

THE POWER OF PROVERBS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF PROVERBS IN SHAPING GENDER ROLES AND STEREOTYPES IN RUSSIAN AND GA CULTURES

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Abstract

Proverbs are an essential part of traditional cultures and they play an important role in shaping people's beliefs, values, and attitudes. Proverbs reflect cultural norms, values, and dogmas that provide insights into the very way people perceive themselves and others in terms of gender. This article aims to explore the role of proverbs in shaping gender roles and stereotypes in two distinct cultures, Russian and Ga. By examining a selection of proverbs from each culture, we will analyze how such reinforces or challenges gender roles and stereotypes. The article will also explore the implications of these messages on the development of gender identity and the perpetuation of gender inequality.

Keywords: Language, Russian, Ga, culture, gender roles, stereotypes, proverbs

Introduction

Proverbs are a universal feature of language and culture that provide concise and memorable expressions of wisdom. These expressions, according to Gafarova (2017), encapsulate cultural norms, values and beliefs. Proverbs serve as a reflection of the collective experiences, wisdom, and knowledge of a society and a way to transmit cultural knowledge and social expectations from generation to generation (Ajdarovich, 2021). Abiodun (2000) found that the language of proverbs has the potential to reinforce social norms and perpetuate stereotypes. This is particularly true when it comes to proverbs about gender, which highlight the binary between masculine and feminine characteristics, reinforcing stereotypes and roles. These proverbs are used to convey important life lessons and to guide behavior, whilst shaping the way people perceive themselves and others in terms of gender, which often results in perpetuating gender inequality (Mieder, 2003).

This article examines the role of proverbs in shaping gender roles and stereotypes in Russian and Ga cultures. It also provides a comparative analysis of proverbs in both cultures, highlighting similarities and differences in the way gender roles are portrayed. The study will also explore the impact of proverbs on gender identity and the perpetuation of gender inequality. The authors resorted to the use of a general approach to analyze the two distinct linguistics comparatively, finding their similarities and differences in terms of the reinforcement of gender

roles and stereotypes. The proverbs were collated from speakers and natives of both languages. In L. R. Sakaeva's view (2009), proverbs are part of cultural heritage. In both Russia and Ghana, they are used to convey cultural values, traditions, and beliefs. In Russia, proverbs have been used to reinforce traditional gender roles, which emphasize the importance of men as providers and women as caretakers (Dal, 2000). Similarly, in the culture of most African countries, proverbs have been used to reinforce traditional gender roles, which emphasize the importance of men as protectors and women as nurturers (Abiodun, 2000). Gender roles refer to the social and cultural expectations, norms, and behaviors that society associates with individuals based on their perceived gender (Yankah, 1989). These roles typically define the rights, responsibilities, and expected behaviors of males and females within a particular society or culture. Gender roles can vary across different cultures and historical periods and can encompass various aspects of life, including family, work, relationships, and societal participation. Gender stereotypes on the other hand are widely held beliefs or generalizations about the characteristics, roles, and behaviors of individuals based on their gender. According to Gyan (2018), these stereotypes often oversimplify and reinforce traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, assigning certain traits, roles, and expectations to individuals based on their gender. Gender stereotypes can be limiting and can perpetuate inequality by shaping societal expectations and influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others. It is important to note that gender roles and stereotypes can vary across different cultures and can change over time as societies evolve, and challenge traditional norms and expectations.

Basically, gender roles and stereotypes are prevalent in every culture. In the Russian culture, traditional gender roles place men in dominant positions, while women are expected to be submissive and nurturing (Shaimardanova et al., 2016). This is reflected in many Russian proverbs, such as “Мужчина голова семьи, а женщина шея, которая эту поворачивает голову” (Muzhchina golova sem'i, a zhenshchina sheya, kotoryaya povorachivaet golovu) – “a man is the head of the family, and a woman is the neck that turns the head”. This proverb highlights the traditional view of men as the decision-makers in the family, while women are expected to support and guide their husbands. It reinforces the idea that men are the leaders and women are subservient to them. We have the same proverb in the Ga culture: “Nuu ji yitso, ni yoo ji kue” (the man is the head, but the woman is the neck) which reinforces the idea that men are the leaders, and women play a supportive role. Gyan et al. (2022) contend that “this shapes the socialization of females to accept their male counterparts as wiser and having the natural capabilities to lead. By these socialization processes, males accrue power and use the power at all levels of decision-making in the communities. Within the context of community development, men tend to use and exert this power by controlling all aspects of decision-making throughout the process, including inception, development, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and feedback”.

