

Proverbs and Enculturation: The Gender Convergence of Kiswahili and Ekegusii Proverbs

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Abstract

Proverbs in Swahili and Gusii cultures are formulated and deployed in subtle ways that underpin the processes of enculturation and as such, proverbs are implicated in the inscriptions of femininity and masculinity in their respective societies. There is no doubt that both the concept of gendering and the construction of gender itself occupy contested positions in African socio-cultural scholarship. Part of the contestation alluded to here and that has subsisted over a long time is the implication of proverbs as “cultural oralities” in the inculcation of gender as a principle of societal organization. Available scholarly evidence contends that, as artistic phenomena proverbs are crafted with patriarchal bias and as such they are involved in the marginalization and relegation of women in virtually all sectors of human endeavor and social interaction. Like in many other African cultures, proverbs are critical in facilitating the definition of moral consciousness, thought and belief, they are a reflection of “wisdom and truth” preserved and passed from one generation to another. However, it is important to note that in the artistic exquisiteness of proverb folklore are presentations of partiality, prejudice and deprecating image inculcation about women. This formulaic depiction of women in Swahili and Gusii proverbs curtails, blurs and mutes women’s notable contributions in the development of humanity in their respective societies. This paper, therefore, seeks to explore the covert and explicit enculturation of patriarchal bigotry in Swahili and Gusii proverbs.

Key words: Enculturation, Proverb, Cultural Oralities, Masculinity, Femininity, Patriarchy

Introduction

Enculturation is defined as the processes by which people learn and recognize the dynamics of their adjacent cultures and their cultural significance as well as acquire values, norms and codes of behavior that are considered acceptable and critically essential in that culture and in the shaping of its worldviews. It entails the recognition and acquisition of structures, codes and strategies that influence, restrain, direct, guide and shape the individual in terms of his/her interactions with parents, other adults, siblings and peers - generally members of that cultural

community. Of critical significance, is the realization that enculturation processes are critically implicated in establishing values, codes, rituals and boundaries of ordinariness of a given culture. In several senses enculturation entails complex and multifaceted socialization processes that result in the purposeful shaping of a functioning social individual. Enculturation subtly teaches and leads an individual to the “accepted” norms and values of a given culture and society in which the individual lives. Most importantly, enculturation ensures that the individual knows, acknowledges, appreciates and respects established boundaries of “accepted behavior and modes of conduct” that dictate what is acceptable and unacceptable within the framework of that society. It instructs the individual about their roles, positions, functions and identities within society and its lifestyles. By basing my discussion on the foregoing theoretical trajectory, I seek to affirm that proverbs in Swahili and Gusii cultures are creatively formulated, circulated and utilized in ways that facilitate processes of enculturation in which patriarchal gender partiality finds entrenchment. This therefore, allows both covert and overt constructions of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ in their societies.

The Proverb and Gender Nexus

As a cultural phenomenon, proverbs are populated with a plethora of definitions focusing on such issues as their economy of word use, their origins in human experience, their presentation as observations of social discernible facts, and above all the assertion that proverbs are presentations of “universal” and “absolute” truths. The assertion of truth is essentially contested on the understanding that truth merely reflects society’s aspiration for control and desire to enforce a given view of life that is assumed to “accurate”, “solid” and “accepted”. This is where the nexus between proverbs and gender gets established in the sense that arguments about absolute truth are deployed to buttress certain partisan issues such as patriarchy; which ingeniously enable the circulation of patriarchy from generation to generation on the premise that patriarchy is a constant and immutable aspect of social organization (Ssetuba 2002). Just like patriarchy, the concept of gendering and the construction of gender itself are issues that occupy contested positions in African gender scholarship. The contestation that has survived for long has been associated with the involvement of cultural oralities in the inscription of gender norms such as the masculine views of the world and their cultural positioning for purposes of societal organization. When proverbs are perceived in this sense, it means that there are certain perceptible peculiarities in proverbs implying that proverbs are emblematically patriarchal and are complicity in the marginalization, exploitation and relegation of women in social interactions. These peculiarities further imply that in societies such as Swahili and Gusii, men are inventively involved in the formulation and

construction of female identities, the designation of female positions and the prescription of the menial and peripheral roles that women play in society.

The actualization of these identity constructions as enabled by proverbs are always predicated on assumptions of proverbs' unquestioned validity and authority. Thus, proverbs in Swahili and Gusii cultures are critically implicated in the creation, encoding and perpetuation of codes of behavior, mentalities and philosophical outlooks that are demeaning and subduing to women. Collectively, proverbs facilitate the definition of moral consciousness, thought and belief, they are a reflection of "wisdom and truth" preserved and passed from one generation to another. However, notwithstanding their artistic exquisiteness, proverbs in Swahili and Gusii cultures are articulations of partiality and deprecating image ascriptions about women. In functional terms, the overall mosaic of cultural enculturation in these cultures entailing the construction, encoding and usage of proverbs is actualized through interactional and instructional contexts and strategies that are varied, continuous and lifelong. This is so because proverbs as an aspect of these cultures' "oralities" partake in the production of cultural identities and the shaping of their worldviews which ultimately construct "accepted" universes imbued with a medley of cultural and social values.

