

# Image of the Woman of Substance in Proverbs 31:10-31 and African Context\*

Emmanuel O. Nwaoru

## Introduction

Expressions such as patriarchal sexism, female inequality and the like dominate the commentary of “women passages” in the Bible and African literature today. What traditionally made wives and mothers “women of substance” in the past has been to some extent justifiably re-read and re-interpreted to expose repressive gender ideology behind the values and roles assigned to women. Proverbs 31:10-31, is not unaffected by such a reinterpretation and rereading. Apart from the acrostic structure of this poem in the Masoretic Text that is self-evident there are a variety of views on its origin, form, structure, and above all, on the image of the woman at its centre. While some critics reduce her image to that of “sweet wife” who does everything just to please her husband,<sup>1</sup> others see her as a domineering wife who does practically everything and renders her husband redundant in running family affairs.<sup>2</sup> These opposing views leave a very blurred and confusing image of a woman who is named and recognised by the poet as אִשְׁת־חַיִל, and as one deserving praise in and outside her home (Prov 31:28, 31).

This paper will examine the significance of the epithet אִשְׁת־חַיִל not only through the traditional lexical analysis but also through listening to the text with the ears of an African. It proposes that greater understanding of Prov

---

\* I would like to thank my friend Dr. Georg Gafus who at his own cost provided the basic material required for this paper together with Prof. Hermann-Josef Stipp and Frau Silvia Weinmayer of the Institut für Biblische Exegese AT, LMU Munich. I am also indebted to my colleague Dr. Joseph O. Faniran, to Mrs. Gloria Opara, and CIWA students – J. Okechukwu, M.I. Ally, CM., and Srs. Elsheba Ongoche and Nkiru Okafor for their contribution to the African context. The paper was my contribution at the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress of the PanAfrican Association of Catholic Exegetes (PACE) on *Human Wisdom and Divine Wisdom. Reading of the Bible in the Context of the Church as Family of God in Africa* held at Kinshasa, Congo, 4-10 September, 2005.

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Chitando, *Wife*, situates the poem among Biblical texts that can be used “to sustain traditions and practices that suffocate African women”; cf. Yoder, *Woman* 446.

<sup>2</sup> See McCreesh, citing Delitzsch in *Wisdom*, esp. 27-28; cf. also Brenner, *Proverbs* 1-9 129; Bellis, *Helpmates* 197.



31:10-31 lies in discovering the secret of its genre; and that one can find a key to unlock that secret in *recital*, a genre often found in African Wisdom corpus, designed to chant the praise of a personality (man or woman, old or young) who has achieved greatness in society.

## 1. Critical Problems in the Text

The acrostic style of Prov 31:10-31, with each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, would naturally suggest a harmony in the text. To the contrary, there is no consensus about the thematic and structural outlines of the poem. On the thematic, some critics suppose that the acrostic form leaves no room for imagination and, consequently, has led the poet either to simply line up his thoughts<sup>3</sup> or even to jump from one topic to another.<sup>4</sup> Yoder sums it up this way: “[...] the poem reads much like an impressionistic painting. Viewed up close, the individual brushstrokes seem scattered and haphazard, but from a step or two away, dots and platters merge to become the cumulative image of a woman.”<sup>5</sup> About the structure, K. Luke believes the acrostic does not attest a clear structure, or any sort of strophic arrangement.<sup>6</sup> This confirms earlier observation that the internal structure of the poem is sacrificed to the external structure.<sup>7</sup> Others however see a meaningful structure but with a variety of themes and patterns.<sup>8</sup> The problem of the text is not only thematic and structural but also rhetorical. According to Toy, the acrostic form of the poem is rhetorically bad,<sup>9</sup> irrespective of what its merits or demerits might be.

The history of the formation of the book of Proverbs is a complex one; it stretches into several centuries. The process of composition of Prov 31:10-31 is not impervious to this. The result is lack of consensus on dating the text. Attempts to ascribe an “Israelian origin”<sup>10</sup> to the text or make it a “northern book”<sup>11</sup> for its “northern character” were not widely accepted.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Dietrich, Buch 318, also McCreesh, Wisdom 31.

<sup>4</sup> McKane, Proverbs 665-666; Toy, Commentary 542; Whybray, Book 184.

<sup>5</sup> Yoder, Woman 428.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Luke, Wife, esp. 123-124.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lettinga, vrouwenpiegel 119.124, cited in Gous, Proverbs 31:10-31, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Lichtenstein, Chiasm; Wolters, Proverbs; Meinhold, Sprüche 521; Gous, Proverbs 31:10-31, 35-51; Hurowitz, Pillar; Brockmüller, Chiasmus.

<sup>9</sup> Toy, Commentary 542, 547.

<sup>10</sup> Ginsberg, Heritage 35-36, reaches such a conclusion based on supposed borrowings between Proverbs and Hosea 4-14.

<sup>11</sup> See Rendsburg, Evidence 100.



All the same, some scholars have dated the poem to the pre-monarchical<sup>13</sup> or non-monarchical period.”<sup>14</sup> However, most critics are agreed for various reasons that the text is postexilic. A good number date the final redaction of the book of Proverbs including Prov 31:10-31 to the Persian period. Some do so out of linguistic considerations,<sup>15</sup> others for structural reasons<sup>16</sup> or on thematic grounds,<sup>17</sup> while others do so for biblical parallels.<sup>18</sup> There are still a few others who consider a late dating to Prov 31:10-31 more appropriate. F. Hitzig heads the group by placing it in the Greek period.<sup>19</sup> A. Wolters specifically assumes that “the song was composed some time after Alexander’s conquest, presumably in the third century B.C.”<sup>20</sup>

Other major problems include those generated by the supposed relationship between literary genre and the *Sitz im Leben* of Prov 31:10-31. The hymnic genre proposed by Gunkel and his followers is linked to the temple liturgy as its proper setting because it is unimaginable to have a hymn in praise of anyone other than YHWH (Ps 65:2(1)). However, other critics believe that hymns in early Israel have functions other than those of liturgical hymns. According to A. Wolters, the hymnic form “is not strictly tied either to the praise of God or to the temple liturgy”.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, he agrees that the genre of Prov 31:10-31 could have been influenced by the hymnic form of the songs of the Psalter which celebrate the mighty acts of YHWH (cf. Ps 33; 65; 66; 78; 105; 106; 114; 135; 136; 146; 147; etc.).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Yoder, *Wisdom* 15-38.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Lyons, *Note*, supposes that Prov 31:10-31 reflected pre-monarchical ideal of women but acquired a new significance when the text was redacted in the postexilic period because cultural conditions were analogous; cf. Yoder, *Wisdom* 18 n. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Schroer, *Women* 80.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Washington, *Wealth*, esp. 116-122 and 127.133; also Yoder, *Wisdom* 15-38; Yoder, *Woman* 428. For other literary considerations see, Toy, *Proverbs* xix-xxxi; Meinhold, *Sprüche* 45-47; Clifford, *Proverbs* 6; Whybray, *Composition* 153-156.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Skehan, *Studies*; Washington, *Wealth* 122-127.

<sup>17</sup> See Maier, *Frau*, esp. 25-68, 262-269. For themes based on tradition-historical evidence, see also Washington, *Wealth* 128-133.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gese, *Wisdom* 204-206.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hitzig, *Sprüche*.

<sup>20</sup> This is based on the supposed pun of the Hebrew word *šōpiyyâ* on the Greek *sophia*; cf. Wolters, *ŠŌPIYYÂ* (Prov 31:27) 586; also Camp, *Woman* 303 n.22. This is a shift from Camp’s earlier postexilic position in her work, *Wisdom and the Feminine*, 227-291.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Wolters, *Proverbs* 452.



Some important questions have been raised because of seeming irregularities between the Septuagint (LXX) and the reading of the Masoretic Text (MT). Such irregularities are evident in verses 21 and 22. While, for instances, the MT has it that it is the wife who has no fear for what might befall the household, LXX says it is rather the husband (v.21). There are also divergent views in v.22 with regard to the coverings: Did the wife make them for herself (MT) or for her husband (LXX)?

