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The Hold of Patriarchy: An Appraisal of the Ganda Proverb in Modern Gender Relations

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Traditional Values and the Proverb

One of the most outstanding new elements of social research in the last quarter of the 20th century, in Africa and elsewhere, is undoubtedly gender. Academics, social researchers and decision-makers have had to contend with sensitivity to gender issues as an essential aspect of all their action.

Based on the theme of this symposium, we highlight a living challenge to modern gender relations through an appraisal of the lasting aspects of human culture. We expose patriarchy as an impediment to gender parity through an examination of the proverb perceived as linguistic phenomenon and enhancer of culture. At the dawn of the new millennium, gender research would not close its eyes to aspects of traditional African culture that challenge the streamlining of gender relations.

Patriarchy is a social system where much of the power rests in the hands of men, who also dominate private and public spheres of life. Gender parity implies equality between men and women, especially in terms of rights and power. Putting gender relations right is thus the search for this parity.

Definitions of the term 'proverb' have centred on its economy of words, origins in human experience and observation of social phenomenon, folkloric and communal belonging as well as the claim of being general or absolute truth. Of all the 'definitional ingredients', the claim over truthfulness is rather disturbing. It actually reflects the user's or society's aspiration for control and desire to impose a given view of life as unshakeable and accepted. This is

where the proverb helps patriarchy to live on from generation to generation by presenting it as a stable immutable part of social order.

Scholars illustrating the functions of the proverb have centred their analyses on one or the other of its characteristics. Some have noted the proverb's prescriptive nature as it seeks to pass over the values 'entrusted' to it for preservation and transmission' (Alcove 1996). Others have not only pointed out the intent of proverbs as the preservation of 'the lives of those who would pay them heed' but also admired their faithfulness to 'the principle of modesty which they preach', citing brevity and precision (Muranga 1996). The proverb is highly regarded as a noble genre of African oral tradition, a custodian of a people's wisdom and philosophy of life. As a literary genre and aspect of living language, the proverb is, stable, concise and fairly fixed and can therefore be transmitted to future generations with minimum alteration. It has been noted by certain scholars that since the proverb is a 'fixed form' genre, any significant textual modification would tantamount to 'deformation of tradition', thus compromising the 'functions of proverbs in archaic societies' (Chevrier 1990). The proverb is durable and resilient and can stand as shaper of mentalities over several generations. Its in-built stability augurs well for the persistence and 'perenniality' of patriarchy in African societies.

Proverbs of the Baganda¹ of Uganda who inhabit the northern shores of Lake Victoria will serve as a sample study of implicit attempts by predominantly patriarchal societies to preserve and sustain patriarchy through language use. However, we should point out that there is nothing special about the nature of patriarchy in this community and that it has been mainly chosen for author's familiarity.

The general Luganda word for 'proverb' is *olugero* (plural: *engeru*), a polyvalent term used to mean story, proverb or parable, as Ruth Finnegan notes (1971). However, strictly speaking, the equivalent Luganda term for 'proverb' is *olugero olusonge* (plural: *engeru ensonge*), which could be interpreted with some 'literalness' as 'pointed comparison'. What brings me to 'comparison' in this approximate attempt to find a befitting translation, is the etymology of the noun '*olugero*' which corresponds to the verb '*okugera*' meaning 'to measure', 'to compare' and 'to time'? Besides, the same word is used for 'recounting' but in *olugero olusonge*, the target sense is 'comparison' encompassing the three meanings of *okugera* with the underlying idea of 'pointing' to meaning. This further asserts Finnegan's view on the allusive and figurative nature of the African proverb. The African words translated as 'proverb' lay the emphasis on 'the significance of speaking in symbolic terms' (Finnegan 1971).

