



Exploring Mother Tongue and Religion as Paradigms for Gender Studies in Africa: Perspectives from the Ibibio Language

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Abstract

This study examines the interconnectedness of religion, mother tongue, and gender construction in Africa, with particular focus on the Ibibio language of Southern Nigeria. While existing gender scholarship in Africa has explored culture, economics, politics, and religion as analytical frameworks, scholarly attention to the role of mother tongue in shaping gender consciousness remains markedly thin. Drawing from sociolinguistic, religious, and gender-based frameworks, the paper argues that language, especially one's mother tongue functions as a primary medium through which societies transmit gender expectations, stereotypes, authority structures, and perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Through the analysis of Ibibio expressions, proverbs, myths, and religiously inflected linguistic constructions, the study shows how language reinforces patriarchal assumptions and legitimizes gender hierarchy within social and religious contexts. The paper further establishes that religion amplifies the authority and sacredness of gendered linguistic expressions, thereby shaping social behaviour and identity formation among speakers. Recent global data including the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024, which places Sub-Saharan Africa sixth among eight regions with a parity score of 68.4% points to the persistence of gender inequality in the very communities where mother tongue operates most powerfully. By

interrogating indigenous linguistic patterns and their socio-religious implications, this study proposes mother tongue as an indispensable paradigm for African gender analysis. The paper concludes that meaningful gender work within African societies must engage local languages and indigenous semantic realities, so as to avoid externally imposed interpretations that miss the lived complexity of African socio-cultural life.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Gender Studies, Religion, Ibibio Language, Africa, Patriarchy, Sociolinguistics.

Introduction

Language is among the most potent instruments through which ideas, values, norms, and cultural orientations are transmitted across generations. As a primary agent of human communication, language plays a foundational role in how societies conceptualise gender roles, construct gender stereotypes, and sustain gendered perceptions of ability, authority, and social position. What a person first learns about being male or female is usually communicated in the language closest to their identity – the mother tongue.

Despite remarkable global efforts to close the gender gap, the challenges persist, particularly in Africa. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024 records that Sub-Saharan Africa has a parity score of only 68.4%, ranking sixth among eight global regions, with Political Empowerment at a mere 22.6% and Economic Participation and Opportunity at 68.1% (World Economic Forum). Disturbingly, since 2006, the region has improved by only 5.6 percentage points and at the current pace, full gender parity would not be achieved within any foreseeable future. Many African scholars have approached gender through the prisms of religion, culture, economics, and law; yet the role of the mother tongue as a carrier and reinforcer of gender ideology has received negligible scholarly attention.

This paper addresses that gap. It juxtaposes religion, gender, and mother tongue with particular attention to the Ibibio language of Akwa Ibom State, Southern Nigeria to argue that the mother tongue constitutes a necessary paradigm for gender studies in Africa. The Ibibio language offers a compelling case because it is deeply inflected with religious meanings, ancestral authority, and social prescriptions that determine how men and women understand themselves and relate to each other in daily life.

Conceptual Clarifications

Mother Tongue

The mother tongue, also variously called first language, native tongue, or home language refers broadly to the language a person is exposed to from birth or during the critical developmental period. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines it as a language from which others spring, reflecting both its generative and foundational quality. Robert Kaplan and Richard Baldauf note that the term poses series of definitional difficulties, especially when taking into account individuals who grew up in a multilingual setting (19). Similarly, Witold Tulasiewicz and Anthony Adams admit to having been bedevilled by the usage of the term, though they retain it on grounds of intuitive familiarity (3).

From a socialization perspective, Gagné et al. describe the mother tongue as the language provided by a child's immediate home environment, shaping cognitive and social development well before formal education intervenes (7). Nigel Love and Umberto Ansaldo go further, stressing that birth and immersion in a language during one's youth, in a family where adults share a similar language experience, is central to native speakership (590). Esjaak Kroon frames the concept through a language policy lens, connecting the mother tongue to national and cultural identity formation and arguing, evocatively, that a fatherland needs a mother tongue (36). Collin Baker and Prys Jones advocate a careful dissection of the different meanings and implications of the term across multilingual contexts (25), a caution especially relevant for southern Nigeria, where multiple ethnic languages coexist and daily code-switching is common. For this paper, "mother tongue" refers to the primary language of socialization, cultural transmission, and indigenous meaning-making. In the specific case under study, it refers to the Ibibio language, a language native to the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Religions

