

## Images of Women in Agikuyyu *Mwomboko* Poetry: A Selection from Performing Artists from Mount Kenya Region

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### Abstract

*The position of women in African societies has been contested in terms of their treatment in social and poetic discourse in contemporary society. The case of traditional and modern poetic dances is spelt out in the composing and rendition of Mwomboko poetry of the Agikuyyu people of Mount Kenya Region. The objectives of this study are: (a) To assess how select compositions of Mwomboko poetry spell out treatment of women in Mount Kenya region community; (b) To analyze how figurative language is applied in select compositions of Mwomboko poetry to approximate images of women in Mount Kenya region community, and (c) To explore the innovativeness of oral poets' poetic architecture in charting out the position of women in contemporary society. Popular artists in Africa have tended to be the mouth pieces of revealing the societal structures that spell out the relationship between men and women as shown through poetic discourse. The place of performance has emerged as a central pivot for linking up members of the community in their efforts to understand their worldview. The emergence of modern performers has created a new forum for capturing the imagination of target recipients in an open multi-ethnic audience. The audience has been mainly in hotels, motels and bars, social halls, wedding reception halls/grounds, political rally grounds, and church service halls among others. The current work hinges on the level of deconstruction theory as seen through feminist and gender lens in contemporary times. The images of women revealed in Mwomboko poetry are constructions by architects of the traditional cum modern poetic genre, and the findings reveal a move towards balanced portrayal of both genders in emergent renditions. The study uses descriptive techniques in analysis of figurative language applied by traditional and modern singers to approximate old meanings to new meanings in their performances as far as images of women are represented.*

**Key Words:** Gikuyu, Women, Mwomboko Poetry, Performance, Artists, Construction, Deconstruction, Reconstruction, Feminism.

## Introduction

The Agikuyu people live mainly in the central part of Kenya, but a large number are also scattered in other parts of Kenya which include Nairobi, Rift valley Province, Parts of the Eastern and parts of Lamu areas of the coastal region. The coming of whites from Europe changed the Agikuyu way of life by translocating them from their original habitat, for the settlers preferred to occupy higher land which they dubbed 'White Highlands'. The Agikuyu myth of origin revolves around the first man and woman named Gikuyu and Mumbi respectively. The two had nine daughters who formed the clans that structure out the Agikuyu people. The Gikuyu community emerged as a matrilineal society in that each daughter headed her family after the husbands who came to marry them settled among the Gikuyu people. Over the years the men took over (people) the power from women and Gikuyu society became a patriarchal society. The women were marginalized and gradually they became 'minority' in their own community. In terms of cultural practices, the Gikuyu had their own oral narratives, songs and dances, proverbs, riddles and tongue twisters among others.

In the musical genre there emerged *Mwomboko* dance as a traditional cum modern oral poetic form in the 1930s which developed mainly in the 1940s. The soldiers who participated in first world war were among the first travelers to come back home with the accordion musical instrument which they used to accompany the lyrics of an oral poet in a *Mwomboko* dance which had been there since time immemorial. The *Karing'aring'a* percussion instrument was also improvised from metallic parts of the engine of a vehicle for women to play, since the men monopolized the beloved accordion. *Mwomboko* composers focused mainly on the themes of love, sex and marriage, and the lyrics that were composed were full of imagery drawn from the immediate local environment.

## Images of Women in *Mwomboko* Poetry

This paper explores the emergent images of women in Agikūyū *Mwomboko* poetry from the feminist theoretical angle. In composition renditions and song-text making there appears to be a trend whereby *Mwomboko* performing oral artists rise to the occasion to chart mental pictures of the aesthetic beauty and aura of social life in Mount Kenya region. The genesis for resistance against foreign intrusion in Kenya started as early in earnest majorly in the 1920s. The socio-historical and political conflicts are stored in the song genre and dances composed by these traditional oral artists, but the crafting of traditional songs bearing the allegory of sex and marriage in terms of composition and rendition of *Muthirigu* and *Mwomboko* poetry appear to display gender bias and political interrelations. Even in the nuances of the

struggle for independence the position of women appears to be negated by oral poets who are involved in political activism as they use images of women to drive home their messages as regards political, social and economic freedom. Poetically, women tend to be used allegorically to be representative of a diversity of conflicts between the White colonizers and their Black subjects.

