

Unmasking Women's Rivalry in Cameroonian Folktales

SUSAN WEINGER, LOTSMART FONJONG, CHARLES
FONCHINGONG and ROBERTA ALLEN

*Western Michigan University, United States, and
University of Buea, Cameroon*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines gender role messages conveyed in Cameroonian folktales. Folktales promote women's rivalry and mask men's culpability in oppressing women by setting the stage for their jealousy, enmity and competition. Attention is drawn away from men's wrong doing toward women by depicting women as conniving evil doers who sometimes use men as pawns to implement their plots. The women are deserving of punishment while men go free from any penalty. Dichotomous representations of women encourage women's rivalry and subordination to men. These repeated teachings convey that women are dangerous and that 'good women' embody all those characteristics that exalt and benefit men. Rivalry between women is augmented by men's comparisons between the 'good woman' and 'bad woman.' If women want to survive in a man's world, the message is unambiguous - be a 'good woman' by exemplifying absolute submissiveness and staying removed and disunited from their sisters.

Keywords: Gender roles, Cameroon, Women's rivalry, Sexism, Folktales

BACKGROUND

Folklore in African oral literature provides a rich source of cultural history and socialization, transmitting and reinforcing messages associated with central values. Gender roles, in particular, are reflected in legends, tales, and myths traditionally shared in oral traditions. Furniss and Gunner (1995) collected essays illuminating the issues of power, gender, and marginalization in African oral literature. Kapteijns' (1999) work with Somali folktales and songs sheds light on the use of early oral narratives in shaping gender expectations. Somali girls, for example, were taught simple lessons in songs praising marriage to a hard-working man, obedience to a husband, giving birth, and outshining her husband's other wives.

Of particular interest here are Cameroonian folktales that illustrate rivalry among women as a socially sanctioned device serving to maintain the male-dominated power structures. A common motif appearing in the following tales involves the portrayal of "good" women making virtuous choices, in contrast with "evil" or "undesirable" women upsetting the social order. The juxtaposition

provides context for the rivalry among women, creating a dynamic in which the good women prevail in order to preserve their honor and the men they serve.

Sanctioned roles for women in Cameroon include those common in most of West-Africa: wife, mother, and daughter in subordinate power roles, with motherhood the chief function. Traits associated with good women are fertility, kindness, generosity, and physical beauty (Furniss and Gunner 1995: 155). Further, good clan background, obedience, health, and competence in women's work, most specifically child rearing, are the domain of honorable women. Outshining her husband's other wives is a worthy goal for brides (Kapteijns 1999: 53-55). The folktale as carrier of this cultural message delivers the rivalry theme to children in simple stories, then throughout adolescence and adulthood reflected in more complex tales.

Oral narratives may subvert history in points of fact but tend to remain faithful to primary social values espoused (Furniss 1995). In West African societies, social organization relies on the power and authority of the male; fathers, sons, seniority, and successive age to trump any role designated for women in the culture. Protagonists in the folktales reported here are invariably male unless the subject involves a woman who has subverted the natural order, and then themes of punishment or witchcraft are introduced (Gorog-Karady 1972: 85). Within these systems, the matrimonial institution is one of the major instruments of domination since elder men control marital arrangements. Women are common property of the husbands' families. Love relationships are discouraged since they tend to weigh down families more productively joined for proprietary reasons. It then becomes incumbent upon the female to produce sons so that the social order is maintained. In these folk tales, as reflective of the societies themselves, male domination is the contextual backdrop in which women's rivalry plays out.

1. METHODOLOGY

Three of the authors taught at the University of Buea, Cameroon in the Women and Gender Studies Department. Such a department is the only one of its kind in Cameroon. Students in two undergraduate classes were assigned to collect folktales from their tribal/ethnic group and select one or more to analyze from a gender perspective. Students gathered folktales from elders in their village including their parents and grandparents. Sometimes they reconstructed stories as they had heard them as children often around nightly campfires. Some copied them from books, primarily from *Tales from the Grassland and the Forest* by Ngoh Agnes Nzuh. The authors suspected that a few of the folktales originated in the imagination of the students.

The authors realized that this body of collected folk tales from the Grassfields of Cameroon was a rich source of stories that communicated cultural messages about gender. We read through approximately 125 stories, selecting

those that appeared to be authentic folktales. We give credit to the students for collecting these folktales; however, student papers were not used for the analysis or writing of this article. Rather, the authors who taught at the University of Buea initially examined these folktales to uncover their messages concerning gender. These authors involved the fourth author in this project because of her literary expertise and interest in folktales. The two male authors are Cameroonians and their two female colleagues are U.S. Americans. Therefore, the gender analysis of the folktales invariably incorporates these different cultural and gender perspectives that may serve to enrich the quality, applicability and depth of the review.

