

## CONCEPTUALISATION OF WOMEN IN IGBO RIDDLES

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### Abstract

Riddles are oral art forms that are prevalent in all African societies. Through riddles, the perceptions, beliefs and worldviews of a people are conveyed as in other oral art forms. In many Igbo literary studies, the importance of riddles is not so much emphasised and many literary scholars do not even see them as an educative tool laden with many cultural values when compared to other oral art forms like proverbs and folktales. By focusing on Igbo riddles, this study examines how Igbo women are conceived and portrayed. The study also tries to ascertain the Igbo ideologies behind such conceptualisations. By using the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, twelve purposely selected Igbo riddles on women that cut across the five core Igbo states, are qualitatively analysed. From the findings, it is observed that women are conceptualised as plants, animals and celestial bodies. As plants, they are represented using flowering plants such as maize, palm tree and African star apple. In the analysed riddles, plants are used to communicate the reproductive ability, beauty, tenderness and the marriageable status of Igbo women. As animals, Igbo women are seen as millipedes indicating women's beauty and gait. Igbo women are also portrayed as the moon, which shows the radiation of their beauty. The study concludes that even though riddles are considered a very minor aspect of oral literature, they are laden with information on the perception of the female gender in the Igbo society.

**Keywords:** Riddles, Igbo, Conceptualisation, Metaphor, Conceptual Metaphor Theory

### Ụmịedemede

Agwugwa bụ ụdị agumagu ọnụ na-adikarị na mba Afrịka gbaa gburu gburu. A na-eji agwugwa eziputa nghọta, nkwenye na nsirihi ụwa ndị, dị ka e si ejikwa ụdị agumagu ọnụ ndị ọzọ eme nke a. N'otutu amụmamụ agumagu Igbo, uru agwugwa bara bụ nke a na-eleghara anya. Ọzọ kwa, ọtụtụ ndị ọka mmụta n'agumagu anaghị ahụta ha dị ka ngwa nkuzi nke juputara n'ụkpụrụ omenala ma ọ bụrụ na a tulerịta ha na ụdị agumagu ọnụ ndị ọzọ dị ka ilu na akụkọ ifo. Site n'igbado ụkwụ n'agwugwa, ọrụ nchọcha a nyochara etu e si ahụta ma na-eziputa ụmụ nwaanyị. Nchọcha a gbakwara mbo ichoputa echemeche ndị Igbo gbasara usoro nziputa nsinechiche ndị a. Site n'iji Atụtụ Mburu Ndinechiche, e ji usoro nsere mbunuche horo agwugwa Igbo iri na abuo metutara nwaanyị ma burukwa ndị metutara obodo okpu Igbo ise. E jikwa usoro kwolitativ nyochaa ha. Na nchoputa, a chọputara na ụmụ nwaanyị bụ ndị a na-eziputa dị ka akumaku, anumanu na ahụ elu igwe. Dị ka akumaku, a na-egosiputa ha site n'iji akumaku na-agba ifuru dị ka ọka, nkwa na udara. N'agwugwa ndị e nyochara, a na-eji akumaku eziputa enwemike imụ nwa, mma, adimro na enwemike ilu di nke ụmụ nwaanyị ndị Igbo. Dị ka anumanu, ụmụ nwaanyị ndị Igbo bụ ndị a na-ahụta ka esu, nke na-egosi ima mma na agaramije nwaanyị. Ụmụ nwaanyị ndị Igbo bukwa ndị a na-eziputa dị ka onwa, nke na-egosi mgbuke nke ima mma ha. Nchọcha a chikọtara na n'agbanyeghi na agwugwa bụ nke a na-ahụta dị ka ngalaba agumagu ọnụ pere ezigbo mpe, o juputara n'ozu gbasara etu e si ahụta agwa nwaanyị n'ala Igbo.

**Okpurukpu okwu:** Agwugwa, Igbo, Nziputa nsinechiche, Mburu, Atutu Mburu Ndinechiche

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## 1. Introduction

The Igbo people predominantly occupy the Eastern part of Nigeria. The term 'Igbo' doubles as a language and a people. The Igbo principally reside in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states of Nigeria. Apart from the aforementioned states, they are known to inhabit some parts of other states, such as Delta, Benue, Cross River and Rivers. The Igbo are known for their rich cultural heritage and vibrant traditions. They are also renowned for hardwork and stellar business acumen. As a people who work hard, the Igbo have recreational activities with which they unwind. They have a plethora of folklore such as folktales, riddles and proverbs with which they entertain as well as educate themselves. These activities normally take place at night especially when the moon is out. The Igbo recreational activities are usually gender based. Activities requiring physical strength, such as wrestling, are often reserved for the males. Nonetheless, there are activities that the female and male genders engage in, such as recitation of proverbs and proposition of riddles. Even though these activities are mainly for entertainment, they are replete with Igbo ideology. The Igbo have their beliefs, thoughts, practices and nuances which give them their identity as a group and serve as a fulcrum for ordering their actions. The proposition of a riddle is one recreational activity with which the Igbo sharpen their wits and pass down their thoughts about life and the intrigues of living. This study, therefore, examines Igbo thoughts entrenched in Igbo riddles.