There are certain collective and uncontested truisms about proverbs generally, for instance, the truism that on the surface proverbs are a synthesis of human thought and experience, artistically expressed and deployed to articulate a proven truth, a wise judgment, a didactic teaching, and a meaningful warning. As such proverbs in Swahili and Gusii cultures, as is elsewhere in African societies, are unquestionable statements of wisdom, passed on from one generation to another to communicate doctrinaire wisdom, expressed in incontestable and authoritative summaries - *kama walivyosema wahenga* (Swahili), *buna abakoro batebete* (Gusii) - literally translating to - *as the sages said/as the wise old people said*. Such authoritative summaries affirm and place proverbs above truth or validity contestation. Proverbs, therefore, are used to perform a variety of functions such as criticizing, prohibiting and admonishing society. They teach ethical values, provide aesthetic dimensions in social interactions and underpin sociable behavior. They incontestably make up one of the most privileged repositories of social wisdom and worldview. They are habitually used as enculturation tools deployed to structure and direct society in particular ways; they are critically utilized in the education and socialization of children and through such instructional interactions are transmitted prejudiced "truths". Besides, Swahili and Gusii proverbs are used to inspire, encourage, rebuke, congratulate, advise, warn, scorn as well as sharpen the mind and deepen the knowledge of members of society.

Proverb Validity and Authenticity as Aspects of Enculturation

The Swahili and Gusii societies and cultures are populated with pervasive and uncritical proverb circulations and transmissions that project “acceptable” patriarchal perceptions in which men view culture and society as a whole as male, and therefore inculcate cultural values and norms that persuade those it discriminates against to acquiesce to that point of view. This is palpable and discernible in sage wisdom, particularly where proverbs are formulated to support the male view of the world, cleverly predicated on uncontested dictums. For instance, there is an insidious presence and recurrent usage of axioms in Swahili and Gusii cultures that are predicated on the uncontested authority and authenticity of such dictums, interestingly and coincidentally abounding in both cultures as “*kufa kiume, simama kiume, jikaze kiume*” (Swahili) with exact correspondences in Gusii culture *gakwe gesacha, tenena gesacha, remereria gesacha*, literally translating as - die like a man, stand like a man, endure like a man. Such maxims present, project and universalize “man” as the norm, the standard value and “accepted” worldview in the inscription of values of bravery, tenacity and endurance. Consequently, these axioms present the view that there is no apparent difference or conflict between what a “man” is and how the world is supposed to understand the same.

There are innumerable situations where both men and women use these pieces of sage wisdom couched as sayings, aphorisms and proverbs, however, where women in particular consciously or otherwise use them, they unwittingly also come to view the world from masculine prism, a sad though regrettable fact. The enablement of the usage of these maxims and by extension proverbs of similar disposition generally lies in their subtlety of inscription. Proverbs, it must be noted, are crafted in such a way they never appear obviously partisan yet they are. Their originality is always imbued with authority, validity and authenticity and placed on a pedestal beyond reproach, already alluded to, *kama walivyosema wahenga* in Kiswahili. In order to uncover the underlying sexist truths embedded in proverbs, critical questions must be asked of age old proverbs. In what ways and by what strategies do Swahili and Gusii proverbs inscribe male as the norm and therefore enable their respective societies to view social interactions as masculine? How is a nexus established between proverbial inscriptions and social enculturation? In essence, what masculinity and femininity have come to mean in contemporary Swahili and Gusii societies lies partly in the proverbs’ subtle inscriptions and uncontested usage. Though the changing roles of women in Swahili and Gusii culture and societies are quite visible in non-literary discourses, proverb usage still remains unresponsive to these changes.

Inscribing Maleness and Femaleness in Proverbs

Although there have been a number critical scholarly engagements focusing on Swahili and Gusii proverbs, there is no noticeable evidence that such engagements have been interested in focusing on exploring the gender or sexist trajectories enabled by proverbs, yet there is copious availability of patriarchal bigotry embedded in these proverbs that is hardly interrogated. Equally, there is an intriguing calmness with which scholars who have engaged in proverb studies tend to gloss over the hushed thematic nuances embedded in these proverbs, by unquestioningly adhering to the proverbs' traditional and archetypal wisdom. Much as it has been asserted variously in proverb studies that proverbs are a reflection of social reality that inevitably mirrors social manners, social categorizations of male-female dichotomies, they nevertheless reflect a portraiture of women that is totally unchanging. They are deeply rooted in normative depictions that buttress equally habitual perceptions of women's biological, social, economic and emotional life. Inexorably, Swahili and Gusii proverbs are framed as 'male', consequently women's portraiture in these proverbs is also 'male' and the wisdom inscribed is 'male', inevitably advancing a masculine trajectory of societal values. For instance, a Swahili proverb such as "*mume ni jaha si raha - a man is honour/ glory/ prosperity, not bliss/comfort/leisure*" projects a positive ascription of the supposed attributes due to men, attributes that reflect achievement and endurance in sustaining not just themselves but their families and by extension their societies as well. This is in contrast to *bliss/comfort/leisure* attributes that don't demand great effort to attain. This type of proverbial ethos has cognates and is well echoed in Gusii proverbs like "*mosacha irooka*" "*a man is a shrub that never dries*" or "*bamura maaga*" "*young men/boys are like branches*", invoking a sense of ubiquity, freedom and non-confinement for men.

