

## Objectification of Women in Esan<sup>1</sup> Proverbs and Folksongs: Wither Cultural Sexism?

### Abstract

*This paper contributes to the discourse by relating female objectification to oral traditions and folklore, focusing on the content of indigenous proverbs and folksongs of the Esan people of Edo State, Nigeria, as manifestations of cultural sexism. The study adopted an ethnographic approach, using observation and interviews to collect primary data. Added to this was the examination of proverbs and folksongs using Risdianto's three-dimensional model for analyzing folksongs, comprising the contextual, grammatical, and semantic dimensions. The study's findings reveal, amongst others, that the selected Esan proverbs, which have evolved immemorially, are still in use. These artistic works portray images that tend to objectify women, their reproductive parts, sexual functions, and general essence for many reasons; namely, to evoke hilarity, pass across indigenous knowledge, mock the female in comic parlance, and counsel for didactic purposes. Women have accepted it as part of their culture and even participate in it.*

**Keywords:** Objectification of women, female sexuality, cultural sexism, folksongs and proverbs, Esan people of Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

Calogero (2012) notes that 'objectification' is worthily explained when he states thus: "To objectify is to make into and treat something that is not an object as an object, which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties". This is, perhaps, a natural or common human behaviour, attitude, or mental engagement. Objectification becomes an act of sexism when the object of reference is the human body. In many gender and psychology discourses, the female gender is notably identified as the commonest butt or recipient of such objectification, hence the usual reference to 'female objectification' in gender studies, often perceived as derogatory, demeaning, relegating, body shaming,

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'Esan' has three meanings:

- i. a name given to the landmass occupied by the indigenous occupants located at Longitude 605 degree Celsius and Latitude 605 degrees Celsius
- ii. the language spoken by the people found in the same land in Edo State, Nigeria
- iii. and the general nomenclature and means of identification of a people found in the land

exploitative, misrepresentational, or unjust. Swim and Hyers (2009), like Calogero (2012), Mbisike (2024), and Carlsson *et al* (2024), rightly affirm such acts as sexual objectification. Swim and Hyers (2009) go further to describe sexism as “individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative evaluations of individuals based on their gender or support unequal status of women and men”. The term ‘cultural sexism’ therefore refers to sexism that exists in everyday culture and manifests in media and art (Savigny, 2020). Agreeably, ‘sexism’ and ‘female objectification’ may not be interchangeable concepts because the latter is subsumed in the former. However, they are very related and condemnable terms in gender and legal studies.

The primary objective of this paper is to demonstrate that female objectification (or the objectification of women) is highly prominent in folklore, oral tradition, and cultural verbal engagements, as it manifests, for instance, in ethnic proverbs and folksongs observed among the Esan people of Nigeria and other ethnic populations. This, in fact, is clear evidence of an aspect of cultural sexism. The overriding question motivating this study, therefore, is: in light of the aesthetic, entertaining, and didactic dimensions foregrounded by the unavoidable presence of female objectification in many age-old ethnic proverbs and songs observed among the Esan people of Nigeria, can elitist culture put an end to this cultural reality? Suppose the answer to the question asked in the preceding sentence is in the negative. In that case, it means the existence of case laws, statutory enactments to protect women’s rights against sexism or female objectification, feminist discontents, activism, and other efforts against the objectification of women, are quite helpless in the domain of cultural sexism.

This study will not go into the macro and/or micro factors that may be responsible for the pervasiveness of cultural sexism as it relates to the objectification of women. That may be the task of another study on this subject. The primary goal of this study is to ethnographically and literarily analyse and describe the impact and importance of female objectifications in specific proverbs and ethnic/folksongs as part of oral tradition and folklore on indigenous societies. Such effort will expose one of the potent reasons accounting for the irrepressible and pervasive consciousness engendering cultural sexism. The implications of this study include evidence of customary acceptance and indifference among indigenous folks, regardless of gender, to the negative connotations of female sexuality. This is evident in the revelations from interviews with local people and in the reactions to the ethnic texts presented for analysis and description. There is also a dominant view that the general acquiescence of female folks to female objectification in oral culture, as posited by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) and Calogero (2012), is a form of ‘self-objectification’ that they imply is culturally and socially enabled. However, the irrevocable fact of the patriarchal foundation of most indigenous cultures and their legacies to modern global culture has also rendered any perspective of culturally induced female self-objectification quite hopeless. Flowing from the primary goal of this study, as expressed above, there is a need to adequately describe the ethnic population known as the Esan people of Edo State and their location in Nigeria. It is from among these people that the proverbs and folksongs selected as primary sources of data are drawn. It is also worth noting that the authors of this essay are members of the investigated ethnic society and are adept in its folklore and oral tradition.