Riddles are common in Africa as almost every African society has them as an aspect of their oral art and literature. A riddle is a verbal puzzle in which a statement is posed in the challenge and another is given in the response, either to the hidden meaning or the form of the challenge (Okpewho, 1992). Riddles are puzzle-like because there are always efforts in a riddle to give an appropriate solution or answer to a given proposition or question. Because of that, there is always a tendency towards a semantic fit between the question that is posed and the solution provided (Okpewho, 1992). This implies that a riddle is a 'question' and 'answer' patterned game between two parties, where one of the parties makes a proposition and expects the other party to provide him/her with the solution to the proposition. On the structure of the question and answer, Mbah & Mbah (2007), note that the question part of a riddle has some information such as the description of an object or sometimes, of a situation through the use of one figure of speech. Such information serves as a clue to the party to whom the proposition is made to. For the answer part, they assert that it is usually a word or plain statement.

According to Chukwuma (1994), the main feature of a riddle is ambiguity. It is ambiguous because the proposition of a riddle presents a description that suggests multiple answers, out of which only one is the ideal answer. The ideal answer is marked by the person who posed the proposition. Chukwuma (1994) uses the letters of the alphabet 'S' and 'P' to mark the answer to a riddle, and the proposition respectively. She states that the answer 'S' as a segment is fixed, while the proposition 'P' plays on the seeming variables of 'S', which 'P' suggests. Also, the path from P to S is not direct as the ambiguous nature of a riddle presents many 'Ss', which may be acceptable to the respondent but rejected by the proposer. Therefore, in riddles, the proposer has the sole right to determine the credibility and validity of an answer. Chukwuma (1994:100) opines "...the essence of the riddle is the ability of one to detect these ambiguities and to identify the right S to link up with P." She further notes that once the P and S are combined, they remain fixed to the users, which must have agreed to such combination based on choice or tradition. This implies that propositions and answers to riddles are culture-based and can vary based on culture. Therefore, each culture enacts its worldviews, ideologies and belief systems in its riddles.

As a literary expression, riddles are believed to share a close relationship with proverbs. Finnegan (2012) observes that this relationship between proverbs and riddles can be as a result of the fact that they are both oral arts, which are expressed concisely. They also share the fixity of form. Aside from the aforementioned similarities, a proverb realises its full meaning when applied to context outside itself, while a riddle shows resemblance between objects. It provides unexpected likeness between things. The above proposition is in line with Okpewho's (1992:239) view but maintains that proverb is higher than the riddle. He states, "Although they (riddles) have attained some status of excellence through long use and bear the same mark of sensitive observation of life and nature as the proverb, they are used primarily for entertainment, or play."

From Okpewho's (1992) view, one wonders why riddles are mainly seen as tools for entertainment and play, even when they are avenues for sensitive observation of life and nature. In a more belittling sense, Finnegan (2012) asserts that they are of minor and childish interest. Mbah & Mbah's (2007) study criticizes Finnegan's view when they note that the riddles, especially those of Igbo extraction are not exclusively meant for children or childish purposes. They posit that highly respected secret societies in Igboland, such as the masquerade cult, use riddles in their initiation rituals; and in contemporary time, such riddles have filtered into common usage. Ikwubuzo (2008) lends credence to Mba and Mbah's view by stating that Igbo riddles are resourceful in folk education. To Ikwubuzo, it makes an upcoming youth to be aware of his/her moral obligations. Thus, they harbour the moral philosophy of the Igbo society. He, however, agrees that riddles are also for entertainment, adding that entertainment is one of their literary features.

Furthermore, Okpewho (1992:240) posits that riddles are basically from "...an intelligent observation of aspects of human life and the environment in which people find themselves: the household, the world of animals and plants, the heavens, the landscape of mountains and rivers and so on." This implies that through riddles, man expresses, dramatises and re-enacts life. An aspect of life portrayed in riddles is gender. Gender shows men and women as varyingly different from each other. Sunderland (2006), notes that gender is a social correlate of sex. This means that the enactment of gender is dependent on the sex of the members of a society as the social expectations of men and women are dependent on their sexes. Sex is, therefore, nature, especially by the presence of the sex organs, while gender is nurture, in the sense that it is not innate. Tsatsa (2013) defines gender as what the society considers masculine or feminine such as roles, behaviours, activities and attributes. This implies that gender is what one does and not essentially who the person is (West & Zimmerman 1987). Ostergaard (1992:6), on the issue of gender and its enactment in the society, notes:

Gender relations are constructed in terms of the relations of power and dominance that structure the life chances of women and men. In other words, gender divisions are not fixed in biology but constitute an aspect of the wider social divisions of labour, which in turn are rooted in the conditions of production and reproduction, and reinforced by the cultural, religious and ideological systems prevailing in a society.

Apart from gender, riddles are replete with metaphors. Their use of metaphor accounts for their literariness, which plays an important role in entertainment (Mbah & Mbah 2007 and Finnegan 2012). As rightly pointed out by Finnegan (2012), riddles involve analogy. It is analogical in the sense that there is a comparison between two entities for clarification and explanation. In such a comparison, one entity is seen as analogous to another entity. In the view of Musolff (2004), metaphor is the transference of a non-expert knowledge about a familiar area of experience, which is referred to as the

source domain, onto a less familiar topic in a different domain. Kövecses (2005:3) defines metaphor as “...understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain.” In the view of Lakoff & Johnson (1980), metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. This means that metaphor serves as an avenue through which humans understand and conceptualise the world they live in since much of human understanding of the mind is construed by metaphor (Schroots, Birren & Kenyon 1999). For Lakoff & Johnson (2003), making a metaphor is a cognitive activity, which the human brain does naturally. Nevertheless, it is worthy to note that cognition or the human brain does not operate outside the confines of the culture and ideology of a society.