Though themes were derived from the entire sample of folktales, a few chosen narratives highlight specific themes mentioned in this paper. We considered that major themes could be most interestingly conveyed through a close view of illustrative folktales. There were other principal themes culled from these cultural stories than those discussed here. For this paper we focus on three interconnected themes: 1. Women are inevitable and disastrous rivals of each other. 2. Men are not to blame for wrongdoings against women because they have been set up to do so by women's connivances. 3. Women are divided into two categories – good/worthy and bad/unworthy.

2. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

2.1 MESSAGES OF SUBSERVIENCE

Repeated readings of folktales may serve to reinforce women's purpose as serving men and occupying a powerless status. Certainly, women's representative tasks are separate from those of men and generally command less authority and public prestige. Women cater to their husbands, carry out homemaking tasks, perform subsistence farming, and sell palm oil, for example. Their husbands are in charge of hunting, soldiering, communal decision-making, and consulting the gods to promote family welfare. Producing and raising children for their husbands, male children in particular, are mandated requirements of true womanhood. Women who do not produce biological children are regarded as unwomanly, laughable, untrustworthy, evil and outcasts. Women in relationships with men must be subservient, acquiescent, uncomplaining, giving, self-denying, devoted and faithful. The end all of a woman's being is to be under the protection/ domination of a man, handle household management tasks, work on a farm earning money for family maintenance, produce his children and absolutely ensure that they are his children by staying monogamous.

2.2 WOMEN ARE RIVALS - MEN ARE BLAMELESS

How better to reinforce this position of servitude than create rivalry between women? If women turn against each other with disdain, they will tend to dislike themselves - after all they are a part of the devalued group. An increase in self-depreciation is helpful for adjusting to a position of subservience. Their suspicion and alienation from each other will preclude close communication, intimacy and solidarity. Their trumped up or fueled conflict and mistrust of each other will deter them from targeting their true oppressor, patriarchy. Whether or not themes of rivalry in folktales were conspiratorially motivated, the dissension between women is a repeated message and its potency deserves consideration.

In *The palm oil daughter*, a childless woman promised an old woman with supernatural powers that if she would give her a daughter, in turn the mother would deliver her daughter to her when the daughter reaches the age of 17. However, the mother, who refuses to give up her now 17 year old daughter, consequently dies. Ola, the daughter marries a man who later falls in love with her best girlfriend, Leega. Leega betrays her, first by seducing her husband and then by telling the husband about Ola's inherited curse - that if she sits by a fire she will melt. The husband, coached by the false friend, forces her to sit by the fire where she liquefies into palm oil. Subsequently, any child that Leega gives birth to dies.

The folktale unmistakably and repeatedly warns listeners and readers that women are rivals and enemies of each other. The old powerful woman grants Ola's mother her wish of having a daughter but at the monstrous price of exacting a promise to offer the witch possession of her to-be teenage daughter. Ola's mother deceives the old woman by not keeping her promise to sacrifice her daughter at the age of seventeen. The old witch's unyielding retribution kills the mother and causes Ola to inherit a curse that will provide the formula for her premature death. Ola's best friend Leega uses this prescription to deliver the fatal blow. A best friend especially can't be trusted; she knows secrets that empower her to be an acutely pernicious foe. Leega uses her powers of seduction to lure Ola's husband who then despises and beats his wife. Obviously, Ola had such great confidence in Leega that she revealed critically sensitive information to her, virtually entrusting Leega with her life. But such trust was totally unfounded; the woman she most trusted plotted her death. A woman's demise will come from the very woman with whom she has the strongest bond. In a sense, Leega also has misfortune that emanates from her interaction with a woman. As a result of her betrayal of Ola, all of her children must die.

And where is Ola's husband in all this highlighted activity of women's backstabbing, blackmail and betrayal? Ola's husband took up with her best friend, broke his marital vows by committing adultery, and treated her cruelly

with disregard, disdain and physical abuse. He murdered her by heartlessly holding her in place, witnessing her melt into oil. But he is not out in front of his crimes. Rather women in these folktales are masterminding, manipulating and setting men up for these heinous acts. Women are behind the wrong doing that men perpetrate on women. It is other women, not men directly, who are to blame. Men are the unsuspecting victims of women's web of plots and schemes. Consequently, the man is the only mortal who goes unpunished in this story. Ola's mother dies for her breach of promise. Ola is murdered by means of her inherited curse. Leega will never have a child who lives because of her homicide, and even her blameless children are doomed to death and deprived of life. Exclusively, Ola's hardhearted husband avoids punishment. A corresponding theme to women's rivalry is men's blamelessness.

