

Vol. 4, No. 1, 2026

Website: [https://doi.org/ http://journals.jozacpublishers.com/jil](https://doi.org/http://journals.jozacpublishers.com/jil)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18427732>

*Type of the Paper: (Article Paper)*

## Masculinities in selected Yoruba proverbs and the complexities of being a man in a changing world

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**Received:** September 24, 2025; **Accepted:** November 28, 2025; **Published:** January 30, 2026

**Abstract:** This paper explores the complexities of being a man as represented in selected Yoruba proverbs and the implications in a fast-changing world. Proverbs in African parlance is a reflection of a people's way of life, culture, strength, weakness, dos and don'ts. As a vehicle of communication, a proverb among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, West Africa, is meant to give meaning to expression. The study, therefore, discusses the construction of man in the Yoruba socio-cultural milieu and how this construction is reflected in the proverbs of the people. As a qualitative research study, the study relies on masculinity as a framework, especially for the analysis of ten selected Yoruba proverbs. The study discovered that while men are constantly changing in status and role as a result of changing economic and social equilibrium, the proverbs that construct him as a man remain constant. It is, therefore, suggested that some of the proverbs that construct the man against the reality of his existence and changing circumstances should begin to change or be rebranded in order to position him for the only thing that is constant "change". By so doing, it is believed that so much pressure will be taken off the man in the face of new realities and emerging changes in gender discourse.

**Keywords:** Parlance, Role, Social Cohesion, Social Equilibrium, Status

### 1. Introduction

Language plays a major role as a means of communicating information and establishing and maintaining social relationships with other members of the speech community. As such, literary artists, the world over, draw their themes from events and social experiences in their social milieu as a platform to create a basis or path for social behavior, attitude, norms, and values in a way that suggests that the literary artist is also a part of that society (Hassan & Babaii, 2009; Babaeitarkami & Baghchi, 2024). This is also applicable to the Yoruba speech community, in which language use is laced with local coloration, most important of which is the proverb. According to Yai (1977) and Alabi (2021), a proverb is a form of literary genre among the Yoruba speaking people of Nigeria in West Africa.

Okoh (2008) opines that in the order of hierarchy of forms in Africa, proverbs deserve heightened attention for two reasons. First, because they usually employ a gnomic, clearly aphoristic form, they are easy to classify under the poetic genre. The second reason appears obvious: proverbs occupy a

commanding position in the rhetorical arsenal of African culture. In this paper, the use of a proverb as a literary weapon to promote change in the perspective of gender inequality and patriarchal domination will be explored. For the purpose of clarity, the study will employ the masculinities approach to the study of literature in examining Yoruba proverbs, especially those that portray the man as macho and confer on him masculine gender power and roles that are no longer in conformity with the new reality because of changes in the economic and political statuses of the man. It must be noted that literature takes its thematic preoccupations from the value system of the social context from which it emerges (Adejumo, 2009; Arcilla Jr, 2024).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Proverbs and the Yoruba Worldview

Akporobaro (2012: 85, 95), while describing its didactic functions and polemic potentials, says proverbs are often very humorous, delightful to hear, morally instructive, philosophic in outlook, and figuratively ornamental. Words expressed in proverbs are not usually lengthy but deep in meaning, and give vent to the description of proverbs as structurally poetic in form. Enunciating characteristics of the proverb, Schipper (2007) emphasizes four areas:

- (i) Its concise fixed artistic form;
- (ii) Its evaluative and conservative function in society;
- (iii) Its authoritative validity; and
- (iv) Its anonymous origin.

Bello-Olowookere (2004) opines that "Yoruba do not use proverbs without reason or relevance to the discourse". For instance, in Yoruba world, a younger person's use of proverbs when elders are present must be preceded by an apology to *sebi owe* (that is if taken as a proverb) with a response from the elder to go ahead, *wa pa mii that is "you will make another one" or owe lo ma pa o ni pa eyan*, meaning "it is proverb you make, you will not kill a man). The word *pa* in the proverb is a form of pun, while the first *pa* means to "produce", and the other means to "kill". The Yoruba, who belong to the people of the West Benue – Congo Language classification, hold proverbs in high esteem, especially as a means of communication of ideas and transmission of values in their society. Proverbs to the ordinary Yoruba person serve an important role in expressing behavior that is either socially repulsive or acceptable, to appraise good action or condemn ignoble acts or antisocial conduct, and to guide in how society is organized. Towing the same line of argument, Asinyanbola (2007; cited in Nhlekisana, 2009) posits that most Yoruba proverbs are biased against women: they portray them negatively as sexually immoral, extravagant, and responsible for most societal ills.