The above proverbs may be contrasted against degrading and marginalizing ethos evident in proverbs such as "*mume kizingiti, mke dupo*" (Swahili), "*a man is a stump/threshold, a woman is a step*". What comes out in this innocent looking proverb is the nuanced sense of the imagery of a base or threshold upon which a stair can be constructed. Therefore, in a subtle sense a woman is portrayed as a dependant, an appendage of a man. A similar ethos can be discerned in a Gusii proverb "*mokungu tana gotomwa (gotura) sira*" – "*a woman is never sent to follow up on a debt*". There are varied and cleverly nuanced philosophies in this proverb - the primary one hints at the probable fact that women are not property owners, therefore they cannot be owed, let alone flow up on a debt. The second probable ethos is that women are untrustworthy. The list of undesirable attributes implied in this proverb can go on and on. There is, therefore, obvious partiality in these proverbs in terms of their depiction of men and women responsibilities, attributes as well as capacities. Unlike in written literature where particular

writings about feminine issues by male writers may be perceived as overly suspect, the production of proverbs is fundamentally different from written literature in the sense that proverb production presents a paradoxical scenario. Proverb formulation is perceived as communal and therefore a product of joint-production. The idea of joint-production ingeniously implies that the proverbs' partisan gender nuances are results of collective production. The suggestion of joint-production is actually rather complex, it insinuates that in spite of the collective involvement in proverb formulation, women are nevertheless primed in proverb wisdom to internalize the male idea of the "feminine" and then recreate themselves in the shape of that "sanctified" idea. This internalization of "given" wisdom makes women as proverb users subjects in the proverbs as well as victims of partisan patriarchal ethos, hardly straying from the given typical patriarchal depictions of the female.

Whereas pro-male proverbs in Swahili and Gusii cultures may be seen as granting free reign for men to be what they like, proverbs depicting women as routinely lowly and they project demeaning feminine attributes which do not accord women equal freedom to choose. The patriarchal attributions entrenched in these proverbs predispose women to play and re-enact the same male determined depictions and perform the same unchanging roles even if in reality such roles are actually changed. Thus, Swahili and Gusii proverbs as aspects of cultural "oralities" have tended to defy influences and realities of changed circumstance. This may explain why "temporally bound" proverbs in Kiswahili and Ekegusii languages are deployed in usages which appear to restrain women from deviating from the norm - "*mwacha mila ni mtumwa* (Swahili) - "*he/she who discards culture is a slave*", while at the same time subtly warning would-be dissenters from deviating from the norm, the male standard. Though there is nothing overly feminine about this proverb, its application in canvassing women-male relations can be very loaded in terms of its admonition and caution, given that in Kiswahili the reference is to person rather than obvious gender marking. This sense of application clearly suggests that the proverb is encompassing in terms of its gender inclusion.

On the same subject, one can find a Gusii proverb with cognate meaning "*mokungu tanyakwebwa ase rorera na ase getinge*" - *a woman never forgets the place of her umbilical cord and place of her ankle-let*". This proverb subtly warns against going against established traditions because the reference to "*ase*" - place, insinuates "placeness" and all that appertains to the place encompassing its norms and practices. This caution and the ethos it inscribes is discernible in other proverbs that appear to call more attention to the purity of what is male and that which is female designated. This is perceptible in the proverb "*mwanamume ni mbono huatika kule*" - *a man is a custard seed, it busts and spreads far*" (Swahili) ingeniously granting men access to open spaces and freedom to move far away

from the confines of the home or the confines of smallness. Proverbs with equivalent meanings and social inscriptions abound among the Gusii culture. For instance, proverbs such as; “*abamura na abaisiko na abaiseke na abanyomba*” - *young men’s activities are outside the homestead, young women’s activities are indoors*”, alternatively “*boys’ activities are outside the homestead while girls’ activities are indoors*”; or “*Omomura otanya/otana gotara nigo agokaga ng’a nsobo oko bokorugwa bwayia* - *a young man who does not/has not travelled far thinks it is only in his home that food is well cooked*”, subtly urging men to go out and explore the world while at the same time confining women to the smallness of homes.

The same sense of adventure, freedom and release from confinement for men is discernible in the proverb “*Omomura ngetii akororerwa* - *the ability of a young man is seen on the battleground*”; a man’s prowess is demonstrated in open spaces not the confines and smallness of the homestead. Obviously, proverbs with such attributions encourage men to be adventurous and shun the confinements of the home. This sense of adventure and courage is also captured in a Swahili proverb “*Nahodha hodari haogopi mawimbi*” - *a courageous sailor is never scared of a stormy sea*” (Swahili). Other than the intimation to explore the open seas and the wealth entrenched therein, the proverb also echoes male courage and resilience on the assumption that seafaring and all ocean-going activities are male. Wealth accumulation is also discernible in a proverb “*Omosacha asache n’omokungu akunge* - *a man gathers riches a woman takes care of the riches*” (Gusii) that is, a man is encouraged and urged to go out and search for wealth and once he brings it home, it is the responsibility of the wife to take care of it. Male and female roles with respect to wealth are also clearly delineated with men designated as creators and gatherers of wealth while women are depicted as keepers of wealth. Other than these role inscriptions, there is a clear dichotomy nuanced in these proverbs about the sense of place and placeness for men and women, men are free to go out and wander and explore while women are confined to the smallness of the homestead.