### **The Locale of Investigation**

The locale of investigation, also known as the research community, is Esan. In contemporary scholarship, the word 'Esan' can be used in a tripartite form to mean: a name given to the landmass occupied by the same people, the language spoken by the people found in the Edo central senatorial district of Edo State, and the general nomenclature and means of identification of a people found in the land. Their tradition or origin has attracted so much debate, and to date, much effort is still being expended to set the record straight about the people. The efforts of Okojie (1994), Ojiefoh (2002), and Okoduwa (2007) are worthy of note. In Okojie's (1994) opinion, the Esan people migrated from Benin around 1440 during the reign of Oba Ewuare. However, Ojiefoh (2002) draws attention to another account that the first settlers of Uromi migrated to Egbele in the Uromi area about 1025AD during the reign of Ogiso Orire of Benin. Half a decade later, Okoduwa (2007) maintains that archaeological finds in some areas of Esan allude to the fact that people were already present in Esanland before the eras linked to Esan origin. Stressing this opinion further, he remarked that it would have been practically impossible for people to migrate to areas where the means of livelihood were unsure. Arising from these divergent views, it will not be easy, in the present circumstances, to determine with exactitude the age of the Esan, when they first migrated, and what prompted the migration. However, to say that these people may have migrated from Benin around 1440 is reductive of their age in the regions they occupy and thus undermines the startling revelations of the archaeological finds in some Esan kingdoms, which allude to their having lived for several centuries in these areas. Barring all odds, the consanguinity shared by the people with the Benin kingdom is not in doubt, and their similar cultural practices and linguistic affinity are indicative of siblinghood. This underscores the general belief that Esan is of Edoid extraction (Butcher, 1982, and Okpoko and Agbontaen, 1993).

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To gather relevant data for this study, a mixed-methods approach of observation, direct personal interaction, and interviews was used. The choice of a mixed approach was made in consonance with the ethnographic nature of the topic, as Esanland comprises 35 kingdoms. They constitute the Edo Central Senatorial District, in which this study was conducted, in five rural and urban towns (Ewatto, Ewossa, Uzea, Urohi, and Idoia are rural, and Ekpoma, Irrua, Uromi, Ubiaja, and Igueben are urban) as the headquarters of Local Government Council areas, typified as urban areas.

#### **Methodology of the Study**

In this study, we find Lebaka's (2018) anthropological research methods, an in-depth ethnographic inquiry to address key research questions, while maintaining sociological concerns in obtaining accurate data. Since this research is more of a sociological and cultural one, his triangulated approach of data collection, consists of (i) Ethnographic observational data, (ii) Interview data, and (iii) Literature searches were deployed in this study. This is further complemented with the use of Data Quality Analysis (DQA) with one hundred respondents investigated in this work, and conclusion drawn from a widespread spectrum that entails some thirty (30) adults between the ages of 25-59 years of age (15 males and 15

females), thirty (30) elderly of 60-80 years of age (15 males and 15 females) thirty (30) Chiefs –all males and ten (10) monarchs- all males. Of the one hundred respondents, thirty percent (30%) were women, while seventy percent (70%) were men. The reason for this type of sex distribution is based on the fact that the locale of investigation is not only agnatic but patriarchal. Added to this is the fact that the Chiefs and Monarchs are all males. Consequently, it is the men who are thus ably qualified to discuss the people’s traditions. To stay on track with data collection, prepared questions to guide field interactions were drawn up. However, the sample of towns selected for this study accounts for 28.57% of the total Esan area in Edo State, Nigeria. They were selected to help us understand the actual situation. In addition to the procedures stated above, a review of relevant literature is included to strengthen the study.