Proverbs are also a distillation of the wisdom of the people, derived over the ages from a careful observation of everyday experiences involving human beings, nature, and animals, as well as natural phenomena and social events (Sheba, 2006; Madiyarovna, 2024; Owoade, 2019). For instance, proverbs are seen among the Yoruba people as a strong determinant of peace or war, as it is encapsulated in the thematic thrust of their content. And because it is couched in wisdom and philosophical expression, it is customary for the Yoruba to say that: *Oro lo n yo obi ninu apo, beloro n yo ida ninu apo*

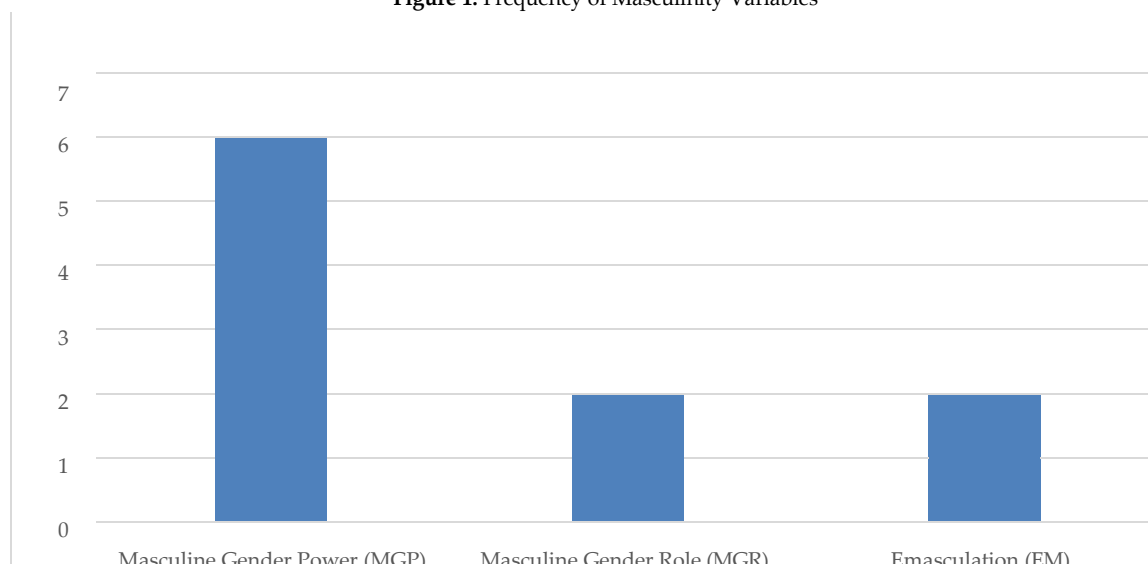
That is, a good word brings forth kola nut from the bag, whereas it is also a word that removes the sword from the pouch.

Thus, the Yoruba definition of proverbs, otherwise called *Owe*, literally means that which is "wrapped" as in the following proverbial expressions:

*Owe lesin oro, oro lesin owe, bi oro ba sonu owe lafi n wa.* Meaning: a proverb is the 'horse' that conveys the word. When the word is lost, it is found by a proverb.

The above expression stresses the fact that proverbs take the route of communication from the speaker to the hearer. But the vehicle of that transmission, in linguistic terms, is a proverb. It also suggests that the meaning of a word can be lost on the hearer, but with a proverb, it is retrieved.

Figure 1: Frequency of Masculinity Variables



### 3. Research methods

For the purpose of this research, twenty-five gender-related proverbs were selected, but only ten were found to have foregrounded masculinities trait exhibition of masculine traits, role performance, and status. The proverbs selected for analysis were drawn from Sheba (2006), while others are from everyday discussions with colleagues by the authors, who, incidentally, use them in everyday discourse. The research categorizes and analyzes ten carefully selected proverbs using the following concepts:

- i) Masculine gender power, which pertains to the exhibition or exercise of masculine power, prowess, or authority in society, over women or other weaker men, in the workplace or marriage.
- ii) Masculine gender role, which delineates roles constructed for the male gender in the social milieu where he learns masculinity. Roles such as breadwinning, responsible father, head of the family, provider, and many more.
- iii) Emasculation, which are proverbs that give definition to weak, subordinated masculinities. These proverbs categorize weak men considered to be failures and unsuccessful in chosen careers, in role exhibition, or at the ebb in masculinities hierarchies.