These proverbs’ formulations are evidently partisan in that they advocate and uphold the narrowness of female portraiture entailing confinement for women and liberal openness for men. There are, therefore, many proverbs that overly encourage men to become “men” in both the proverbs and in life - “*mume ni kazi*” (Swahili), “*a man is work/labour*” insinuating that only men work or that men are always involved in strenuous and laborious work, men are thus defined by their work output. Gusii proverbs with similar portraiture assert “*basacha mbaniberani na bakungu mbaiborerani* - *men raise property for each other while women raise children for fellow women*”, and “*mochie otabwati mwana momura togokiinia gesaku*” - *a home without a son (male-child) never raises a clan/tribe*”. Whereas the first proverb intimates that men are property creators of wealth/property

owners, women are projected as child-bearers and nurturers, in a word women are home keepers. The second proverb elevates this dichotomy of men as superior beings to the extent of insinuating that the survival and continuity of a genealogy/lineage is predicated on the whims of the man while women's involvement in the same is completely muted. The implication of these observations is that, passive and uncritical studies of proverbs which eschew interrogating the proverbs' subtexts inadvertently perpetuate sexist ethos entailing female silence, subservience and marginality.

Subtlety of Enculturation through Cultural Inscription

There are no known rules of thumb that guide enculturation processes in Swahili and Gusii communities, yet close and critical observations will always reveal the existence of established values, codes, rituals and boundaries of ordinariness in these communities. However, given that enculturation is intricately entwined with the life-long cultural processes of education operative in these communities, it can be argued that enculturation is ingrained in everyday activities and communicative interactions. Consequently, ordinary everyday proverb usage enables the circulation of subjective sexist values and worldviews, and yet in this ordinariness the subtlety of inscription with which proverbs are formulated allows the partiality and debasing of women continual circulation. There is, therefore, some prudent need for proverb scholars to revisit and understand the subtlety of inscription with which proverbs inscribe ethos of privileged masculinity and debased femininity. This is because when proverb usage is uncritically read, the obvious conclusion drawn is that there are hardly any Swahili and Gusii proverbs which exhibit explicit sexist orientations or views about men and women.

There are numerous proverbs in these cultures in which either men or women are mentioned explicitly such as *"mke ni nguo mgomba kupalilia"* - *a woman is garments and adornments like a banana plant's constant weeding* (Swahili). The imagery of garments and adornments and the perennial shedding of the banana plant leaves are very intriguing. They imply that women are objects of non permanence, needing constant attendance to adornment to look good, not a very edifying imagery. The Gusii on the other hand have a proverb echoing similar sentiments *"abakungu nabaya nemenwa yabasaririe"* - *women are good except for their 'loose' mouths that spoil them*". The insinuation here is that women are just as objects of adoration, as beautiful trophies and appendages to men, yet this kind of gender portraiture is amenable to numerous interpretations. For instance, women's intellectual ability that is realizable through speech is shunned—the allusion to "loose mouths". On the other hand, proverbs that elevate men and by extension celebrate manhood also abound such as the proverb *"Omosacha omuya noyokoringa nkundi kagosoa mochie mogoko osara nyumba"* - *a good husband is the one who comes home with a closed fist such that when he opens it happiness*

spreads in the home” (Gusii). The insinuation in this proverb is that men are providers - a fist opening that spreads happiness is predicated on the imagery of wrapped things whose unwrapping is materially rewarding. Similar ethos is echoed in the proverb “*mume ni moto wa koko usipowaka utafuka - a man is like a kiln fire if it does not burn outright it still emits heat*” (Swahili), cleverly suggesting that you cannot put a man down, that even when men appear down trodden, they still have some salvaging value.

When proverbs of this nature are interrogated within the framework of negative cultural role inscriptions, it is possible to recognize sexist stereotypes, as attested by the proverbs provided above. It is also possible to understand what the proverbs may mean in varied contexts, understand the extent and the ways proverbs may be seen as manipulative devices deployed to buttress patriarchy. Therefore, for any critical scholarship on proverb formulation and usage, intriguing questions must arise such as; are there ways in which users of proverbs are unconsciously bombarded with sexist images of men and women? Do the images in proverbs present a lacuna in the inscriptions of cultural philosophies and wisdom? How do they consciously or unconsciously inscribe masculinity and femininity in the cultures of the Swahili and the Gusii people? How do proverbs inscribe certain positive traits that get manifested much more in pro-male proverbs such as: ingenuity, creativity and bravery? Alternatively, how do proverbs portraying women end up inscribing subdued and passive attributes such as mother-the provider of life, nurturer, mother-the meek and submissive; or even woman as a shrew, a nag or witch - “*mwanamke haambiwi siri—a woman is never entrusted with a secret*”, (Swahili), insinuating that women untrustworthy and betrayers. This same proverb, interestingly is expressed in virtually the same way in Ekegusii as “*mokungu tarikoorokigwa bobisi/totobia mokungu bobisi - a woman is never shown a secret/don't tell a woman secrets*”.