### Conceptual Clarification of ‘Objectification’ and ‘Women Objectification’

Simply put, the term 'objectification' has been examined by many people from diverse backgrounds. However, according to Dictionary.com, objectification is, firstly, the act or an instance of treating a person as an object or thing. Secondly, the act or practice of regarding the natural world, or any part of it, solely as an inanimate object of study or exploitation, with no intrinsic relationship to human beings, and thirdly, the act or practice of presenting an idea, feeling, or other abstraction as a concrete object that can be seen, touched, etc<sup>3</sup>. Of the three perspectives stated above, this essay confines itself to examining objectification from the standpoint of a cultural or systemic relegation/degrading of an individual to a mere object. In Papadaki's (2024) view, objectification of women is a notion central to feminist theory. It can be roughly defined as seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, *as an object*. The idea of women's objectification is quite often linked to the male folks as the ‘objectifiers’, and sometimes also linked to the patriarchal nature of most global cultures, which entrenches women's objectification, making the female sex the most common victim of objectification. Ironically, however, women partake subconsciously or culturally in helping to entrench the objectification of women. In an earlier research, Nussbaum (1995) identified seven features that are involved in the idea of treating a person as an object:

1. *instrumentality*: the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier’s purposes;
2. *denial of autonomy*: the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination;
3. *inertness*: the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity;
4. *fungibility*: the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects;
5. *violability*: the treatment of a person as lacking in boundary-integrity;
6. *ownership*: the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold);
7. *denial of subjectivity*: the treatment of a person as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be considered.

The perception of womanhood and the treatment of women in many Esan proverbs and folksongs are replete with these features identified by Nussbaum (1995). In subsequent segments of this article, we will give attention to such features as they reflect in selected Esan proverbs and folksongs. Women's objectification in the selected texts manifests as a

<sup>3</sup><https://www.dictionary.com/browse/objectification>

demeaning cum pejorative term that describes women as sexual objects, commodities/things, lacking autonomy, and relegated. Such texts are used at events / in ordinary social discussions / for advertisement, for didactic purposes, to reprimand, to criticise, to counsel, to express scepticism about attitudes and intentions of the male folks to females, for conveying indigenous knowledge or wisdom, to evoke humour, for entertainment, etc.

According to Mackinnon (1987) 50% contextual gender objectifications have women as subjects against 16% for men. Both sexes (men and women) are recipients of sexual objectification, though the phenomenon is more associated with women. This study agrees with Dworkin (1974), but most especially Mackinnon (1987) in her pornographic study, that the admiration of natural physical beauty as objectification consequently makes harmful what ought to be harmless. The likes of MacKinnon, Dworkin, and especially Nussbaum (2016) further affirmed that: “It is true, and very much to the point that - women are objects, commodities, and some deemed more expensive than others.” In a related category where women were also perceived as sexual objects for conquest, domination, exploitation, possession, and violation, or for use as sex objects...; the latter, however, advocated for the use of the Indianapolis Ordinance as in the case of *Inc. v. Hudnut*<sup>4</sup>, which struck down the American Booksellers, which perceived women in the same light. Dworkin (1974) strongly detests the same and reiterates, “...after all, it is the core of our struggle...” and applauded the significant progress already achieved by women, having recognized their being injured through exploitation and systematic subordination. This study finds that the sexual abuses women are exposed to not only hurt, but also economically de-empower them to the extent that society celebrates even the cruelty that derogates female dignity and integrity. Hence, feminists are now on a rampage to destroy male dominance/supremacy, sex hierarchy, and to create an egalitarian society with a level playing field for both sexes to strive. For example, one of our female interviewees questions why women are fined, abused, and humiliated in cases of infidelity involving both genders<sup>5</sup>?