#### 3.1. Framework for the study

The framework for the study is masculinities with particular attention to Bem's schema theory. Bem's (1981, 1983) gender-role schema theory is in furtherance of Hatty's role theory that views masculinity as a set of social scripts acquired in early childhood. Bem's schema theory, according to O'Neil and Nadeau (1999: 97), proposes that:

1. Individuals learn cultural definitions of femaleness and maleness.
2. Schemas include networks or associations that organize and guide an individual's perception of masculinity and femininity based on sex.
3. Schemas become part of the self-concept and are used to evaluate one's personal adequacy as a male or female.

Bem's schema theory presupposes that the society in which the man is socialized defines the man according to the dictates of the culture of the environment. So, the man is aware of all the traits and responsibilities that define a male as a man and a female as a woman. The man or woman is therefore aware of his or her inadequacy when juxtaposed with the way they have been constructed in their socio-cultural environment.

#### 4. Findings and discussions

##### Presentation and Analysis of the Proverbs

Proverb	Tag	Category
1. <i>Obe ti bale ile o kii je, iyawo ile kii see</i>	MGP	Masculine Gender Power
2. <i>Ki a ri ogun, ki a maa sa a, ni iyi okunrin</i>	MGP	Masculine gender power
3. <i>Oko lo lori aya</i>	MGR	Masculine gender role
4. <i>Aya ole lan gba, a kii gb'omo ole</i>	EM	Emasculation
5. <i>A kii dagba maa laya, ibi aye ba ba ni ni a a je e</i>	MGP	Masculine gender power
6. <i>Okunrin lada, eni to mu dani gan okunrin</i>	MGP	Masculine gender power
7. <i>Okunrin to n sun ile ana, akitan lo n sun</i>	EM	Emasculation
8. <i>A ti gbe yawo o t'ejo, owo obe lo ju</i>	MGR	Masculine gender role
9. <i>Oke o ku, loku re, baba omo lo lomo</i>	MGP	Masculine gender power
10. <i>Ibi to le, la n b' okunrin</i>	MGP	Masculine gender power

**Proverb 1.** *Obe ti bale ile o kii je, iyawo ile kii see*

**Interpretation:** The kind of soup that the husband does not eat, the wife must not prepare.

**Category:** Masculine gender power

**Implication for masculinities:** This reminds the Yoruba woman that the husband has the last say in the affairs of the home. As a provider, he is to make provision for the proverbial soup here, and the duty of the woman is to cook it. Therefore, the type of soup the husband does not eat, the wife dares not prepare. By implication, whatever the man of the house does not approve of, the woman must not do because authority resides with him. By extension, the desire of the woman is subject to the approval of the man in a marriage.

**Proverb 2.** *Ki a ri ogun, ki a maa sa a, ni iyi okunrin*

**Interpretation:** To face war and not flee is the honour of a man

**Category:** Masculine gender power

**Implication for masculinities:** The Yoruba man is constructed in his social milieu as brave, macho, and strong. He is given this orientation as he socializes in his cultural environment, and this has registered in his psyche as one of the traits that distinguish him from his female counterpart. According to this proverb, to fight in a battle without fleeing is an honour to men who are usually saddled with the responsibility of defending the territorial integrity. By his social construction, he is expected to take on any battle without fleeing as a show of power and strength. In reality, this proverb is a gentle reminder to the man that he is masculine, strong, and macho, and these are traits that define him as a man, clearly different from a woman in his socio-cultural environment. This is believed to earn him honour in society as a brave warrior. However, things are changing, and some of these proverbs are no longer relevant to the current realities where modern warfare demands that a man should fight and run away to be able to fight another day. A situation where war is fierce may demand that the brave man retreats to regroup for counter attack. This underscores one of the objectives of this paper in projecting the fact that things are changing and that some of the proverbs may no longer define the modern man. In fact, within the socio-cultural setting, the man is also instructed by another proverb that seems to have abrogated the above proverb, where the man is meant to flee a battle as a mark of bravery. It says *mo ja mosa la nmo akinkanju loju ogun, akinkanju to ba moja ti o mosa, iru won ma nbogun lo ni*. Meaning to 'fight and run is how we distinguish the brave in battle, the brave that does not know how to fight and run usually die in battle.' By implication, in modern realities, a man should fight and run to be able to fight another day.