This eventually results, according to researchers, in females holding back and sagging in their capabilities and capacities. More so, in Russian culture, gender roles have traditionally been defined by a strict division of labor, with men expected to be providers and women expected to be

caretakers (Dal, 2000). This division of labor is reflected in the many proverbs about gender that emphasize the importance of men as protectors and providers (Yankah, 1989). Dal (2000) again, argues that Russian proverbs reflect these gender roles and often reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. For instance, the proverb “мужчина без работы, как птица без крыльев” (muzhchina bez raboty, kak ptitsa bez krylev) – “a man without a job is like a bird without wings”: this proverb conveys the thought that a man is as weak as “a bird without wings” when he does not have a job, from which he can have substance to cater or provide for his family. In other words, a man, juxtaposed to a bird in the proverb must of a necessity have wings, just as a bird has wings to be able to fly (naturally function well), which equates to his ability to provide.

Similarly, in Ga culture, gender roles have traditionally been defined by a strict division of labor, with men expected to be protectors as well, and women expected to be nurturers and expected to take care of the home and family. This is seen in proverbs such as “yoo tamɔ fɔfɔi, ni nuu tamɔ tɛ” (a woman is like a flower, while a man is like a rock). This implies that the woman is delicate and fragile as compared to the man, who is strong and unbreakable. This reinforces the idea that hard work is for the man, and soft work and comfort is for the woman, as she is delicate and fragile. One of such proverbs that highlights the idea of disparity in strength and capacity, mentally, emotionally, and physically is the Russian proverb “Мужчина должен быть сильным, а женщина красивой” (Muzhchina dolzhen byt' sil'nym, a zhenshchina krasivoi) – “a man should be strong, and a woman should be beautiful”. This proverb reinforces the stereotype that men should be physically and emotionally strong, while women should focus on their appearance. This idea is like the proverb “женщина за рулем — как обезьяна с гранатой” (zhenshchina za rulem — kak obezyana s granatoy) – “a woman driving is like a monkey with a grenade”, which suggests that women are incapable of driving and performing tasks that require physical and mental skills. This conveys a similar stereotype in the proverb “век живи — век учись, а женщина красится” (vek zhivi — vek uchis', a zhenshchina krasitsya) – “live and learn your whole life, and a woman should always be beautiful”. This proverb reinforces the stereotype that a woman’s primary role is to be aesthetically pleasing to men, which is to say, while the man concerns himself with more serious issues like “learning”, the woman concerns herself with beautifying herself and for the man.

Correspondingly, a Ga proverb that reflects the stereotype of women as limited and probably “weaker” than men is “yoo lɛ shia bi ni shi nuu lɛ jɛɲfɛɛ bi ni” (the woman is the child of the home, and the man is the child of the world). This proverb highlights the view that women belong in the home, while men have a broader role to play in the world. Just as the home is a smaller portion of the world, the woman's role is limited, whereas the man is free to impact the entire world. This idea in the past affected many women in the Ga community. With the view that a man’s influence is upon the whole world, boys and men were given priority in education at the expense of women. When there were especially, financial challenges in the family, it was the women who were asked to give up their education for the men. The women engaged in trade or something to support the home financially so that their brothers could go to school. Another proverb that demonstrates the

belief that men are providers and protectors, and women, caregivers, and homemakers is the proverb “*я крakra foaa ewu sɛɛ daaa*” (a good wife is the one who always says yes to her husband). This reinforces the stereotype that women should submit to men’s authority. The woman is tagged as disrespectful to challenge her husband’s opinion or object to it. Women are by this proverb charged to keep quiet when men are talking. It is out of order in the Ga community for a woman to oppose her husband in any way, as the man must think and hers, to follow as a good wife. This gender role expectation is further reinforced by another Russian proverb, “*хорошая жена – тихая жена*” (*khoroshaya zhena – tikhaya zhena*) – a good wife is a quiet wife”, which suggests that women should be submissive and not speak up. Such proverbs perpetuate the idea that men should be dominant, and women should be subservient. Other proverbs that depict gender stereotypes in the two cultures include:

