelligent but not in comparison to men (Diabah and Amfo, 2015).

2. Gender representation in Akan and Swahili proverbs

In this section, we examine gender identity construction, roles and functions in Akan and Swahili societies via gendered proverbs. To reach this goal through our analysis and to streamline the data in a more effective manner, we categorise our data under various themes and/or sub-themes. These sub-categorisations though inspired by works such as Schipper (2006), Diabah and Amfo (2015) and Hussein (2005), have not been adopted directly from previous studies. We arrived at these particular themes after gathering our data. They are as follows:

- a) Marriage
- b) Gender roles and positions in the family
 - i. Reproductive Roles
 - ii. Productive and management roles
- c) Intelligence
- d) Beauty and Physical Appearance
- e) Behaviour and Manners in society
 - i. Representation of Virtue
 - ii. Promiscuity
- f) Respect and Power
- g) Sexuality

The themes are based on the various aspects of gender roles and perceptions the proverbs address. Although some of the themes may overlap, this categorisation still serves our purpose. They allow us to discuss proverbs under particular themes together. Under these themes, we discuss the intertextuality in terms of how the conceptualisation of gender in the two societies are intertextual (overlap) on the one hand and how they reflect societal views on the other hand. Gender ideological links between the conceptions of male and female as reflected in the proverbs of the two societies are also demonstrated. We also take note of divergent reflections in the identity representation of men and women in selected proverbs. We undertake the analysis paying attention to our research questions (1), (2) and (3).

2.1. Marriage

Proverbs from both societies emphasise the roles that males and females play in undertaking marriage. Among the Akan, marriage is highly valued by women compared to men as it is regarded as a sign of respect for her (cf. Diabah and Amfo, 2015). Proverbs concerning marriage may be used when parents advise their mature children to get married or to sustain their marriages. Such proverbs are also used during the traditional marriage ceremony.

Akan:

- (1) *Obaa animuonyam ne awaree.*
A woman’s glory (lit. what causes her to be respected) is marriage.
(Appiah et al. (2007:16) No. 70)
- (2) *Obaa biara te se deben ara, na ogyae awaree a, n’anim mma nyam.*
No matter how outstanding a woman is, if she is always divorcing, she has no respect.
(Appiah et al. (2007:14), No. 39)

The two proverbs (1) and (2) portray clearly what marriage is worth and what it should mean to an Akan woman. In (1) marriage is equated to her glory and (2) indicates that being divorced is equated with a woman losing her glory irrespective of the virtues she possesses.

The Swahili counterpart proverbs of the Akan ones under the marriage theme (3)–(5) also emphasise gender roles in the marriage institution among the Swahili. Similarly, in the Swahili society, marriage is a sign of respect especially for a woman and it ‘means being economically and socially protected’ (Schipper 2006:103, 230).

Swahili:

- (3) *Nguzo ya nyumba ni mke.*
A wife is the pillar of the household.
(Wamitila, 2010: 232 No. 1586; Robert, 2007:55, No. 1118)
- (4) *Afadhali ndoa mbaya kuliko ujane mwema.*
It is better to have a bad marriage than to be a good widow.
(Robert, 2007:2, 52 No. 20, 1049)
- (5) *Kosa moja haliachi(shi) mke.*
One mistake does not divorce a wife.
(Wamitila, 2010: 112, No. 783; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:126, No. 844)

As in the case of the Akan, the importance of marriage is mainly depicted via the woman. For instance, (3) conceptualises the wife as the pillar that keeps the household in place, thus to be strong the household should have a wife. Proverb (4) implies that marriage is very important for a woman to the extent that even a bad one is preferred to widowhood (with riches). Thus, the rationale behind (2) and (4) are the same. Staying married is more glorious than being divorced or being widowed. It is the expectation of the societies therefore that a woman gets married as the society as a whole derives important benefits from her status as a married woman. It is worth noting that although (4) does not refer to a specific gender, since “ujane” is widow/widower; it is assumed that it refers to a woman, because, certainly, a man is not expected to endure a bad marriage. After all, he has the preserve to remarry anytime, whether he is widowed or not.