Religion in the African context is not confined to formal worship or theological doctrine. It permeates daily life, community rituals, language use, and social norms in a way that defies the Western sacred-secular dichotomy. As John Mbiti classically observes, Africans carry their religion into every aspect of existence, finding it nearly impossible to separate sacred from secular realities (2). For the Ibibio people specifically, religion mediates relationships between individuals, communities, and the divine, lending cosmic significance to otherwise ordinary social arrangements. This is what

makes religion an especially potent amplifier of gendered meanings already embedded in language. Thus, in the study, we adopt the definition of religion by the Institute of African Studies as institutionalised patterns of beliefs and worship practiced by various African societies from time immemorial in response to the 'supernatural' as manifested in their environment and experience.

Gender Studies in Africa

Gender studies in Africa has evolved from early feminist critiques of patriarchy toward more nuanced, multidisciplinary engagements that take African social realities seriously on their own terms. Andrea Cornwall describes this field as one that contributes distinctively to development in Africa through conscious effort to draw from and simultaneously rethink concepts, paradigms and methodologies (1). Much early scholarship concentrated on women as subjects of inquiry, driven by a feminist agenda aimed at dismantling institutionalised patriarchy. Over time the focus expanded to include masculinities, colonial configurations of gender, and transnational gender currents (Cornwall 2). This paper extends this tradition by proposing an indigenous linguistic framework as a fresh and underexplored analytical lens.

Methodology

This study is qualitative and desk-based, drawing on textual analysis, sociolinguistic inquiry, and documentary research. Primary linguistic data consists of Ibibio-language expressions, proverbs, and oral-tradition elements as documented in existing ethnographic, religious studies, and linguistic scholarship. Secondary data includes peer-reviewed articles, books, and institutional reports on gender, language, and religion in Africa and beyond. The analytical framework integrates sociolinguistic gender theory, African feminist scholarship, and religious studies perspectives. Ibibio linguistic data are examined for their gendered semantic content and their relationship to traditional religious belief systems. The study does not engage primary fieldwork but synthesises available scholarly and ethnographic material to construct a theoretical argument for mother tongue as a gender studies paradigm, consistent with the desk-based theoretical traditions established in the foundational work of scholars such as Ifi Amadiume (29) and Oyeronke Oyěwùmí (3).

Literature Review

Language and Gender

The relationship between language and gender has attracted some scholarly attention globally, though its African dimensions remain underdeveloped. Selin Kesebir (12) argues that word order can both convey and reinforce gender beliefs, and that masculine generics consistently evoke mental images of men even when gender-neutral references are intended with consequences for how gender hierarchies are sustained at the cognitive level. Deborah Tannen demonstrates that men tend to use storytelling to reinforce social status, while women's narratives centre others rather than themselves (78), a pattern visibly replicated in how Ibibio oral traditions distribute agency and heroism along gender lines.

Jeroen Darquennes and Wim Vandebussche observe that in the twenty-first century, the intertwining of language and religion has produced a distinct subfield of sociolinguistics (1). Mukherjee identifies two core questions within this subfield: the role of language in sustaining religion, and the role of religion in sustaining language, both of which intersect with questions of gendered identity formation (2). Eve Gregory et al. underscore the importance of heritage language learning in granting children access to religious and cultural community membership (28), a dynamic that among the Ibibio simultaneously socialises young people into gendered roles embedded in that community.

Religion and the Mother Tongue in Africa

The bond between religion and mother tongue in Africa has deep historical roots. Early Christian missionaries discovered that proselytising in European languages produced far thinner results than when the gospel was communicated through indigenous tongues. Amonoo puts it plainly: mother tongue and its relevance cannot be underestimated for it is the medium of our innermost feeling (23). Building on this, John Ekem defines a field of mother tongue hermeneutics in African Christianity as a context-sensitive interpretation which will end up providing study Bibles and commentaries that clearly articulate theological, linguistic and anthropological issues to the peoples in local languages (12). The practical success of mother tongue evangelism in Africa demonstrates how deeply religious meanings are bound up with indigenous linguistic forms and by extension, how gendered theological ideas travel most effectively through those same forms.