Oral literature from Africa is rich in revealing African heritage within the realms of African oral traditions. Through the various genres of the discipline is creation of literary experience for instance poetry rendition. Scholars in the field of literature have had divergent but agreeable views about the growth and development of African oral poetry. Performance of African rites and rituals has more often than not been expressed through oral poetry.

Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics*, (1975: 23) observes that:

Poetry lies at the centre of literary experience because it is the form that most clearly asserts the specificity of literature, its difference from ordinary discourse by an empirical individual about the world.

Ruth Finnegan (1977: 201) notes the same but in much more detail when she writes:

It is true audiences play a more directly influential part in the creation of oral literature than is common with written literature and the process of variability in oral poetry and the influence of traditional conventions from which a poet selects means that in one sense many poets play a part in the composition of poetry and not just one original composer on the model of written literature.

Essentially popular secular songs artists perform for both active and passive audiences. In night clubs and hotels, the clientele normally joins in singing and dancing. At home, listeners enjoy their lyrics as they perform their chores at their places of work.

It is in this context, Mwangi (2002:116) averred that:

The gestures and body movements enhance the implied meaning in songs and also direct dancers to change from one dance movement to another. From this angle, we advance that the dynamics of performance and the performer: gestures, facial expression, teasing, antics and body movements constitute the dramatic elements of *Mwomboko* poetry.

Performance of oral arts is a driving force towards attaining societal solidarity in addressing issues of socio-cultural as well as liberalism in contemporary times.

Tong Rosemarie (*Feminist Thought*; 1989) claims that "Liberal feminism emerges as an appropriate strand of feminism that has guided...the offshoot of African feminism. Liberal feminism is in the process of re-conceptualizing, reconsidering, and restricting itself, which makes it difficult to determine the status of liberal feminist thought." There are varied views on what motivates feminism as a realm of fighting for equity and equality in our contemporary society. From this end, every society has its own informed reasons for appreciating or not the social construction of gender.

As Vansina (1994: 94) says:

Communication presupposes society and all messages are social products. Hence messages of oral tradition have a social face. They are significant to members of the communities in which they are told. Otherwise, they would not be communicated at all. Would the social pressure not alter the contents of a message? No doubt, this occurs, and, as all messages from tradition are altered in the present, when they are recorded they are strongly influenced by the social present. Therefore, one must assess the extent of such influences, the means by which they can be recognized, and the ways in which the interpretation of any message will have to take such influences into account.

It is observable that Mwomboko poetry is a social product, which facilitates dissemination of knowledge on oral traditions and the emerging modern art in our contemporary society. The reflections of a social face is quite crucial and significant not only to the Gikuyu Community but to the Kenyan Society as it incorporates a diversified element of music across Kenya.

Further Jan Vansina (1994:96) advances the argument that:

Social construction of gender is an end result of the process of socialization – a process through which the values, norms, beliefs, wisdom, philosophy, customs, skills and practices of the community and the society are learned, accepted and internalized.

There is a kind of revelation of aspects of social constructs and cognitive constructs in the interpretation of the data evident in song-texts. In this study, a major focus of social constructionism is geared towards uncovering the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. Through the eyes of the secular songs artists, the

approach involves looking at the ways social phenomena are developed, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition by the human web.

In Gikuyu history the most famous famine was dubbed: *ngaragu ya mianga*. That is, "The hunger of cassava" and *Ngaragu ya Kimotho*, "The Hunger of Kimotho." The type of hunger alluded to in this song-text, is "hunger" for love and stable marriage. The matters of gender interrelationship are broached in a negative light. The Momo domineering image in contemporary style as applied symbolism in secular renditions captures the direction *Mwomboko* oral artists take in shaping their oral composition. The Momo companion as female person does not reciprocate nor complement the efforts made by the weak spouse who appears to be whining for sympathy from the audience. *Mwomboko* oral artists are also keen in draining out images of women as food to be consumed by hungry eaters. The food metaphor is a recurrent technique for airing sensitive societal issues like hunger for conjugal rights. While handling gender imbalances in the contemporary realities oral artists tend to blame unfulfilled conjugal rights on the lifestyles adopted by "people of the city."