AKASWA proverbs also address divorce. ‘This perhaps is because a wife, being a man’s property, can be handled and disposed of at will’ (Schipper 2006: 260). While (2) depicts that in Akan, a divorced woman loses respect, (5) in the Swahili society depicts that a man is advised not to divorce his wife when she commits only one mistake. In both societies, the husband has the power to divorce his wife. This is because he pays the bride price. In addition, he goes to the woman’s family to contract the marriage. Nevertheless, in the Akan society when all attempts to reconcile a woman who is seeking to leave a marriage fail, her family can return the drink that was presented by the man’s family to initiate the marriage process, and this frees her from the marriage. In contrast, among the Swahili, especially those from Islamic backgrounds, the act of divorce is largely the man’s preserve. He issues a divorce note to the wife. In the event that she wants to end the marriage, she can only ask her husband to issue a divorce note to her otherwise she remains married. This shows that ‘historically, in Islamic societies men have been placed in a more advantageous social status than women. They even have the right to custody of their children in the instance of a divorce’ (Hecht, 1987:10 cited in Gower et al., 1996:257). The above buttresses the point that to understand any text as intertextuality insists, ‘interpretation has to take into account the relation between text and society and culture’ (Raj, 2015:80). Similarly, this point is in consonance with Agbemebiese’s (2016:1) statement that there is ‘strong intertextual and intercultural threads between the ways proverbs represent the roles, statuses, and identity of women in Ewe proverbs.’

2.2. Gender roles and positions in the family

In this section, we discuss the ideological representations of men and women in proverbs from the two societies in terms of their responsibilities, roles and positions in the family or household. Gender roles are particular traits, statuses, or values that individuals, groups and societies ascribe to individuals purely based on their sex (Blackstone, 2003). They are sub categorised into reproductive, productive and socio-political management roles. Reproductive roles have to do with activities that include child bearing and child upbringing in the home. Productive roles are activities carried out by men and women in order to meet the needs of the family and management roles are activities that ensure the provision and maintenance of resources for family needs and those that involve socio-political decision making. People learn gender roles from institutionalised gender systems, which are through various means such as social, economic, legislative, political, traditional and cultural structures. Some proverbs in the Akan and Swahili societies reflect gender role constructs that exist among them. These proverbs can be used in various contexts such as at an initiation ceremony when teaching the initiates their gender responsibilities and roles in the family or at a wedding ceremony when advising a married couple on married life. They are also used in daily conversations when talking about the role of marriage and childbearing in life (cf. Omari and Senkoro, 2018).

It must be noted that in as much as these gendered proverbs reflect societal perceptions of gender roles historically, our observation is that in modern Akan and Swahili societies, sometimes the younger generations take these pieces of advice offered by these proverbs with a pinch of salt.

2.2.1. Reproductive roles

The two societies assign reproductive roles and the act of childbearing and child upbringing to wives, although procreation is a product of both the husband and the wife. In many African societies, children are a source of happiness among married couples (Mbiti, 2011).

Akan:

- (6) *Wo na wu a, na w'abusua asa.*
When your mother dies, then you have no family.
(Diabah and Amfo, 2015:11, No. 1)

- (7) *Obaa na ɔwo ɔbarima.*
It is a woman who gives birth to a man.
(Appiah et al., 2007:15, No. 67)
- (8) *Obaatan mmim ba bɔne.*
A mother does not know a bad child.
(Appiah et al., 2007:20, No. 166)

Proverbs (6) and (7) portray that even though in Akan gender ideology marriage represents a woman's glory (implying that the man is the source of this glory)², the wife is the foundation on which the family stands, just as is depicted in (3) for the Swahili society. Again (7) portrays that even though the man is superior to the woman and she derives her glory from him, he owes his existence to her. Although the woman and the man play mutual biological roles in the reproduction process in the Akan society, the mother's role is key, hence, (6) and (7) depict that without her there is no family, there is no life while (8) portrays that she loves her child even if he/she is not a 'good' child.

Swahili:

- (9) *Ukimstahi mke ndugu huzai naye.*
If you are shy of your wife, you will not have a child with her.
(Wamitila, 2010:275, No. 1882; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:326, No. 2185)
- (10) *Maji na tumbawe, Mama na mwanawe.*
As a coral reef cannot be separated from the ocean, so is a mother and her child.
(Wamitila, 2010: 137, No. 953; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:154, No. 1049)

While a woman is expected to have a child, as children are her pride, (9) delineates that men are also urged not to be shy of their wives³ otherwise; no children will be born. On the other hand, (10) portrays that in the Swahili society, the role of the father and mother are equally significant. Therefore, Swahili proverbs portray the perception that both genders are expected to play their roles to ensure that procreation takes place.