The most acute problem, however, is the one concerning the assessment of the image of the woman at the centre of the poem. The undertone of this problem is sensed in Fontaine's fear when she admonishes the reader to read with caution for what lies underneath may be figures "inversely proportional to the truth of real women's lives."<sup>22</sup> It may not then be surprising that critics see the אִשֶׁת-חַיִל as a figure both too feminine<sup>23</sup> and unfeminine<sup>24</sup> alike. But none of these extreme positions can be said to be exhaustive.

## 2. Background of the Text

Various suggestions have been made regarding the historical background of Prov 31:10-31. Fontaine locates this in the World of Wisdom in ancient Near East. She conceives the image and activities of the woman in the text, in her private and public domains, in the light of those of other women sages in ancient Israel and its neighbours.<sup>25</sup> Arguing from both biblical and extra-biblical evidence, Luke sought the context in the school of an anonymous sage<sup>26</sup> and surmises that Prov 31:10-31 is a short treatise designed for the *Instruction* of young girls in school. Crook had earlier thought of the ode as "*Instruction* of a mother to her daughter".<sup>27</sup> Some others take the text to be written by a male poet in search of a portrait of an

---

<sup>22</sup> Fontaine, Roles 25.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Chitando, Wife.

<sup>24</sup> Gous, Proverbs 31:10-31 38, supposes that the poet fails to incorporate feminine characteristics like the erotic as it is found naturally in ANE songs about women. Moreover, she is engaged in the business of buying and selling which, according to him, is reserved for men (Prov 27:26b). Notwithstanding the mention of children (Prov 31:28), Gottlieb, Words 287, insists that no mention is made of child-rearing, thus removing the woman far away from duties proper to women.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Fontaine, Roles, esp. 40-41. Schroer, Women 68-84, draws her analogy only from the role of counselling women within ancient Israel.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Luke, Wife 118-123.

<sup>27</sup> Crook, maiden 139; also Brenner, Proverbs 1-9 127-128.



ideal wife,<sup>28</sup> intended for a predominantly male audience.<sup>29</sup> A. Wolters locates the *Sitz im Leben* of both the poet and the intended audience in “a sophisticated and highly literate milieu” proper to Hellenism.<sup>30</sup> Such a milieu contrasts with the cultic setting suggested by Gunkel for the wisdom psalms.

The text of Prov 31:10-31 also reflects the life in those other cultures where the woman is truly the mistress of the home (vv.15, 27). The activities of the woman are orientated, as it were, towards the needs of each member of the household – her husband, children and servant girls. But the poet does not always insist on such a relationship<sup>31</sup> for the portrait of the אִשְׁת־חַיִל; rather, her image derives from a cultural environment, which does not fail to appreciate in recitals, songs or hymns the accomplishments of its “Big” people. This is found in ancient Israel, precisely in the period of the Judges and of David, a period classically known as Israel’s Heroic Age,<sup>32</sup> and among other peoples.<sup>33</sup> From its genre, especially in the oral stage, one can associate the features of Prov 31:10-31 with the tradition of heroic poetry, Although this genre belongs traditionally to the liturgical hymns (the Psalter) in praise of YHWH, as we have earlier pointed out, the setting of

<sup>28</sup> Gerstenberger, *Theologies* 72, considers it as “an ideal picture from male perspective.”

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Yoder, *Woman* 446.

<sup>30</sup> Wolters, *Şöpiyyâ* (Prov 31:27) 586; also Gottlieb, *Words* 280.290; Gous, *Proverbs* 31:10-31, 49, steers a middle course by taking the audience to be both the *diligentia* and *intelligentia*, i.e. those who reflect the necessary unity between knowing and doing–WIS–DONE.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the relationship is couched in 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns demonstrating that the female protagonist is not associated with the other members by name. For her various relationships, see vv.11, 12, 23, 28b (with husband); v.28b (with children) and v.15b (with servant girls).

<sup>32</sup> See the song of Deborah (Judg 5; the women’s song after David’s victory over the Philistine (1Sam 18:6-7); David’s mourning for Saul and Jonathan (2Sam 1) as typical examples of heroic poetry in praise of a victor or in lament of a fallen hero in the OT; cf. Wolters, *Proverbs* 452. These are distinguished from songs that have YHWH as subject such as the Song of Moses (Ex 15:1-19), the Song of Miriam (Ex 15:20-21) and the psalms of praise.

<sup>33</sup> See the *oriki* and the *egwu une* of the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria respectively. The Homeric epics of ancient Greece also come quickly to mind. Wolters, *Proverbs* 452, has also identified the Old Norse poetry of the Vikings and the heroic songs of the Balkans. Other supposed parallels to Prov 31:10-31 have been found by Plöger, *Sprüche* 379-380, in Virgil’s *Aeneid* VIII: 408-412 and the Chinese translation of an Indian treatise on dharma, just as Luke, *Wife* 131-132, following J.J. Meyer found two parallels in chapters 123 and 146 of the thirteenth book of the *Mahābhārata*.



Prov 31:10-31 can hardly be cultic, given אִשֶׁת־חַיִל as subject of praise. This can be corroborated by the social setting of similar recitals in Africa.

Whatever may be the historical background and dating of the final redaction of the book of Proverbs and of Prov 31:10-31 in particular it is most likely that the original materials of the latter find their proper setting in the early period of ancient Israel at their oral stage.

### 3. The Genre of Prov 31:10-31 in Context of African Praise Poetry

Although the form-critical issues of Prov 31:10-31 have not received as much attention as other literary matters of the text,<sup>34</sup> critics have identified hymn<sup>35</sup> or song of praise<sup>36</sup> as its possible its genre. Today many critics seem to have accepted the hymn-like<sup>37</sup> character of Prov 31:10-31 because of the features it shares with wisdom psalms to which Gunkel ascribed the genre *Hymnus*.<sup>38</sup>

It is however the position of this paper that Prov 31:10-31 is a *recital*, chanted or recited essentially by an individual and not by a group. African oral poetry<sup>39</sup> is familiar with this genre, and it will be typified here in *oriki* of the Yoruba, Nigeria. Our choice of *oriki* genre<sup>40</sup> is based on the process of the development, the language of composition and the transcendence of

<sup>34</sup> Wolters, Proverbs 446-447, bemoans such neglect.

<sup>35</sup> Wolff, Anthropologie 250, alludes to the text as „der grosse Hymnus auf die tüchtige Frau“ (the great hymn to the capable wife), see also Obersteiner, Erklärung 1, who calls it a hymn of praise (Lobeshymnus). Wolters in *Šōpiyyā* (Prov 31:27) 579-585, and (Proverbs XXXI 10-31) 446-452, has interchangeably called it hymn and song based not only on the formal features of the text but also on linguistic evidence.

<sup>36</sup> It is called „Preislied“ by Wünsche, Schönheit 327; „Lobpreis / Loblied“ in Rahner, Maria 86; referred to as „Lobpreisung“ in Plöger, Sprüche 379. See also Wolters, Proverbs 447.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hamilton, *iššā* 539. Nevertheless, there are dissident voices against hymnic genre. For instance, Gous, Proverbs 31:10-31 38, bases his objection on the lack of erotic aspect prevalent in Ancient Near Eastern songs about women.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Gunkel, Einleitung 33-59, also Gunkel, Psalms 10-12.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, the *egwu une* of Ibusa, Nigeria is a piece of poetry, partly narrative and partly sung to the accompaniment of the *une*, a string instrument, which takes one long Igbo week, i.e. eight days to tell. The collection is recently made by Emenanjo; cf. Emenanjo, Igbo or Igboid 34. Another is the Swahili epic *Utendi wa Mwanakupona* – a creative poem designed to teach young females how to achieve self-awareness and empowerment in a patriarchal society.