Riddles are also culture specific and culture sensitive. They do not operate outside the confines of the culture and ideology of a society (Ikwubuzo 2008). Enhancing and codifying societal values entail social construction. Social construction according to Gergen (1985) is the process of understanding intersubjective reality through describing and explaining an experience in its social context. This suggests that in social construction, one creates meaning and explanation from socio-cultural resources.

As pointed out earlier, riddles are often regarded as an insignificant oral art form and of less importance when compared to other oral art forms. Focusing on the socio-cultural resources of the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria, through their riddles, this paper examines the portrayal and/or conceptualisation of women in selected Igbo riddles; to find out how Igbo riddles help to showcase Igbo beliefs and values concerning their female folk.

Focusing on riddles, the study explores how women are conceptualised in order to prove that they (riddles) are avenues through which ideologies, societal perceptions and worldviews are made evident. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to:

- i. find out how Igbo women are conceived in Igbo riddles;
- ii. ascertain the Igbo ideologies behind such conceptualisations.

## 2. Review of related literature

Based on the earlier projections on Igbo riddles, the researchers observe that there is a dearth of literature on the conceptualisation of women in Igbo riddles. However, research works on the portrayal of women in Igbo proverbs and other literary genres are reviewed in this section to shed light on the various grounds covered by scholars and the need for the present study. Oha (1998) conducts a study on the semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs. The objective of his study is to show that Igbo proverbs possess sexually derogatory meanings. The study further brings to the limelight, the fact that proverbs serve as a major channel through which Africa's patriarchal system has tried to sustain and invigorate itself in the African society. Even though Oha (1998) notes few areas where women are positively presented in Igbo proverbs, he observes that women are mainly represented in the negative light. He notes that women are portrayed in Igbo proverbs as being childish, irresponsible, foolish, weak, unreliable, wicked, dangerous and generally inferior to men. The proverbs show the sexual vulnerability of women as they are constantly disempowered as sex objects by men. Oha's (1998) findings are similar to Onu's (2019) findings on the portrayal of women in Igbo proverbs. In Onu's quantitative analysis of selected 140 Igbo proverbs used in her study, she observes that Igbo women are seen as gullible, irrational and insensitive. Oha (1998) and Onu (2019) suggest that derogation of womanhood by men in their use of proverbs suggests men as the dominant species in the Igbo society, with women perceived as lesser beings. Onu (2019) quickly adds that her investigation also reveals some positive

conceptions of women in Igbo proverbs, as people who are industrious and faithful in marriage.

Balogun (2010) examines the proverbial oppression of women in Yoruba culture. He argues that proverbs serve as channels for the oppression of women, thereby creating gender imbalance. The objectives of Balogun's study are to examine the pervasiveness of oppressive proverbs and how they can be overcome using Yoruba proverbs. Balogun (2010) notes that Yoruba proverbs show women as children that can err and be disciplined by the men; people who are unpredictable concerning sexual and marital issues; people who are covetous and have unpredictable characters; individuals that should be married off at a specific age; people who should strive never to have only female children; jealous beings and people who cannot keep secrets. He observes that the aforementioned oppressive representations have pernicious effects on the identity, rights, freedom and empowerment of women. The proverbs show that women differ from men in many distinct ways. He suggests that oppressive proverbs can be resisted and reconstructed using proper education and rigorous commitment to the feminine course. Also, oppressive proverbs can be reconstructed to reflect the presence of both genders rather than sidelining them to portray only the women.

Olarinmoye (2013) investigates the images of women in Yoruba folktales. The objective of her study is to analyse the projection of women in Yoruba folktales to explore the authentic ideology the Yoruba have of the male and female genders. The study further seeks to uncover the implication of such ideology in contemporary Yoruba gender relations. Data for the study are collected using books on Yoruba folktales and oral narratives from *Odu-Ifa*. Participant observation, focused group and key research partner interviews are also used in eliciting data for the study. From the findings, Olarinmoye (2013:140) observes the following as they relate to gender distribution in Yoruba folktales.

1. Female representations in themes of human tales are more than male.
2. Heroes are more than heroines in heroic or legend tales.
3. Male animated tales outnumber female animated tales.
4. The leaning towards females is greater if the focus is on an adult character (especially the *alo olorogun*) and less if the focus is on a child character, and much less if the focus is on animals.

The imbalance in depicting males and females varies from one locality to the other: the male is better represented in Oyo/Ijebu folktales, while females enjoy a better coverage in Akoko-Ondo/Ekiti folktales. Olarinmoye (2013) also notes that women are seen as life bringers in that they are endowed with the gift of childbearing. They are also portrayed as mothers and wives. They are associated with spiritual powers, thus, the reason for being the primary candidates for the priesthood in the Yoruba society. Because of that, women are given multifaceted roles in Yoruba society. Olarinmoye (2013), notes that to the Yoruba, gender has nothing to do with character, because the society, though recognising the places of men and women as relative to each other, places both sexes as equal and complementary of each other. The study further finds out that the dynamics of gender construct in Yoruba terminologies is reflective of moods and contexts.