Darquennes and Vandebussche further note that language and religion together produce social realities that neither could generate alone (1). This co-production is

particularly visible in how Ibibio religious terminology for divinity, kingship, and authority overlaps with gendered linguistic expressions in ways that make hierarchies feel cosmically inevitable rather than socially constructed.

Existing Gender Paradigms in Africa

African gender scholarship has addressed its subject through several broad paradigms. Oyěwùmí's landmark work challenges eurocentrism in feminist scholarship, arguing that the categories of woman and gender did not exist in Yoruba society in the way Western frameworks assume (31). She contends that when indigenous parameters such as seniority and wealth are privileged, the myth of universal male domination begins to unravel. Amadiume similarly demonstrates through Igbo ethnography that women can accumulate masculine attributes through wealth and seniority, destabilising any unilinear link between biological sex and social gender (7).

Economic dimensions (gender division of labour), social dimensions (marriage, family, inheritance, education), political dimensions, and religious dimensions have all received sustained treatment in the literature. Language, however, particularly the mother tongue remains the least theorised paradigm. This paper argues this constitutes a significant lacuna. The fact that the same scholars who critique imported gender frameworks still largely communicate their critiques through English-language analyses of indigenous realities suggests the depth of the challenge: the mother tongue itself, as a site of gender inscription, has not yet been sufficiently centred.

Results

The Ibibio Mother Tongue, Religion, and Gender Construction

Among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, traditional religious belief permeates language, and this permeation has measurable consequences for how gender is constructed and sustained. Effiong Udo establishes that in Ibibio society, religion and culture set the parameters for women's structurally unequal position with men in the families, communities, workplaces, schools, and every imaginable setting (80). The following analysis of specific Ibibio expressions bears this out.

Nam mkpo nte owodeen (Behave like a man): This expression assigns strength, courage, and authority exclusively to maleness. Its religious grounding lies in the Ibibio concept of the Supreme Being as masculine, possessing absolute power and dominion. A related expression, *Abasi ado ideen* (God is male), directly theologizes male authority,

making the gender hierarchy appear cosmically ordained rather than culturally constructed.

Anie Ufok adomo mboi ufok omo (The owner of the house determines the dimensions of its frames): This expression confers absolute domestic authority on the man alone, framing female participation in household decision-making as structurally inappropriate. Women who absorb this saying may feel disqualified from leadership not through explicit prohibition but through the weight of inherited language that makes male authority feel self-evident.

Ado anie Ufok idiaha efere akwenge? (Is it proper to finish the soup when the owner has not tasted it?): Here the wife addresses her husband as *Obongowo* (man king) or *ette ufok* (owner of the house) terms that embed male authority deep in the domestic lexicon. The title *Obong*, which also names the Supreme Being in Ibibio traditional religion, further conflates political position with divine ordination, making female aspiration to leadership feel like a form of theological transgression.

Ekood eyen Ukpong Ekpe, Esit adad eka (If the son is nicknamed the soul of a lion, the mother gladdens): This expression ties female fulfilment to the production of male children. Esen observes that the Ibibio world is a man's world; mothers were happy and proud if they produced sons that were strong and successful (47). Male child preference documented widely across Akwa Ibom and beyond draws much of its emotional force from expressions precisely like this one.

Awonwan adad itid, idadta enyen (Only a woman's vagina should be red, not her eyes): This expression defines female ambition as narrowly domestic and reproductive. It forecloses at the level of everyday speech the legitimacy of women's social, economic, or political competition with men.

Adiaha adung atung ette (A first daughter who stays in her father's house): This expression ridicules unmarried women or divorcees, normalising male inheritance of the family compound and structurally excluding daughters from family property and patrilineal continuity.

Additional terms of prestige applied exclusively to male children such as *ada idaha*, *akpan iwuod iyak*, *abom ufok ette*, and *uku ette* carry strong social significance that reinforces male child preference not only among the Ibibio but across many neighbouring African ethnic communities.

Discussion

The foregoing analysis reveals that gender is constructed not only in the political or economic domain, but also in the everyday speech acts of ordinary men and women

communicating in their mother tongue. When a woman hears *nam mkpo nte owodeen* in the language she first learned to describe the world, the ideological weight of that expression differs fundamentally from its translated equivalent. The mother tongue carries the authority of origin, of intimacy, and as demonstrated through the Ibibio case, of religious sanctity. This combination makes linguistically embedded gender constructs particularly durable and resistant to challenge.