- (11) *Jogoo hawezi kulea wana.*
A rooster cannot raise children.
(Wamitila, 2010: 88, No. 619; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:95, No. 639)
- (12) *Mama hawezi kumkana mtoto hata kama ni kilema.*
Mother cannot reject her child even if he/she is physically challenged.
(Wamitila, 2010: 142, No. 985)
- (13) *Mke ni nguo, mgomba ni kupalilia.*
A wife needs to be taken care of just as the banana tree needs to be tendered by weeding around it.
(Lit. Clothing is to the wife, as weeding is to the banana tree.)
(Wamitila, 2010: 170, No. 1168; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:191, No. 1306, Robert, 2007:42 No. 843)

Concerning child upbringing, for instance, Swahili proverb (11), delineates that a rooster, a metaphor for man cannot bring up its offspring portrays by implication that he can even refuse the responsibility of taking care of his disabled child (see also Akan proverb (8)) and (12). The point here is that it is the hen's (the wife's) responsibility to bring up her chickens (children). While the wife occupies herself with her children and husband, the husband is required to take care of his wife by making provision for food and clothing and protecting her against any form of danger. Proverb (13) portrays that, for a woman to be attractive and to be able to play her reproductive role of conceiving, child delivery and upbringing, like a cared for 'banana tree' she has to be taken good care of by her husband. As in other parts of the world, 'many proverbs insist that men are obliged to support their wife or wives materially' (Schipper 2006:103).

2.2.2. Productive and management roles

AKASWA proverbs portray that women's activities are mainly confined to indoor activities and domestic chores such as cooking for the family and raising children.

Akan:

- (14) *Obaa na ɔnim ne kunu yem kɔm.*
A woman knows when her husband is hungry (lit. A wife knows the hunger in her husband's stomach).
(Appiah et al., 2007:15, No. 66)
- (15) *Obaatan na ɔnim deɛ ne ba bɛdɛ.*
It is a mother who knows what her child will eat
(Diabah and Amfo, 2015:11, No. 4)
- (16) *Obaa wɔ mpempem a, ɔbarima na ɔhwe no soɔ.*
However rich a woman may be (lit. if a woman has thousands and thousands), it is a man who looks after her.
(Appiah et al., 2007:17, No. 99)

As said earlier, many AKASWA proverbs portray the woman as a domestic being. The picture that (14)–(16) paint is that, she is not expected to work to support the family, she is expected to take care of the domestic aspect of family life. Proverb (16) portrays that irrespective of how wealthy a woman is her security is provided by the man. Thus, her economic independence does not really make her independent.

² This is because the man marries the woman, not vice-versa. A woman has to wait for a man to do her that honour.

³ This proverb also represents the Swahili tradition of marrying relatives such as nephews and nieces.

Akan:

- (17) *ɔbaa yɛ turo mu nhwiren, ne kunu yɛ ne ho ban.*
A woman is a flower in the garden; her husband is the fence.
(Diabah and Amfo, 2015:12, No. 11)
- (18) *ɔbaa by yie a, na efiri ɔbarima.*
A woman's success depends on a man. (lit. If a woman will be wealthy/successful, it is due to a man.)
(Appiah et al., 2007:17, No. 102)
- (19) *ɔbaa tɔ ɔdwan a, ɔbarima na ɔyɛn no.*
If a woman buys a sheep, it is a man who rears it.
(Appiah et al., 2007:17, No. 95)

Akan proverbs (17) portrays the woman as a flower garden; beautiful yet frail and powerless without the man who ensures her safety as a fence does to a flower garden. In the Akan society during traditional marriage ceremonies, the bride is usually referred to as a flower that the man sees and decides to seek permission from her family to pluck her and take her away. Proverb (18) portrays that a woman can work to accrue wealth and property. However, it is believed that her success is due to man's assistance. Representations of men and women in (17) and (18) further reflect gender role ideologies of the Akans. Proverb (18) again attributes the success of a woman to a man and (19) does the same by depicting that no matter how hard a woman tries to be independent, she would, in the end have to rely on a man. If she is able to buy a goat, she will still need a man to rear it for her.

Although our Swahili data does not include proverbs that mention women's ability to work and acquire property, talking about women in Swahili society in nineteenth century, Gower et al. (1996:256) argue that 'Although Swahili women were marginalised they were also given opportunities to exert influence and autonomy.' However, our data indicates that generally the representation of gender roles in Swahili proverbs indicates that women are expected to make themselves attractive to their men while the men are expected to work to ensure that their women are well-groomed.

Swahili:

- (20) *Mwanamume ni mbono hualika kote/kule.*
A man is like a castor-oil plant, it creeps far afield.
(Wamitila, 2010: 207, No. 1422; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:239, No.1620)
- (21) *Mume ni kazi, mke ni nguo.*
A husband is expected to work; a wife is expected to dress up.
(Wamitila, 2010: 199, No. 1363; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:228, No.1549; Robert, 2007:48, No. 976)
- (22) *Mume ni moto wa koko usipowaka utafuka.*
A husband is like a bush fire if it does not burn, it will smother.
(Wamitila, 2010: 199, No. 1364; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:228, No.1550)

The representation of men in (20)–(21) point to the fact that the man is expected to go out to work and take care of his wife's needs. Proverb (22) portrays that he must be active, tough and spread like fire to ensure he is economically viable. Thus, AKASWA proverbs represent men as those who have the responsibility to take care of women. Nevertheless, while the Swahili proverbs emphasise on the need for the man to ensure that his woman is well-groomed, the Akan counterpart proverbs rather emphasise on the sheer authority that the man has over his woman irrespective of her wealth or ability to make wealth. It is evident that, as the intertextuality theory postulates, the AKASWA gendered proverb 'is constructed out of already existent discourse' of patriarchy in the Akan and Swahili societies (Allen 2000:35), which represent their gender ideology.