<sup>40</sup> Much on this genre will depend on the dissertation of Barber; Speak.



time they evoke. Prov 31:10-31, we suppose, shares all this in common with *oriki* chant. With regard to the process of development of *oriki* Barber observes:

They (*oriki*) encapsulate whatever is noteworthy in contemporary experience. Epithets are composed as things happen, or as qualities in people emerge. But because they are valued, they are preserved, and transmitted for decades – sometimes even for centuries. They are then valued all the more for coming from the past, and bringing with them something of its accumulated capabilities, the attributes of earlier powers. In performance they are recycled and recomposed, but they also retain an essential core which is preserved even when its meaning has been forgotten.<sup>41</sup>

Like *oriki*, Prov 31:10-31 is a highly charged form of utterance, composed to single out and arrest in concentrated language whatever is remarkable in current experience. The ode compares with *oriki* as a seemingly unending invocation or chant, describing the attributes and epithets of a woman and showering elaborated encomium on her. The transcendence of both pieces of praise poetry lies in the ability of Prov 31:10-31 and *oriki* to reactivate the past in the present and to present their subject as a model for all times. Thus they accomplish two things all at once: one is the praise of an outstanding figure; the other is the presentation of the subject as a model for the instruction of present and future generations. This could explain why some critics have taken the genre of Prov 31:10-31 as *Instruction*, as we have earlier noted. Hence we speak of the personal and socio-cultural dimensions of the genre.

It is important to remark that African recitals are regular features during festivals and funeral<sup>42</sup> ceremonies. We shall assume here that it is in one of such festivals that celebrate the accomplishments of a woman / wife / mother in the private and public sphere that the woman of substance of Prov 31:10-31 is singled out for praises. In this context we can imagine a woman artist chanting the ode at King Lemuel's request<sup>43</sup> in appreciation to and honour of the Queen mother, especially for her teaching (cf. Prov 31:1-9) and other achievements. This agrees with the ideas behind the *oriki*, as the saying goes:

---

<sup>41</sup> Barber, *Speak* 14.

<sup>42</sup> The recital could be used at funerals to commemorate the dead or ancestors even long time after their death in order to make their good qualities impact on the living.

<sup>43</sup> McCreech, *Wisdom* 38, however, sees the entire chapter 31 as "the words of Lemuel."



We never live to a ripe old age  
 Without acquiring some nicknames  
 On the day we grow old  
 In righteous age, our children will use them to  
 Praise us.<sup>44</sup>

The woman's activities, though exaggerated, are not foreign to human situation. In fact, the genre as we have pointed out necessitates such exaggeration. Consequently, the *oriki*-like genre enables us to place the subject, the central figure, in her real human situation. There is no necessity therefore to "transport" her to the realm of transcendence or even make her an abstract and mystical figure.

For those not fully aware of the African recitals, the whole composition (Prov 31:10-31) may seem to be "a series of disjointed descriptions of various attributes and activities".<sup>45</sup> But in reality it is a well-thought out performance, focusing mainly on the heroic qualities (virtues) and activities of the subject. However, this does not rule out the possibility of redactional activities, especially in the literary stage, which could have given rise to deliberate changes in the poem.<sup>46</sup>

The subject matter of a typical African recital (*oriki*) is exemplified in Barber's report about Ayantayo, a woman of Okuku of Southwest Nigeria who was known as *bòròkìíní alágbára ilú* – a highly placed and powerful person, a woman who "was not only known for her wealth but for her ability to get her own way" in the town.

She traded in meat. She was an indomitable woman (*akikanju obinrin*), and one who was awake to progress (*o laju*) ... She was the first to sell European drinks in the town and the first person to build a house with an iron roof ... She had two horses, one white and one red, and went to the farm on them ... She built a house near the railway station, and opened a beer and stout shop there.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Barber, *Speak* 68.

<sup>45</sup> Yoder, *Woman* 427.

<sup>46</sup> Perdue, *Wisdom*, has rightly pointed out that "brief sayings incorporating human observations suggest a more archaic genre than do lengthy instructions and didactic poems that require greater intellectual and literary sophistication"; cf. Yoder, *Wisdom* 16; Eissfeldt, *Testament* 473; Scott, *Proverbs / Ecclesiastes* 15; Gemser, *Sprüche* 5; Baumgartner, *Wisdom* 212. Watson, *Poetry* 191, argues from the point of the acrostic pattern which according to him is highly artificial and non-oral in character. Lyons, *Note*, speaks of new significance the text acquires after redaction.

<sup>47</sup> The report is based on her converse with Emmanuel, the grandchild of this woman of substance; cf. Barber, *Speak* 233.



It is interesting to observe that the way this woman of many parts at home and in business is depicted forms part of the message. In other words, the genre is inseparable from the content of the message. They are finely balanced, each playing a vital role in communicating the image of the central figure.<sup>48</sup>

We can now see that an *oriki*-like genre gives a clue to the understanding of most of the nagging questions about Prov 31:10-31, especially about the apparent passivity of the husband with regard to the said domineering attitude of the wife in managing the family affairs<sup>49</sup> and the idealised language of her portrait, etc. None of this should warrant her being transported to the ideal world because in this genre the figure at the centre is always the subject of lavished praise. The audience understands this without questioning; so also do those who are well-acquainted with the recital and oral poetry of the orient and Africa. Only such an audience can appreciate the figure of this ode as a truly existential model and not a paradigmatic, idealised symbol up there.

#### 4. The Woman of Substance in Proverbs 31:10-31

Characteristic of the *oriki*, Prov 31:10-31 begins with naming the woman. Her epithet is אִשְׁת־חַיִל, taken in context to mean “woman of substance” (v.10a). I adopt Yoder’s rendition of חַיִל as substance<sup>50</sup> because it is an all-embracing construal that expresses the full significance of אִשְׁת־חַיִל in many African societies.<sup>51</sup> This absolute noun חַיִל (capability, nobility, power, strength, efficiency, wealth, etc.) is the unchangeable variable in the construct chain and the key to the understanding of the epithet. In its ordinary sense, it gives clue to the activities of the woman and expresses, at the same time, the quality of her character. The syntactical link between the two words does not suggest that the woman has חַיִל as authors suppose,<sup>52</sup> but that she is completely possessed by it. Rendering חַיִל attributively, as many translators have done, tends to focus attention more on the physical qualities of the

<sup>48</sup> Gous, Proverbs 31:10-31 48.

<sup>49</sup> She is the sole mistress of the house in the fabrication and sales of goods, in the feeding and education her household.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Yoder, Woman 427, also “woman of noble character” (NIV). McKane, Proverb 443, describes her as a woman of quality, one of sterling character.

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, the Igbo “*akpu nwanyĩ*” – lit. “a woman made out of hard stump” or *akpu nwa* – somebody of substance, etc.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. McCreesh, Wisdom 40. However, it is not contestable, as he said, that the אִשְׁת־חַיִל creates, builds up, strengthens, nurtures and protects.



woman.<sup>53</sup> For instance a strong woman does not necessarily mean a woman of strength, etc. The poet, from all indications, meant *הַיֵּל* to be a substantive to express all that the woman stands for – her physical qualities, activities<sup>54</sup> as well as her very make-up. In its military sense, which actually dominates its usage in the Old Testament, *הַיֵּל* connotes military prowess, strength, valour, might, especially when used together with *גִּבּוֹר*.<sup>55</sup>

Since the context here is clearly non-military, we take *הַיֵּל* to describe the special skill, great ability, industry and qualities of the woman / wife (cf. Gen 47:6). It is used of a woman who is very capable for her work in the home and larger society (cf. 1Chr 9:13; 26:6 in relation to priests). From other contexts one realises that this power is not exercised arbitrarily (Ex 18:21, 25); skill and industry can only truly be exhibited by people of nobility and integrity, who are God fearing (cf. Bar 31:30). A wife / woman fully possessed, as it were, by *הַיֵּל* cannot but be a special woman in the home, in her business and in the society. In fact, she is a rare gem to find (*מִצָּא*), thus giving an occasion for the poet to try to express the inexpressible, the unique and incomparable, in a language akin to the *oriki* genre.<sup>56</sup> Her worth is beyond price; her value far more than that of *פְּנִינִים* (jewels, rubies, corals) (Prov 31:10b). Hence the woman is taken to rank among wisdom and knowledge which are valued more than *פְּנִינִים* (Job 28:18; Prov 3:15; 8:11; 20:15). No wonder she is described as a wife whose husband can confide in (v.11a) and as one who can help her husband to realise his potential and acquire higher status, dignity, and position of influence in the

<sup>53</sup> Cf. “capable wife” (NRSV, NEB), “fine woman” (REB), “worthy woman” (ASV), “excellent woman” (NAS, NAB), also “*γυναῖκα ἀνδρείαν*” – manly woman (LXX); “*mulierem fortem*” – strong woman (VUL), “*donna efficiente*” – efficient woman (IEP).