Richard Bauman (1992:290) in his study of popular art forms and relevance on performance approach usage observes: Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience in the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation in the way it is done, in the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence.

African Folk music and dance are genres that are performed in a dichotomous rendition in that it is rare to find an African song that is not danced in performative lines. Among the Agikuyu the terms *rwiimbo* (singular) and *Nyiimbo* (plural) stand for both songs and dance. When one says: *Twathii rwiimbo rwa mwomboko* it implies that one has gone to sing and dance to the *mwomboko* traditional cum modern rhythms. *Mwomboko* in spite being forceful, in 1930s and 1940s was not classified as an African song and dance, and we do not find it in ethnomusicologist George Zenoga Zake's *The Folk Music of Kenya* (1987).

Feminists have always been vocal in pointing out that the centrality of studying popular literary materials is through conducting of research in all types of genres whether written or orally relayed. This study is motivated mainly by African feminism as propagated by Carol Davies and Ann Graves (1987) on the collection and analysis of literary material from popular arts and

entertainment. Communication is crucial in rendering popular art form materials. The use of a communicative approach revamps the reception of the popular artists' intended messages to their target audience. The researcher highlights the effectiveness or lack of it on the part of oral artists in their attempt to raise feminist concerns on gender standpoints as regards contemporary issues involving men and women in Kenya.

The Gikuyu traditional folk song and dances include *Gichandi*, *Gichukia*, *Mwenyuro*, *Kagica*, *Ngucu*, *Gitiro* and *Nduumo* among others. The *Gitiro* and *Nduumo* categories are the ones that were performed purely by girls and women. They served as a venue for praising the centrality of men in a patriarchal society when they emerged heroic and as well they disparaged wayward men or irresponsible husbands, the good for nothing trouble makers, in the Gikuyu community. Through traditional folk song and dance as well as traditional cum modern dancers like *Mwomboko* women and men composers have addressed the case of alcoholism and irresponsible spouses in the contemporary society.

The *Mwomboko* subgenre of song and dance emerged as an anonymous rendition in Nairobi areas and its environs within central Kenya. This song and dance was catapulted by its precursor, *Muthirigu* a dance that revolved around political hegemony in Kenya, especially in the central Kenyan region. The composers applied allegory and allusion to address social concerns and also political ones. Heywood (1983: XI) observes that "Modern poetry also abounds in ambiguities of mood and meaning, and draws on allusiveness of language." Thus, specific words may be chosen not for their simple dictionary meaning (denotation) but for the associated meanings which they carry over for us from all contexts. Such connotations may be sensory, emotional or intellectual.

In the song-text, *Mwomboko wa 40*, performed by Kiragu wa Kinanda at County Motel in Maragua town. He was interviewed by the researcher on 10 May 1996, at Sawa Lodge Hotel, Murang'a town where he performed for revellers, during weekend performances in Murang'a County. The oral poet sings:

*Mukiinira rendi mwambiririe icokio*

As you sing and praise ladies, begin the marriage-divorces

*mikebe ni miingi gwi ikombe.*

'Cans' are more than cups in the marriage market

*Ndingitira giathi kia Maithirini Gatunda anitite*

I cannot skip a Market-date with Maithirini Gatunda – she has dated me.

These lines underline how humour has been used to satirise the status of ladies who have failed in marriages relationship prompting them to be sent back to their parents' home. They are likened to empty cans that have been emptied their contents. They are used for taking traditional brew as opposed to clean decent cups that are used for serving beverages. The oral artist blows his own trumpet that he has been dated by a beautiful young lady, Maithirini, the juicy young fruit. The nickname is drawn from the sweet "margarine" used for smearing bread in colonial times.

John Kiragu wa Kinanda, Mwomboko singer and an accordionist serves as an invaluable resource person in this study. During the interview he belted popular and least known Mwomboko numbers. Interestingly, "The breast narrative" is a recurring anecdote in socio-poetic discourse from pre-colonial times way up to colonial experience up to post independent and/or neo-colonial realities of our nation-state. Wa Kinanda meticulously performed the following songs. Rendi ya Nyondo Inya, "A Lady with Quadri-breasts" which flows:

*Rendi ya Nyondo Inya!*

A Lady with quadri-breasts

*Aya ni andu a guthunguthia marinda tu*

These people's mission and work is sheer shaking skirts arrogantly

*Makinyaga wenge makinagia nyangethu.*

They walk elegantly shaking their hip-joints arrogantly

*Ici ni nginya na racho cia guthia athuri gicici*

These are leopardesses that grind boisterous young men in village-confinements

*Ici ni numi huhi ciina ndwara cia gicagi*

These are rodents that bite and soothe one's wounds

And they had gigantic claws in village concentration camp dwellings.