In Section 2.1, (3) refers to the woman as a pillar of the home. A pillar is used as a metaphor to represent a woman's strength in the home, in that among other things, she does the household chores, raises children and takes care of hospitality.

In (13) comparing a woman with a flower in a garden or banana tree portrays that she is to stay at home while the man goes out to work (see also (20)–(21)). A flower and a banana tree (woman) need watering, weeding and manure in order to grow well, produce good fruits, and be attractive to their viewers.

2.3. Intelligence

Only a few proverbs address intelligence, and when they do, often they discredit women. Men, in their discussion about women's intelligence and qualities mainly refer to proverbs about intelligence.

Akan:

- (23) *ɔbaa nitefoɔ kɔ aware a, onnya.*
If a clever woman gets married, she does not succeed.
(Appiah et al., 2007:16, No. 71)
- (24) *ɔbaa te se akokɔ; yede aburoo na esɔne no.*
A woman is like a chicken; maize is used to lure her.
(Appiah et al., 2007:16, No. 92)

The Akan proverb (23) portrays the notion that a clever woman does not succeed when she gets married. We argue that this refusal to acknowledge women's intelligence might be borne out of the fear that an intelligent woman may not be submissive to her husband, especially when it comes to decision making in the family. It is also depicted in (24) that a

woman's intelligence is comparable to that of a chicken, as she can be easily deceived and lured. (cf. Diabah and Amfo, 2015:14).

In the same way, in the Swahili society, there are also several sayings⁴ regarding a woman and her intelligence, which demean her.

Swahili:

- (25) *Wanawake akili zao ni kama watoto.*
Women's intelligence is like that of children.
(Author)
- (26) *Wanawake mwalimu wao kipofu.*
The teacher of women is blind.
(Author)
- (27) *Kitu usichonacho usimwahidi mama mkwe.*
Do not promise to your mother-in-law what you do not have.
(Wamitila, 2010:110, No. 768; King'ei and Ndalu, 2009:122, No. 820)

In (25) and (26) respectively, a woman's intelligence is likened to that of a child and that of one who is taught by a blind person. Interestingly, Schipper (2006: 40) cites the equivalent of (25) as a West African proverb. In many African countries, blind persons are often denied access to resources such as education, thus denying them access to knowledge. This saying implies that one taught by a blind teacher (that is a woman) is not knowledgeable. Proverb (27) cautions against promising your mother-in-law (i.e. woman) something that you do not have. This portrays the notion that like a child she will pester you until you fulfil your promise, thus she is portrayed in a negative way as being childish. Comparing a woman's cognitive thinking with that of a chicken (in Akan) or that of a child (in Swahili) portrays how a woman's intellect is demeaned compared to a man's. Perceptions like these deny women the opportunity to participate in various spheres such as socio-political decision making for the betterment of the family or society, although the situation is changing in today's world nevertheless, many are the men who still do not trust women's intelligence. In fact, mental capabilities of women are depicted as weak, dependent, immature and inferior compared to men. Indeed, in these proverbs, figuratively 'women are associated with shallowness and men with brains' (Schipper 2006:79); proverbs belittle women's intellectual capacities as much as possible' (Schipper 2006:232). 'This is due to the patriarchal societal view that women do not have the mental and physical strength that men have' (Hussein, 2009:103). It has also been argued that 'there are cross-cutting racial and class statutes within each gender status that belie the universal pattern of men's domination and women's subordination implied by the concept of patriarchy' (Lorber, 1994: 4 cited in Gower et al., 1996: 254). The existence of AKASWA proverbs that portray similar views regarding women's intelligence illustrates well Kristeva's notion of intertextuality that posits that the 'literary word is a dialogue among several writings' (Kristeva, 1980: 65 in Alfaro, 1996: 268). This is also in consonance with Fairclough's (2004: 39) broad view of intertextuality that it is "the presence of actual elements of other texts within a text. This is true especially about (24) and (25). Both refer to woman and both liken her to something; (24) to a chicken and (25) to a child. This confirms Schipper's (2006:40) assertion that "for convenience's sake, women's 'nature' is defined such as to deny them a sharp intelligence".