The folktale *My Best Friend* is a variation of the published story, *The old woman and her golden necklace* (Nzuh, 1999). Rivalry between women is highlighted by the sarcastic title because the best female friend actually personifies the worst enemy.

Awah the husband is a wealthy, intelligent, brave man who is beloved by the villagers. He is generous and kind to his beloved wife, Nchang who is hardworking and submissive to him. Even though in 15 years of marriage Nchang couldn't bear him a child, he showed only love and not anger toward her. Nchang decided that her husband should take a second wife and overcame his resistance to doing so by vigorous, active convincing. Nchang brought her best friend, Ngefore to her husband to become his second wife. Nchang does everything to make Ngefore happy. She gets new clothes for Ngefore, bears the brunt of farm and domestic chores, and assumes even more work whenever the second wife is pregnant. Still Ngefore sees that Awah gives most attention and time to Nchang and she grows extremely jealous. Ngefore tells Awah lies such as that Nchang beats her and is a witch conspiring to give her a still-birth. Awah, now convinced, beats Nchang so severely that she fainted. Unexpectedly Nchang becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy. Beside herself with envy, Ngefore consulted with a traditional doctor to be able to kill Nchang through food poisoning. The traditional doctor warns her that the poison shouldn't touch the ground. Inadvertently, she dropped the poison and instantly became "mad." Awah and Nchang reunite and again "live happily in their marital home with their children."

How ferociously jealous women can be of other women. Jealousy drives Ngefore to malign her former confidant and persuade her husband to beat his first wife. Until Ngefore became the second wife Awah loved Nchang dearly. Ngefore brought drastic changes by turning the husband against Nchang. As if that isn't enough she seeks to murder her previous best friend. However, women have a knack of bringing about their own misfortune. Awah was content with Nchang even though she was "barren" and thus the laughing stock of the villagers. It was Nchang who pleaded, cajoled and insisted that Awah take a

second wife who brought about her disaster. Too, Ngefore by trying to kill Nchang brings on her own madness.

Here again the man is not to blame for the agony that women suffer. They are their own worst enemies and men are the victims of circumstance or the tools for their machinations. Women are not only untrustworthy and deceiving of each other; they also delude men. Curiously, he is dominant and in charge in all important matters except when it comes to being the perpetrator of women's downfall. He marries a second wife that legalizes his adultery, disbelieves his loyal and hardworking wife, and beats her to the point of unconsciousness. In these instances, he is seemingly not the commanding, controlling, paramount force. Remarkably, he is in the background and ostensibly not fully behaving by his own volition.

2.3 FOR EVERY GOOD WOMAN, THERE IS AT LEAST ONE BAD ONE

Rivalry between women and the blamelessness of men is supported by the depiction and propagation that there are two types of women, good women and bad women. In the last folktale summarized (*My best friend*) the good first wife, Nchang, works hard and submits to her husband; she stays generous, loyal, docile, selfless and hardworking even while subjected to enduring maltreatment. The good woman is also characterized by producing a child, a male child in particular; and by being ever ready to take back the attention and focus of her husband as soon, or as late as, he is willing to bestow it. In contrast, Ngefore, clearly the bad woman, tends toward pronounced jealousy. She betrays her best friend by fabricating lies about her in efforts to turn her husband's affection and trust away from his first wife and toward herself. While her friend persists to be generous and wholehearted toward her, she schemes to poison Nchang. Notably, the good wife gets restored to the position of favored wife and the bad woman, who gets a taste of her own medicine, turns mad. In the end the good woman wins out and the bad woman reaps her own destruction. Female readers or listeners take heed and precaution to fall into the "good women camp" by staying faithful, nurturing, hardworking, compliant, reproductive and placid. Such a dichotomous split among women obstructs their development of rapport and coalitions. To be a good woman you must be leery of bad women and of resembling them in any way. Such meaning reinforces all those qualities that are congruous with staying in a servant-like position and encourages recoiling from any women who deviates from this straight-jacket existence.

In the folktale *Ba Mbanyne Ba Icon* (The Jealous Wives) it isn't one, but two bad women for every good one.