<sup>54</sup> Granted that the activities of *אִשֶׁת-הַיֵּל* portrays her as a woman for others, it will be too narrow to suppose with Whybray, Book 184, that “the whole emphasis of the poem is on the benefits which the wife will bring to her husband and family by her industry and reliability”; cf. also Chitando, *Wife* 154-155.

<sup>55</sup> In this regard, the term was applied in military context for those who were bound to armed duty and at the same time capable because they were sufficiently well off to provide their own equipment (cf. 2Kgs 24:14); cf. de Vaux, *Israel* 70.

<sup>56</sup> Scholars have taken the rhetoric question in Prov 31:10a too earnestly and sought to interpret it accordingly. Yoder, *Woman* 432, for instance, has related the question with a “purchase price”, i.e. the value of marriage dowry of the woman. While this supposition is possible in a general way, we believe that the poet may not be thinking of marriage dowry in this context. He rates the woman very high; not for material value but for the model she is in society.



community (v.23). Hers then is a husband who because of his wife has everything to gain – he lacks nothing of value (שָׁלֵל) (v.11b).

To her husband, the capable wife is a *bringer of טוב* (good, pleasure, happiness, prosperity, etc.) not רָע (evil, harm, pain, displeasure, unhappiness) (v.12). In fact, Prov 12:4, in another context, gives her the epithet, “her husband’s crown”. Since the verb נָמַל supposes some element of appreciation and gratitude, it is likely the woman is recompensing her husband for generously supporting her to be the kind of wife she is – אִשְׁת־חַיִל.

A woman of substance is selective (דָּרַשׁ). She does not pick haphazardly her raw materials; rather she makes right judgement in carefully seeking out what she needs in her business, knowing fully the gain it will bring in future (v.13a). Her painstaking selection is only matched by her industry. Hence she is depicted as a *zealous worker* (v.13b, cf. vv.17, 19). Here too the thought for future gain remains ultimate.

“*She is like merchant ships*” (v.14): This direct simile sees in the woman of substance a semblance of אֲנִיֹּת סוֹחָר (merchant ships). As those ships bring in foreign goods and carry off local ones for export, so do the activities of the woman boost foreign trade and make possible far-off (מִמְרוֹקֶק) goods to flow into the land (cf. v.24). This simile that focuses on the woman’s capacity for sustained commerce (cf. v.18a) is an obvious shift from the first that was on her worth and personality (v.10a).

אִשְׁת־חַיִל is described as one who gets up while it is still night (v.15a; 18b). She does so primarily for the care and concern of her family. A skilful wife / mother considers the welfare of the family first. Since she foresees her possible absence during the day because of her business, she endeavours not only to provide for the household, but also to apportion commensurate duties to the servant girls (נְעָרָה)<sup>57</sup> (v.15b). She does not relegate or even delegate what she sees as her primary duty. This does not make her the sole bread winner of the family as critics suggest. Provision of food here can also be seen in terms of performing family chores and food preparation. Simply put, she is an *astute organiser and mistress of her house*. Far from it that this reduces her to a homemaker; on the contrary, she has all the autonomy, economic power base, and the freedom to engage in inland and foreign trade.

<sup>57</sup> It is important to note that for a woman to own more than one servant girl in the family is a mark of affluence; cf. Gen 24:61; Ex 2:5; 1Sam 25:42; Esth 4:4,16; figuratively in Prov 9:3; also Ruth 2:8, 22-23; 3:2 in the case of Boaz.



In v.16 she is portrayed as a woman of foresight (cf. v.25b) and initiative in planning and strategising (זָמַם).<sup>58</sup> She engages in commerce, especially with her home-made products (cf. v.24); and in agriculture,<sup>59</sup> she makes critical decisions over purchase of land and planting of crops that will bring in gain. The choice to plant a vineyard, which from prehistorical times has a great value placed on it (Gen 9:20), brings her into the mainstream of Israelite culture and, indeed, the entire ancient Near East. For a vineyard is archetypal of what agriculture stands for in the region and, in Israel, a symbol of blessing, wealth, joy and prosperity for all time.<sup>60</sup> Her wisdom to acquire land and tend a vineyard has another implication; it reverses the irresponsibility of the lazy and stupid person who failed to care for both his field and vineyard (Prov 24:30-31).

Verses 17-19 describe her industry (cf. v.24). The metaphor, girdling the loins<sup>61</sup> with vigour (v.17a) used together with the verb אָמַץ “to strengthen” the arms (v.17b) expresses the capacity of the woman of substance for sustained work. The language of v.17 reflects much her epithet אִשְׁת־הִיל. Her activities show her to be a woman with vision, calculative and above all driven for gain. In spite of her desire for gain, she is not a selfish profiteer. Her gains she shares (v.20) with the materially and economically poor, עָנִי (cf. Prov 22:22; 30:14; 31:9) and the needy, אֶבְיֹן (cf. Prov 30:25; 31:19; Is 25:4).

Just as her husband has confidence in her so does she also have confidence in herself and in her capability to provide for the family at most critical times (snow period). She achieves absolute security and luxury<sup>62</sup> at hard times not by wishful thinking or false piety; but by concretely providing for the needs of her family – making suitable clothing and coverings

<sup>58</sup> This verb is used in a positive sense with a direct object to indicate the putting together of a plan or strategy on which to act; cf. Hartley, *zmm* 1112.

<sup>59</sup> It is interesting to observe how שָׂדֵה (field) is used together with כֶּרֶם (vineyard) in v.16 to express the sum total of agricultural resources (cf. Ex 22:4(5); Lev 25:3-4; Num 16:14; 20:17; 21:22; Judg 9:27; 1Sam 8:14; 22:7; Neh 5:3-5,11; Job 24:6; Ps 107:37; Prov 24:30-31; Jer 32:15; 35:9).

<sup>60</sup> One can therefore imagine the reason behind Ahab's avarice (1Kgs 21:6) or why YHWH insists on the first fruits of its produce being presented to him (Num 18:12; Dt 18:4); cf. Carpenter / Cornelius, *kerem*.

<sup>61</sup> The loins מִתְּנִיָּם has always depicted a place of strength and vigour (Dt 33:11; 1 Kgs 12:10 = 2 Chr 10:10; Job 40:6).

<sup>62</sup> This is symbolised by the materials scarlet (cf. 2Sam 1:24; Jer 4:30), fine-linen and purple (cf. Judg 8:26; Songs 3:10; 7:5(6); Ezk 27:7, 16; Dan 5:7, 16, 29; also Acts 16:14).



(vv.21-22).<sup>63</sup> It must also be remarked that this is one of the few instances in which attention is given to the physical appearance of the אִשְׁת־חַיִל (v.22b) and also her utilising part of her gain for herself (vv.21-22).

Her activities and character enhance the respect the husband commands among the elders in public gathering (at the gates) (v.23). There is no reason to suggest that the husband's dignity depends solely on that of the wife or that the wife's activities in running family affairs render the husband redundant. Rather, the wife's worth enhances the husband's dignity in the same way her industry brings socioeconomic well being to the family. The fact is, as Fontaine suggests, "her attention to household management frees her husband to fulfil extradomestic tasks."<sup>64</sup>

The double metaphor in v.25 – "Strength and dignity are her clothing", and her laughing (שָׂחַק) at the future (coming day) – summarises the qualities of the woman of substance. The metaphor hinges primarily on חַיִל first used in v.10 and, indeed, recaptures its real meaning. Only a woman of strength can be so defiant to what the future holds. The future poses no problem for her because she is self-confident and fully prepared for it (cf. Job 39:18, 22; 41:29[21]). Hence she laughs.

Up to now the אִשְׁת־חַיִל has been regarded by scholars as figure of wisdom. There are two indicators in the text, particularly v.10b, that seem to suggest this. Her worth like that of wisdom ranks above precious ornaments (corals) (cf. Job 28:18; Prov 3:15; 8:11; 20:15). But in v.26 she is just portrayed as a channel through which wisdom and faithful instruction flow.<sup>65</sup> However, the parallel here is not very obvious since she is not said to be wisdom herself. This is why I agree with Gilbert that the woman of Prov 31:10-31 is exemplary figure of the wise,<sup>66</sup> rather than personified wisdom herself.