Mmadike (2014) studies the Igbo perception of womanhood using sexist proverbs. His study aims to show how women are conceptualised in the Igbo language. In the study, Mmadike uses fifteen proverbs. From his findings, the proverbs present male

domination, sex differentiation and women as sex objects. Under male domination, women are seen as individuals that are incapable of performing given tasks; this is evident in the way men and women urinate – **nwaanyị sị na ya na nwoke ha ya nyūlie mamiri elu** (if a woman claims equality with a man, let her urinate upwards). Nonetheless, he notes that modern-day women now stand to urinate, unlike their olden day's contemporaries. This to a large extent shows the changing roles evident in the contemporary Igbo society. Women are also seen as people who can only earn the respect they deserve when they are married – **mma/ugwu nwaanyị bụ di ya** (the beauty/prestige of a woman is derived from her husband). For sex differentiation, the physiognomy of the female genitals is explored and ridiculed - **otụ ma ụma egbu amuma, o gaghi ezo mmiri** (the vagina is feigning in vain as lightning, it will not bring rain). Mmadike further observes that the proverbs are laden with sexual symbols and images. As sex objects, the female genital is ridiculed and its dependency on that of the male to function effectively shown to a large extent – **ikpu ukwu a na-asọ anya, o bụ ya ga-ara onwe ya?** (a large vulva that is regarded with awe, will it be sexed by itself?). The proverbs help in sustaining the cultural biases of the males towards their female counterparts, thereby, enforcing cultural stereotype in the Igbo society.

Barasa and Opande (2017) study women representation using animal metaphors in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs in Kenya. Their study aims to investigate how animal metaphors construct men and women in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs. They adopt the theoretical underpinnings of CMT and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis in their analysis. From their findings, it is observed that women in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs are attributed to inanimate things such as sticks, animals, birds, plants, private body parts and faeces. The findings show that women in the studied proverbs are correlated with animals such as dogs, cats and cows. As dogs, women are presented as despicable, prostitutes, ill-mannered and meant to be treated with contempt. As cats, women are represented to be undependable, low in intelligence and lazy. Women are also attributed to an inanimate object – door, which presents them as sex objects to the men. As birds (hen and cock), women are represented in positive and negative lights. In the positive light, they are shown to be hard working, while in the negative light, they are talkative and gossips, thereby showing their untrustworthiness. Although the above-reviewed studies are insightful and relevant to the present study, they, unfortunately, do not reflect the conceptualisation of women in riddles, even though they reveal how women are conceived in literary genres such as folktales and proverbs. It is, therefore, the interest of this research work to examine how women are conceived in Igbo riddles and to ascertain the ideologies behind such conceptualisations.

### 3. Classification of Igbo riddles

Riddles can be classified into different subgenres. In the view of Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2018), generally, riddles can be categorized into subgenres such as visual riddles, joke riddles, puzzles, wisdom questions, literary riddles, sexual riddles and parody riddles. She notes that performing context plays a crucial role in determining the nature of a riddle. Therefore, one can say that context serves as a means for the classification of riddles. As it relates to Africa, Finnegan (2012) notes that there exist simple riddles, in most of which some generalisations are suggested and require the identification of the implied answer. Aside the aforementioned, she notes other types of riddles inherent in Africa such as the tone riddles, bird riddles and song riddles. However, some Igbo scholars such as Nwadike (2003), Okebalama (2003) and Mbah & Mbah (2007) have made effort at classifying Igbo riddles. One peculiar feature in their categorisation of Igbo riddles is the structural

and contextual classifications of Igbo riddles. Some of these classifications are reviewed below.

### ▪ Ideophonic riddle

Okebalama (2003) defines this type of riddle as riddles that have propositions that are ideophonic or onomatopoeic (relating to sound). He notes that at times, their responses come in a form of pun, but most times, rhythm also plays an important role in this type of riddle. An example adapted from Okebalama (2003:99) is:

- (1.) Proposition: **Gwa m kpukuru kpukuru** Answer: **Kpukuru kpukuru bu ejula**  
**Gwa m waghara waghara** **Waghara waghara bu okazi**  
**Gwa m bodoo** **Bodoo bu ero**  
[Tell me **kpukuru kpukuru** [Kpukuru kpukuru is snail  
Tell me **waghara waghara** **Waghara waghara** is **okazi** leaf  
Tell me **bodoo**] **Bodoo** is mushroom]

The answers to the above riddles are realised from the physical features of the items (snail, **okazi** leaves and mushroom) described with sound.

### ▪ Metaphoric riddle

Okebalama (2003) refers to these types of riddles as those that are metaphoric in nature, where there is analogy drawn between the proposition and the solution. Nwadike (2003) refers to metaphoric riddles as personified in nature, while according to Mbah & Mbah's (2007) classification they are common riddles. Mbah & Mbah (2007), note that in this type of riddle, the question part is paradoxical, metaphorical or of figures of speech, such as similes and hyperbole. It is seen as the most prevalent among other types of riddles. Example is:

- (2.) Proposition: **Gwa m o dabara n'iyi** Answer: **Nnu** [Salt]  
**arughị mma** [Tell me that  
which falls into the river  
without losing its beauty]

### ▪ Parallel riddle

In this type of riddle, the tone with which the proposition is presented is used in providing the answer to the riddle. Mbah & Mbah (2007) note that this class of riddles

exhibits parallelism because both the proposition and solution parts share same tonal pattern. An example is:

(3.) Proposition: **Gwa m gwa m gwa m gwa m tùm tùm gem gem** [Tell me tell me tell me *tùm tùm gem gem*] Answer: **Ọsọ mgbada bụ n’ugwu** [The gallop-like race of the antelope is on the hills]

#### ▪ Song riddle

Song riddles have their propositions presented in form of songs, while their answers come in word form. Mbah & Mbah (2007) observe that song riddles present a description of an object in song or recitation, while the answers come in form of objects that have been described in the song. An example is:

(4.) Proposition: **Gwa m gwa m gwa m** Answer: **Esu** [Millipede]

**Ị na-ama mma**

**Ị na-aha mmanụ**

**Mmadụ ole meturụ gị aka**

**Ghara ịgbarụ ihu**

[Tell me tell me tell me

You pride in beauty

You release oil

How many people touched you

Without frowning]