The first two wives of Ngokoba Ndinga are lazy. He marries his third wife, Demole, who works very hard along side her husband to build a new house. He loves her the most because she works so hard. The lazy

wives plot against Demole. When their husband left town on a fishing trip, they capture the favorite wife, tie her to a tree and leave her to die in the forest. When Ngokoba Ndinga gets word from a messenger that Demole has been missing for three days he rushes home to search for her. Finding Demole covered with ant bites he carries her home, baths and rubs her with oil, and drives his first two wives away.

This folk tale emphasizes the murderous intent that springs from women's jealousy of each other. These indolent wives don't even require help from a man in executing attempted murder. It is the one aspect of their activities that is not imbued with lethargy; they are active and diligent in carrying out their crime. The contrast is so extreme that this husband has no difficulty deciphering between his good wife compared to his wrongdoing sluggish wives.

However, this division between good women and bad women is not always an easy distinction to make as shown in the tale, *A man with discriminatory matrimonial role*.

Banta was married to a hardworking wife for 12 years before he procured a second wife. Although he favors the second wife by giving his earnings to her, the first wife continues without a murmur to be faithful, uncomplaining, and obedient. Banta observes that the second wife isn't responding with gratitude for all that he is giving to her. With his suspicions aroused, he does a test by faking his death. He discovers that his discounted first wife wails while his catered-to second wife nonchalantly proceeds to cook dinner as if no calamity had befallen. He divorces his second wife and remains with his first wife.

While it is essential for a man to choose a good woman as a wife, it is not clear which one is which. It is so difficult for Banta to tell if his wives really value him that he cannot even discern this through the innumerable observations of daily interactions. Rather, he must expose their predispositions toward him by devising a tricky experiment. In *Adu the antelope*, which is another version of *The old woman and her golden necklace*, the lazy second wife reverts back to her true self as an antelope in order to steal food from the first wife's farm and avoid hard labor. The maligned and mistreated first wife consults a sorcerer who advises the removal of palm fronds, which enable the second wife to transform into a human. In this way the first wife is able to show the husband that the second wife and her male offspring are unworthy antelopes. Indeed, it is so difficult for a man to detect a good woman that he can only do so if a bad woman (and if that isn't enough, an antelope), is juxtaposed to a good one. Rivalry between women is an outcome of men's comparisons and need for these comparisons.

Because this distinction is difficult for men to make, it is even more essential for women to be demonstratively good women so that men can detect their goodness and not mistake them for bad women. A good woman is unvaryingly one who works hard, obeys, and is deeply grateful to her husband, even if

overlooked and downgraded by him for years. Furthermore, she remains available and delighted at the return of his attention whenever that might come. If a husband subjects his wife to a lot of hardships and mistreatment, she need not worry because she will eventually be rewarded by his recognition that indeed she is a good wife. A folktale theme is that a good wife is often one who suffers the most. This extensive suffering is a sign that helps to make her identifiable as a good wife and encourages her husband's certain return.

There is another irony surrounding men's problematic confusion in sorting out the good woman/wife from the exploitative, spiteful, or dangerous one. Man's inability to distinguish between a good and bad woman is never attributed to his ignorance and obliviousness but rather only points to just how deceiving, dangerous and tricky women can be.

3. CONCLUSION

The folktales examined pinpoint the entrenched, precarious roles of women in traditional Cameroonian society. Their purpose is clearly to supplement and enhance the lives of men on whom they are dependent for survival and social position. In each of these folktales the husband 'owned' multiple wives each vying for his favor, particularly through fulfilling the mandate of motherhood. Women in folktales often focus their lives on fulfilling patriarchal expectations at the expense of their own well-being and their relationships with each other. Women scramble to meet male prescriptions first and foremost and in so doing destroy themselves and each other.

It is paradoxical that in such a male dominated world, women's rivalry in these folktales is held up as the root cause of so much destruction. Women have little power, yet some are brandished as responsible for great wrongdoings. Another seemingly curious contradiction is that women who are given messages to be kind and gentle rarely use these characteristics to join in cooperative and successful friendships with each other. Folktales obscure these inconsistencies by portraying women as caricatures of "good or "bad" according to patriarchal male attitudes. Bound in these categories, women are isolated and prevented from utilizing their socialized traits such as compassion and kindness to forge relationships with each other. Pitted against one another, attention is turned away from men as culpable for staging and implementing criminal or heartless acts. It is evident from the cross-section of these folktales that women are entrapped in a complex web of gender relations that divide them and prevent them from uniting around common issues of oppression.