The theme of being mistress of her family (cf. v.15) resurfaces in v.27 where it is shown that her numerous engagements do not undermine her primary commitment to the orderly affairs of her home. Thus she has a high

<sup>63</sup> It is interesting to observe that coverings (מְרִבְדִים) are used both by the capable wife (v.22) and the seductive wife (Prov 7:16). They both take pride in their labours but for different reasons; the former brings honour to her family, the latter dishonour; cf. Domeris, *ksh* 677.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Fontaine, *Wife* 304.

<sup>65</sup> The work of teaching and counselling is proper to a mother; it is a handing over of what a mother herself was taught to her own children (cf. Prov 1:8; 6:20). Fontaine, (Roles 31) rightly observes that the mother's role as instructor in her household is one of the great sources of power and authority in the traditional family setting.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Gilbert, *La donna* 147-167; also Cholin, *Structure* 346. For references to wise counsels by women in the OT see, 2Sam 14:1-14; 2Sam 20:15-22; Jdt 8:29-36; etc.



esteem at home; her children consider her to be fortunate, happy or rather blessed (אֲשֶׁר), and her husband praise her (v.28) in recognition of her selfless service to them (cf. Prov 3:18; 4:14; 9:6; 23:19). She is also worthy of praise in the public domain. Hence the poet / artist calls on the audience to accord her the praise<sup>67</sup> which her activities earn her.<sup>68</sup> Her deeds (מַעֲשֵׂיהָ) – enterprise and achievement – in the society make the praise singing imperative (v.31). The call goes to confirm the well-known maxim: “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth – a stranger, and not your own lips” (Prov 27:2) because self-praise is taken to be no commendation at all. Her receiving praise from within and outside her home contrasts with the sorrow experienced by a mother whose child does not heed instruction (cf. Prov 10:1; 15:20).

There are indications in the immediate preceding verses summarising, as it were, why the אִשְׁת־חַיִל deserves to be praised (תְּחַהֵּל):<sup>69</sup> she does not eat the bread of idleness (v.27a), she surpasses all women in performing noble things חַיִל (v.29) and does not go after illusive things (charms) and physical beauty (v.30a); above all, she fears<sup>70</sup> the Lord (v.30b). Thus the woman of substance is a figure that draws attention in a world of glamour to the fact that nobility resides not in physical charm and beauty, which are transient and deceptive, but in the fear of the Lord and in noble deeds. Her fear of the

<sup>67</sup> This is one of the occasions in which the audience is summoned to give praise to an individual. In overwhelming cases praises are only due to YHWH; Israel or rather the community has the obligation to render them to God (Ps 22:23(24); etc.). In fact, all the living have the obligation to praise God; only the dead are excluded (Is 38:18).

<sup>68</sup> The metaphor used is: “from the fruit of her hands”, signifying the reward that comes from her labour. The reward is in part expressed in the luxury she enjoys.

<sup>69</sup> Here is one of the few occasions, if not the only one, in which the hithpael form of this root occurs in the passive; cf. GK § 54g.

<sup>70</sup> The MT reading יִרְאֵת יְהוָה is a difficult one. It is not clear whether יִרְאֵת should be read as a feminine adjective as rendered by the LXX σοφειη = *nbwnh* (intelligent, wise), or as a noun in construct with יהוה (MT also LXX φόβον κυρίου), thus placing יִרְאֵת יְהוָה in apposition with אִשָּׁה. The confusion must have resulted in a somewhat LXX's conflating two different idioms, the one with σοφειη, “for it is a wise woman that is blessed”, and the other with φόβον, “but let her praise the fear of the Lord”. This is probably an attempt to make the MT reading more intelligible. However, the reading of Aquila, Peshitta, Targum and the Vulgate, “A woman who fears the Lord, she is to be praised”, has thrown more light to the difficult text. In other words, her piety as the fearer of the Lord rather than her intelligence is the *raison d'être* for her being praised. For more comments, see Lichtenstein, Chiasm 209, esp. n.19; also McCreesh, Wisdom 28-29 n.11.



Lord is her source of confidence; it explains why she does not fear any mishap to her household (v.21).

The woman of substance is presented all through as woman for action, always with a verb predicated to her. Only two adjectives (רְבוּחַ טוֹב) are used in the poem; but none of them qualifies her directly. The first is used in relation to her profit (v.18) and the other to the women she is compared with (v.29). Her physical appearance is never a subject of any figurative speech. The metaphors and similes that are used have either her personal qualities or her activities as “vehicles” (cf. vv.10, 14, 17, 25, 27, 31). With her personal qualities and activities, which are encapsulated in חַיִל, she improves on the socio-economic situation of her family (vv.14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 22, 24) and on the family image (vv.23; 28, 31). There is a great affinity between the characteristics of the woman here and Ruth whose husband describes as אִשְׁת־חַיִל (Ruth 3:10-11). Both are daring and very resourceful in providing a livelihood for the family in which they are proudly rooted. They awaken their husband’s good memory of them, causing them to praise their performance and their personality.<sup>71</sup>

We can see, as McCreesh rightly points out, “this particular portrait of a busy, industrious wife is intentionally one-sided because it is meant to describe not just any wife, not even the ideal wife, but a very special, unique wife. This wife is at the heart and source of everything that happens within her domain.”<sup>72</sup> The artist of this ode has created out of the אִשְׁת־חַיִל an image of a woman of many parts. That is also what the *oriki*-like genre achieves in African context.

## 5. Woman of Substance in African Perspective

The point of contact between the presentation of the woman of substance in Prov 31:10-31 and in African culture is not in the acrostic pattern of the text, which is visibly lacking in African poetry, but in her qualities and activities. We now survey this through the help of some typical recitals in African praise poetry, short wisdom sayings (proverbs), and traditional views about women in some African societies that show affinity with Prov 31:10-31 in their message and idealised and flamboyant language.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. McCreesh, Wisdom 38-40; also Nwaoru, Boundaries 104-122.

<sup>72</sup> McCreesh, Wisdom 28.



## 5.1 African Praise Poetry

Our first text is personal *oriki* (recitals) which have Arinke, the daughter of *ile* Aro-Isale who married *oba* Adeoba as subject. The *oriki* read:<sup>73</sup>

*What about Enikeejinmi, Mogbeola, one whom we plead with to  
dress up, child of 'Wealth at Isan'  
Enikeejinmi, child of one who finds lovers where money is plenty  
One whom we plead with to dress up, one whose family [status]  
prevented her from finding a husband  
She proceeded gently and arrived at the house of [i.e. married] Adeoba  
Arinke one who has everything anyone could want  
She stands out among her peers most distinctly  
She's a person who stands out like the middle bead in a string  
Not knowing how to dance allows the visitors to dance  
My mother Arinke knows how to dance better than the visitors  
Child of 'The pepper leaf spreads'  
Real native of Aran, child of 'The worm rejoices'  
Arinke can go masquerading wherever she likes  
So she went to the house of Adeoba  
She went entertaining to Ipo  
Our mother Arinke felt like going entertaining to Ofa, so she went  
Arinke felt like going entertaining to Ijagbo, so she went  
And when she felt like it, she went entertaining to the house of the oba*

The purpose of the recital is to praise the great achievement of the woman at the centre of the *oriki* for her outstanding character and great achievements, which include having the capacity to stand out against her good background, surpassing all other young women who surround her to marry the *Oba*. The language and some of the sayings are as impressive as those of Prov 31:10-31. They are coloured with figurative speech. For instance, the epithet “child of wealth” recalls the name, “woman of substance”. The reason for her not finding suitable husband (line 3) provides insight to the rhetorical question of Prov 31:10a: she is a noble woman from a good family and, so, can afford to be selective. Like the woman of substance (v.29) she is said to surpass all her peers (ll. 6-7) because of her sterling qualities. One of the major metaphors in the *oriki* is created out of a middle bead which by dividing the string makes itself conspicuous and outstanding among other beads (l. 7). All she is and has is summed up in the assessment: “She has everything anyone could want” (l. 5), including the autonomy and freedom to dance wherever she felt like dancing (ll. 15-17). Her superior

<sup>73</sup> Here is the English translation of the original Yoruba version by Barber (I Could Speak 272-273), taken from a performance by a woman artist Sangowemi in honour of members of *ile* Aro-Isale.



status does not make her selfish or look down on others as evidenced in allowing visitors (the inexperienced) to share in her joys (dance) (cf. Prov 31:20).