#### 4. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is Lakoff & Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). In their book, *Metaphor we live by*, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) deconstruct metaphor from the realm of aesthetics alone to the realms of cognition and thought. They claim that the human mind is highly metaphoric in nature. By this, they disagree with the traditional notion on metaphor that sees metaphor as an aesthetic feature that is prevalent in poetry. Lakoff & Johnson (1980:3) state:

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary other than ordinary language. Moreover,

metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980:44-45) view metaphor as an avenue that helps humans to understand and imagine the world in which they live. Therefore, metaphors are seen as being embedded with factual information about human life and living. They further view metaphor as understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. This involves cross-mapping between two domains – source domain and target domain. To further elaborate on the cross-domain mapping of the source domain to the target domain, they use the example – *Love is a journey*. *Love is a journey* is regarded as conceptual metaphor from where metaphorical expressions such as those presented below can be generated.

- (5) a. Look how far *we've come*.  
b. We're *at a crossroad*.  
c. We'll just have to *go our separate ways*.  
d. We can't *turn back now*.  
e. I don't think this relationship is *going anywhere*.  
f. *Where* are we? We're *stuck*.

From example (5) above, LOVE is the target domain and JOURNEY, the source domain. The concept of 'JOURNEY' is used to clarify our understanding of love. Lovers in a relationship, as can be deduced from the above example consider themselves as people who are on a journey that are bound to have hitches during the course of the journey. Kövecses (2002) notes that CMT views metaphor from a cognitive perspective, with less attention paid to its linguistic materialisation. As such, there is the need to differentiate conceptual metaphor from linguistic metaphor. Conceptual metaphor deals with one domain being used to understand another (for example *Love is a journey*), while linguistic metaphors are metaphorical expressions that can be realised from the conceptual metaphor. Egudu (1972:101) states "...the mind of the Igbo man works often with images, and it ranges through the labyrinth of nature to collect them; so that they appear not to have been artificially created but ready-made and embedded in nature." He goes further to note that riddles serve as a channel through which images are communicated. Egudu (1972) observes that like proverbs, riddles are often metaphorical. He reiterates that most riddles are synonymous with metaphors. He opines metaphors that result from riddles are far from the ordinary in that they are conceits in their own way and require sensitive imagination. CMT is deemed fit for this study because riddles are replete with metaphors that explore how humans conceptualise themselves and the world in which they live.

## 5. Methodology

The purposive sampling technique is used to select twelve riddles that portray the image of women in their propositions and their answers. Two Igbo textbooks, Ofomata's

(nd) *Utoasusu Igbo maka Siniọ Sekondiri* and Uzochukwu's (2007) *Uto Omimi Asusu Igbo* are used as appraisal tools to elicit the riddles to ensure that they are universal among the Igbo people of South Eastern Nigeria. Data elicited are qualitatively analysed using the theoretical tenets of CMT to show that the presence of women and women features in the selected riddles are not just for conversation sake or aesthetics; rather, the riddles go a long way in demonstrating how Igbo women are conceptualised among the Igbo people of Nigeria, and also as a mirror through which other cultures can view the Igbo beliefs and values about their female folk.

## 6. Data presentation and analysis

In this section, the purposely selected riddles are presented and qualitatively analysed. It is worthy to note that it is not by mere coincidence that women and feminine features exist in the riddles. The presence of the feminine features in the analysed riddles shows that the Igbo society uses riddles as avenues to communicate notions and conceptions about their women. From the twelve analysed riddles, three conceptual metaphors are identified about Igbo women – WOMEN AS PLANTS; WOMEN AS ANIMALS and WOMEN AS CELESTIAL BODIES. The aforementioned conceptual metaphors are discussed below.

### 6.1 Women as plants

Igbo riddles present women as plants. Plants exist in the human environment and are observed to be analogous to women. This is evident in the riddles discussed below:

**Riddle 1:** Proposition – **Gwa m agboghọ toro n'afọ laa n'afọ** [Tell me the maiden that grew up in a year and died in a year]

Answer - **Ọka** [Maize]

In riddle one, women are conceptualised as a maize plant. The maize plant is a flowering plant that produces seeds or fruits. It is also a seasonal plant, usually planted during the rainy season. The stalk of the maize plant is tender and not deeply rooted. This feature can be mapped onto women, who are referred to as tender and weak. Its flowering ability can be likened to the reproductive nature of women, who are charged with the responsibility of bearing children. The life cycle of the maize, its stalk and corncob can be mapped onto women. The maize stalk when tender looks greenish; after some months, it dries up and loses its greenish look. For the corncob, at the initial stage, after reproduction, the female pollen inflorescence develops into a young cob. The cob grows and produces succulent and fleshy seeds that contain a milky juice. After a while, the seeds and the cobs dry up to become tough and hard. The above explanation is evident in the life stages of a woman. As a young girl, she is tender and lovely. From being a young girl, she grows into a reproductive maiden, with clear changes and development in her physiological makeup such as the breasts, hips, posture and pubic hairs. After this stage, she declines and becomes unproductive after reaching menopause. Her breasts sag, the skin shrinks and her posture gets distorted. Therefore, a woman is seen as a maiden who is time-bound and whose beauty fades with time. 'Die' as shown in the above riddle does

not mean physical death; rather, the notion conveyed is that of fading and losing youthful radiance and beauty.