Women in actual society are socialized not to express overt aggression and competition but rather to be cooperative and develop intimate relationships (Brown 1998; Miner & Longino 1987; Tracy 1991). Does their socialization as nurturers and caretakers infuse their relationships with each other with compassionate understanding, giving and closeness? Or do messages such as

those conveyed in the folktales serve as obstructions preventing close and supportive friendships? Do their socialized strengths as mothers and wives, evaporate in their interactions with each other? Some believe that girls and women internalize patriarchal values of misogyny and therefore turn against each other (Brown 1998; Cambell 2002). Tanenbaum (2002: 47) elucidates “Many women compete over things they think men value, such as looking sexy. The most dangerous outcome of this is self hatred; girls and women disparage themselves and dissociate from other females.” Being friends to women provides no status and friendship with a “bad” woman may be contaminating and destructive of one’s reputation. Furthermore, folktales illustrate that women can’t be trusted and will readily betray and harm other women. Perhaps these messages replayed over and over again disturb and obstruct women in society from bonding strongly with one another and developing deep trust.

Thus an area for future research concerns whether women’s dissension and mutual disparagement exists in Cameroon and whether it disempowers them and undermines their cause of emancipation just as surely as it did in these oral stories. Do men establish the context and pull the strings setting up rivalry between women in modern day Cameroon that follows the blue print depicted in folktales? While the women are forcibly entangled, do men manipulate the state of affairs leaving the women further marginalized? Lost in a miasma of bickering, do women become toys and weapons in the hands of men thereby jeopardizing any efforts at rapprochement? If so, what is the role of folktales in predetermining these competitive and undermining interactions between women? Folktales remain the bedrock of cultural identity. So it wouldn’t be surprising if gender roles in present society recreate modern day versions of those patterns offered in Cameroonian oral traditions.

In this article we have situated Cameroonian folktales within a gender perspective to trace the genesis of female marginalization and male supremacy. Obviously, in these folktales women try to please their men either by quiet submission or strategizing how to achieve a favored position at the expense of other women. Their attempt to curry favor in their men’s eyes locks them into a position of subservience and exclusion. Therefore, cultivating an awareness of gender issues reflected in African folklore is imperative. The authors agree with Chinweizu’s (1980: 1) assertion that “Africa’s literary culture should be de-colonized and liberated” to the extent possible in a context of cultural change. This preliminary gender analysis of folktales may contribute to such an evolution and revision of positions accorded men and especially women in Cameroonian society.

REFERENCES

- Brown, L.M. 1998.
Raising their voices: The politics of girls' anger. London: Harvard University Press.
- Cambell, A. 2002.
A mind of her own: The evolutionary psychology of women. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Chinweizu, A. 1980.
Toward the decolonization of African literature. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.
- Furniss, G. & Grunner, L. 1995.
Power, marginality, and African oral literature. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Gorog-Karady, V. 1972.
Tales and ideology: The revolt of sons in Bambara-Malinke tales. In: *African folklore*, Richard M. Dorson (ed.), pp. 83-90. New York: Anchor Books and Indiana University Press.
- Kaptejns, L. & Ali, M. O. 1999.
Women's voices in a man's world: Women and the pastoral tradition in northern Somali orature, c. 1899-1980. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press.
- Miner, V. & Longino, H. E. (eds.) 1987.
Competition: A Feminist Taboo? New York: The Feminist Press.
- Nzuh, N. A. 1999.
Tales from the grassland and the forest. Yaounde: Editions CLE.
- Tanenbaum, L. 2002.
Catfight: Women and Competition. New York: Seven Stories.
- Tracy, L. 1991.
The secret between us: Competition among women. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Uku, P. 1991.
Women and political parities. In: *Nigerian women and the challenges of our time*, Chizea, D. & Njoku, J. (eds.), pp. 26-38. Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd.

About the authors:

Susan Weinger PhD is an Associate Professor at Western Michigan University in the School of Social Work. She spent a Fulbright year conducting research and teaching at the University of Buea. Her research focuses on the voices of marginalized population groups.

Lotsmart Fonjong PhD lectures in the Department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Buea. His research interests include gender and poverty, gender analysis, and rural women's empowerment.

Charles Fonchingong lectures in the Department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Buea, and is currently pursuing his doctoral studies at the School of Social Policy, Sociology, and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. His research covers aspects of structural adjustment policies and livelihoods, the role of women in political change, human rights issues in developing nations, and the gender dynamics of elderly welfare services.

Robert Allen PhD is a Professor at Western Michigan University in the College of Business teaching intercultural communication and writing. She developed MBA coursework to incorporate gender and intercultural issues prevalent in international business.