2.4. Beauty and physical appearance

Schipper (2006:35) states, 'In the human world, it has generally been taken for granted that beauty is a feminine trait'. The concept of beauty and physical appearance in both genders is portrayed in proverbs of both societies though to differing extents. There are several proverbs in Akan that foreground women's body upkeep.

Akan:

- (28) *Obaa ko adwaree na omma ntem a na oresiesie ne ho.*
If a woman goes to the bathroom and she does not come back quickly, then she is grooming herself.
(Appiah et al., 2007:15, No. 57)
- (29) *Obaa nya adwaree pa dware a, okyere ne ho.*
If a woman gets a good bathroom to bathe in, she takes her time.
(Appiah et al., 2007:16, No. 73)

Aspects of grooming that are conceptualised as important include bathing and making up as represented in (28) and (29). These are generally applied metaphorically. They imply that when one goes to a place that they find comfortable, they do not hurry to leave.

- (30) *Obaa de feefe nko ara ko awaree a, onnya.*
If a woman marries only with her 'beauty', she will not be successful.
(Appiah et al., 2007:15, No. 47)
- (31) *Obaa ho ye fe a, na efiri obarima.*
If a woman is beautiful, she owes it to a man.
(Appiah et al., 2007:15, No. 54)

⁴ Due to lack of proverbs concerning this topic, we refer to some sayings from our native speakers' competence to illustrate our point.

About beauty, (30) and (31) respectively delineate that a woman should not take too much pride in her beauty, because it will take more than her beauty to sustain her marriage; if she is beautiful, it is because a man has taken good care of her or has paid for her grooming and beauty products.

Swahili:

- (32) *Uzuri wa mwanamke ni nguo, mgomba kupaliliwa.*
The beauty of a woman is in dressing as a banana tree is in weeding.
(Wamitila, 2010:299, No. 2045; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:355, No. 2390)
- (33) *Mwanamke mzuri hakosi kilema.*
A beautiful woman must have a defect.
(Wamitila, 2010:207, No. 1420; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:238, No. 1617)

The Swahili counterparts (32) and (33) also portray that for the Swahili a beautiful woman is not perfect, either her beauty is attributed to her clothing as depicted in (32) or she certainly has some flaws as depicted in (33). The proverbs (31) and (32) portray that men contribute significantly to the beauty of women as they fund the necessary accessories that enhance women's beauty and attractiveness. Both societies perceive beautiful women as not completely praiseworthy: while (30) portrays that for the Akan, it takes more than a woman's beauty to succeed in marriage, for the Swahili a beautiful woman certainly has some flaws and this should make her humble.

In both societies, the concept of beauty and physical appearance address mainly women, not men. It can be argued then that the notion of beauty as conceptualised in the Akan and Swahili societies tie in with Storm's (1992:173) observation that 'Many proverbs concerning beautiful women reflect men's feelings towards beautiful women.'

2.5. Behaviour and manners in society

We discuss this theme under two sub-categories: representation of virtue, and representation of promiscuity and how men and women are depicted through proverbs in the light of these.

2.5.1. Representation of virtue

Many AKASWA proverbs address the phenomenon of virtue. The attributes for men and women are clearly set in these proverbs. For instance, among the Akan the virtues expected of women (in and outside marriage) are subservience, respectfulness, assiduousness, and neatness, just to mention but a few.

Akan:

- (34) *Ɔbaa pa ne deɛ ɔtie ne kunu asem.*
A good woman is one who accepts her husband's advice.
(Appiah et al., 2007:16, No. 80)
- (35) *Ɔbaa mmɔdemmofo/ɔbaasima na ne ba hye n' akyiri a, ɔsoa nnoɔma.*
It is the hard-working/ideal woman who carries her child on her back and a load on her head at the same time.
(Appiah et al., 2007:16, No. 77)
- (36) *Ɔbaa nyansafoɔ na ɔse: 'Mehwe deɛ abusua beka.'*
A wise woman says: 'I look to what my matrilineal clan will say.'
(Appiah et al., 2007:16, No. 75)
- (37) *Ɔbaa a ɔpe ne kunu, ɔse: 'Mehwe wo ara.'*
A woman who loves her husband says, 'I look up to you.'
(Appiah et al., 2007:14, No. 37)

The conceptualisation of female submissiveness is represented in (34) and (37); being submissive is equated with the virtues of goodness and love. Submissiveness is also equated with wisdom in (36) while (35) represents unnecessarily hard physical exertion with virtue. On the other hand, the assessment of a man is based on his ability to provide for and protect his family, and take care of his wife (see (31) in Section 2.4 and (17) in Section 2.2.2).

In the Swahili society, an ideal woman is also measured by her good behaviour concerning living and communicating with her husband and family. The proverbs portray that a woman is required to have good manners that conform to the standards of society.