Riddle 1 also uses the maize metaphor to convey the notion that Igbo women and men are not on the same level when it comes to ageing. They believe that women age faster than their men counterparts. In the Igbo society, aged men stand better opportunities of marrying younger women but aged women do not stand the same chance. From the economic perspective, women are seen as useful in that maize as a plant has economic values because it reproduces and can be sold to make money. This hints at why women are conceived of as assets to be sold off by their fathers to men when ready for marriage. Among the Igbo, female children are given names such as **Akūnna** (Her father's wealth) and **Ogbenyeaṅ** (a maiden not meant for poor men) to highlight their economic value. Nonetheless, socially, it implies that even though women are valuable, their values are temporal and transient. In other words, a woman's beauty is bound to fade with time.

**Riddle 2:** Proposition – **Gwa m akwụ chara n'obi eze** [Tell me the palm fruit that is ripe in the palace of the King]

Answer – **Nwa agboghọ oma toputere n'ụlọ mmadụ** [A beautiful maiden that grows in one's house]

In riddle 2, women are conceived as palm fruits. Women generally are referred to as palm fruits in marriage discourses in Igbo land. In such marriage discourses, the intending in-law (the family of the intending groom) presents the bride-to-be as a palm fruit that they have come to harvest. Expressions such as **O nwere akwụ anyị hụrụ chara be gi, nke anyị b́jara ka anyị kpara** [There is a ripe palm fruit we saw in your house, and we have come to pick it] explains the above notion. The oil palm is a flowering plant that produces palm fruits. In the Igbo society, a ripe palm fruit serves many purposes. It can be eaten. Oil and pulp are also extracted from ripe palm fruits. The oil and pulp are used for culinary, medicinal and economical purposes. Every part of the palm fruit is useful. A good maiden is referred to as a ripe palm fruit because her parents are expected to reap from the fruits of their labour when she gets married. And she is also an asset to the husband because she is priceless.

In the traditional Igbo society, a maiden is not fully acclaimed if she is unmarried as the concept of marriage is seen as the major essence of the girl child. The parent, especially the mother, takes her time to nurture her on how to make and manage a home as raising a home is one of the essential factors that makes her very valuable in society. Benefits such as bride price, monetary and physical gifts are got from in-laws when a maiden is given out in marriage. Such gifts are seen as proceeds of one's training of a girl child. Riddle 2 also showcases the fecundity of women as the oil palm is very productive with lots of seeds. The riddle further points to the economic importance of the female child. However, the use of the word *ripe* has some connotations. One of such connotations is that a girl who is not well trained, that is *unripe*, is unworthy. The hierarchical placing of the ripe and unripe maidens is condescending. Women in the above riddle are portrayed as assets that can be used by their fathers in gaining wealth when they are given out in marriage at a ripe age as a ripe palm fruit is expected to be harvested.

**Riddle 3:** Proposition – **Gwa m akwụ chara be nna gi mana i gaghi ata ya** [Tell me the palm fruit that is ripe in your

Answer – **Agboghobia (nwanne gi nwaanyi)** [A maiden (your sister)]

father's compound but you cannot eat it]

Riddle 2 is related to Riddle 3 because they present women as palm fruits. Riddle 3 portrays the Igbo norm that prohibits sexual relations between people that are related by blood. A woman in the above riddles is seen as an asset, economically, and her owner will enjoy the economic benefits in her when she matures. Unfortunately, the sexual aspect of her will only be enjoyed by her future husband, not her blood relations. So, as an asset, she is fully enjoyed when she is married off. Riddle 4 below further exemplifies this.

**Riddle 4:** Proposition – **Gwa m osisi toro na mba laa na mba** [Tell me the tree that grew in a distant land and goes to a distant land] Answer – **Agboghobia** [A maiden]

Riddle 4 shows the marriageable status of women. She is raised and nurtured to be married off to another family/land. This can be seen as one of the reasons why women in most traditional societies are not entitled to landed property. Unlike the men, they cannot continue their fathers' lineages. Also, the above riddle is evident in the way traditional Igbo women change their maiden surnames to that of their husbands or attach their maiden names to their husbands' surnames once their dowries are paid. Also, as a tree that grows in a distant land, the notion of the Igbo people towards incest or marriage between blood relations is shown. The Igbo do not allow marriage between blood relations. It is a taboo, and anybody who does that has committed incest. They frown at such acts. Therefore, riddle 4 conveys the notion of the maiden growing up in a distant land (referring to her father's house) and being married off to another distant land (referring to her husband's house). From the above riddle, it is evident that women are socially construed as transferable assets, which is condescending as their men counterparts are conceived of as permanent and non-transferable assets.

**Riddle 5:** Proposition – **Gwa m udara chara n'obi eze** [Tell me the African star apple that got ripe in the compound of the King] Answer – **Nwa agboghọ mara mma** [A beautiful maiden]

A woman is seen as an African star apple. Like the palm fruit, the African star apple is used in marriage discourses to refer to a bride. The apple is flesh and succulent. It has an enticing inner red part. Some of its parts are chewed like gum and the seeds used for beautification. These attributes are feminine. When ripe, the African star apple looks attractive and enticing. Using the metaphor of the African star apple, women are portrayed as attractive and marriageable. The apple harbours seeds and has milky juice. Its ability to house seeds can be likened to women's ability to conceive and carry babies in their wombs. Also, infants are nurtured and groomed using breast milk, which is analogous to the milky juice produced by the African star apple. According to one of the research partners [oral interview 2021], women who are looking for the fruit of the womb

are also advised to visit the **ụdara** tree because the god of productivity is believed to reside in **ụdara** trees.