In homage to a woman of substance at the core of her family and society, Rose Ure Mezu dedicates this poem:

*You are Woman  
Although you could scatter  
You often prefer to gather  
You could strike out in conquest  
Yet balance in the home is your quest  
For You, my dear, are eternal Woman.*

*You shoulder the burden of the ages  
With the patient wisdom of the sages  
The tripod task of man, child and Self  
Is a juggling act worthy of an elf itself  
But all know You are capable Woman.*

*Although most often there's no appreciation  
Yet you people the earth as if by proclamation  
Reaping in return naught but fearful domination  
But eternal woman, march on to life's termination  
Because ordained from on High, You are the Woman.*

*Tis only the strong who know how to stoop  
Tis only the brave who pretend to lose  
Tis only the kind who suffer and smile  
Tis only the wise who can quell the strife  
Tis only You Creator / Nurturer/Worker Woman  
Tis only You, my dear, who are Wonder Woman.*

*Since the dawn of life you are made scapegoat  
Yet across the ages, You carry a great workload  
But say! If one day you decide to proclaim a strike  
Then it will dawn on all that you're the pillar of life:  
Indestructible, Irreplaceable, Irrepressible!  
Capable, eternal, wonder Woman! You are Woman.<sup>74</sup>*

This poem bears the basic characteristics of Prov 31:10-31 notwithstanding its expressing the immediate concern of modern women in Africa, especially with regard to lack of appreciation for the role of women (line 12); fearful domination (l. 14), and being made scapegoat (l. 23). Its subject, the woman of substance, is presented as a woman who prefers to gather rather than to scatter in her home; she longs to balance up the affairs of her

<sup>74</sup> Visit her collection *Homage to My People* at  
[www.nathanielturner.com/africanawomen2.htm](http://www.nathanielturner.com/africanawomen2.htm).



household. With wisdom she organises the affairs in the home and performs her duties in the private and public domain. She is not only repeatedly named “capable woman” but indeed given epithets – Creator / Nurturer / Worker – that are no less those of the woman in Prov 31. She is the one who “suffer and smile”, “the wise who can quell the strife”, and “carry a great workload” in the family. Although there is no invitation in the poem to praise the woman of outstanding qualities, the intensity of the last two lines of the ode already suggests applause. “Then it will dawn on all that you’re the pillar of life: Indestructible, Irreplaceable, Irrepressible! Capable, eternal, wonder Woman! Here again is the flamboyant and idealised language characteristic of Prov 31:10-31.

### 5.2 Short Wisdom Sayings (Proverbs)

On the near impossibility of finding an all-round woman of substance (Prov 31:10) the African sage would say: “*Ezi nwanyi di uko*” - a good wife is uncommon or rare to find. Another saying expresses it more figuratively thus: “[...] to find a “good wife that never grumble” is like looking for a pin in a hay stack- a near impossible task.”<sup>75</sup>

The mutual trust between the woman of substance and her husband (v.11) is expressed in a series of African proverbs: In a Ghanaian proverb we are told: “The most ideal marriage is that between the teeth and the tongue,”<sup>76</sup> and in a Nigerian proverb: “The hen knows the dawn is here but leaves the duty of crowing to the cock.”<sup>77</sup> The husband of the woman lacks nothing of value (v.11b) and so can afford to say to his colleagues in the city gate: “Once you have the head of the cow, what business have you anymore with the tail or leg?”<sup>78</sup> This is because he has full confidence in the wife (v.11a) whom he can truly nickname “*Obi di ya*” – the husband’s heart, i.e. a woman who knows the heart of her husband. On the contrary, “the husband whose wife dances badly scratches his eyes while the dance lasts” says an Igbo proverb. She does not bring him respect in public gathering (v.23). Her generosity in sharing her gains with the poor (v.20) would be expressed in a proverb of the Sango in Central African Republic thus: *Yanga da so a zi mingui, a ngassa li da* – the door that is widely opened let in even goats.

<sup>75</sup> Owan, Wisdom 14.

<sup>76</sup> Owan, Wisdom 36.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Owan, Wisdom 27. A Lugbara proverb puts it this way: “The woman is the rib of man” parallel to Gen 2:21-22; cf. Dalfovo, Proverbs 237.

<sup>78</sup> Owan, Wisdom 47.



Prov 31:26-28 has shown that it is the mark of woman of substance to give faithful instruction to her children. Failure to do so, African thought assumes, will yield a corresponding reward. For instance, a Cameroonian proverb says: "A mother who carelessly breastfeed her child risks being bitten on her nipples."<sup>79</sup> In other words, pain will substitute for praise. Another saying confirms this: "A home which neglects the upbringing of its children in quest for material wealth should wait for a harvest of troubles."<sup>80</sup>

As nobility of character is paramount in the image-making of the woman of substance of Prov 31, so it is in the naming of a woman in Africa. Thus the Igbo say, "*Agwa (nwanyị) bu mma*" – character is the beauty of a woman. The repercussion for not possessing it is regrettably expressed in another pertinent Nigerian proverb: "the woman who outgrows her underwears (sic) will one day dance naked in the square."<sup>81</sup> It is remarkable that like the Biblical poet the African poet underscores the interdependence of the praise accorded to the individual in society on the person's character and achievement (v.31; also v.28).

### 5.3 Popular Traditional Views

How an African perceives today the image (qualities and activities) of the woman of substance in Prov 31:10-31 will definitely evoke nostalgia for such women in traditional African societies.<sup>82</sup> Those women had great autonomy; they were as capable as their male counterparts and were symbols of high esteem for the African woman. Basden, a missionary of the colonial period once remarked among the Igbo: "There are instances of women becoming rich, but they are the kind who prefer an independent life, and are able to dominate the situation; they are not of the average type. A few women occupy very influential positions, and by force of character and sheer ability have become wealthy."<sup>83</sup>

The mark of the woman of substance is to provide for her household (cf. v.15) and establish herself as organiser and mistress of her house (cf. v.27). In many traditional African societies, women were in fact those who provi-

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Owan, Wisdom 78.

<sup>80</sup> Mgbodile, Wisdom 117.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Owan, Wisdom 26.

<sup>82</sup> They include among many others: Nzinga, Amazon Queen of Matamba, Nandi Queen of Zululand, Amina Queen of Zaria, Omu Okwei of Osomari and Queen Kambasa of Bonny, Nigeria, Nehanda Mbuya (Grandmother) of Zimbabwe, Yaa Asantewa of the Ashanti Empire.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Basden, Niger 208.



ded “the lion share of the normal family food ... out of their own money.”<sup>84</sup> In this regard the portrait Mezu has of her mother recalls to a great extent what we know of a typical African mother and wife – “loving, organized, disciplined, busy at home, in the farm, and with other business ventures. She had farms that produced sheaves of vegetables for early morning sale ... also taught other women to bake for a fee.” She goes on to describe this industrious woman as “a community *othermother*”,<sup>85</sup> an epithet, which I believe, belongs to a woman of substance par excellence, and which Prov 31:10-31 is out to epitomise. Hence a Sango proverb tells us: *Wali a yeke mve ti da* – A woman is the owner of the house.

Like the woman of substance, many African wealthy women traders (professionals?) not only contribute to but also, sometimes, maintain their husband’s homesteads. They have a considerable economic power base, and the freedom to engage in local and foreign trade. Perhaps this is why Uchendu maintains that an Igbo woman “enjoys a socioeconomic and legal status. ... She marries in her own right and manages her trading capital and her profits as she sees fit ... they can have leasehold, take titles, and practice medicine.”<sup>86</sup> Although such women in reality may be said to be in the minority in Africa just as they were in ancient Israel, Africans hold women and their role in the home and society irreplaceable and indispensable. They recognise that “behind a successful man there is a woman.” In other words, the success or failure of a man begins with the kind of wife he marries. That is why it is cautioned that if a husband is then fortunate to have a wife of substance he must never take the sense of compliment for granted or stifles genuine initiatives from her. The reason is evident in the saying: “A man that wants to keep his home in peace must appreciate the efforts of his wife.”<sup>87</sup> Above all, “the cow that must be milked must not be pinched by the tail.”<sup>88</sup> The husband of the woman of substance realised the veracity of this secret in his own family and acted accordingly (cf. Prov 31:11, 14, 16, 28).