The corpus of proverbs in focus is a selection from three published sources in Luganda language and one, with translations into English (Nsimbi 1989; Mugerwa 1996; Magoba 1997; Walser 1984). Attention is also given to proverbs and versions of proverbs in contemporary use although they may not be

documented in any written sources. Proverb compilation in particular and the documentation of Ganda oral tradition in general, had a good start in the first half of the 20th century but such cultural activity later subsided due to negligence and socio-political malaise. This area of social study was badly hit and it experienced serious problems of publication that linger on up to the present day. The two recent Luganda proverb collections (Mugerwa 1996; Magoba 1997) referred to above are self-published and Father Walser's collection with English renderings, completed in 1958, only got published in 1984. The translations into English of proverbs in this paper are mainly by the author. They are rather free, meant for explanation and should, therefore, not be taken as definitive. In our translation, for the purpose of this paper, fidelity is more to the matter than to the manner.

The Woman: As she is seen and wanted

Ganda proverbs give us images of the woman that translate the way traditional society perceives her and wishes her to be. Ultimately, we are led to some stereotypes about what the woman is and should be. In the first instance, we note that Ganda proverbs generally depict women as weak, inferior and subsidiary. To uphold this machoistic attitude, the Muganda says:

- *Omukazi ntamu nkadde; togiteresa munno* (A woman is an old cooking-pot; you never entrust it to a friend).
- *Alima ne bba; taba munafu* (A woman who digs with her husband cannot be taken for weak).
- *Ekwata omwami; tereka muganzi* (The disease that catches the husband never spares his favourite wife or the husband's slogan is equally that of his favourite wife). There are two versions of this proverb because the subject prefix 'e' in 'ekwata' (that catches) is not preceded by a noun and could therefore refer to 'engombo' (a slogan) or 'endwadde' (a disease), the former being more common.

Further, a woman is expected to be totally subservient, submissive and obedient to her husband. In many African societies, this is a value that elders strive to inculcate in young women getting ready for marriage. The proverbs below call for husband's respect and submission to his will:

- *Kaggwe ensonyi; ng'omukazi ayomba ne bba* (As abominable as a woman who engages her husband in a quarrel). Another version replaces 'ayomba' (who quarrels) with 'awoza' (who pleads), and the abomination is 'pleading with one's husband'.
- *Gaanya bba; ng'alabye obugyo* (She affords to disobey her husband once she has found an alternative haven).
- *Anyoma bba; abula obugyo* (She that despises her husband shall lack a haven/refuge).

- *Nyinimu atiihwa* (The lord of the house deserves respect).

A woman also has to be tolerant and cultivate resilience before suffering and trying experiences. The suffering is portrayed in the proverbs as enshrined in female destiny. Among the many rewards for bearing the burden of suffering is a lasting marriage:

- *Nnaku za bakayala; buli omu azisinda bubwe* (Women's suffering; each one has a different story to tell).
- *'Zansanze' y'afira mu bufumbo; nga 'siibisobole' yeekunidde* ('Suffering is my lot', lasts in wedlock when 'I wouldn't stand such,' is long gone away (divorced)).
- *'Siivemuke' y'afa n'ommami* ('I fear dishonour', keeps husband for good).

A marital practice that any woman had to come to terms with, traditionally, despite discontent and misery, was polygamy. The proverbs present polygamy as natural, befitting and unquestionable. Rivalry among co-wives is part of the game and many ganda sayings are constructed on the motif of the 'omuganzi' (the favourite) against the 'omukyawe' (the disliked). Quite often, not much good is expected of a co-wife:

- *Mukazi muggya kabugo kakadde; tekabulamu nsekere* (A co-wife is an old backcloth; it is never free of lice).
- *Mukazi muggya nsingo ya munya; tebulako keeringiriza* (A co-wife is a lizard's neck; it always has reason to turn).
- *Empaka ennemeremu; zikubya mukyawe* (Prolonged arguments earn the disliked a beating).
- *Kyoterekera omuganzi; omukyawe yakirya* (What's meant for the favourite could, sometimes, go to the disliked).
- *Ogguzibwa omuganzi; omukyawe yagumala* (The disliked answers for the favourite's wrong).