**Proverb 3.** *Oko lo lori aya***Interpretation:** The husband is the head of the house**Category:** Masculine gender role**Implication for masculinities:** This proverb is a reinforcement of the headship of the man in a marriage setting. The man is the overall de facto leader, and everything revolves around him, including decision-making in the family. This proverb confers on the Yoruba man the notion of overall leadership socially, economically, and emotionally. By implication, he is the provider and breadwinner. So, no matter the social and economic profile or status of the woman, she is subject to the whims of the husband.**Proverb 4.** *Aya ole lan gba, a kii gb'omo ole***Interpretation:** It is possible to snatch the wife of a lazy man, but it is impossible to snatch his child**Category:** Emasculation**Implication for masculinities:** This proverb reveals the enactment of masculinities hierarchies of hegemonic, complicit, and subordinated among men of different statuses. These statuses denote a disparity between the weak and strong men and the possibility of the weak being rendered effeminate by reason of economic or political disempowerment (Bamidele-Nelly & Sotunsa, 2023). The proverb reminds us that a man who has no economic or political power can lose his wife to a man more economically/politically empowered. However, the consolation is that a more powerful man may take his wife, but not his children.**Proverb 5.** *A kii dagba maa laya, ibi aye ba ba ni ni a a je e***Interpretation:** A man is never too old to marry a wife; it is where life enjoyment meets one that one enjoys it.**Category:** Masculine gender power**Implication for masculinities:** This proverb confers on the man the privilege of taking a wife even at an old age. As part of the patriarchal privileges conferred on the Yoruba man, unlike his female counterpart, this masculine gender power reminds him of the enormous power he has as a man in a marriage. Again, it shows that even old age is not a hindrance to a man to marry a new wife as against the woman, who, apart from biological changes in the physical body, psychologically she may be ridiculed for marrying at a very old age.**Proverb 6.** *Okunrin lada, eni to mu dani gan okunrin***Interpretation:** A man is a cutlass, even the person that holds it is a man**Category:** Masculine gender power**Implication for masculinities:** Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, West Africa, a cutlass is a metaphor for power, strength, and bravery. So, this proverb constructs the man to be strong and macho. He sees himself as strong, brave, and audacious, especially in war, on the farm, and generally in the performance of any task. As a result of this cultural definition, he is not expected to show any sign of weakness in anything.**Proverb 7.** *Okunrin to n sun ile ana, akitan lo n sun***Interpretation:** A man who sleeps in his in-law's house is sleeping on a dunghill**Category:** Emasculation**Implication for masculinities:** According to this proverb, he belongs to the dunghill any man who will depend on his in-law for survival. The social implication of this proverb has far reached effect on the man because of the way he has been constructed to be independent and dependable. Culturally, the Yoruba man's construction as the head of his family and a breadwinner also affects his relationship with his in-laws. It is, therefore, a sign of weakness for a man to live with his in-laws. In fact, it is a taboo for a man to die in the house of his in-laws. If it happens, his corpse is to be brought out through the window. The man who lives in his in-laws' house is seen not only to be shameless but also worthless. The dignity of the Yoruba man is measured by how independent he is from his in-laws economically and otherwise. He, therefore, loses his respect, honor, and self-esteem

once he has any reason to depend on his in-laws for livelihood. What this means is that the man becomes psychologically inadequate due to his inability to be self-sufficient.

**Proverb 8.** *A ti gbe yawo o t'ejo, owo obe lo ju*

**Interpretation:** To marry for the man is not an issue; what is important is to provide money for the soup.

**Category:** Masculine gender role

**Implication for masculinities:** By its very content, this proverb is a reminder to the man that he is the breadwinner and that the primary and most important responsibility for the man in a marriage is to provide. Just as the Bible says, a man who cannot provide for his household is worse than an infidel. The man has been constructed as the head and provider; the societal expectation is that before he envisages marriage at all, he must be fully ready to take responsibility. This responsibility is represented by "money for soup" in the proverb.

**Proverb 9.** *Oke o ku, loku re, baba omo lo lomo*

**Interpretation:** The dead go to their abodes; it is the father who owns the child

**Category:** Masculine gender power

**Implication for masculinities:** This proverb denounces patriarchy, which is practiced in some cultures across Africa. To the Yoruba man, the proverb reinforces the fact that the child belongs to his father just as the dead belong to the afterlife. This explains why the Yoruba man will go to any length to determine the paternity of his child/children, because once it is established that the child's paternity is not in contention, the man raises his head high as a proud father.