Nonetheless, a ripe African star apple can be sweet or sour. This can be drawn to the nature of a married African woman. She is a sweet African star apple if she manages the home well. When she causes chaos and conflict in her home, she is the sour variant of the apple. Again, the word **chara** (ripe) is used to describe the womenfolk. It is used derogatorily. Aside the above-mentioned conceptualisations; women are also portrayed negatively using the African star apple. Examine riddles (6) and (7) below.

**Riddle 6:** Proposition – **Gwa m agboghọ a na-apịwa ọnụ** [Tell me the maiden whose mouth is broken]

Answer - **Ụdara** [African star apple]

**Riddle 7:** Proposition – **Gwa m agboghọ ábụ na-agba n'isi** [Tell me the maiden whose head emits pus]

Answer - **Ụdara** [African star apple]

Riddle (6) shows domination, because the notion of one's mouth being broken implies that the person being referred to is powerless. Also, riddle (7) denotes suffering and pain, which can be likened to the travails of womanhood.

**Riddle 8:** Proposition – **Gwa m agboghọ mara mma mana ọ lughị di** [Tell me the maiden that is beautiful but not married]

Answer - **Okpete** [Sugarcane]

Riddle (8) shows the great importance which the Igbo people place on marriage. In the traditional Igbo society according to one of the research partners who is a traditional chief [oral interview, 2021], a maiden who is not married is believed to have character issues, familial problem or health challenges. As such, Igbo parents, continues the chief, feel satisfied whenever their female children are given out in marriage because such action shows that they are worthy parents, who discharged their parental duties very well. Nevertheless, a research partner [oral interview 2021] adds that this may differ in cases where some Igbo parents are unable to produce male children. They can ask one of their daughters to remain at home and produce children, especially male children that will continue their father's lineage.

Furthermore, sugarcane is sweet, and like the previously discussed plants, it is a flowering plant because it produces flowers or seeds. Sugar is got from sugarcane. This implies that women are seen as a source of satisfaction to men, especially sexual satisfaction. However, the analogy of sugarcane being an unmarried woman can be drawn from the physiology of sugarcane. Unlike other plants, the sugarcane grows from the stem, which later develops into a cane stalk. It does not have branches that carry fruits and does not also shoot out cobs. Therefore, it is harvested by the cutting of the stem. Also, its planting is usually in rows that take like six (6) feet apart to create room for possible cultivation. The above explication shows the isolated life of sugarcane, which is mapped unto some Igbo women. The beauty of such women notwithstanding, Igbo men

do not want any permanent relationship with them because they will eventually fade and wither away.

Riddle 8 is derogatory to the womenfolk. It implies that a woman's fulfillment depends on a man. The riddle further shows the cultural attachment and fulfillment the Igbo have when a female child gets married. In the Igbo society, no matter how beautiful a lady is, she is considered incomplete without a husband. This shows the role marriage plays for the female child as it serves as her mark of fulfillment and accomplishment.

**Riddle 9:** Proposition – **Gwa m agboghọ ku mmiri gbago elu** [Tell me the maiden that carried water up]

Answer – **Akị oyibo** [Coconut]

In riddle (9) above, Igbo women are metaphorically presented as coconut. Coconut is got from the coconut tree, which is also a flowering plant because the tree produces flowers and seeds. The tree has a slender shape and most women are found attractive by men because of their slender figures. The coconut fruit is ovoid in shape, with dry fibrous bark and a hard shell. Inside the hard shell is the juicy fibre, with an aqueous or milky liquid known as coconut water. In the traditional Igbo society, women are charged with the responsibility of fetching water. Based on that, the source domain of a coconut is used to explain the Igbo maiden, who is the target domain. Fetching water in this context also involves diligence and being meticulous in house chores according to a research partner [oral interview 2020]. For coconut to store water up there entails its ability to nurture with carefulness, and this is one of the most important features of a responsible Igbo maiden. Conceptualising women as coconuts also entails their ability to store breast milk for babies – lactating mothers. In addition, it is only mature coconuts that produce fruits and only mature women can demonstrate water storage metaphor. In the traditional Igbo society, women fetch water for domestic chores, for husbands, parents and younger children to bath, for visitors to drink amongst others.

**Riddle 10:** Proposition – **Gwa m agboghọ otu ntụ ime** [Tell me a maiden that gets pregnant only once]

Answer – **Jioko/Ojoko** [Plantain]

The childbearing capability of women is expressed in the riddle (10). The woman is presented as a plantain. The plantain is a flowering plant and a sucker. It is sweet but not usually eaten fresh like sweet bananas. Plantain takes a couple of months after planting to produce fruit. This can be likened to the period of conception about women. Women carry babies in their wombs for nine months before delivery, even though this may differ in cases of premature delivery. Also, once the plantain plant produces fruits and they mature, the fruit is harvested and the stem is cut off to give room for new suckers to grow. Even though there are cases of women with multiple children, some women have only one child. Therefore, an analogy is drawn between childbirth and plantain in the above riddle, because carrying pregnancy (biologically) is time bond activity meant for women. Mapping this characteristic feature of the plantain plant may seem demeaning to women who suffer from secondary infertility. In its minor tone, Riddle 10 portrays some kind of abusive representations on women who suffer from secondary infertility.

## 6.2 Women as animals

Only one riddle is identified here, where Igbo women are portrayed as an animal. In riddle (11), women are metaphorically conceptualised as millipedes.