Some form of brutality on the part of the husband, in this polygamous setting, would not raise eye-brows. Disciplinary action and chastisement against disobedient wives is part of a husband's duties:

- *Omukazi birenge bya ddiba; bw'otabikunya tebigonda* (A woman is (like) extremities of a hide; they need rubbing to soften).
- *Muganzi lwazaza; omukyawe lwacanca* (The day the favourite is in the wrong; the disliked celebrates).
- *Akaggo akaakuba muggyawo; bw'okalaba okakasuka* (The stick that whipped your co-wife ought to be thrown away).
- *'Ommami alidda ddi?', ku ggwe kwatuukira* ('When is the husband's return?', gets beaten up first/She that long for the husband's return; is first to be beaten when he is back).

A woman, in spite of her perceived 'weakness', is supposed to be very hardworking. Her role as a farm-hand is crucial in the sustenance of the husband and the family. A woman is somewhat an economic asset and farm manual chores are part of her existence. Proverbs showers praises on the hardworking woman and emits fiery scorn against the lazy one:

- *Omukazi agumira ku nkumbi* (A woman stands by the hoe).
- *Omukazi omulima azaala mmere; omunafu azaala muddo* (The hardworking woman brings forth food; the lazy one, weed).
- *Omukazi omunafu alayira enkuba okutonnya* (A lazy woman resents the falling rain).
- *Akyogerako siyakireeta; (omukazi)omunafu tayita njala kugwa* (S/he that talks of something doesn't invite it to occur; a lazy woman never invites famine). Versions of this proverb exist with or without the word 'omukazi' (woman).
- *Okuddiza guba mwoyo; (omukazi) omunafu asala ku lusuku lwe naddiza ensiko* (Sharing (eats) with the giver, out of one's will, is generosity; a lazy (woman) returns parts of her garden to the bushes).
- *Omukazi omulima akuliisa n'engabo ku mmere* (A hardworking woman allow you to keep a shield nearby at mealtime). Our own interpretation points to the well-fed man who, as a result, is always ready to go to war but generally, the 'shield at mealtime' is taken to be the man's hand gesture to indicate to his wife that he is satisfied and should not be served more food (Walser-1984).

It should, however, be underlined that the images of the woman in the enlisted proverbs do not necessarily relate to what she is but rather what is ought to be. It is basically a matter of the way she is 'seen' and 'wanted' and not the way she is. This is an illustration of culturally imposed and enhanced stereotypes that, ultimately, aim at conditioning the woman perception both by herself and others.

The Man: Dominance and Vitality

On the other hand, man or, more precisely, maleness, is depicted in terms of dominance, strength, might and vitality. Implicitly, the proverbs in this section complete the contrasting image of man and woman where male activity is constantly opposed to female passivity. This is a view of male-female relations that patriarchy as social order strives to assert. Man and 'male being' is, first and foremost, active, indulgent and adventurous:

- *Ssegnanga gyekoma okweereega; n'emivula gyegikoma obugumu* (The more the Cockerel indulges in dispute; the stronger his muscles become).
- *Ennume ekula bigwo* (The male (being) grows up wrestling).
- *Musajja gyagenda; gyasanga basajja banne* (Where a man goes; he (surely) finds fellow men).

- *Basajja bukirana* (Men supersede each other in manly qualities).
- *Basajja ssubi; erimu lisiba linnaalyo* (Men are grass; they tie each other).
- *Basajja nsolo; ezimu ziryza zinnaazyo* (Men are animal; they feed on each other).
- *Basajja mivule; givaatula negiggumiza* (Men are Mivule² tree; they shed and blossom)
- *Bw'ogoba musajja munno; olekamu ezinadda* (As you chase a fellow man; spare some strength for running back).

The culturally desirable male and female attitudes and perceptions are summarised in a popular Ganda pun around the words 'omusajja' (a man) and 'omukazi' (a woman). The man domineeringly asserts, 'Nze eyajja *omu sajjja* (Me, who came alone, didn't I reach) while the woman laments, 'Nze eyajja *omu kazzzi* (Poor me, who came alone). The woman's sentence contains 'kazzi', an interjection of pity.

