

**Review**

# **The Portrayal of Women in Tigrigna Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions: the Stereotypical Beliefs and Behavioral Tendencies**

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Proverbs are the most widely and commonly used in the people's long-standing tradition of oral arts. They have been enabling the transmission of knowledge, culture and communal beliefs from generation to generation. Thus, in this study a rigorous attempt has been made to examine the portrayal of Women in glance of Tigrigna proverbs and proverbial expressions. A field work evolving ethnographic study was applied to gather proverbs from the selected sites of the research area. Having identified potential informants via snow ball and purposive sampling techniques, data were collected through interview and document analysis. Then, the collected proverbs were first transcribed in the source language i.e. Tigrigna and then translated into English. Finally, after in-depth reading, thirteen proverbs were selected and arranged for analysis using thematic coding. In the analysis, in addition to the textual sources, attention has also been paid to the contextual data to reflect the real images of women portrayed in the proverbs with respect to the social and psychological context. Thus, the findings of the study illustrated both favorable and unfavorable images of women. Despite this fact, the proverbs and proverbial expressions of Tigrigna lacks balance between the negative and positive attitudes towards women. Contrary to men, Women are portrayed positively only in a very few proverbs. Most proverbs and proverbial expressions of Tigrigna indicated that women are dependent, evil, lazy and inferior in both their self-esteem and intelligence. In addition, the findings showed that women are considered as irrational, talkative, jealous and, unfaithful sub-species of humanity. Thus, based on the findings of the study, recommendations were made as to how to change the biased and largely prejudice attitudes of the society towards women.

**Key Words:** Proverbs, Tigrigna, Women

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Proverb has been studied by different scholars over the past centuries. However, still there is no agreement upon

the definition of the term. This is because; proverbs vary considerably depending on the culture of a given society.

As to Galperin (1977), Proverbs are brief statements showing in condensed form the accumulated life experience of the community and serving as conventional practical symbols for abstract ideas.

Similarly, Mieder,( 2004)stated that, a proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation.

Richter (1993) has also defined proverbs as a very old literary tradition of mankind. They disclose in a surprisingly precise manner a people's philosophy of life, its ideas and concepts about the world, its self-consciousness.

A proverb is a sentence or a phrase, which briefly and strikingly expresses some recognized truth or shrewd observations about practical life and which has been preserved by oral tradition; it may be preserved and transmitted in written literature as well (Holman, 1980).

Generally, based on the above arguments proverbs could be conceptualized as condensed or well-known sentences or phrases but memorable saying embodying some important fact of experience that is taken as true by members of some traditions and communities.

Proverbs constitute a cultural heritage, which is handed down to us by the past generations. They are considered to be the items of traditional knowledge, occurring for centuries over the world. In favor of this, Malinauskienė (2004) stated that proverbs transmit cultural idiosyncrasy, national world outlook, wisdom, experience and mentality of people and, as such, they contain didactic and certain behavioral patterns. Therefore, these expressions of human mind can be considered as not only a written monument of a nation, but they also carry practical value, which will be analyzed further in the present research.

People often encounter proverbs in everyday life in oral communication and in diverse written works. These lexical units connect individuals with their ancestors and transmit their values and knowledge. They contribute certain stability and a sense of identity as every individual is provided with something that they can hold on to or rely upon, but at the same time they retain unique character to a particular nation in regard to the whole world. Accordingly, proverbs as the items of folklore deserve a respectful study (Valiulytė, 2010).

Proverbs are an integral part of interpersonal communication of everyday life. They strengthen human interactions in day to day socio-cultural occasions and make utterance interesting and impressive. Beyond their literacy value, proverbs have been used as a source of didacticism and more generally as medium for expression of commonly held views and wisdoms. They enshrine much of the cultural heritage of people, their traditions, their history, their wisdom and ethics (Tefaye and Mesfine, 2014).Accordingly, this paper is intended to examine the portrayal of women in glance of Tigrigna

proverbs and proverbial expressions.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Proverbs are a product of human mind, which resulted from generalized experiences and observations. Hence, it is natural that these units are often met in everyday life and are constantly used by people for practical purposes. According to Abrahams (1982), proverbs criticize moral problems either by directing future actions or by altering a point of view towards something that has already happened.

In many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly in proverbs (Finnegan, 1970).

As to Mieder (2004:28), African proverbs are common ways of expressing religious ideas and feelings. "It is in proverbs they find the remains of the oldest forms of African religion and philosophical wisdom." The Ibo people of Nigeria view them as the palm-oil with which words are eaten and the horse on which the conversation rides.