**Riddle 11:** Proposition – **Gwa m nwamgbọ dere uri** [Tell me the maiden that applied the *uri* substance]      Answer – **Esu** [Millipede]

Millipedes are brightly coloured arthropods that usually coil up when disturbed. They are also slow-moving animals. They have a shiny outer covering that glimmer when in contact with light. The millipede is used in the above riddle to highlight women's quest for beautification and adornment, says one of the research partners [oral interview, 2021]. The **uri** is a local decorative substance used by traditional Igbo women to look attractive and beautiful. It can be deduced from the millipede metaphor, based on the movement and body segmentation of the millipede that it showcases the gait of women, because most women walk stylishly and slowly like the millipede so as to flaunt their backsides and hips. Also, its ability to coil up when attacked shows the harmless nature of most women, who in most cases withdraw and sulk in silence. The riddle seems to glorify women; nevertheless, it depicts them as sluggish, vain and incapable of defending/standing up to challenges.

## 6.3 Women as celestial bodies

As celestial bodies, women in Igbo riddles are conceptualised as the moon. This is evident in the riddle below:

**Riddle 12:** Proposition – **Gwa m agboghọ ọma ji abali aga** [Tell me the beautiful maiden that moves in the night]      Answer – **Ọnwa** [Moon]

The moon is regarded as the brightest object after the sun. It is beautiful and this beauty is mapped unto women. Burke (2019) observes that the desolate beauty of the moon must have been the reason it has many cultural and symbolic relevance. Burke further notes that in past civilizations, the moon is regarded as a deity that has tremendous control over the tides and cycle of female fertility. This implies that the use of the moon in the above riddle also touches on women's fertility. According to one of the research partners [oral interview 2021], in the Igbo culture, women as moon radiate beauty; and are conceived as romantic and fertile. He quickly adds that even though this riddle showcases the beauty and social values of women; likening them to the moon that moves at night suggests that they are not to be seen. They are socio-culturally subsumed by their male counterpart (sun) and other environmental factors (such as the cloud) created by the male folk.

## 7. Summary of findings and conclusion

Riddles, aside from their educational and aesthetic qualities, have cultural notions and ideologies embedded in them. These cultural notions showcase the different ways men and women are represented in a particular society. By focusing on the Igbo society of South Eastern Nigeria, the study examines how women are conceptualised in Igbo riddles. From the twelve studied riddles, Igbo women are conceptualised as maize, palm fruit, African star apple, sugarcane, coconut, plantain, millipede and moon. From the aforementioned conceptualisations, the following conceptual metaphors can be deduced – WOMEN AS PLANTS, WOMEN AS ANIMALS and WOMEN AS CELESTIAL BODIES. As plants, women are conceptualised using edibles. The edible and sweet nature of maize, palm fruit and African star apple is used to portray the tenderness and marriageable status of Igbo women. They are also conceptualised using flowering plants; plants that are seed and fruit-producing. The plant's ability to produce seeds is mapped onto women's ability to conceive and bear children. This is because women are metaphorically presented as such plants in marriage discourses as the intending in-laws (family of the intending groom) see themselves as harvesters, who have come to harvest a particular fruit/plant from a farm (referring to the family of the bride).

Furthermore, most of the identified plants are mainly annual or perennial plants. This means that they live for a year or more than two years. This can be related to women's pregnancy period. For instance, the plantain takes months to produce fruit and women in like manner, take months to produce children. Another interesting fact about the identified plants is that they are mostly economic plants. Aside from their economic values, they are also useful in the production of medicine and for culinary purposes. This throws light on the versatility of the Igbo woman. As plants, Igbo women are presented in the riddles as people who need to be married to be fulfilled (palm fruit, sugarcane); beautiful and tender creatures (African star apple, maize); beings that are charged with conception and procreation (plantain, coconut, maize, African star apple); powerless beings (African star apple); beings that can be sweet or bitter based on their behaviours (African star apple); succulent beings that can dry up within a specified period (maize, plantain). As animals, women are represented using the millipede. The millipede is used to portray women's beauty and stylish gait. As a celestial body, they are presented as beautiful creatures using the moon, and also as beings under the dominance of men.

The studied riddles show the beauty and value of the Igbo woman, ranging from her tenderness to her reproductive ability. However, each riddle no matter how beautifully laced has a demeaning undertone for the female gender. For instance, the Igbo woman is conceived of as one who is incomplete without marriage using the sugarcane metaphor. She is also presented as one whose beauty is transient and bound to fade using the maize metaphor. She is conceived of as an asset that can be used in acquiring wealth, especially when given out in marriage. This is evident in the mapping of the Igbo woman using the palm fruit, which is a major cash crop among the Igbo people. Not only is the Igbo woman considered as an asset, but she is also portrayed as a transferable asset, which her father brings up to be given out in marriage *against* her man counterpart, who remains non-transferable to continue the lineage. She is also overshadowed, just like the sun outshines the moon, and most times is covered by the clouds.

From the studied riddles, it is clear that the mapping of plants, animals and celestial bodies' features onto women are not just a mere coincidence; rather, they are feminine features perceptible to the Igbo society as they relate to the source domains that made the society relate the understanding of the target domain 'women', using the identified source domains 'plants, animals and celestial bodies.' This is based on culturally entrenched ideas and views which the Igbo philosophy and literature have for women. Therefore, the

study posits that even though riddles constitute the minutest aspect of Igbo oral literature, they have inherent cultural information that exposes how humans in a particular society are conceptualised and perceived. The studied riddles have metaphorical images through which Igbo ideology, perspectives and worldviews are made evident. However, there are no established patterns of metaphor in the analysed data. Also, the images inherent in the metaphors are fluid as they can generate another meaning in another context.

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