Some Shades of Gender Awareness?

Despite the manicheist view showing man as strong and woman as weak or the dominant man versus the submissive woman, there are a number of Ganda proverbs that carry positive messages for gender relations. Some studies have highlighted this rare but persistent tendency of the African proverb that could represent 'a more gender balanced perception of the women's image' (Natukunda 1996). Marriage is a treasured virtue and co-existence and co-habitation between the sexes is both desirable and inevitable:

- *Eka egwana mukazi na bba* (A home suits man and wife).
- *Awagumba ennume n'enduusi* (The male's abode is the female's too).
- *Tosala gwa kawala nga tonnavulira gwa kalenzi* (Never judge in the girl's favour before to the boy's pleading). An alternative version of proverb, in use, is the reverse.
- *Ontuuse; Nnalunga yatuuka Jjuuko* (We are a perfect match; just like Nnalunga and Jjuuko). This is the ideal couple in Ganda mythology.

In a way, Ganda proverbs enhance the survival of the marriage institution by calling upon the woman to endure suffering that may arise from it, thus depicting wedlock as necessary and inevitable. Further more, in proverbs alluding to marriage, deviants, failures and probably the unfortunate, are subjects of ridicule. These ones include the bachelors, spinsters, the unmarried and the divorced. Nonetheless, how ever approving the above attitude is of the marriage institution, it may end up reinforcing patriarchy if the man is to unquestionably have the upper hand with woman's suffering naturally implicated. In the sayings below, the bachelor get a fair share of scorn and ridicule despite his maleness:

- *Kannulu gagezi kagenda okunywa ogw'obusogozzi kaleka keeyalidde* (A 'wise' bachelor first makes his bed before going out to drink his brewer's share).

- *Kiraza mwoyo ng'omuwuulu ayimba nti, 'ndibula naye'* (As mind-meddling as a bachelor who sings, 'I will elope with her').
- *Bw'olaba omuwuulu aliko entumbwe; ng'asula wa ijajjaawe* (If you see a fine-legged bachelor, then, he is surely under grand parent care).
- *'Ntegedde', omuwuulu ategeera awudde* (By the time he says 'I have got it', the quarrelsome man is already a divorcé).
- *Ssematiko agaggibwa omuwuulu; omufumbo yagagaba* (Mushroom picked by the bachelor are given out by the married man).
- *Yeetematema ng'omuwuulu omusawo nti, "Ejjembe lyange lifunyisa abakazi"* (As contradictory as a bachelor medicine-man who claims, "my deity wins over women.")

The Luganda word for 'bachelor' is 'omuwuulu' but in the first proverb above, it is replaced by its demunitive form '(a)kawuulu' to translate despise and contempt as society's attitude to the bachelor. Here the 'demunitive' 'ka' takes the place of the normal subject prefix 'mu'. Similarly, in proverbs referring to the divorced woman, the 'emaciative' 'lu' replaces the 'mu', and we hear of '(o)lukazi' (emaciated unpleasant woman) instead of '(o)mukazi' (woman). The inferred 'smallishness' for the man and 'longishness'/'thinnishness' for the woman all express the derogatory attitude toward the divorced and the single. The divorced woman or one contemplating divorce is held in low esteem:

- *Lunaanoba; terubula ntondo* (She that intends to divorce is easily angered).
- *Lunaanoba; Terubulako kyervekvasa* (She that intends to divorce always finds a (weak) reason to do so).
- *Yeeyogezza ng'olwanobako nti, 'baleete omwenge bannone', nti, 'olubereberye baaleeta mazzi?'* (As nonsensical as the divorced woman's talk; she say, 'let them bring beer (part of bride price) to reclaim me', as though they had offered water the first time they came for her).
- *'Siringi zenfuna simanyi gyezidda'; awasa banobye* ('I wonder what takes away my earnings', he insists on marrying divorcées). This is a new saying; the word 'siringi' is a corruption of 'shilling'.