In the same token, Ethiopia is a country with a long history of writing. Even though literacy is still far from universal, storytelling remains important in many parts of the country. In support of this idea, Fekade (2001) stated that, the study of folklore in Ethiopia seems to be a recent development.

Although the attempt to collect Ethiopian oral literature can be traced from the period when missionaries appeared in the country, the participation of Ethiopians in folklore research had been limited until the second half of the twentieth century. It was in the 1970s that the study of Ethiopian folklore by Ethiopians themselves was given a considerable attention. Since then a considerable number of researches have been produced in folkloric forms of Ethiopian ethnic groups although the number of the works is still insignificant when seen from the folkloric potential of the country.

Although there are domestic studies on proverbs in some ethnic groups of Ethiopia, for instance Tefaye and Mesfin (2014) on Kafa proverbs, Fikre (2012) on Wolayta proverbs, and Tadesse (2004) on Guji-Oromo proverbs; as to the knowledge of the investigator no research has been conducted on the portrayal of women in Tigrigna proverbs and proverbial expressions specifically on the stereotypical beliefs and behavioral tendencies.

Similar to that of other Ethiopian ethnic groups, the life and day to day activities and social practices of Tigray people are characterized by oral poems, folktales and proverbs. Despite this fact, the folkloric treasure of Tigray people has not been studied and publicized widely. It seems that such verbal treasure (proverbs) of the society has been given little attention by researchers.

Thus, the current study is initiated by such tempting situations and attempts to tackle the problem with its focus on the portrayal of women's in glance of Tigrigna proverbs.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

### General Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the portrayal of women in Tigrigna proverbs and proverbial expressions.

### Specific Objectives of the Study

This study has specifically attempted to:

- Examine the portrayal of women in glance of Tigrigna proverbs.
- Investigate the negative and positive effects of the Tigrigna proverbs in relation to gender issues.
- Assess the Psycho-social implications of the proverbs.
- Document the indigenous wisdom (folkloric treasure) of the people under study.

## RESEARCH METHOD

In an attempt to understand and study the culture and folkloric life of Tigrai people, the research design that the researcher employed was a qualitative approach particularly ethnographic. This is because, ethnographic approach is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher scientifically describes the essence of human experiences (human cultures) of a given community or society.

To collect the relevant data for the study two instruments were employed. These two folkloric data collecting tools were interview and document analysis. By these two tools 30 proverbs were collected. Interview was carried out with selected community elders who were recommended by the local community on the bases of their deep knowledge of the socio-cultural context and oral tradition of the society. Furthermore, most of the interviews held with the key informants were recorded using tape-recorder. Likewise, proverbs were also collected via document analysis.

The researcher has visited Culture and Tourism agency, Women's Association Affairs office and other offices from woreda to region in order to assess documents pertinent to the issue under scrutiny. Specifically, three books that deals on Tigrigna proverbs and proverbial expressions have been used as a main sources.

During data analysis, what the researcher did was

writing up of the notes and transcriptions of recorded materials following the data collection process. Then, in order to attain the specified research objectives, the collected data were organized based on the purpose of the study suitable for analysis and discussion.

Finally, since the participants were interviewed in Tigrigna language, the transcribed interviews were translated in to English. The next step was reading the transcripts and field notes so as to clutch the themes and patterns of the data. After a thorough reading of the raw data, the researcher categorized or coded the data in to manageable and meaningful sets of themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the study presents the interpretations and discussion of proverbs that were selected, categorized and coded thematically. Thus, the content of proverbs incorporated in the analysis has two major themes i.e. proverbs that show both negative and positive images of women. Under the two themes there are seven sub themes which reflect the positive and negative pictures of women.

### Proverbs that Show Women's Negative Image

#### Proverbs that Inspire Men to subdue Women

1. "Sebeytn Nihugn enawequetka"(A woman and a niger-seed shall be hit).
2. "Sebeyti zhabkaya tithn Bekli zhabkaya tkuhum" (A woman does whatever task given as a mule eats whatever provided).

In Tigrigna, some proverbs are used to initiate men to suppress and control women. It is viewed that becoming careless towards women and allowing them some sort of freedom is hurtful. Hence, the proverbs above have assumed that every activity of a woman is fully under control of her husband. Men are described as hosts and shields of women. Moreover, the proverbs instruct husbands not to fear their wives, for if they do, they may not get full services from them. Let us try to exemplify this assertion by explaining the proverbs according to the context they are used in the society. A woman does whatever task given as a mule eats whatever provided. The implication of this proverb is that, women are dependent on their husbands. This is to mean their future and stability depends on the success of their husbands. What is more, the proverb also implies that a woman must accept whatever an authority figures-most often husband order. They should not refuse for any reason behind.