**Proverb 10.** *Ibi to le, la n b' okunrin*

**Interpretation:** A man is found in a tough place

**Category:** Masculine gender power

**Implication for masculinities:** Men are meant to be brave and strong, unlike their female counterparts. So for the Yoruba man, he is to be found in difficult terrains and accomplishing difficult tasks. This Iron Mike image communicates to him in the proverb the need to engage in daredevil encounters to prove his masculinity. No room for sissies and weaklings, but great exploits, especially in war and tough challenges.

In the analyses above, it was discovered that much of the exhibition of masculine traits centers more on the power relationship between male and female as reflected in the proverbs identified above. For instance, while Masculine Gender Power (MGP), which includes political and economic power reflected six times, both Masculine Gender Roles (MGR) and Emasculation (EM) were reflected only two times each. The social construction of any society is found directly or indirectly in the culture of the people, especially their language, food, marriage, belief system, and cultural practices. This explains why men are stratified according to strength, power dynamics, success, ability to provide for their households, success with women, and, at times, ability to make money. Like some other African societies, the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria also have some of these social constructions represented in their proverbs as their perceptions of what it means to be a man in their social milieu.

The argument in this paper is that things are changing; economic power for women, for instance, is changing the status quo, but the proverbs that communicate the man's masculinities to him are not changing. It is obvious from the above that some of these proverbs no longer describe the modern Yoruba man who has been emasculated by the economic crises and poverty that have ravaged the nation for decades. Many men are at the mercy of their wives because of political appointments or access to education that changes the status of these women from being just housewives to breadwinners and providers. In this circumstance, the proverbs that confer masculine gender role on the man may no longer fit the description of such a man because he may be the husband as culturally constructed, but in reality, not the breadwinner.

In a heterosexual relationship where the woman is the breadwinner as a result of the economic power and educational opportunities at her disposal, the construction mirrored to the man creates confusion for him. It makes the man more vulnerable to frustration and despair once the script is different from the actual performance and exhibition of masculine traits and statuses. The man is,

therefore, different from how he has been culturally defined and constructed socially in his social milieu. These are the complexities that create confusion for the man in the enactment of his masculinities.

Men are generally believed to enjoy patriarchal privileges by reason of the roles assigned to them culturally as the heads, the fathers of their children, husbands of their wives, and decision makers of their households. The man is not expected to cower to the whims of his wife because his word is final as the head of the family and lord to his wife. No wonder the adage Okunrin to n sun ile ana, akitan lo n sun (the man that sleeps in his in-law's house sleeps on the dunghill) reminds him how unmanly he is to surrender his manliness to a woman for whatever reason. To a non-African or a non-Yoruba person, it not only sounds weird but could be categorized as toxic, or described as hypo-masculinity, but to the culturally immersed man who is socially constructed in that socio-cultural environment, the proverb is a reminder of who he is. So, when this masculinity traits and statuses are challenged, especially by new opportunities opened to women through education and economic empowerment, violence becomes inevitable in that relationship. This violence comes about as a result of the invocation of a masculine defense mechanism that provokes a violent reaction from the emasculated man to act in defense of his manhood. This predilection to violence has been described by Bamidele-Nelly and Sotunsa (2023) as a form of entitlement bestowed on men to use violence to maintain power, control, and possession over women.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shown that the Yoruba society perceives men and women differently. The society also has expectations for the sexes, which inform the roles and responsibilities assigned to them. Proverbs have also been espoused in this paper as veritable tools through which the illusion of masculine gender power and roles has been promoted and sustained. In the proverbs analyzed, it is crystal clear that in the Yoruba language community, proverbs help to legitimize patriarchy in the way men are portrayed as strong, macho, powerful, nurturing, as breadwinners and providers with privileges and domination as forms of hegemony. However, it has also been discovered that some of these descriptions no longer capture the man in terms of role exhibition, status, and masculinity enactment because of changing economic and socio-political circumstances that are throwing opportunities at the womenfolk in a changing world.

It is, therefore, recommended that Yoruba linguists and cultural enthusiasts should begin research into the formulation of contemporary proverbs that will define the man in the light of new realities engendered by changes in economic and political power equations. Proverbs that will make the man gravitate towards partnership with women for a better relationship should begin to dominate the language use of the Yoruba people.

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