There are indeed many proverbs in Swahili and Gusii societies constructed on the premises of mother/wife role and thus enabling the inscription of a host of mixed attributions of love and/or hate. Ultimately, such proverbs tend to promote and advance the idea of submissive and unadulterated “wifeliness” or “motherliness”, an ethos which is also captured in the proverb “*omokungu omuya mbokano botingire bogaika*” - *a good woman is like a well tuned harp* (Gusii); deceitfully inscribing the attributions of submission, inferiority and unrestrained readiness to please. It will be noted that the use of “*botingire bogaika*” in this proverb literally translating as “*well tuned*” is a function that is external to the instrument, (in this case woman is equated to instrument), consequently conjuring the understanding that the harp is tuned, it does not tune itself, in which case a good woman/wife is “encultured” to the satisfaction of the man. Proverbs that uphold “wifeliness” or “motherliness” also eschew the reverse side of this passive woman, they eschew a dominant wife, a shrew who dominates her husband and

demeans him as in the proverb “*omokungu nyagetiara tiga kondamera omosacha nere ritiro rire nyumba*” - *obstinate woman stop chastising my man he is the pillar in the house* (Gusii). The woman admonished here is the one who stands her ground and voices disapproval over established norms. Such proverbs also shun women’s attributes that may be associated with domineering, nastiness and unkindness.

Proverb crafters of this persuasion would rather encourage respectability and passivity on the one hand and religiosity or piety on the other as in the proverb “*noba kerema naye baba okanyibora nkaba omosera*” - *even if you are lame/crippled you are my mother who gave birth to me and nurtured me into a fine one* (Gusii), which appears to assuage and praise womanhood in terms of giving birth and raising children. Yet a critical re-reading of the same proverb will reveal that it is subtly inscribing passivity and docility. A similar projection of tameness and submissiveness is observable in a number of proverbs “*mama ni mama hajapokuwa rikwama*” - *a mother is a mother even if a handcart/cripple* (Swahili), intimating that women should be contented the way they are. Similarly, the proverb “*mama hawezi kumkana mtoto hata akiwa kilema*” - *a mother cannot deny her child even if it’s crippled* (Swahili), advances the same idea of meekness and contentment. The word “crippled” whether in reference to the woman or the woman’s possessions, may be interpreted as connoting images of women being things that are less than whole, they shouldn’t complain or try to make them better. The same cultural inscription is perpetuated in other Swahili proverbs such as “*mama kwa manawe, mtoto kwa mamaye* - *every mother’s love to her child and every child’s love to her/his mother*, obviously upholding the attributions of respectability and passivity.

An exploration of various Swahili and Gusii proverbs will reveal that they prejudicially inscribe positive masculine attributes while projecting negative feminine attributes. Ordinarily, when one comes across proverbs that ascribe positive attributes such as perseverance, achievement, adventurousness, curiosity, strength, heroism, imagination and mobility, those proverbs would tend to focus on men, thus inscribing masculinity and privileging “maleness”. For instance, a proverb like “*ensinyo managokwanwa mbamura etabwati*” - *for a neighbourhood to be continually chastised and chided, it’s because it lacks brave young men*” (Gusii), in essence intimates that there must be something positive about bravery and consequently, notably the safety of community neighbourhoods, its attribution to young men rather than young women, therefore, accords with maleness. When attributes such as passivity, incompetence, fearfulness, docility and dependence are discernible in proverbs, they tend to be ascribed to women. For instance, “*omokungu omobe nsagasaga ekobongia buna maemba ‘nkongo*” - *an awful talkative woman hardly keeps secrets, her endless chatter is like the rattle of dry millet stalks* (Gusii), alludes to all manner of incompetence and any

other such negativity being characteristic of women. The subliminal message in these proverbs is that whereas proverbial wisdom is assumed to be multidimensional, there are instances where they are overly prejudiced and couched in terms that conceal either patriarchal preferences or spiteful negativity.

When proverb studies focus on traits and certain characteristics associated either with men or women, they must help us to understand what cultural values they inscribe. The foregrounding of elements of “manhood - maleness” or “womanhood - femaleness” in proverbs cannot not be seen as shielded from advancing certain covert agendas of male or female persuasion. Indeed there are proverbs suggesting soft bodies and therefore soft minds, obviously attributable to women and intimating women’s intellectual ability as inferiority. Positive male attributes will cleverly inculcate clarity and precision of thought as being emblematic of men. Such partisan ascriptions are discernible in Kiswahili proverbs such as “*mke kipofu huwa mwaminifu*” - *a blind woman is always faithful*, a rather subtle celebration of a disability in a demeaning way where physical inability is seen as beneficial to patriarchal schemes, the celebration of passivity and inability. Something else that is observable in this scheme of things is the inscription of inability to move to action as being emblematic of women, as opposed to the celebration of attributes of aggression and belligerence ascribed to men in a proverb such as, “*kwa shujaa huenda kilio kwa mwoga huenda kicheko*” - *to the hero’s home goes mourning, to the coward’s home goes laughter*, a celebration of men’s violence and aggression.