In proverb number one we see the comparison of

women with oil seed (Nihug) which portrayed physical punishment of women is considered as normal. The proverb dictates beating women is believed to be appropriate.

This is based on the assumption that women do things right only when beaten. The proverb that says, A woman and a niger-seed shall be hit becomes applicable in this context. The proverbs further showed it is compulsory on the wife to obey her husband; this is only because he bears the responsibility and she is subordinate to him. He is a caretaker of his home and responsible for those who are under his charge. Moreover, he is supposed to be more insightful and more open-minded, and to know things that the wife does not know because of his wide circle of acquaintances and his wide experience that enables him to see what his wife does not. The wise wife is the one who obeys her husband, fulfills his commands and responds to his opinions and advice willingly and sincerely.

In general, the above proverbs directly degrade women and emphasize the worth of men in the patriarchal ideology that is to control Women.

### **Proverbs that Represent Women as an Evil Sub-species of Humanity**

3. "Sebeyti zleaketo mot ayferhn" (One sent by a woman does not fear death).
4. "Gual mwlad gud mwlad". (Giving birth to a daughter is getting a curse to a self).
5. "Gual ziweleden Chew zinegeden hade" (It's all same to have a female child and to trade salt).
6. "Sebeytin aysebn Adgin aygenzebin" (A woman is not a human as a donkey is not a property).
7. "Sebeyti keygedfu adi yigedfu (A man scarifies his place for his wife).
8. "Sebeyti guhila entemstela tibel-e entemote tistem-e" (A wife of a thief enjoys up to his death).
- 9 "Kab gets ansti gets anabsti" (Seeing women's face is more horrific than seeing a lion's face).

All of the above proverbs grouped under this theme represent women as an evil sub-species of humanity. For example, the following narrative proverb shows this: Seeing women's face is more horrific than seeing a lion's face. This patriarchal proverb reveals the dangers (evil nature) of women. This emanates from the view that men are the normative model of humanity and women are an afterthought. Still, here is another proverb which represents women as a symbol of "evil", leading man into trouble; one sent by a woman does not fear death. The implication of this proverb is the view that women are architects of instigation and provocation to evil acts of men.

In favor of this idea, Hussein (2005), stated that "to go to women or to live with them is equated with committing

suicide in the Oromo proverb, "He who goes to woman has already sold himself." Although it is situated within a narrow contextual framework, the proverb, "The child of a stepmother is like the meat from the back part of the neck," emphasizes the bad side of women.

The proverbs above illustrate that men are victims of women's trick. In the traditional sayings of the society woman is believed to have the power of influencing men to commit evil deeds. That is why men are advised through oral traditions of the society to take care of women.

### **5.1.3. Proverbs that Convey Society's View of Women's Laziness, Low Self-worth and Intelligence**

10. "Lbi sebeyti kindi merfie etiakua enteseamkaya titefie" (A woman has a tiny heart and it cease to exist while in a kiss).

11. "Sebeyti kab zigeberela zihasewela" (A woman is much in to one that pretends than one that serves her).

12. "Sebeyti etserho geza afdege yeblun" (A house built by a woman does not have a gate).

13. "Sebeyti Keshisya felat felat entebelwas mtshaf tihatsib (Over praised wife of a priest washes a book).

14. "Beserosya tsebha yitema" ("When a woman prepares a bad meal, she starts eating as if the meal is tasty,")

15. "Sebeyti entezyfeletetewn felat tweld" (A woman may give birth to a wise man but is never wise herself).

16. "Lebam sebeytin werkit sedfin yelen" (It is impossible to find gold on a cliff, as it is impossible to find a knowledgeable woman).

17. "Lebam sebeytin keran adgin yelbon (There is no grass on a cliff, likewise there is no knowledgeable woman)

In the above proverbs women are portrayed as incompetent in their thinking ability. They are believed to think only in short terms. These proverbs clearly showed that women are assumed less intelligent in life. The following proverbs disparage women's knowledge and analytical skill, there is no grass on a cliff, and likewise there is no knowledgeable woman. This proverb conveys the society's prejudice against women's thought and practice. The proverb further illustrate that the brain of a woman is dull as compared to that of a man. The conception of the society towards women's knowledge is also reflected through the following proverb. A woman may give birth to a wise man but is never wise herself. Alike to the above proverb, this proverb is also declared that societies believed that women are not wise as compared to men.