- “*Жена на кухне, муж на работе*” (*Zhena na kukhne, muzh na rabote*) – “A wife in the kitchen, a husband at work”, which implies that the woman’s place is in the kitchen, and the man’s place is in the workplace. The people of Ga also similarly say that “*Yoo gbehe ji kpatashi, shi jee mantse shia*” – (the woman’s place is in the kitchen, and not in the chief’s court). This is a proverb that reinforces the idea that women should be confined to domestic roles and not involved in decision-making or leadership. These two proverbs prove similarities between the two cultures and are almost the same and the implication as well as what they reinforce are the same – thus, work and decision-making are for the masculine gender, while the feminine is relegated to kitchen duties and house chores. The ultimate effect of such proverbs is that they pass on the orientation that women cannot handle, hold nor properly use power (Lakoff, 1975). The same meaning is implied in the proverb “*yoo nine shɛɛɛ edaŋ*” – “A woman’s hand does not reach her mouth”. This, in the Ga language, likewise, suggests that women are not capable of providing for themselves or making decisions independently, which affirms the stereotype of their inferiority to men.
- “*Мужчина должен быть головой семьи*” (*Muzhchina dolzhen byt' golovoy sem'i*) – “A man should be the head of the family”, which reinforces the patriarchal idea that men should have power and authority over women.
- “*Женщина должна выходить замуж*” (*zhenshchina dolzhna vykhodit' zamuzh*) – “A woman should get married”, which suggests that a woman’s primary purpose is to be a wife and mother, rather than pursuing a career or other goals.

In Ga culture, there are similar proverbs such as:

- “*Кɛ yoo gbo le, a ya saa ewu shia*” – “When a woman dies, we go to clean her husband’s compound”, which implies that a woman’s worth is tied to her husband, and that her death is primarily significant in how it affects him. The messages conveyed by these proverbs have significant implications for the development of gender identity and the perpetuation of gender inequality in the sense of how men or the masculine gender is treated and preferred to the feminine. Proverbs that reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes can limit people’s potential and

reinforce gender inequality (Gyan et al., 2022). For example, the Russian proverb “У женщины длинные волосы, но короткий разум” (zhenshchiny dlinnye volosy, no korotkiy razum) – “a woman’s hair is long, but her mind is short” reinforces the stereotype that women are not intelligent and should not be involved in decision-making. This can have a significant impact on the self-esteem and confidence of women, limiting their ability to reach their full potential. In the same way, as aforementioned, the Ga proverb that interprets that “a woman’s place is in the kitchen” reinforces the stereotype that women belong in the home and are not capable of fulfilling roles outside of the domestic sphere.

Furthermore, some proverbs reinforce the stereotype that men are supposed to be “hard” and strong, while women are expected to be soft and submissive. In the Russian culture, the proverb “Мужик должен быть крепок, как дуб, а женщина мягка, как вата” (muzhik dolzhen byt' krepok, kak dub, a zhenshchina myagka, kak vata) translates to “a man should be strong as an oak, while a woman should be soft as cotton wool”. This proverb suggests that men should be physically strong and emotionally stoic, while women should be emotionally sensitive and passive. Another example is the Ga proverb “Keji nuu ji bo le onifeemə taməə yoo” (if you are a man, don’t behave like a woman), which suggests that women’s behaviors and characteristics are inferior to those of men. In the Ga culture, it is women who cry. Men do not. Therefore, when a man is seen crying or doing anything that is associated to the woman’s character by way of stereotype, then that man must be less of a man, probably a woman. It is because of such stereotypes that there is a popular saying in the Ga community that “nuu fooo”, which means “men do not cry”.

In Ga culture, the proverb “bii fəmə ji yoo hesəenamə” translates to “a woman’s worth is in her ability to bear children”. This proverb reinforces the stereotype that a woman’s main purpose is to bear children and care for the family. It implies that a woman’s value is based solely on her ability to fulfill her traditional gender role, which is to be a mother and a homemaker.