Inscribing Instability through Proverbs

The range of subjective inscriptions enabled by proverbs in Swahili and Gusii is quite wide, such as proverbs which portray women in terms of instability of character, thought or action as in the following proverbs “*mwanamke mzuri hakosi kilema*” - *a beautiful woman never lacks a blemish* (Swahili), suggesting no matter how much women try to accomplish tasks as socially prescribed or on their own volition, a blemish of one sort or other must always be flashed out to imply women’s accomplishments are less than whole. By extension, there is a subtle insinuation that overall women are less than whole; they are not complete unless they are appendaged to the “positive” attributes of “maleness”, a rather crafty invocation of Freud’s phallic conjunctures. This sense of women lacking “something” to make them whole is also captured in the proverb “*wanawake uchungu wao u*” - *women are easily irritated* (Swahili), which echoes that sense of “*kilema*” a blemish of some category, literally meaning the “*uchungu*” that is, pain or irritability is seen as a blemish, hence the inscription of a negative attribute of women being irritable, touchy and short-tempered. These are attributes of shakiness; intimating women are unstable and unreliable. Character volatility is not observable only in male and female interactions, there proverbs that suggest

that this unpredictability is also exhibited among women interactions as in the proverb “*mke mwenza! Ha! Mezea - to a co-wife! - No! Woe unto you* (Swahili). These traits as inscribed in these proverbs appear to define women in Kiswahili in terms of constant blemishes - a subtle insistence that women are less than whole, irritable, intolerant, the hallmarks of instability of character.

Similar proverbs echoing ascriptions of similar attributes are also found among the Gusii as in the proverb “*bakungu tibana gotogia onde, otango mbatogetie nyamani*” - *women never praise anybody, if they do, they would have praised the one who served them liver*, suggesting that women are characteristically ungrateful, unappreciative and unthankful. It further intimates that if women are not thankful to their benefactors such as those feeding them on choice meats, they cannot be grateful anybody. Such disdain even to benefactors is extended in yet another proverb “*moibori omino nkerecha kere enyasi - your co-wife is a constant devil of the wall*” (Gusii). The proverb is predicated on scorn arising out of a relational arrangement in which there is competition for the attention of the patriarchy. The proverb also insinuates a constant contestation among women which prevents them from realizing they are victims of patriarchal regulation. In another proverb “*Kobeka Mokeira ibega inkebera kwerentereire*” - *keeping Mokeira close to you is self inflicting* (Gusii) (Mokeira is a woman’s name)”, the continual contestation among women is highlighted. This ethos is further magnified in another proverb “*omokungu siomia siomia n’gai akomanya bwarugeirwe gose mboke gose mbwa mwana*” - *how will a loitering and peeping woman know whether what has been cooked is little or it is for the child?* The range of proverbs inscribing this ethos among the Gusii is rather extensive as is noted in yet other proverbs “*omokungu omweanyi, motarere toigo*”- *of the conceited haughty woman, visit her on a rainy day*, meaning that her snobbery is shallow and empty. Further negative insinuations are discernible in a proverb such as “*Oyogambeire ‘mokungu, ogambeire ne chimbeba chire amagachi - he who has managed to establish dominion over a woman can also rule the rats on the rafters*”. Here one can see a range of negative attributes accredited to women such as women being unappreciative, devilish in their relationships, bound to inflict unnecessary injury, lazy loiterers, uncontrollable like rats, among others.

Inscribing Confinement and Compliance

Confinement

Some of the other negative gendering inscriptions enabled by proverbs in Swahili and Gusii languages are associated with role and space confinements as well as restrictive compliance. There is a pervasiveness of proverbs which overly praise and celebrate womanhood and motherhood such as “*Baba n’omuya ondereire kwaa na magega aboronge na ngobo chiamarera*” - *Mother is precious, she raised me in her arms and on her back girded in skin-cloth* (Gusii). This proverb

celebrates motherhood in terms of nurturing and bringing up children. Indeed the child persona in this proverb is grateful that his/her being today is thanks to the mother's efforts and sacrifice. Other proverbs within the same celebratory trajectory include "*Magokoro nsaro maya bantina bagwa boreba*" - *my grandmother's advice is like a rich purse, those who turn a deaf ear to her advice fall into a trap* (Gusii), this proverb acknowledges grandmothers as repositories of knowledge and wisdom. This is further echoed in the proverb "*Tata na baba n'abaya n'ebinto bikobora*" - *my father and mother are precious it is just that I lack resources to appreciate them*. Apart from celebrating womanhood, this proverb places father and mother on the same pedestal. Another proverb with similar celebratory nuances among the Gusii include "*mokungu o'bande 'nyabarati e'bweri torusia mokorogoto oagage insoni chitamere magachi, otang'ang'e tureti binyunsa bire mioro*" - *somebody's wife is like a cow in his shed, don't seduce her to lie with her lest shame befalls you in the elder's council*; there is a strong admonition against immorality and need to respect marital boundaries as suggested in the "cow in a shed" imagery. Even while admonishing against moral depravity, the sense of confinement and smallness of place is not lost, it is observable in terms of the confinement of the cow shed. Confinement is indeed evoked in this proverb in terms of mothering, wife-husband relationships, child nurturing roles, generally confinement to what is culturally prescribed for women. The ethos evoked presents women as mothers and nurturers and as wives, but generally within the narrow sense of peripheral significance.