### **Objectification of Women from the Lens of Tradition**

In the entire world, there is a common tendency to view women as lesser beings. Outman (2014) specifically gave an etymological survey from Greek mythology to the present, how images of the body parts of women have been used in demeaning forms. Till date, the narrative has not changed, even in many forms of contemporary communication, women are equated with animals, inanimate objects and entities. The Esan scenario is not any different. For example, in the Esan contemporary society, there are age-old practices that have been handed down from generation to generation, which relegate women in the social milieu and the people’s organogram. We see a well-orchestrated design to perpetually dominate and demean womanhood (Ibhadode, 2025). There is a general agreement that women objectification is a global reality. That objectification of women is more or less a global phenomenon is well attested to in the view of McKay (2013), when he maintained that objectifying women is taught in our society through gender roles. Talking specifically of the

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<sup>4</sup>598 F. Supp.1316 S.D. Ind. 1984

<sup>5</sup> A submission by F.O. Akhimien on Women Abuse in Male and Female Relationship in Esan. An oral interview conducted at Uromi, Edo State on 11-2-2025.

Esan scenario, Eboiyehi and Akinyemi (2016:92) posit that:

In many Esan communities, when a man dies, the property he acquired over his lifetime is transmitted to those he left behind as their inheritance...Crucial to the concept of inheritance among the Esan is that Native Laws and Customs are governed by the principles of primogeniture, whereby the first surviving son in a family inherits the entire estate (the title, if any) of his late father, with none of the inheritance going to the wives and other children, provided he performed the proper burial ceremony. In contemporary societies and even amidst legislations for a world of equal justice, the narrative of women's objectification remained unchanged. Thus, Agueli, Esposito, Arcidiacono, and Di Napoli (2023:1) note that "Discriminatory attitudes towards women are still widespread and have also pervaded the digital world. They are often connected with the propensity to view and treat women as sexual objects, which sometimes leads to harmful behaviours, such as the sharing of intimate images without the partner's consent". In the Esan culture, it is unthinkable, for example, for a wife to report her husband over a case of rape. Such issues as dead-on-arrival, because, according to tradition, taking what belongs to one is not to steal (Ikhine, 2024).

### **What are the Negative Effects of Women's Objectification?**

From the global lens, the adverse effects of women's objectification are stupendous. According to Vignati (2023), mental distress, which is supposedly a systemic and social issue, is often sadly perceived as a sign of individual failure. Objectification of women is real. It is about power. It is about treating women as if they are less than human. Vignati (2023) further remarks that this treatment begets shame, anxiety, and alienation, as well as a sense of powerlessness and lack of control, which can all result from objectification, increasing the risk of depression in women. Additionally, objectification is also linked to sexual harassment and violence, as women who are objectified are seen as less human and are more vulnerable to mistreatment. All these phenomena can lead to the development of depression, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders, among others. While in appreciation of the dangers of women's objectification, a myriad of mechanisms are being put in place to arrest the trend in the Western world, it is still quite profound in sub-Saharan Africa and, indeed, the Esan. Women objectification strips women of humanness. Moreover, more disturbing is the fact that there is often no one to speak to, and in some circumstances, women themselves are involved in the perpetuation of such objectification.

According to Ikhanjiagbe, based on an interview conducted in 2025, when a male and a female commit the same offence, the male is often set free, while the woman is penalized in multiple ways. Some of such ways are that the woman should not cook for her husband and children until she is pardoned, she cannot mix with other members of the community, and her pardon starts by having her dance to obscene songs, almost nude, through the village. This act has a boomerang effect not just on the individual but on the entire family. Her children are looked upon with scorn; they are no longer able to socialize with others, fearing that anything could happen that would remind them of their family's ugly past. This background breeds depression, an inferiority complex, alienation, suicidal thoughts, and other shades of disorders. It is in appreciation of these myriads of issues that Ebhomienlen (2020:11) warns that the Church must begin in the area of mental re-orientation of the individual girl child, as well as the general public. The traditional Esan girl child is born into a world whose beliefs

are complex. What this means is that there is an environment made up of people whose beliefs and mindset about the female child are amazingly frustrating. Everything surrounding a girl child is never accepted as good enough, as whatever she does or says is never respected.