It is important to recognize the influence of these proverbs in shaping cultural attitudes and values, and the necessity to work towards creating more inclusive and equitable societies. These proverbs demonstrate the different ways in which gender roles and stereotypes are reinforced in the different cultures. Prevalently, proverbs of both cultures tend to perpetuate traditional gender roles and reinforce gender stereotypes. However, that not all proverbs in Russian and Ga cultures reinforce gender stereotypes or inequality. In fact, some proverbs subvert gender norms and challenge traditional gender roles. A few Ga proverbs focus on the complementary roles of men and women in society. Such proverbs are only to create the idea of harmony and solidarity in the society and not necessarily, equality. They focus on the complementary roles of men and women in society, rather than the superiority of one gender over the other. For example, the Russian proverb “Без бабы жить - как без глаза” (bez baby zhit' - kak bez glaza) translates to “living without a woman is like living without an eye”.

This proverb suggests that women are necessary and valuable to men, and that men cannot fully function without them. It challenges the traditional gender roles that men are supposed to be

dominant and independent, while women are supposed to be submissive and dependent. Likewise, the Ga proverb, “Wuɔ yoo kɛ wuɔ nuu lɛ amɛyi enyɔ, shi amɛ tsuɔ ni kome” (the hen and the rooster are a pair, they work together) emphasizes the importance of cooperation between men and women in achieving common goals. Another Ga proverb, “Wuɔ nyɛ kpeee ebii; ewoɔ amɛ naa nii” (The mother hen does not eat its chicks, but it feeds them) highlights the nurturing and caring role of women. In both proverbs, men and women have complementary roles that are necessary for the proper functioning of society. The Ga proverb, “Yoo nyɛɔ etsuɔ nuu nitumɔ, hegbe namɔ pɛ ni ke susumɔ baa” translates to “the woman is as capable as the man, and it is only a matter of opportunity that makes the difference” challenges the notion that men are inherently more capable and qualified than women. It suggests that women have the same potential as men, but their opportunities are limited by gender discrimination and societal expectations. The differences in the proverbs used by these cultures only reflect the different gender roles and expectations that are prevalent in their societies.

Conclusion

Proverbs play a significant role in shaping gender roles and stereotypes in both Russian and Ga cultures. While some proverbs can be empowering and inspirational, many others perpetuate traditional gender norms and stereotypes. The analysis of proverbs from the Russian and Ga cultures shows that the two have similar attitudes towards gender roles and expectations. Many of the proverbs in both cultures tend to reinforce the distinct traditional expectations of males and females and perpetuate gender stereotypes, whereas others focus on the complementary roles of men and women in the society. These differences reflect the different gender roles and expectations that are prevalent in their respective societies. By analyzing the role of proverbs in shaping gender roles and stereotypes in these cultures, we can better understand how language and culture intersect to shape our perceptions of gender, where sometimes, some stereotypes can limit the opportunities and potential of individuals, particularly women and those who do not conform to traditional gender roles. It is important to recognize and address the harmful effects of gender stereotypes and inequality, and to promote gender equality and inclusivity in all aspects of life. It is also crucial to recognize the role that proverbs play in shaping gender roles and stereotypes. Proverbs are deeply ingrained in the society and they have a significant impact on how people view themselves and others; especially, the traditional African. With special focus on the Ghanaian society, it is necessary for us to pay heed to proverbs, discourses and oral traditions, with respect to their implications on inequalities in gender, stereotyping and discrimination (Gyan et al., 2022), (Abiodun, 2000). By analyzing proverbs and understanding their underlying messages, we can gain insight into the gender roles and expectations of different cultures and work towards promoting gender equality and breaking down harmful stereotypes.

Thus, the results obtained in the course of the comparative analysis indicate a significant unity of the semantic organization of proverbs and sayings of the two differently structured and unrelated languages, which characterizes the similarity of the linguistic picture of the peoples studied. This is a natural result of the commonality of the world around us, human experiences, and the

universality categories of human thinking. The existence of specific national expressions characterizes the originality of the historical experience of language groups, the originality of culture, and the peculiarity of the thinking of the people - native speakers.

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