Similar celebratory proverbs about women in Swahili society may include proverbs such as, "*Mke ni nguzo ya nyumba*" - *a wife is the pillar of the house* and "*Nyumba ni mwanamke*" - *a home is not complete without a woman*, which acknowledges the contributions of women in making homes worth of the name. The proverb "*Mwana ni mamaye na mlezi akalea; the child is to the mother, a nanny just takes care*" extends the celebratory trajectory but affords all credit to the mother. However, as much as these proverbs celebrate women, womanhood and motherhood specifically, a critical re-reading of the same will show that within that celebratory veneer, it is possible to discern hushed patriarchal inscriptions, that is, a celebration of womanhood and motherhood but only in confined and restricted contexts. Thus, one will find proverbs in Kiswahili such as "*mama ni mama hajapokuwa rikwama*" - *a mother is a mother even if a handcart/cripple*, and "*mama hawezi kumkana mtoto hata akiwa kilema*" - *a mother cannot deny her child even if a cripple*, which celebrate women and motherhood in terms of their resilience in nurturing children, their unconditional love, their unreserved sacrifices for the good of their children and families, nevertheless, it will be noted that this celebration is basically restricted to child nurturing and other mothering roles.

The confinement inscription is sometimes portrayed in demeaning imageries and this is extensive in both Swahili and Gusii proverbs like “*kuku akiatamia hana matembezi*” - *a hatching chicken doesn't stroll around* (Swahili), and *ngoko ndareri teri taro/ngoko eumamerete teri taro*” - *a hatching chicken doesn't stroll around* (Gusii), subtly inscribing the confinement of women to “hatching” and consequently movement restrictions as captured in - *a hatching chicken doesn't stroll around*. When transposed to real life situations, this hatching metaphor is life-long and it simply parallels child bearing and nurturing. In another Swahili proverb a woman's physical beauty is downplayed and counts for nothing, she is celebrated in terms of her ability to give birth: “*Uzuri wa mwanamke ni tabia si sura*” - *a woman's worth is in her character and not her beautiful looks*, similar to the proverb “*totogia mokungu kieni, motogie mwana*” - *don't praise a woman for her beauty praise her for siring children* (Gusii). Similar sentiments are captured in a proverb such as “*Okoibora nokuya gwakorete omokungu monyaka nting'ana/enting'ana* - *giving birth is good it made a hapless woman a queen*” (Gusii). Here, a woman's worth is seen in terms of character and function and not in terms of physical beauty while in the Gusii proverbs cited, the concern is about a woman's ability to bear children, beauty is secondary.

The overall portraiture of praise and celebration of womanhood and motherhood in Swahili and Gusii proverbs is predicated on the inscription of confinement. This is strongly echoed in the proverb “*mwanamke ni kama maji ya dafu, hayapendezi ila dafuni mwake* - *a woman is like the juice of a young coconut which is not pleasant except in its own shell*” (Swahili), here confinement is evoked in terms of the “smallness of the coconut shell”. A similar proverb; “*Buya bw'mosubati/kieni ki'mosubati 'nsigiti etaratwata* - *the goodness/beauty of a young woman is like an ewe that has not calved*” (Gusii). There is a subtle warning in this proverb to both women and men not to invest so much in beauty because in this community's worldview, beauty is transient and momentary. Alternatively, when women activities and roles are not perceived as ephemeral, then they are seen as trivial as in the proverb - “*Riomana ria mokungu tiriana koirwa tureti*, or rephrased differently *eriomana ri'omokungu tiriri koirwa kegambero* - *a woman's constant quarrel is never taken to the elders' council to be solved*” (Gusii). In this proverb women's issues are portrayed as trivialities, that women don't have real issues and worthy matters that can be brought before the council of elders. In other words, their concerns, daily chores, roles and functions are at best peripheral.