Swahili:

- (38) *Uzuri wa mwanamke ni tabia.*
The beauty of a woman is in her behaviour.
(Wamitila, 2010: 299, No. 2046)
- (39) *Mume ni moto wa koko usipowaka utafuka.*
A husband is like a bush fire when it is not aflame, it is billowing.
(Wamitila, 2010: 199, No. 1364; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:228, No.1550)

Noticeably, submissiveness is not a theme that is clearly addressed by Swahili proverbs, at least as far as our data is concerned. The emphasis seems to be rather on beauty as portrayed in (33) and (38).

Swahili proverbs also caution men not be idle and confined indoors like a flower or a banana tree. A man ought to strive and get out there in search of financial and economic opportunities, and create networks with other people. As portrayed in (39), he should be visible like a fire or smoke' in his endeavour to work (see also (21) in Section 2.2.2).

2.5.2. Promiscuity

Some AKASWA gendered proverbs also touch on promiscuity and often in both societies; they are directed towards women more than they are to men.

Akan:

- (40) *Ɔbaa a ne kunu nni hɔ na yedi no.*
It is a woman whose husband is absent that can be lured into having extra-marital sex.
(Appiah et al., 2007:14, No. 33)
- (41) *Ɔbaa a ɔbeɔɔ adwaman nnim se wakɔ aware pa.*
An adulterous woman does not consider the fact that she has a good marriage.
(Appiah et al., 2007:14, No. 31)
- (42) *Ɔbaa de ka a, ɔde ne twe na ekɔ.*
If a woman is in debt, she uses her vagina to get rid of it.
(Appiah et al., 2007:15, No. 48)

Several AKASWA proverbs depict women as naturally adulterous regardless of their marital status. Proverb (40) portrays that it is a woman whose husband is not around who gets pursued by other men for sex and (41) depicts that if a woman is promiscuous, even a good marriage will not deter her from committing adultery. Proverb (42) also portrays a woman as sexually immoral to the extent that she can even use her body to solve her debt problem.

Swahili:

- (43) *Mke kipofu huwa mwaminifu.*
A blind wife is faithful.
(Wamitila, 2010: 169, No. 1166)
- (44) *Bibi wa ovyo anampata mume mzuri.*
A careless woman gets a nice husband.
(Wamitila, 2010: 41, No. 294)

Swahili proverbs also portray that women are sexually unfaithful. This gender ideology, as depicted in (43) is formed from the premise that it is worth marrying a blind woman as she is somewhat faithful compared to the one who is not. In other words, it is the physical challenge that can prevent her from being unfaithful. In both societies, men are not portrayed as promiscuous or immoral as seen in (44) because polygamy is allowed by their cultures. In expressing perceptions of promiscuity, the Akan AKASWA counterparts refer explicitly to sex organs and sexual acts as seen in (40) to (42), while the Swahili counterparts (43) and (44) only refer to promiscuity implicitly.

2.6. Polygyny

Polygynous marriage is another area addressed by gendered proverbs. Since most African societies are polygynous, both Akan and Swahili proverbs address the issue of polygyny and the role that males and female play in it. Often, women are depicted as defective, adulterous/prostitute,⁵ devious, and unfaithful in a marriage or in general. Likewise, while any human being can err, in Swahili the commitment of errors is attributed to the woman (wife), not the man (husband), to the extent that she may be corrected even by physical beating or even thought a lesson by divorcing her as represented in (5) in Section 2.1. Schipper (2006:266) alludes to a similar portrayal by an Arabic proverb. She states that “to force the wife into awe and respect, a very popular Arabic proverb suggests, as a first tactic, to teach the cat: ‘Beat the she-cat and [that will] teach your bride a lesson.’”

Akan:

- (45) *Mmaa dodoo kunu, ekɔm na ede no.*
A husband of many women gets hungry.
(Author)
(Often each wife assumes he's been fed by another)
- (46) *Obi nnyae abawuo nkɔdi akorasem.*
Someone does not leave the death of a child to go and involve themselves in quarrels of co-wives.
(Appiah et al., 2007:34, No. 489)

Swahili:

- (47) *Fimbo impigayo mke mwenzio ukiiona itupe.*
When you see the stick that beats your co wife, throw it away.
(Wamitila, 2010:64, No. 454)
- (48) *Akataaye kula humwongezea mke mwenziwe.*
A wife who refuses to eat gives an advantage to her co wife.
(Wamitila, 2010:8, No. 58).