### **The Status of Women in the Eye of the Nigerian Legal System**

A contemporary analysis of Esan Cultural Folklores/Orature (an equivalent of oral literature) reveals pejorative tendencies towards women, despite the anti-women practice. This study finds that the Esan society is patrilineal, due to its Primogeniture rule that asserts male dominance, especially for firstborn male children as heirs, regardless of their birth order in the line of seniority. This practice highly disenfranchises the girl-child / female gender, especially on issues of inheritance, successions and widowhood, even though it is a nationwide practice that cuts across class, ethnicity, race, sexuality and religions in contemporary realities, much that - even the Holy Bible condemns this practice - where in Mathew 5: 28 the Bible says; "...do not objectify women" According to Goksun (2020), language does not only pass as a medium of communication, it is also a window through which the collective mind-set of a people can be perceived, and their thoughts represent the cognitive processes of communications." Hence, the derogatory content of Esan proverbs on 'women objectification' cannot be denied, going by the long-enduring Patriarchal society that is not only insensitive to contemporary cultural realities, but also contrasts the accomplishments and virtues of Esan women as affirmed by the Edo State Judiciary<sup>6</sup> thus as: "...a Socio-Economic instrument to the development of the society." The claim of women objectification by Esan people, has been affirmed not only by the trio of Ehiemua, Aluede and Aziegbe (2023) who emphasized the negativity of Esan proverbs on women thus that; "... it is a sub-textual manifestation of pervasive gender bias and segregation in Esan traditional society, which the contemporary/modern Nigerian reality is struggling to displace/erase, even though the changes are yet to be clearly manifest from Judge-made laws, and the extant national and international regulations.

### **The Status of Women in the Eye of the Nigerian Legal System**

This is perceived from a dual perspective and from the generic viewpoint of gender equity. While from the Customary viewpoint, it is the obnoxious Patriarchal system, and its discriminatory gender-based Primogeniture rule that avails males, dominance/control in socio-economic and political leadership, that the Generic Nigerian Legal system strongly frowns at. Indeed, the Primogeniture rule regulates issues of inheritance and succession in Nigeria, as reiterates Itua (2021), even though it is more palpable amongst the Esan people. Whereas, the Preamble in the Second Paragraph of Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria of 1999 provides for freedom from discriminations against community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion / political opinion; while the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 and other extant laws, also provide equal opportunities for women with their male counterparts, vis-à-vis their rights to Property at divorce or widowhood as decided in *Essien v. Essien* and *Amadi v. Nwosu*, where direct financial contribution to acquire a matrimonial

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<sup>6</sup><https://edojudiciary.gov.ng>

home/mortgage repayment was established as claims to joint ownership. Just as in *Shodipe v. Shodipe*, the Court upheld similar principles for spouses who have clearly shown intentions to be domiciled in Nigeria / taken the oaths of allegiance, as prescribed in the 7<sup>th</sup> Schedule to the Nigerian Constitution. Regardless of that, it is subject to the provisions of Section 28 of the 1999 (CFRN). Also highlighted are reforms to inheritance and succession that disenfranchise the girl-child/woman, as decided in *Ukeje v. Ukeje* (Married Women's Property Act of 1882).

Here, Gloria, the daughter of Lazarous Ogbonaya Ukeje, was initially excluded from inheriting in her father's estate, which the Court declared to be repugnant to justice, equity, and good conscience. Just as the combined provisions of Section 43 of the CFRN and Section 72 of the Matrimonial Causes Act (9 NWLR (Pt. 1146) 306 of 331 2009), both reinforce the marriage rights of parties, whilst the marriage subsists under an equitably just circumstance of a divorce, in Nigeria. Inclusive is the capacity of children to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria, regardless of location, locality, gender, or tribe. Note that Abia and Rivers States have enacted laws that reinforce women's rights to inheritance, just as key international treaties on gender equality like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1992), also provides: non-discrimination against women; increased quotas on women representation in elective offices; obligates comity of nations in its Article 1 to eliminate all forms of gender based violence and discriminations against women, which it tagged 'the last frontiers of the civil rights movement'; to ensure equal access to opportunities in all spheres of life as regards: political, economic, social, cultural, and civil spheres in their advancements /retaining/changing nationality. So, has Article 189 provided for its Member States' ratification of the CEDAW treaty in 2016?