During the horrifying state of emergency in colonial Kenya

This Gicagi narrative echoes the human suffering encountered in restricted areas of the British East Africa colony.

*Ino rendi waruguru ni rendi Gitunda*

This lady-from-the-West is a galantine fruit

*Ni rendi ya ndabari kuma Ngong nginya karimatura*

She is a double-busted lady in the region of Ngong to Garbatula

*Tarora woone ni rendi ya nyondo inya*

Gaze and see this quadric-breast lady

*Uyu ni uthaka kiororerwa wa mwari mwende*  
 This is an amazing rare beauty of a loved daughter  
*Kinya kahora mwana wa muthuri*  
 Walk slowly daughter of an elder  
*Nyukwa ahanaga o tawe itura riothe*  
 Your mother was just like your entire village  
*Akinyaga ta Nyakang'a..*  
 As she walked like a proud white lady  
*thi yoothe ikainaina ta kwina githingithia*  
 The entire world shook like the time of an earthquake  
*Athiaga rwiimbo aingira kihaaro nyanake*  
 On entering the dancing arena boisterous gantline young men  
*ikagega ta magega a kwa mbari ya magega.*  
 They would be stunned like the House-of-the-Shocked-ones (of the village)  
*Gutiri nyanake itendaga kuina na rendi ino*  
 Every boisterous young man longed to dance with her  
*Rendi ino yaruagirwo ni miruthi yonete nyama weru*  
 The lady was fought for by lions that had  
 Thrown a gaze at meat in the savannah.  
*No umuthii ungimiona niyakurire ni cucu wa keru*  
 Today she is old and she is a great grandma  
*Ikaraga ikonotete*  
*It lives desolate skackled life*  
*Onawe ni ugakura wone ta igogo*  
 You too will be old like a crow  
*Rukainuo nja wi nyumba nanduume*  
 Dancers will dance outside your house  
 As you remain locked indoors  
*Uthikiriirie nyungu ndikahwe*  
 Listening to the simmering cooking pot  
 To ensure the water level does not dry up.

In the above song-narrative titled: *Rendi ya Nyondo Inya*, that is a 'Lady With Four Breasts Amazing Beauty', or a 'Quadric-breasted Lady', the oral poet draws his material from the emergent conflict between traditional dress-code and the modern Western dress codes. This kind of imagery pronounces the centrality of African aesthetics whereby the black woman is a symbol of African beauty, to be utilized at the pleasure of men. The men decide what is appropriate outfit for women because 'women dress for men'. The arrogance displayed by beautiful ladies to some extent is acceptable to the contemporary cum traditional society, since the teasing business is meant to



provoke the men to react in a masculine way and show their prowess over female beauty. As the Gikuyu saying goes: *Njohi ni iri arugiruo*, that is, traditional beer is brewed for a purpose (of satisfying a given select people like in-laws). Everything herein is for the satisfaction of men, who arrogantly speak for women about their deportment and sexuality.

In essence, stunning beauty that does not touch the hearts of men is frowned against. It is like a performance where there is no audience; or say a spectacular football match played in an empty stadium – which then is a waste! This status quo of aesthetics appreciation is contrasted by another proverb that warns men against stunning beauty displayed by brown Gikuyu women. It says: *Mwari Mweru ni Magambo*, (A very beautiful brown damsel is a definite source of disaster). This implies that “even if she wants to,” she cannot stick to one man. Men will always woo her and fight over her. Her husband will always live a stressed and depressed life. Being spoken for then, is a dangerous situation, where both ugliness and too much beauty are derided – women, indeed, are supposed to remain ‘average’ as men take their place of pride in the masculine world.

The image of ‘leopardesses that grind the boisterous young men in the village’, is also interesting: It is the male leopards that are known to be destructive in that they can go on strangling sprees where they grab “innocent” goats and sheep and suck their blood and leave the carcasses/meat behind. Instead of the leopards hunting the innocent women, the male artist turns it upside down – men are in themselves good, it is women who come in to destroy them.