Kesebir's insight that language reinforces gender beliefs at a cognitive level acquires special force in this context. Ibibio expressions do not merely describe an existing social reality; they create it, sustain it, and resist interrogation by wrapping it in theological legitimacy. When Obong, the title for chief shares semantic space with the Supreme Being, female aspiration to leadership faces not just social resistance but something that registers as sacrilege. This theological weaponization of language is a dimension of gender inequality that neither economic analysis nor political activism alone can adequately address.

The findings also shed fresh light on the WEF 2024 data. Sub-Saharan Africa's Political Empowerment score of 22.6% is not simply the product of structural or legal barriers. It is also the product of a linguistic environment in which women are routinely scripted — from childhood, in their most intimate language as inappropriate candidates for public authority. The WEF data tells us that the gap exists; the analysis of mother tongue tells us where it lives in the mind and the mouth of the community.

This analysis reinforces the broader argument that African gender scholarship must engage indigenous languages more directly. Post-colonial scholars like Oyěwùmí (14) and Amadiume (23) have rightly critiqued imported frameworks; yet a fully indigenous account of African gender must also interrogate the linguistic medium through which indigenous gender norms are daily reproduced. Proposing mother tongue as a paradigm does not add a variable to existing frameworks it asks a more fundamental question: in what language did a community first learn to be male or female?

Evaluation

The strength of this study lies in its integration of three under-connected analytical frames; religion, mother tongue, and gender into a single coherent lens, grounded in concrete Ibibio linguistic data. By connecting specific indigenous expressions to their religious underpinnings and their gendered social effects, the paper offers a culturally embedded paradigm that resists the external imposition of frameworks ill-fitted to African realities.

Its limitations are equally worth acknowledging. The study draws primarily on existing ethnographic and theological literature rather than original fieldwork, which limits the scope for capturing how younger or urban Ibibio speakers may be contesting or reinventing these inherited expressions. The Ibibio case, while illustrative, is not necessarily representative of all African linguistic communities. Future research should conduct primary fieldwork, expand to comparative analysis across multiple African languages, and specifically investigate how digital media, formal education, and inter-ethnic contact are reshaping the gendered dimensions of mother tongue use in contemporary Nigerian society.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the mother tongue constitutes an indispensable paradigm for gender studies in Africa. Language, particularly one's first language of socialization — carries within it the values, hierarchies, and assumptions of the society that produced it. When religion further consecrates these linguistic constructs, they become exceptionally resistant to challenge. Among the Ibibio people, the analysis of indigenous expressions reveals a deeply gendered worldview embedded at the level of daily speech, continuously reinforced by theological concepts that align masculinity with divine power, domestic authority, and community leadership.

Studying gender through the lens of the mother tongue does not merely add another variable to existing frameworks. It asks a foundational question: in what language does a community first learn to be male or female? The answer to that question contains much of what needs to be understood — and thoughtfully transformed — in the long work of building genuine gender equity across Africa. Externally imposed gender vocabularies, however well intentioned, will always remain partial without a sustained engagement with the meanings that communities carry in their most intimate tongue.

Recommendations

- Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are offered:
1. African gender scholars should make the systematic analysis of indigenous language expressions a standard component of gender research, moving beyond secondary references to language toward sustained primary linguistic inquiry within community settings.
 2. Curriculum developers and educators in Nigerian and African schools should design culturally sensitive gender education modules that critically engage

indigenous proverbs, idioms, and oral traditions, helping learners interrogate rather than merely inherit the gendered assumptions embedded in their mother tongues.

3. Religious leaders and community stakeholders among the Ibibio and similar communities should initiate constructive conversations about theological and cultural language that conflates divine authority with male authority, thereby producing ideological barriers to women's civic and spiritual participation.
4. Policy makers working toward the African Union Agenda 2063 gender targets and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 should recognise language reform and mother tongue-based gender education as complementary strategies alongside legal and economic interventions.
5. Future researchers should carry out primary fieldwork among Ibibio speakers — including rural, urban, and diaspora populations — to document how linguistic gender norms are being reproduced, modified, or actively contested across generations and social contexts.

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