According to Puri (2016), the reality of time is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Section 1 of the Married Women's Property Act of the Federal Republic of Nigeria helps spouses establish, with proof of direct financial contributions, disputed property rights between them. However, it does not recognize the adjustment /redistribution of matrimonial property between spouses in marriage dissolution. It might interest us to know that the new 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also recognizes gender equity as a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development, just as other Foundations on 'Human Rights Commitments and the Implementation of Gender Equality.' Education, Economic Empowerment, Self-Determination, Esteem, and Integrity have been identified as the basis of the wheel of progress toward gender parity/equity. This is what the Patriarchal Esan traditional society lacks, due to its bias and pervasive gender segregation that will take generations of non-static thinkers to change.

### **Select Proverbs and Songs on Women's Objectification in Esan**

In Africa, proverbs serve as catalysts for knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, ethics, and morals. They provoke further reflection and call for deeper thinking (Mokitimi, 1997: viii). According to Aluede, Okakah and Ehiemua (2023:101) "The use of proverbs to buttress points during conversations or cap statements is a common phenomenon among the Esan people of Edo State, Nigeria. In doing this, the speaker is considered someone well-versed in

the people's language and culture and thus well respected as a repository of indigenous Knowledge (IK).” Proverbs in Esan have multifarious functions; they enhance brevity and laconicism, encapsulate a series of thoughts in a catchy, comprehensible form, and serve as the foundation, catalyst, and facilitator of wisdom in daily living principles. Beyond their content, proverbs are better appreciated in a given context. Below is a set of four proverbs that will be discussed in the context of the Esan cultural milieu.

### Esan Texts Translated into English

1.	Okhole no so okhuo re re egbe no okpea Oki so re fie ekun-o bho	The conscience that makes a woman to make love to a man should also enable her to twist her waist accordingly
2.	Edin okhuo-i men Oki ro maebhoho	When a woman's privates are disease-stricken It becomes public in the quest for a healing solution.
3.	Okho no bie bhe eki Ai yole gue edin	The woman who has been put to bed in the market cannot be admonished to close up her privates.
4.	Ai ba no okhuoa Na ha ghe ole elo	You do not strip a woman and then look at her face

In a similar vein, a set of four songs selected from the plethora gathered during our field investigation is also presented below as samples to be analysed within the remit of this article, enabling us to draw inferences.

### Esan Texts Translated into English

1.	Uwedin kobo nebilo  Uwedin kobo nebilo Uwedin kobo nebilo Omamen nu moewan	Buttocks do not remain rotund till nightfall <sup>7</sup> Buttocks do not remain rotund till nightfall Buttocks do not remain rotund till nightfall Young girl, be sensible
2.	Edin ne ewa, Edin ne ewaewa	The private that itches The private that itches and itches
3.	Ọkuẹ di kaka? Uwedingbeu! Ọkuẹ di kaka? Enyengbeu!	Will she ever agree? Big buttocks! Will she ever agree? Big breasts!
4.	Qnokhuoni, obalo lea Qba lo lea bho otọ ekperele, ejuda fie kun, da bho nyen egbe, Qbalọ lea bho to ekperele	That woman has pained her considerably. It has pained considerably in her loins Having twisted your waist, also endure the pain It has pained considerably in her loins

<sup>7</sup> Nightfall as used in this context means old age

## Textual Analysis of the Proverbs and Songs

For emphasis, it is important that we state once again that the import of songs is derived from the figurative and literal uses of language in folksong texts. The ways songs are used and interpreted in these communities align with models by Risdianto (2016), who discussed three-dimensional models of song analysis: the contextual, grammatical, and semantic dimensions in the examination of folksongs. In this segment, we take a close look at the four proverbs selected in this study. For the sake of emphasis, we would like to restate them, and they are

1. *The conscience that makes a woman make love with a man should also enable her to twist her waist accordingly.*
2. *When a woman's privates are disease-stricken, it becomes public when looking for a healing solution.*
3. *A pregnant woman under labour pressure at the market and is delivered of her baby at the market cannot be admonished to close up her privates.*
4. *You do not strip a woman and then look at her face.*