The other two severely attacked categories of women are the 'Nakyeyombekedde', the spinster far beyond her prime who is not interested in marriage, and the 'ow'obusa', the unmarried young woman who is ripe for marriage. Some of the spinster's favours boom-rang as self-provoked troubles. The saying goes: *Nakyeyombekedde; gw'ayiisa gwegumukubya* (The spinster is beaten for the beer she brews). The 'Ow'obusa,' literally meaning 'the one of nothing', is the subject of unkind remarks to make her loathe her situation and hasten to find a suitor. Unfortunately, she usually has no total command of over the circumstances around her. Traditionally, she may not freely choose a husband or determine when to get married without extensive

family involvement. She is, perhaps unjustifiably, associated with ill behaviour and depicted as an attraction to quench all curiosities:

- *Akola bya mbyone; ow'obusa by'akola ewaabwe* (As ill-mannered as an unmarried woman before her own people (family)).
- *Ow'obusa ngabi; n'ataafumite akootakoota* (An unmarried woman is an antelope (in the hunting field); even that who wouldn't throw his spear stoops about).

Paradoxically, the polygamist or, precisely, 'the two-homed man', to be more faithful to the letter of the proverbs below, is pitied in traditional wisdom. Apparently, the issue is not the number of wives but keeping them in more than a place. Such a man ends up not well catered for and disoriented:

- *Namakabirye; asula njala* (The 'two homed man' sleeps hungry).
- *Amaka abiri musango; bw'ohwanirira agali e Kyaggwe ng'ag'e Ssinga baganyaga* (Keeping two homes is a 'burden'; when you defend one the other is looted). This proverb is rather geographically-bound, we have left out names of places.

Undoubtedly, the woman is treasured as mother and culturally perceived as prime in matters of fecundity and procreation. The mother is given a lot of respect, deserving care and protection. Mother's dishonour is abominable just like disobedience of one's husband. A proverb earlier noted in the paper has two versions, with the same introductory bit, 'Kaggwe ensonyi', but different endings. This phrase expresses abomination but taken literally it means 'shedding modesty'. One version calls for respect of the husband and the other for the mother: *Kaggwe ensonyi; ng'omwana abba nnyina* (As abominable as a child stealing from its mother). Concern and fear for the mother is preached in the proverbs below:

- *Anakuggya ennimi; ageya nnyoko ng'olaba* (S/he that wants a quarrel with you; backbites your mother in your presence).
- *Gwekitaliiridde nnyina; nti, 'linda bukye'* (If the beast hasn't eaten your own mother; you may afford to relax till day-break).
- *Atwalira nnyina talemererna* (One carrying for his/her mother never fails).

Although a mother's respect is cherished, the child belongs to the father's clan and nation, and this is a true mark of patriarchy. A mother gains more value and attains higher status if she gives birth to a boy child. The boy is definitely come into the world to strengthen the father's clan in belonging and number. A boy child is so dear and he even commands some reverence from his parents, particularly the mother. To institutes 'stately' patriarchy besides its other shades, the Muganda says:

- *Nnyoko abanga omunyoro; nakuzaal ku kika* (Let thy mother be foreign but be born into a clan). Children born of foreign women belong to the Ganda nation, the reverse is inadmissible.

- *Bakidambya kye kizaaala eddenzi* (The unloved woman may bring forth a boy child). The term 'Bakidambya' refers to 'the not much loved, mistreated woman'. In this proverb, she is objectised' or equated to 'a thing' to indicate her lesser value. And it is this kind of woman that gives her husband a boy child, 'eddenzi'. Once again, desired meaning plays around 'omulenzi' (a boy) given in its 'super augmentive' form, 'eddenzi,' to express grandeur and superior value attached to the boy child.
- *Senkuzaalenkuzaale; ng'omwana ow'obulenzi* (A boy child is parent to you as you parent to him). The meaning of this proverb is expressed in 'archeatypised reciprocal-duplicative' verbal construction 'Senkuzaalenkuzaale'. This construction is built around the verb 'okuzaala' (to give birth / to father or mother). With cultural context, the proverb's text is more of a mother's words.