The proverbs (45)–(48) reveal that life in a polygynous marriage is full of clashes between not only the co wives as revealed in (46) but also between a husband and wives to the extent that he can beat his wife as depicted in (47). While ‘co wives are depicted as rivals’ Kiyimba (2005:256), a husband is depicted as powerful and a wife beater. The wives are depicted as powerless as they fail to confront their husbands to defend themselves. Through the proverb, a co wife is advised to throw away the stick that was used to hit her colleague to show solitariness. The proverbs portray husbands as disciplinarians who beat

⁵ Prostitution is illegal in both countries.

their wives to ensure their 'obedience, submissiveness, and silence' (Hussein, 2009:104) and good manners. 'Women need battering to have manners' (Hussein, 2009:105). Nevertheless, as we will see later, proverb (55) advocates that men should consider their first wives as their biological mothers and accord them a mother's respect.

2.7. Respect and Power

In both societies, a woman/mother is depicted as deserving of respect and even more powerful than man is (Diabah and Amfo, 2015). Schipper (2006:18) claims that 'In virtually all societies men fare better than women. Men exercise more power, have more status and enjoy more freedom'. However, she points out that many proverbs also 'wholeheartedly acknowledge procreation as an indispensable female quality and motherhood as a crucial domain of life' and this is true of AKASWA proverbs (Schipper, 2006:16).

Akan:

- (49) *Ɔbaa na ɔwo ɔbarima.*
It is a woman that gives birth to a man.
(Appiah et al., 2007:15, No. 67)
- (50) *Ɔbaa tɔn nyaadewa na ɔntɔn atuduro.*
A woman sells garden eggs, not gunpowder.
(Appiah et al., 2007:17, No. 96)
- (51) *Ɔbaa beye yie a, na efiri ɔbarima.*
If a woman will be wealthy/successful, she owes it to a man.
(Appiah et al., 2007:17, No. 102)
- (52) *Ɔbaa da ɔbarima akyi.*
A woman lies behind a man.
(Appiah et al., 2007:15, No. 45)

Proverb (49) indicates that in some respects, a woman's ability to give birth to children is perceived as divine. In this respect, a mother is a parent who is 'respected and valued' most. In many African societies, it is believed that the power of a mother can be revealed for instance via the potency of her curse on her child as it turns out to be more harmful than that of a father (cf. Mbiti, 2011). Despite the portrayal of power and respect that the woman commands through her reproductive role by some AKASWA gendered proverbs, many more of them reiterate the superiority of man over her as portrayed in (50), (51) and (52). For instance, in (50) a woman is expected to sell garden eggs, not gunpowder. Garden eggs are contrasted graphically with gunpowder, which is by far more potent and powerful.

In addition, the Akan society recognises that a woman has the capability to acquire riches (51) or trade (50), however, this power is limited, as she is considered not to be the main source of her progress and she is not allowed to engage in some trades that are strictly reserved for men. A man's power is directed towards economics and politics as he is considered a leader. For instance, in (52) the woman is depicted as a subordinate who needs the protection of a man. Again, (52) reflects the belief among the Akan that it is a husband's duty to protect his wife from all forms of dangers. So in the bed the man is expected to lie in front while the woman lies behind him by the wall so that in case of any attack the man will shield and protect her.

On the contrary, some proverbs portray that among the Swahili the woman is expected to play a leading role within the household.

Swahili:

- (53) *Nyumba ni kunga ya mume na mke.*
House is composed of secrets/principles of both husband and wife.
(Robert, 2007:54 No. 1117)
- (54) *Mtu mamaye ni Mungu wake wa pili.*
Mother is one's second God.
(Wamitila, 2010: 195, No. 1342)
- (55) *Mke wa kwanza ni kama mama mzazi.*
The first wife is like your biological mother.
(Wamitila, 2010: 170, No. 1169; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:192, No. 1309)

Proverb (53) delineates both the husband and wife as equally responsible for the family, thus they play complimentary roles. However, (54) and (55) represent the wife as respected and powerful; she is likened to a second God to her husband in (54) and to the husband's mother in (55). These suggest that wives are valued highly.

Swahili:

- (56) *Mume ni jaha, si raha.*
A man is mighty not joy.
(Wamitila, 2010: 198, No. 1362; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:228, No. 1548)
- (57) *Mume si babe kwa mkewe.*
Husband is not powerful to his wife.
(Wamitila, 2010: 199, No. 136; King'ei and Ndal, 2009:229, No. 1551)

Respect or power of man at the family level is due to his ability to work and provide for his family and (56) depicts this fact (see also (21), Section 2.2.2). In East Africa 'even though Swahili culture has limited women's participation in public life'

historically (Gower et al., 1996:266), today, women's roles and responsibilities have increased and women have increasingly become breadwinners and economic supporters of their families (Silberschmidt, 2001).

Furthermore, (57) insinuates the notion that a woman does not revere her husband after all. This is because she is privy to his weaknesses.