From the first proverb to the last one, we see a central thrust - the tendency to see women as sex objects. Regarding the second proverb, in terms of specificity, it is a known fact that any diseased part of the body will require medical examination, diagnosis, and treatment. This procedure does not relate solely to the female body part. In an interview with Akhimien (2025), he intimates that, sub-textually, beyond the second proverb's known superficial meaning, it also connotes that if a woman is promiscuous, everyone, including youngsters far below her age, will have seen her naked and had her. The fourth proverb is a lewd or licentious objectification of the woman as one to be made loved to, which, unconscious to the male speaker, subjects the woman to a doll. When a woman is stripped nude, what happens next? What follows should be mating. Why use women in such derogatory contexts? So, when men are naked, what are the possible ennobling duties that they do? This proverb takes us to the people's construct of women as sex objects. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary<sup>8</sup> defines a sex object as: "a person regarded especially and exclusively as an object of sexual interest." It means that the female essence is reduced to a mere sex object meant to fulfil a man's desire.

The dualism of the Nigerian legal system, as enunciated by Sagay (2006) and Ocheja (2012) in the law of succession, recommends that the pressures of advocacy under national and international laws ought to enhance gender equality in all spheres, regardless of one's capacity to assert one's humanness in all situations. For instance, CEDAW (1992) focuses not only on identifying the needs of girl children and women, but also formulates specific policies that define their rights, finance their development, identify their challenges, and evaluate State actions and responsibilities. Sexual objectification takes place when a woman's body, parts of it, or sexual functions are split from the rest of her person or treated as if they represent her. This means that the body, or its parts, is substituted for the whole person, thereby depriving the woman of her personality and specificity as a human being (McKinley

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<sup>8</sup>Merriam-Webster Dictionary at: <https://www.initiativelifecenter.com>

& Hyde, 1996; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). When a society that is supposedly culturally alert suddenly deviates from its standards to mention women's body parts in derogatory forms, it clearly shows the posture of arrant disrespect for womanhood. An in-depth look at the four songs whose texts are below presents a similar direction of thought:

*Buttocks do not remain rotund till nightfall. Privates that itch uncontrollably. Will she ever agree? Big buttocks! Will she ever agree? Big breasts! That woman, it has pained her considerably; it has pained her considerably in her loins. Having twisted your waist, you also endure the pain. It has pained considerably in her loins.*

Aging is a universal reality that is not in any way gender specific. So, to say of women that their buttocks do not remain rotund all through their lifetime is more of a satirical statement than telling the truth, because the male buttocks do not become rotund either with aging. The second song talks of an itchy female private part. This is a song sung for a woman who is guilty of infidelity. Sadly, the case of infidelity involves two people, a male and a female. While the male partner is often not mentioned as would have been reasonably necessary, the female is paraded almost nude all through the village as part of the cleansing rite. Surprisingly strange is the fact that it is the women who parade the woman who is being cleansed. Moreover, they sing the obscene songs for the woman to dance to. This is a clear case of female self-objectification. Female self-objectification can best be defined as “regular exposure to objectifying experiences that socialize girls and women to engage in self-objectification, whereby they come to internalize this view of themselves as an object or collection of body parts” (Kroon & Perez, 2013: 16).

Song three presents a context in which a man lusts after a lady. Full of the intention to ask her out, he keeps introspecting, wondering whether the lady will ever agree to his desires. Will she ever agree, big buttocks, will she ever agree, big breasts. No doubt, while the big buttocks and breasts are the features that attract him to the woman, he is, in the same breath, using them to denigrate and devalue her. Of a very pathetic note is song number four. This is a song sung for a woman in labour. Although falling into labour or having labour pains is not an illness, it goes with considerable pain. Rather than lend support and fellow-feeling to a colleague and mate, the consolation she gets is having twisted your waist in your love for mating, and also enduring the pain of birthing. This is awkward and needs to be addressed. Here, we see men attacking women and women also attacking themselves. Changing the narratives on ‘women objectification’ is a must through petitions, peaceful boycotts, and protests against negative/offensive media images; mindfulness and self-awareness; advocating for positive media body image; education about objectification theory; collective actions to leverage religious & spiritual approaches; to seek support for economic empowerment, etc., much as it takes national efforts to ensure the conferment of these rights on the female gender (Ocheja, 2012).