Confinement can be seen as the extreme opposite of what is positively masculine in these communities' proverbs. One aspect of positive masculinity that is manifestly observable in a number of proverbs, is maturity and sharp temperament as evoked in the proverb - “*Mpemba hakimpii mvua ndogo* - *a man from Pemba doesn't run away from a drizzle*” (Swahili), evoking strength of

character and determination, while a proverb like “*Jogoo hawezi kulea wana - a cock cannot raise chicks*”, subtly excuses men from those child nurturing roles. The proverb “*Eeri tiyana kwana marara - a bull never bellows while lying down*” (Gusii) evokes similar sentiments and subtly extols patriarchal qualities. This is further evoked in another proverb - *Bamura mbaya, baegererete esinyo ekagera tokamenya - young men are good for they defended the communal boundary till we settled*” (Gusii), here one sees the celebration of young men as defenders of a community. In yet another proverb men are elevated and celebrated, “*Omogaka ore bwoye ne ritiro rire enyasi - an old man in his home is a pillar in the house*” and “*Omomura ore sobo ne rirubi nyamong’eto - a young man in his home is a king cobra*”. It may be argued that where proverbs appear to cleverly inscribe confinement, they tend to justify confinement that it allows women to “thrive” in innocence and purity. Thus seclusion and confinement are portrayed as attributes that extol women only in “smallness”. Men’s depictions in proverbs as fathers or husbands are imbued with authority, control, possession and freedom, while women proverb imageries symbolize narrowness and smallness on one hand and tediousness, tedium and dreariness on the other.

Compliance

Compliance as an ethos and attribute in the portraiture of women in Swahili and Gusii proverbs usually takes varied forms such as women being compliant and submissive daughters and wives; being biddable as mothers or whores - they all share the same sense of submission. For example, the proverb “*Mwenye dada hakosi shimeji - he who has a sister cannot lack an in-law*” (Swahili), emphasizes the centrality of the marriage institution among the Swahili community. Consequently, it is anticipated that girls will naturally get married, they have no choice about it, they are expected to be marriage compliant. This is further accentuated in the sense that these proverbs portray daughters or sisters as assets to be bartered, “*Uzuri wa mwanamke si wa kila mpita njia - the beauty of a woman is not for every passer-by*” (Swahili). Here, a woman is presented as a trophy that is jealously guarded for both material and sentimental value for men. In the proverb “*Teke la kuku halimwumizi mwanawe - the kick of a hen doesn’t hurt its chick*” (Swahili), women’s care-giving and nurturing of children is acknowledged. *Nyumba ni mwanamke - a home is not complete without a woman*, is yet another celebration of women’s home chores. Child bearing is celebrated in proverbs such as “*Uzazi masika ugumba kiangazi*” - *giving birth is like a rainy season barrenness is like a dry season*. A Gusii proverb “*Mwanyabaiseke bange mbirandi bitakwoma ko mbotakana botagosira*” - *a home with many girls will abound with gourds full of milk but misery will persist*, alludes to the material worth of women and the transient nature of that worth. The sense of compliance is further discernible in - “*Moiseke onyabagambi bange tanyagosoka*” - *a young*

woman with many advisors hardly gets married, essentially meaning girls must do all there is to do to be acquiescent to marriage. The thread of this sense of compliance runs through other Gusii proverbs such as “*Omoiseke omobariri, oyogochi komonywoma namoroche*” - *brown girl whoever will marry you has seen you*. The same ethos is echoed in “*Omoiseke esang’onde/omonyamobwato omonyene emori namoroche*” - *the beautiful girl with enchanting thighs, the owner of gorgeous calves has seen you*. Further still “*Ase gesicha ‘geseera kere ‘nchoke ‘nsamisi tichiana komocha aroro*” - *wherever there is a beautiful flower, there will always be found a sucking bee*.

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing discussions that Swahili and Gusii proverbs are implicated in the circulation of partisan cultural ethos that go beyond what is obvious on their surface texts. It has been demonstrated that where proverbs are overly and patriarchal in their formulation, they portray women as secondary, peripheral and subordinate characters in the male mosaic of social and material world. The consequences of these types of proverbs in patriarchal societies such as the Swahili and Gusii are that they “naturalize” the construction and portraiture of women in proverbs within narrow and restrictive confines. In such proverb constructions men create the world in terms of the patriarchal perceptions and women are merely appendaged to these constructions unquestioningly and in a peripheral sense. The hushing of patriarchal schema in proverb formulation is critically implicated in the inscription of inaccurate ideologies and the circulation of misleading worldviews. Though both Swahili and Gusii societies have proverbs that appreciate the critical roles that women perform in society, such proverbs nonetheless tend to have sub-texts that are embedded with certain hushed critical characteristics which privilege the male gender over the female gender. Consequently, there are several proverbs in circulation in these communities that cage women while on the other hand are proverbs that free and elevate men to do whatever they please. Consequently, one of the most critical considerations in interrogating Swahili and Gusii proverbs ought to be the need to explore the subtle ways and the strategies through which proverbs are deployed in specific situations so as to project “accurate” or “accepted” gender images in circulation in their societies. Though it is true that proverbs are actualized by means of figurative language, such language is in most cases layered with varied meanings and embedded with more than what is obvious on the surface of proverbs. It is this multiple layering of meaning that should concern proverb scholars so as to ensure that when proverbs are perceived as endorsing what is “coherent and rational” social behavior, they indeed underscore what they inscribe. Finally, given that functionally proverbs are summaries of everyday experiences of people, their thoughts, intellectual status, attitudes toward social

situations and problems, their opinions and feelings, their group morality, social ideas, life goals, virtues and values, such summaries should be devoid of partiality.

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