Kariara in *An Introduction to East African Poetry* (1976:12) for instance has a more balanced poetic in written poetry view in “A Leopard Lives in A Muu Tree,’ where he refers to an adulterous Gikuyu man who hibernates in fellow men’s homesteads once he notices the old polygamist no longer fulfills his conjugal duties to all his wives. Here it is the male who is the immoral hunter, and therefore women are absolved from blame even if they are spoken for – this kind of balanced attitude does not obtain in *Mwomboko* poetry.

The imagery in the song, *Rendi ya Nyondo Inya* captures the imagination of the reader when the oral artist draws an analogous picture of rodents (huge rats) which were notorious for biting the toes of the confined people in the Agikuyu Reserve Areas, also referred to as ‘Concentration Camps,’ created in the early 1950s and demolished in the early 1960s. These rats aggravated the pain and suffering the enslaved indigenes were going through during the State of Emergency in Kenya where armed struggle culminated into achievement of independence. In revisiting this history, it appears that the

oral artiste is not only satirizing the men who fought alongside the colonizers and frowned at the gallant Mau Mau freedom fighters, but also including the women among the 'sex predators' for willingly entertaining these traitors as their valiant sons, brothers and husbands suffered dry spells in the forest. It is noticeable that at this juncture we need a redefinition of 'consent,' since the sexual encounter is indeed consensual but the circumstances have left no other option but consent. Not knowing whether your husband has already died in the forest, having no way of securing food apart from having sex with the home guard, the women are forced to choose between starving to death and having sex (and food) and indeed they choose wisely.

Then comes 'the lady-from-the-West with a gigantic fruit - A real wide double-chested beauty that reigns from Ngong upto Garbatula (the area that the Gikuyu inhabited before the coming of the colonial powers). The imagery compares the atrocities of colonialism to ravishing female beauty that destroys all men in her path; once again the predators are female and the prey male, but *Ciero ni uimbo*, (Thigh Beauty is a Bubble); danger awaits these beautiful ladies who lack focus, for this beauty is transient and can be deflated like a balloon any time. Furthermore, *Uthaka ni Mwiithua*, (Beauty is a contagious scratching skin disease), which can quickly spread sickness throughout the community: Instead of beauty being a good thing, because it is monopolized by women, it is a societal illness.

PMB Ndece Kama-danger, an oral artist in *Uthaka ni Mwiithua*, "Beauty is a contagious scratching skin disease' a cover song opines:

*Arata akwa inyuotho rekei ndimwire*  
 Wow! My friends, let me tell you,  
*Uthaka ni mwiithua*  
 beauty is a contagious scratching disease  
*Ndahikitie muiritu umwe ni undu wa uhaka waake*  
 I married one girl due to her physical beauty  
*Ngimutwara gwitu mucii*  
 Then I took her to my mother's home  
*Maikarage na maitu*  
 So that she would live with her  
*Akarutage maitu ihoru makiganaga ngano*  
 To pursue loneliness together and live narrating tales  
*Itananina ciu mia ithatu ngiigua marua kokokoko!*  
 Before three weeks elapsed letters knocked kokokoko  
*Maitu akinjira nduire mutirima waaku*  
 My mother told to come and pick my wife  
*Atindaga barabara etereire matatu*

She stays all the day long on the road side waiting for matatus  
*Ino ni matatu!- Onakuruga ndarugaga ariaa mikawa-ini*

This is a matatu! -Even she does not cook: She eats in hotels

The failed marriage narrative in the song leads the listener to note the genesis of the fugitive wife who will one day get aged as she continues to live a cosmetic life punctuated with love escapes with matatu conductors. She is a "matatu" that gives service to all and sundry in the village townships. She rides with drivers, conductors and touts all the day long.

Consequently, as seen in *Rendi ya Nyondo Inya*, "A Lady with Quadri-breasts" which depicts the life of a beautiful lady who ends up being a destitute, freelance lifestyle ends up in doom. Why?

That love is cosmetic, transient and mechanical is well emphasized by the artist in the song: when he uses the imagery of the 'great grandma,'

Today she is old and she is a great grandma /You too will be old like  
 a crow

Dancers will dance outside your house / As you remain locked  
 indoors

Listening to the simmering cooking pot /To ensure the water level  
 does not dry up.