However, Ganda proverbs occasionally depict that legendary woman of great courage and assertiveness who is ready to challenge and measure to the heights of men: *Omukazi Nnambaalaala; omvunge agunywa kisajja* (The woman 'Nnambaalaala' who drinks her beer like men). The etymology of this courageous woman's 'nickname' points to 'flatchestedness' that translates as 'manly'. In the study of African proverb, more research is needed in this direction because the etymological root of a word could reveal the target meaning. Generally, there are several words in popular use without traces of their origins where their hidden sense often lies. Other words that would call for such investigation are 'Nakyeyombekedde' and 'Nnalukalala'(10).

Considerable 'archeatypisation' exists in Ganda proverbs expressed in the grammatical gender forms of 'sse' (masculine) and 'nna' (feminine). Remember that many Ganda names are differentiated by these gender prefixes, thus we have 'Ssettuba' for men and 'Nnattuba' for women, keeping the name root 'ttuba' (fig tree). Proverbial constructions with 'sse' and 'nna' exist in Luganda without necessarily targeting men or women but merely, people. Such sayings are usually critical of human conduct and are advice against undue excesses. Could this imply implicit sense of parity expressed in this 'arbitrary' and 'alternate' use of both male and female 'archetypal' grammatical forms to target 'the human' as mere 'being'? Here are two examples:

- *Nnabyevanga; ng'akaliga akaliira mu nte* (An intruder/meddler, out of place, like a tiny sheep feeding amidst cows).
- *Ssebingi bwebikwalira; ogamba tebirimbula* (In abundance, one imagines there will never be shortage).

Loosening the Hold

Our analysis has given us an overview of Ganda proverbs on gender relations. The major shortcoming of the study is having to read a culture through the

eyes of a foreign language. A culture and its language are entwined and a translation is never as good as the original. We believe that the proverbs can talk for themselves and more meaning should be sought in what they say and not in the commentary. They have equally suffered the inconvenience of having to speak in a language other than their own.

It is quite evident that patriarchy as a social system has held firm for ages thanks to cultural value-enhancers like proverbs. The proverb as linguistic and philosophical phenomenon has served to uphold patriarchy in many societies. Linguistically, a proverb is stable and versatile and thus easily absorbed in everyday speech and into other oral genres like riddles, short stories and songs, all often used for instructional purposes. Philosophically, in a traditional African setting, the proverbial messages are the gist of one's way of life representing treasures of wisdom inherited from forefathers. The proverb is then granted authority and prestige in shaping social perception and behaviour. And patriarchy, deeply embedded therein, had to live on and hold firm.

In our era of gender awareness, primarily seeking gender parity, proverbs that offer positive messages for gender relations should be boosted to show that somewhere in the forefathers' (or ancestors, to be less sexist) mentality lay some awareness of gender balance, how ever faint. Other proverbs need simply to be understood differently bearing in mind the polyphony of their meaning. We could simply extract the desirable and favourable meanings then stick to and live with that. A woman digging with the husband could mean complementarity and likening a woman to 'an old cooking pot', manifestation of concern over delicacy. Dismantling, re-reading and re-phrasing proverbs could constitute a form of deconstructive re-interpretation to give them a new lease of life a line with the demands of the times.

Originally and basically, the proverb is an oral genre and adaptation and constructive change are no strangers to it. But one wonders where to fix the limits of change, with compilation of oral forms weighing heavy on their true nature while ensuring their preservation besides users' wisdom. In addition, these written forms can be far from the authentic and original setting. Nevertheless, a wise saying transcends space and time to become universal human heritage. In case of wisdom gone sour, a rereading or retouch could save gems of the noble oral genre.

Notes

1. Baganda: Bantu ethnic group of southern Uganda. Ganda (root word), Luganda (language), Buganda (Nation), Muganda (member of group).
2. *Muvule*: hard, heavy, light coloured tropical wood.

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