---

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Green, Igbo 170.

<sup>85</sup> Mezu, Women, at <http://jewel.morgan.edu/~mezu/index.html>

<sup>86</sup> Uchendu, Igbo 87. The autonomy is affirmed by the earlier observation made by Basden, Ibo 93-95; cf. Prov 31:14,16,18.

<sup>87</sup> Mgbodile, Wisdom 111.

<sup>88</sup> Owan, Wisdom 42.



## 6. Conclusion

From the characteristics of ancient Israel's heroic poetry evident in this poem and from what is known of African recitals, Prov 31:10-31 could be a frantic attempt by a female artist to revisit the dynamic female oral past through reverberating the praises of a historical woman of many parts and strength, thus delineating where the greatness and nobility of womanhood lie. This is understandable at a period when ideal feminine perfection in the erotic poetry of ancient Near East was measured in praise of physical charms and their sex appeal rather than in woman's *vita activa* in the home and community.<sup>89</sup> Prov 31:10-31 presents a figure of a wife and mother, strong and capable in business and managerial skills, rich in virtuous life and in the fear of the Lord (v.30). Her image is that of one whose creative force her family and the society at large must acknowledge and appreciate and not that of a passive victim of social inequalities.

From this study, one can also say that some indicators in African Wisdom corpus have shed more light on the image of אִשֶׁת-חַיִל. The *oriki*-like genre has made it possible to understand why Prov 31:10-31 has to be different from the rest of the book of the Proverbs and how suited it is to be its conclusion. It is a chant in praise of a wife and mother who has given faithful instruction to her children and household. It is an ode of an "actual" woman and not a personified mystical figure. Her qualities and activities show her to be an ideal woman, but not idolised or deified.<sup>90</sup>

The embellished and colourful language is typical of the genre; for the subject of praise, they say, is also the object of attention. If there are polemics, they are primarily directed against the excesses of certain women in the Israelite society, and by extension Israel's neighbours, including Africa, who parade themselves as women of substance but are, in fact, ill-tempered women (Prov 12:4; 19:13; 21:9,19; 25:24; 27:15-16), nagging wives (Prov 19:13), adulterous wives (Prov 5:3; 6:29-35; 7:19-23; 12:4), etc. Such polemic is meant to challenge women who do not aspire to nobility of character rooted in the fear of YHWH. It is also instructive to husbands who would not give the needed autonomy to their wives to be themselves.

The image of the אִשֶׁת-חַיִל has put to question whether indeed ours was / is purely a male-only world as some trends seem today to suggest. From

<sup>89</sup> Wolters (Proverbs 456-457), however, finds reason for the "heroicizing" of the accomplishments of the woman of substance in the polemics against the intellectual ideal of Hellenism and in the attempt to reevaluate what constitutes military prowess.

<sup>90</sup> This was the case with Hatshepsut, Nefertari, Nefertiti, Queen mothers and women of substance in national and international affairs in ancient Egypt, Nyabingi of East Africa, etc.



time, two ideological currents have always existed in the Biblical world and African culture. The one derives the status of the wife from her husband, and the other extols the indispensability of the wife to and autonomy from the husband. Both are expressed in African proverbs, “*Mma (ugwu) nwanyi bu di*” (The beauty (dignity) of the wife derives from the husband), and “*Nwanyi bu ugo di ya*” – A woman is the crown of her husband (cf. Prov 31:23; also 12:4).<sup>91</sup> Notwithstanding these two currents of thought, *complementarity* and *interdependence* have always been advocated as the choice relationship between husband and wife (cf. Gen 2:22-23; Sir 25:1). Each partner maximises whatever he or she has for the good of the family. That is the principle governing the activities of the woman of substance in Prov 31:10-31; it is also the principle many African proverbs seek to inculcate.<sup>92</sup>

No matter in which culture she is found, a woman of substance will always support the family with her personal qualities and her trade and industry not because the husband is imperious or lazy, but because it is an aspect of her nobility of character. She also shows herself mistress of the household not because she is domineering, but because she has the natural capacity to achieve in her own right what traditionally would be seen as men’s feat. It is in being herself that she attains self-actualisation, be able to dictate her own terms of engagement within her family and society. Given the context of Prov 31:10-31, it will definitely be hasty to reduce the woman of substance to a marginalised, voiceless wife, or a “sweet mother” symbol that is good only for the home. Rather her image, I suppose, is that of a true womanist, whose career and quest never robbed her of her womanhood and care for the household – husband, children, servant girls and family chores. Unfortunately, indeed, such women are rare to find. As A. Clarke would put it: “There are very few of those who are called managing women who are not lords over their husbands, tyrants over their servants, and insolent among their neighbors. But this woman, with all her eminence and excellence, was of a meek and quiet spirit.”<sup>93</sup>

### Summary

The history of interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31 shows that the image of the woman at the centre of the poem is not sacrosanct. Oftentimes, she has been misjudged and her activities misunderstood. This paper is an attempt to put in context the

<sup>91</sup> Another Igbo proverb puts it thus: “*Nwanyi ji oji (e ji eko di ya)*” – A wife’s behaviour determines the honour or respect due to her husband.

<sup>92</sup> “*Ike adighi nwoko kute nwanyi ya, nwanyi ekute di ya*” – If a man can’t (doesn’t have the resources) to support the wife, the wife (who has) should support the husband.

<sup>93</sup> See his comment on Prov 31:26 in Clarke’s Commentary OT 1856-1857.



image of the אִשְׁת־חַיִל, as she is rightly named (v.10), a woman whose husband, children and general public accord praises for her qualities and activities (vv.28, 31). It also proposes that greater understanding of Prov 31:10-31 lies in discovering the secret of the genre of the text; and that one can find a key to unlock that secret in *recital*, a genre generally found in African Wisdom corpus, designed to chant the praise of a personality that has achieved greatness in society. Its finding is that Prov 31:10-31 is an ode of an “actual” woman and not a personified mystical figure. Her qualities and activities show her to be an ideal woman and mother, but not idolised or deified. These give her the image of one whose creative force her family and the society at large must acknowledge and appreciate and not a passive victim of social inequalities.

### Zusammenfassung

Die Auslegungsgeschichte von Spr 31,10-31 zeigt, dass das Bild der Frau unterschiedlich gesehen wird. Häufig werden sie und deren Aktivitäten missverstanden. Dieser Artikel ist der Versuch, das Bild der אִשְׁת־חַיִל, wie sie richtig bezeichnet werden müsste (V.10), im Hinblick auf ihren Gatten, deren Kinder und der öffentlichen Anerkennung, wodurch deren Qualitäten und Aktivitäten (VV.28.31) gerühmt werden, zu stellen. Das vertiefte Verständnis von Spr 31,10-31 liegt in der Entdeckung der subtilen Absicht der Textgattung. Es handelt sich um ein „recital“ (öffentlicher Vortrag), eine allgemeine literarische Gattung afrikanischen Weisheit: ein Preislied für große Persönlichkeiten der Gesellschaft. Spr 31,10-31 ist ein Hymnus über eine „konkrete“ Frau, und nicht für eine personifizierte Idealgestalt. Ihre Fähigkeiten und Tätigkeiten zeigen sie als ideale Frau und Mutter, aber nicht vergöttlicht. Das lässt sie als eine aktive Kraft für ihre Familie und die Gesellschaft, jedoch nicht als passives Opfer sozialer Ungleichheit erscheinen.