Not only that men do not 'grow old,' they also have the advantage of watching women's beauty wither away as they themselves remain available in 'the dancing arena,' consorting with new beauties in the market after surviving the intended 'destruction' of the earlier beauties. Because men 'compete' for these beauties, they are a symbol of disunity (turning man against fellow man), mistrust and a veritable source of conflicts. This reflects on the famous quote from Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's work, that we are living in a man eat man society, due to fangs of ruthless capitalism, a ruthless mode of governance.

In the song, the so-called beauties have *Kiero gitune*, (Ominous red thighs which are a symbol of bad luck), since any man who impregnates such 'perishes' and never lives to see his children. It is ironical that the warning here is that they are to be avoided at all costs, yet competition in the arena is highest for them: No wonder the artist consigns them to locked kitchens where all they do is ensure the dancers' food does not get burnt. These women are 'destroyers' of menfolk and a 'shocker' to the entire community, they turn men into 'zombies' resulting in disintegration and total destruction of society if they are not isolated, contained and controlled. This sad image of women getting as old as 'crows' pours scorn on them as they are perceived

as perpetrators of human suffering. The daughters have therefore been forewarned of what awaits them should they not toe the thin line earmarked for them by the menfolk. Meanwhile, as the dominant majority, the warning fired towards the menfolk is that if they do not 'control' these beauties, they will end up being destroyed.

The position of women in the Agikuyu society has always generated heated debates as there are pros and cons that at times run parallel with the expectations of the people. The height of this contestation dates back to the time of Wangu wa Makeri who was a famous chief in Fort Hall, now Murang'a County, when a rare breed of woman (Wangu) raised her head among men and ruled with an iron fist. The myth spells out Wangu as a tyrant who sat on men as she ruled, one who was always carried around by men and whose feet never touched the ground. In a twist of fate, so goes the myth, the men trick her into agreeing to sing and dance *Nduumo* as well as *Kibaata* totally naked to safeguard her Chieftaincy, only for her to be dethroned when her nakedness is exposed to all and sundry.

As Wanyoike (2002) notes in *Wangu Makeri Records: the audacity of leadership as a woman*.

She entered into a relationship with the paramount chief of Fort Hall (now Murang'a), Karuri wa Gakure, after he stopped on occasion in her village and stayed with the family. Her husband knew about this, and in response was offered the position of headman, which he declined. Instead, Gakure offered the position to Makeri, which she accepted in 1902. This was at a time when the position was exclusively male-only<sup>15</sup> and Makeri was the only female headman of the Kikuyu during the whole of the British Colonial period.

Wangu's challenge to join a male dominated world marked the beginning of women empowerment in Mount Kenya region. She advocated for equality between the female and male gender. This kind of advocacy lives on in contemporary times.

Wa Gacanja, Muigai in "Images of Women in Kenyan Oral Narratives" in *Fabula* (2002:75) registers:

Advocacy groups seeking equality between men and women, and at the same time tracing the causes of male dominance to the traditional social system, and particularly the traditional methods of socialization are many and widespread.

Fortunately, in modern *Mwomboko* poetry the voice of a minority of women performing oral artistes has emerged among the dominating male voices. The

scenario in performance has seen silence from the women's quarters turn into a battle of wits between genders. The contemporary female oral artist has endeavored to bridge the gap by "singing back" or "answering back" to the male chauvinists who fuel animosity between genders by denigrating the womenfolk. In these contemporary female composed songs the male being emerges as a worthless fellow who staggers home drunk and with nothing to offer to the family after a whole day's loitering. Wanjiku Kabira (1993), affirms in the traditional Gikuyu society, the female oral artist addressed the issues of conjugal rights as a case of failed marriage unions as stemming from male counterparts. In contemporary times, the newly emergent female *Mwomboko* singers urge women never to passively watch their families disintegrate, but to actively participate in looking for a livelihood for their families. As a result, some women have emerged to take over as heads of the homesteads or even heads of their families in contemporary times.