Thus, 'what was true of religious texts was also made extensible to secular ones' as illustrated in (49)–(52) (Alfaro, 1996: 270). It is noteworthy that as (49) and (55) portray, a woman's ability to give birth is by far the greatest power that she wields. After all, if she does not give birth to man, he will not exist.

2.8. Sexuality

In Akan proverbs, women are depicted as sex objects, lovers of money, multi-partnered and even capable of selling their bodies to earn a living or settle their debts. Schipper (2006: 193) posits, "In proverbs, sex as a source of pleasure for women is hardly ever referred to in a positive way.

Akan:

- (58) *ɔbaa yare a, ne twe nyare bi.*
If a woman is sick, her vagina is not sick too.
(Appiah et al., 2007:17, No. 99)

Proverb (58) portrays that a wife is expected to play her wifely role of satisfying her husband's sexual desires even when she is sick. Proverb (58) as well as (40) and (42) in Section 2.5.2, use explicit words for sexual organs and the act of sexual intercourse. Swahili proverbs in contrast do not make direct reference to sex organs and the act of sex itself.

Swahili has scanty data concerning sexuality in proverbs. In Swahili society, women are portrayed as recipients of men's sexual advances. They are not expected to initiate intimacy in their relationship with their husbands. Hence, the proverb (9) in Section 2.2.1, states that if a man is shy of his wife, he will not get children. If a man is shy of his wife, it implies that he may not be able to make sexual advances, which will lead to the act of sexual intercourse, which will in turn lead to conception and ultimately childbirth. Thus, Swahili proverbs do not make explicit reference to sex organs and the act of sex itself although they do by implication. It is interesting, that Akan proverbs express sex organs and sexual act explicitly because, in Akan society, certain words including sex organs and related words are supposed to be taboos (unmentionables) Agyekum (2002:371). For the sake of decorum, euphemisms are used instead, but it seems there is an exception when it comes to proverbs. Perhaps the justification for this may stem from the Akan custom, which demands that, the apologetic word *sebe* 'excuse me to say' is used before the utterance of a taboo or 'unmentionable' word. Indeed, this apologetic word is quantified depending on the magnitude of the unmentionable word/s in question. An apology can be demanded from one who utters such a proverb without a preceding apologetic word.

3. Further discussion

In both Akan and Swahili societies, direct mention of men in gendered proverbs is minimal; it is almost as if they are sacred. Often reference to men are by implication, and in comparative reference to women rather than direct mention. All these are underpinned by the African patriarchy ideology and cultural system which uphold men as leaders who rule in society by occupying the important positions within the family, political, economic and social jurisdictions. Msibi (2013: 261) defines patriarchy as 'a system which broadly privileges the dominance of men over women in all forms of social, institutional and structural organisation.'

Hussein (2009) posits that habits in the African patriarchal system reinforce the myth of male superiority. Thus, as is often said among the Akans, whatever the achievement of a woman, her real place at the end of it all is in the Kitchen.

4. Conclusion

The data discussed in this paper mainly reveal that many more AKASWA proverbs address women than men, but relatively few of them describe women in a positive way. This conclusion is in line with other studies concerning proverbs worldwide (cf. Storm, 1992; Schipper, 2006). It has illustrated that both societies use metaphors of items such as rooster, chicken, plants, etc. to portray gender roles. Men are mainly depicted as tough, powerful, outgoing, and controllers of resources. Women though often depicted as dependent and devious, are also conceptualised as powerful and worthy of respect especially, in their roles as mothers and caretakers of the home (Storm, 1992:180; Diabah and Amfo, 2015). Although Kambon and Dzahene-Quarshie (2017) demonstrates that, there are many parallel proverbs in Akan and Swahili, our data indicate that gendered proverbs in the two languages tend to be more convergent than parallel. They often address similar issues but from different perspectives. The main diverging point in Akan and Swahili gendered proverbs in our data is seen in proverbs that express sex organs and sexual acts explicitly. While several Akan gendered proverbs explicitly mention sex organs and sexual intercourse, Swahili gendered proverbs do not. Perhaps the reason for this difference is that in Akan, the apologetic word *sebe* offers a good excuse, while no such word exists in Swahili. Another diverging point is that some Akan proverbs depict that a woman can work and create wealth, but no such proverbs were identified in the case of Swahili.

The intertextual nature of AKASWA gendered proverbs attest that ‘intertextuality promotes a vision resistant to ingrained notions of originality, uniqueness, singularity and autonomy’ (Allen, 2000: 6). Clearly, they reflect an appreciable level of convergence in gender ideology in the two societies. Thus, the study has demonstrated that proverbs are a good source of representation of the conceptualisation of gender roles and relations in many societies, including Akan and Swahili.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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