In the proverbs above women are considered as foolish and lower in their thinking skills. Despite this old belief, there is no research finding that confirms IQ difference between the two sexes. But such kinds of sayings not only discourage women from performing and achieving equal

with the masculine, but also cause sharp psychological pain.

### **Proverbs that Convey the Society's View of Women as Irrational, Talkative and Unfaithful**

18. Werega sebeytin zerzara menfitn hade" (Talkative wife is like a lose sieve).

19. Zitefea were kab sebyti dleyo (Disremembered information could be found among females).

20. Haw sebeyti nab wushate haw seb-ay nab dege (A wife favors her relatives than her husband's relative).

21. Sebeytkan dawitkan ab kurkuetka (Woman and "Dawit" should be kept under armpit).

22. Sa-enkan sebeytkan ab tsegemka ykeduka (A shoes and a wife abandons at the time of misery)

Proverbs number 21 and 22 reflect that women are dishonest to their husbands and to the society. Due to their unreliable nature, they betray their husbands. In this view, female infidelity should increase if women obtain independent sources of power, because then they would no longer be dependent on their partners for wealth and status.

The following Proverb describes this belief. A shoes and wife abandons at the time of misery. As oppose to the proverbs and proverbial expressions of Tigrigna, other research findings revealed that men are more likely to be unfaithful than women are. Such findings are typically explained with evolutionary theories, which hold that men and women use different strategies for spreading their genes and having offspring (Buss & Schmitt, as cited in Lammers, 2011). Specifically, men are thought to be motivated to seek multiple partners so as to maximize their genetic longevity; women are thought to be less inclined to infidelity and to be more oriented toward binding with a single, successful partner, because of their greater investment when procreating: internal fertilization.

In addition, Proverbs number 18 and 19 both showed that, there are gender differences in controversial habits. The stereotype of chatty, talkative women is so prevalent that both literate and illiterate societies have long presumed that females speak more than men. This shows that women are the victims of malicious proverbs in a lot of languages. However, the researcher believed that not only women are disadvantaged by this popular myth, but men as well, because it suggests to males that "silence is golden" and in order to be a good man, they should not talk. So this stereotype puts constraints on both sexes and it should be dispelled unless it is founded scientifically.

### **Proverbs that Convey the Society's View of Women as Jealous Sub-species of Humanity**

23. Sebeyti keshi megdef ember mendef yirekbo aytbln.

(A wife of priest thinks her husband is eating and drinking but not suffering).

24. Sebeytka etblo ember adeka etblo aygberelka (Let you be as your wife fantasizes but not as your mother does).

The above proverbs confirmed that women are very jealous human creatures. This is to mean women are assumed to have more concern and distress about their partner's sexual contact with a rival woman. The proverb let you be as your wife fantasizes but not as your mother does is applicable here. According to this line of thinking, women invokes low self-esteem, immaturity, or character defects. Research results indicated that, adults who enjoy high self-esteem, maturity, and psychological soundness should experience less jealousy or not experience jealousy at all.

But, contrary to the society's beliefs (proverbs above), men are more jealous than their women counter parts. In favor of this, Daly and Wilson as cited in Buss (2013) argued that men are predicted to experience jealousy and engage in mate monopolization behavior ranging from vigilance to violence, as a function of the reproductive value of their mates.

### **Proverbs Indicating Positive Images of Women**

The proverbs above have showed that women are usually given negative images. And most proverbs are expressing this type of attitude. Conversely, folk tales that praise females are also there. This indicates that there are some attempts to illustrate women positively. The problem, however, is that women are portrayed positively in a very few cases. And the positive images of women revolve only around conceiving, rearing children, taking care of spouses who play major roles in social activities, and the like. Thus, it is important to examine some of these oral traditions below:

### **Proverbs that Depict Wisdom of Women**

25. Blhat kem sebeyti girma kem leyti (Wisdom is to a woman as "girma" is to a night)

26. Sebeyti zbeleto aykewnin sebeyti zbelotoke aykern (What a woman says never listened but happened)

The above proverbs indicated that women can serve as an advisor to their husbands. There are also common beliefs that even kings and famous warriors get advice from their wives whenever they face critical problems. For instance, Empress Taytu's unique wisdom and leadership skills became visible during the war with Italy in 1896, in which she took an active part. As to Biseswar (2011), Taytu was actively engaged in encouraging men to go and fight. Not only did she command her own troops on the battlefields, she also provided leadership to the

thousands of women camp followers, supervising their tasks. Similarly, Proverb number 25 and 26 strengthen the extraordinary importance of Women to their husbands. It may be appropriate to analyze these proverbs one by one. "Blhat" (wisdom) is to a woman as "girma" is to a night. "Blhat" refers to the wisest idea forwarded to solve a certain problem. Therefore, the proverb indicated that, the advice and recommendations gained from women is always noble and desirable. The Proverb which says "What a woman says never listened but happened also showed the insightful and wisest nature of women. The proverb show, despite its importance and nobleness, what women says never listened. This proverb further illustrated the society's prejudice against women's thought and practices.