### Bibliographie

- Barber, K., I could Speak until Tomorrow, Oriki Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town (IAL 7), Edinburgh 1991.
- Basden, G.T., Among the Ibos of Nigeria, London 1921.
- Basden, G.T., Niger Ibos, London 1938.
- Baumgartner, W., The Wisdom Literature, in: Rowley, H.H. (Hg.), The Old Testament and Modern Study: A Generation of Discovery and Research (trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas), Oxford 1951.
- Bellis, A.O., Helpmates, harlots and heroes: Women's stories in the Hebrew Bible, Louisville 1994.
- Brenner, A., Proverbs 1-9: An F voice?, in: Brenner, A. / van Dijk-Hemmes F. (Hg.), On Gendering texts: female and male voices in the Hebrew Bible, Leiden 1993, 127-130.
- Brockmöller, K., Chiasmus und Symmetrie, zur Diskussion um eine sinnvolle Struktur in Spr 31,10-31: BN 110 (2001) 12-18.
- Camp, C., What's so Strange About the Strange Woman?, in: Jobling, D. u.a. (Hg.), The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday, Cleveland 1991, 17-31.
- Camp, C., Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs, Sheffield 1985.



- Carpenter, E. / Cornelius I., *kerem*, in: NIDOTTE 2, 1997, 723-724.
- Chitando, E., 'The Good Wife': A Phenomenological Re-reading of Proverbs 31:10-31 in the Context of HIV / AIDS in Zimbabwe: *Scriptura* 86 (2004) 151-159.
- Cholin, M., Structure de Proverbes 31:10-31: *RB* 108 (2001) 331-348.
- Clarke, A., Job-Song of Solomon, Commentary OT 3, The AGES Digital Library commentary Version 5, Albany 1997.
- Clifford, R.J., Proverbs. A Commentary (OTL), Louisville 1999.
- Crook, M.B., The Marriage maiden of Prov 31:10-31: *JNES* 13 (1954) 137-140.
- Dalfovo, A.T., *Lögbara Proverbs*, Rome 1984.
- Dietrich, W., *Das Buch der Sprüche* (Wuppertaler Studienbibel. AT), Wuppertal, 1985.
- Domeris, W.R., *ksh*, in: VanGemeren, W.A. u.a. (Hg.), NIDOTTE 2, 1997, 674-678.
- Eissfeldt, O., *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (trans. P.R. Ackroyd), New York 1965.
- Emenanjo, E.N., Igbo or Igboid: Asusu n'Agburu ndi Igbo Language in Igbo Civilization, Owerri 2001.
- Fontaine, C.R., The Social Roles of Women in the World of Wisdom, in: Brenner, A. (Hg.), *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, Sheffield 1995.
- Fontaine, C.R., Wife, in: Meyers, C., u.a. (Hg.), *Women in Scripture*, Grand Rapids 2001[2000], 303-304.
- Gemser, B., *Sprüche Salomos* (HAT 16), Tübingen 1963.
- Gerstenberger, E.S., *Theologies in the Old Testament* (trans. J. Bowden), London / New York 2002.
- Gese, H., Wisdom Literature in the Persian Period, in: Davies, W.D. / Finkelstein, L. (Hg.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism I. Introduction. The Persian Period*, Cambridge 1984, 200-211.
- Gilbert, M., *La donna forte di Proverbi 31,10-31 in Libro dei Proverbi*, Casale Monferrato 1999, 147-167.
- Ginsberg, H.L., *The Israelian Heritage of Judaism* (Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America 24), New York 1982.
- Gottlieb C., The Words of the exceedingly Wise: Proverbs 30:31, in: Younger, K.L. u.a. (Hg.), *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective: Scripture in Context IV*, Lewiston 1991, 277-298.
- Gous, I.G.P., Proverbs 31:10-31 – The A to Z of Woman Wisdom (Old Testament Essays 9,1), 1996, 35-51.
- Green M.M., *Igbo Village Affairs*, London<sup>2</sup>1964.
- Gunkel, H., *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, Göttingen 1933.
- Gunkel, H., *The Psalms. A Form-Critical Introduction*, Philadelphia 1967.
- Hamilton, V.P., *'iššá*, in: NIDOTTE 1, 1997, 537-540.
- Hartley, J.E., *zmm*, in: NIDOTTE 1, 1997, 1112-1114.
- Hitzig, F., *Die Sprüche Solomo's*, Zürich 1858.
- Hurowitz, A., The Seventh Pillar – Reconsidering the Literary Structure and Unity of Proverbs 31: *ZAW* 113 (2001) 209-218.
- Lichtenstein, M.H., Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31: *CBQ* 44 (1982) 202-211.
- Luke, K., The Ideal Wife (Prv 31:10-31: *Jeev* 21 (1991) 118-132.
- Lyons, E.L., A Note on Proverbs 31:10-31, in: Hoglund, K.G. u.a. (Hg.), *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy*, O. Carm. (JSOTSup 58), Sheffield 1987, 237-243.



- Maier, C., Die "fremde Frau" in Proverbien 1-9: Einer exegetische und sozialgeschichtliche Studie (OBO 144), Göttingen 1995.
- McCreech, Th.P., Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31: RB 92 (1985) 25-46.
- McKane, W., Proverbs A New Introduction (OTL), London 1970.
- Meinhold, A., Die Sprüche. Teil 1 u. 2: Sprüche, Zürich 1991.
- Mezu R.U., African Women. Their Historic Past and Future Activism:  
<<http://jewel.morgan.edu/~mezu/index.html>>
- Mezu, R.U., Homage to My People:  
<<http://www.nathanielturner.com/africanawomen2.htm>>
- Mgbodile, T.O., African Wisdom, Enugu 2000.
- Nwaoru, E.O., Transcending the Boundaries of Ethnic Bias: Lessons in the Book of Ruth, in: Nwaigbo, F. u.a. (Hg.), Ethnicity and Christian Leadership in West African Sub-Region, Port Harcourt 2004, 104-122.
- Obersteiner J., Die Erklärung von Proverbia 31,10-31 durch Beda den Ehrwürdigen und Bruno on Asti: TPQ 102 (1954) 1-12.
- Owan, K.J.N., African Proverbial Wisdom Series 1, Iperu-Remo 2000.
- Perdue, L.G., Wisdom Theology and Social History in Proverbs 1-9, in: Barré, M.L., (Hg.), Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., on the occasion of his Eightieth Birthday (CBQMS 29), Washington D.C. 1997, 79-80.
- Plöger, O., Sprüche Salomos (BK 17), Neukirchen-Vluyt 1984.
- Rahner, H., Maria und die Kirche, Innsbruck 1951.
- Rendsburg G.A., Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms (SBLMS 43), Atlanta 1990.
- Schroer, S., Wise and Counselling Women in Ancient Israel: Literary and Historical Ideals of the Personified Ḥokmâ, in: Brenner, A. (Hg.), A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature, Sheffield 1995, 67-84.
- Scott, R.B.Y., Proverbs / Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Translation and Notes (AncB 18), Garden City 1965.
- Skehan, P., Studies in Ancient Israelite Poetry and Wisdom (CBQMS 1), Washington DC 1971, 9-45.
- Toy, C.H., A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs (ICC), Edinburgh [1914] 1977.
- Uchendu, V.A., The Igbo of South East Nigeria, New York / London 1965.
- Vaux de, R., Ancient Israel Its Life and Institutions (trans. J. McHugh), London 1973.
- Washington, H.C., Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs (SBLDS 142), Atlanta 1994, 111-133.
- Watson, W.G.E., Classical Hebrew Poetry (JSOTSup 26), Sheffield 1984.
- Whybray, R.N., The Book of Proverbs, Cambridge 1972.
- Whybray, R.N., The Composition of the Book of Proverbs (JSOTSup 168), Sheffield 1994.
- Wolff, H.W., Anthropologie des Alten Testaments, Munich 1973.
- Wolters Al, ŠŌPIYYÂ (Prov 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on Sophia: JBL 104 (1985) 577-587.
- Wolters, Al, Proverbs XXXI 10-31 as Heroic Hymn: A Form-critical Analysis: VT 38 (1988) 446-457.



- Wünsche, A., Die Schönheit der Bibel (Erster Band: Die Schönheit des Alten Testaments), Leipzig 1906.
- Yoder, Chr.R., The Woman of Substance (אִשְׁת־חַיִל): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10-31: JBL 122 (2003) 427-447.
- Yoder, Chr.R., Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31 (BZAW 304), Berlin / New York 2001.

Emmanuel O. Nwaoru  
Department of Biblical Studies  
Catholic Institute of West Africa;  
P.O. Box 499 - Port Harcourt,  
Nigeria  
eonwaoru@yahoo.com