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that Esan women, whether young or old, face all forms of women's objectification in indigenous proverbs and folksongs. It is observed that this cultural tendency is not the result of a lack of respect or disregard for the woman as a daughter, wife,

mother, or a community woman, nor is it a conscious act of misogyny. Instead, it is a cultural practice that dates back to the tribe's prehistoric existence and is part of the people's folklore. Truly, many proverbs and songs, as seen in the examples given above, subject the female gender or its reproductive essence to ridicule. However, they also serve as one of the means of conveying indigenous knowledge and wisdom. They are sometimes wisecracks. Some indigenous/folk proverbs or songs, as correctly observed by Ajie (2009), are also rendered by women at private or social occasions or to a female counterpart whose conditions or situations necessitate such verbal responses. For example, the fourth song, which ordinarily pictures the pains of a woman in labour, has turned into a light-hearted comic song rendered by the local female folks to their female counterpart, either heavily pregnant or undergoing labour pains and about to be delivered of a baby, rather than to sympathise with her. In the rendition, the women consciously act to provide the pregnant lady targeted in the song with some form of comic relief, to which she responds with laughter or a mirthful smile.

Women interviewed in the course of this study sang the selected songs brought here or helped complete the selected proverbs objectifying women, and reminded them of many others, but laughed it off. The phenomenon significantly traces the root of this cultural sexism, stereotyping, or prejudice against women based on sex in any conceivable way, to traditional settings, to indigenous cultures, to a resistant and robust patriarchal foundation that formed the bedrock of most tribal communities around the globe. The experiences of these writers during direct interviews with local Esan women revealed that all the women found the songs and proverbs fun. One of the women remarked that if men or husbands use female parts or their sexuality to ridicule their wives or other women, it does not mean these men do not love and respect women, and that the men are their husbands. They can say whatever they want. They are heads of their families due to divine providence. Another woman summed it up by saying she believed men originated these proverbs and songs in the past because they are naturally loquacious beings/creatures who do nothing but gossip about women, and ended by saying these songs are hilarious anyway and have become pleasant pastimes for both genders. These women's mirthful acceptance of the phenomenon is self-objectification itself, as described earlier in this essay, and it powerfully signifies how self-objectification has sunk deep irrevocably into the racial memory of the female folk.

The question of 'whether cultural sexism', which forms part of the motivation for this study, points to the extent to which cultural sexism can be tackled for elimination in order to relieve feminist agitators, advocates of legislation, and case laws against the objectification of women. The answer is a helpless negative. Objectification of women is a collective experience of humanity. It cannot be dislodged. It is one of the manifestations of the dominant patriarchal syndrome of mankind, even as semantically revealing as the linguistic term 'mankind'. The past and the here and now of global societies all constitute a man's world.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article, we examined, by way of definition, what objectification is, providing a basis for interrogating women's objectification in Esan proverbs and folksongs. An intense study of the texts revealing women's objectification in Esanland was done. The study found that this

idea of women's objectification in Esanland has a long history that is intertwined with their culture. Hence, the status of women in Esan is not revocable or sanctioned by any feminist agitation, legislation, or case law. The study also identified the duality and mixed feelings towards women's objectification from local and global perspectives. Given this background, this essay enumerates the adverse effects of women's objectification but cannot argue for its abrogation because of their functions in oral culture. Using relevant proverbs and song texts from Esan culture, the work showed a corpus of traditional artistic compositions of obscene and lecherous colouration targeting women as sex objects, which definitely are anti-female gender or opposed gender to gender equality and a clear manifestation of cultural sexism. However, the willpower to abolish such biases against women in indigenous proverbs and folksongs cannot be mustered because women take delight in it and help render them clearly signifying acts of self-objectification. The patriarchal nature of the society, especially the Esan cultural primogeniture belief system, poses another challenge to any organised act to dislodge or put an end to the phenomenon in her folklore, irrespective of feminist activism and judicial efforts meant to tackle the objectification of women. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) will also be quite helpless in any sensitisation effort or campaign to stop the objectification of women at this cultural level.

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