### 5.2.2. Proverbs that Show Complementarity of the two sexes and the Supportive role of females to their male counterparts

27. Sebeytin seb-ayn kab hade ela yikdhu (Husband and wife are fetched from the same river).

28. Sebeyti zeyblkum aythresu (Farming without a wife is worthless).

29. Sebeyti zeyblu gezan kefti zeyblu demben hade (A house without a woman and a barn without cattle are the same).

30. Abgoni hid-hid wts-etawi seb-ay hanta tenkara sebyti ala (Behind every successful man, there is a strong woman).

Men and women make different contributions to make life possible. Although the two sexes are spatially categorized to carry out culturally different roles, they are in a condition to supplement each other's responsibilities. The above proverbs portray women as very crucial sections of the family and society. Further, they indicated that a man's life without a woman is extremely despairing. The proverb that says a house without a woman and a barn without cattle are the same becomes applicable in this context. In favor of this idea, Meles as cited in Desalegn (2013) stated that, unless we let involve women in the development process we are doing things with a single hand while we have two hands, hence participation of women in the development has no opinion. The late prime minister added, unless we mobilize women, we cannot come out of illiteracy. Similarly, Hussein (2005) also stated cult of femininity in the Oromo society and is used to implicate the importance of women in creating a receptive environment around home. It establishes social sub-structures and patterns of expectations for the sexes: it glorifies women for the comfortable services they provide men and endorses men's entitlement to the services.

The above proverbs affirmed that women's have a remarkable role in the life of their husbands. Besides, the

proverbs indicated that although the two sexes are spatially categorized to carry out culturally different roles deemed suitable for each sex, men and women are in a condition to complement each other's undertakings.

## CONCLUSIONS

Like other Ethiopian ethnic groups, the people of Tigray have developed their own set of social and cultural values. The proverbs and proverbial expressions of Tigrigna are emanated from these traditional values and beliefs of the society. The underling fact identified in this study is that proverbs are social tools used to convey the perception, value and beliefs of the society for whom the message is communicated.

The findings of the study illustrated both negative and positive images of the people towards women. Despite this fact, the proverbs and proverbial expressions of Tigrigna lacks balance between the negative and positive attitudes towards women. Contrary to men, Women are portrayed positively only in a very few proverbs.

Most proverbs and proverbial expressions of Tigrigna indicated that women are dependent, evil, lazy and inferior in both self-esteem and intelligence. The implication is that men usually use these stereotypes as grounds to legitimize their authority over women. The proverbs further showed, the senselessness of women's thought and actions. This is simply showed the societies' misconception about women. In contrary to this idea (Veale, 2003), argued that the contribution of Tigrian women as fighters in the liberation struggle against Mengistu's Derg regime is exemplary. It is widely regarded that Tigrian fighter women were strong, if not stronger, than the men, and played a critical role in the success of the movement. Similarly, as to Meles cited in Desalegn (2013), stated that, it is unquestionable that women have equal patriotic potential with men; however, it does not mean that they have equal physical capability.

Tigrigna proverbs describe the inner thoughts, relationships, power structure and patterns of social control in the society. Thus, it is possible to note that Tigrigna proverbs are reflectors of the thoughts, beliefs and socio-cultural values of the society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings above, the following recommendations are suggested:

The findings of this study indicated that women in Tigrigna proverbs are linguistically disadvantaged. Hence, the researcher would like to address his suggestion to government officials particularly those who work in gender affairs to strive further in creating

awareness in the society about gender equality. In doing so, they should vividly show cultural stereotypes that degrade women. In the same fashion, they should also teach the society about the roles that women could play in the socio-economic and political arenas of the society. Specifically educational institutions have to enlighten the entire community that such type of oral traditions should not play any role other than providing historical significance.

Moreover, all concerned bodies including governmental and non-governmental organizations, civic societies, and the public in general should work in cooperation to empower women and maintain equality between the two sexes. In conclusion, the researcher intends that further studies have to be made regarding the portrayal of Women in glance of Tigrigna Proverbs. This is because, when further studies are made, more proverbs which praise women could be obtained. At the same time, proverbs that ridicule women's will be criticized.

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