The balance sheet in striking a balance in contemporary secular music emerged strongly when Jane Nyambura from Kiharo, Murang'a, the land of Wangu Makeri was fished out of the fallowness of the realms of musical world by a famous male secular artist from Mount Kenya region

'Queen' Jane Nyambura, (now late) as a modern oral artist composed songs that reveal the weaknesses of male characters in our contemporary society, that foreground irresponsible men who abandon their families to live with rich widows or concubines, and that questions the usefulness of a polygamy that men engage in just for prestige.

In her song: *Tiga Kwiiyamba ta Maburi*, "Stop Arrogance Like an Umbrella."

*Mwanake ngukwiira ndutige kwiiamba*

You young man stop being boastful

*Ndutige kwiimba ota maburi ona gutari riua`*

Stop being boastful like an umbrella yet there is no hot sunshine

*Riu ureamba na nggari na mwiri*

Now yore showing off with a car

*Icio ciothe ciathira*

When the things you have vanish in inequities

*Riu ureraga ciana iciarituo ni angĩ*

Now you will end up bringing up children sired by other boisterous people

Queen Jane, the songster in this number appears to be deconstructing the spirit of a "community" husband emerging culture in the contemporary

society. She is contemptuous of the young boisterous young man who destroys his life living in a quagmire of immorality.

Thankfully this involvement of female artists has led to the striking of a balance in the gender debate, has created dialogue in the Music industry not only in Mount Kenya region but also nationally. Nowadays, it is not uncommon to find music performance “collabos” in contemporary *Mwomboko* poetry renditions that feature female and male voices singing in partnership. The image of a woman as a co-worker and a challenger has propped up for the welfare of an improved and balanced society.

This life and spirit of comradeship thriving in female and male gender is captured in a collabo between a secular musician known as Kuruga wa wanjiru and Lady Mzima Mzima, a popular radio presenter who works for Kameme FM. In a number entitled: Maisha no Maya, which implies, “This is the life (of today)” They quip:

*Wiku my dear tuthie sherehe*  
Where are you my dear?  
*Tuthie tugakene maica no maya*  
Let’s go and have fun-This is the life  
*Nyondo icio ni ithambio na ihakuo maguuta*  
Clean those breasts and apply oil (lotion)

The duo songsters in the song are engaged in reconstructing the relationship that may have reached a lukewarm status in the family front. The male counterpart is ready to take his dear companion for an outing to release stress and loneliness. In a favoured reciprocation the female counterpart responds the nice gesture affirmatively. This contemporary composition echoes a Gikuyu traditional marriage song, *Nyumba ya Mwari Witu*, “Our Daughter’s House.” In one of the lines the breasts narrative features in the following line:

*I mucii ucio ingigooka I nyondo icio ni ithambio*  
If I happen to come to that homestead, those breasts should be washed  
*Ikihakaguo maguuta*  
And they should be smeared with oil (castor)  
*I mucii ucio ingigooka I nyondo icio ni ithambio*  
If I happen to come to that homestead, those breasts should be washed  
*Ikihakaguo maguuta*  
And they should be smeared with oil (castor)  
*I ndendire gutwaruo ni Mathioya na Irati*  
I almost got drown in River Mathioya and River Irati  
*Inginyirite rendi*  
Pursuing a lady

*I ndendire gutwaruo ni Mathioya na Irati*  
 I almost got drown in River Mathioya and River Irati  
*Inginyirite rendi*  
 Pursuing a lady.

There emerges innovativeness in the contemporary composers' fraternity in drawing their present works from renditions of Gikuyu folklore that was performed time immemorial in the community. In this traditional song 'the drowning in the river' connotes sexual relationship between lovers. The revisiting of traditional practices in Gikuyu Folklore demonstrates and illustrates the idea of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction in the evolving cultural performances and entertainment endeavours in our contemporary times.

### Conclusion

The paper has looked at images of women that are produced by male composers in the *Mwomboko* subgenre of Gikuyu oral poetic materials. There is a visible link between the pre-independent singers and/or composers of post-independent as well as the contemporary ones. The dichotomy between traditional and modern views as well as observations indicate that there is a consistency in terms of drawing their imagery from the surrounding or the local environment to subvert the position of women and make them look inferior in society. However, the recent entry and participation of female oral artists and their consistency in "answering back" to male counterparts has created a suitable meeting point for a healthy discussion of masculine and feminine gender positions.

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