



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

ejass.eanso.org

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2020

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>

ENSO

EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

In Opposing Community Wisdom: Exposing Lexicon Choices in Kimeru Folklore as Agents of Patriarchy and Gender Bias

Dr. Ann Hildah Gatakaa Kinyua^{1*}

¹Chuka University, P. O. Box 109-60400, Chuka, Kenya.

*Correspondence email: hgatakaa@chuka.ac.ke.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8441-9532>

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.2.1.158>

Article history: ABSTRACT

01 June 2020 Since time immemorial, communities across the world exhibit gender inequity whereby the feminine gender is viewed as lesser to their male counterparts.

Keywords: Patriarchal, Degradation, Gender Bias, Social Construction, Stereotyping. Studies indicate that no one is born a man or a woman, but rather the society makes us men or women through acculturation into roles that are conventionally stereotyped as male or female. However, the roles and duties for men and women vary from community to community; some duties are strictly viewed as being for one gender in one community are considered duties for the other gender in another community. For example, among the Ameru, a patriarchal society of Eastern Kenya, no woman can undertake the task of building a shelter, while among the pastoralist communities of Kenya, women build family shelters. This means there are no duties that are strictly for men or women in the world. This paper argues that one way that society makes men and women out of her people is through the language used in community folklore transmitted through formal or informal linguistic interactions. A case is made from a careful examination of the Ameru proverbs, wise sayings, and riddles. It will be shown that the language used in these genres continually exhorts and invites the male gender to manifest macho and positive qualities while at the same time depicts the female gender as feeble, vain, and weak. The paper proposes the repackaging of community folklore and wisdom through language that establishes positive qualities for members of both genders.

APA CITATION

Kinyua, A. (2020). In Opposing Community Wisdom: Exposing Lexicon Choices in Kimeru Folklore as Agents of Patriarchy and Gender Bias. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 21-32. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.2.1.158>

CHICAGO CITATION

Kinyua, Ann. 2020. "In Opposing Community Wisdom: Exposing Lexicon Choices in Kimeru Folklore as Agents of Patriarchy and Gender Bias". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 2 (1), 21-32. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.2.1.158>.

HARVARD CITATION

Kinyua, A. (2020) "In Opposing Community Wisdom: Exposing Lexicon Choices in Kimeru Folklore as Agents of Patriarchy and Gender Bias", *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 2(1), pp. 21-32. doi: 10.37284/eajass.2.1.158.

IEEE CITATION

A. Kinyua, "In Opposing Community Wisdom: Exposing Lexicon Choices in Kimeru Folklore as Agents of Patriarchy and Gender Bias", *EAJASS*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 21-32, Jun 2020.

MLA CITATION

Kinyua, Ann. "In Opposing Community Wisdom: Exposing Lexicon Choices in Kimeru Folklore as Agents of Patriarchy and Gender Bias". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, no. 1, Jun 2020, pp. 21-32, doi:10.37284/eajass.2.1.158.

INTRODUCTION

The social construction of gender differences is a view present in many philosophical theories about gender. According to this view gender roles are socially constructed, meaning that society and culture create the roles and that these roles are what is generally considered ideal or appropriate behaviour for a person of that specific gender. Stronger versions argue that the differences in behaviour between men and women are entirely social conventions, whereas weaker versions believe that behaviour is defined by biological universal factors to some extent, but that social conventions also have some effect on gendered behaviour. Gender identity is not a stable, fixed trait - rather, it is socially constructed and may vary over time for an individual. Simone de Beauvoir's quote, "one is not born a woman but becomes one" is applicable here (1949). The notion of womanhood or femininity is accomplished through an active process of creating gender through interacting with others in a particular social context. The sense of one's gender identity is acquired through the internalization of external knowledge. However, it is in fact never fully acquired – it has to be constantly performed and re-enacted in social interactions. According to Alsop, Fitzsimmons & Lennon (2002), "gender is part of an identity woven from a complex and specific social whole, and requiring very specific and local readings". Thus, gender identity can be defined as part of a socially situated understanding of gender.

It is a basic fact that since time immemorial, communities across the world exhibit gender

inequity whereby the feminine gender has been viewed as being lesser to their male counterparts. It is also a fact that feminists who have made any attempt to right this wrong have been, as Bukenya (2014) observes, "vilified as nasty, loud viragos and man-haters who have miserably failed in their relationships and are letting out their venom on anyone in sight." Male opportunists have been and still are exploiting biological differences to construct social structures and strictures that condemn their mothers, sisters and partners to lifelong contempt, degradation and marginalisation.

Bukenya (2014) notes that in his systematic and formal initiation into gender sensitivity through seminars and workshops organised by KOLA (Kenya Oral Literature Association), the most telling lesson was the realisation that in order to achieve gender common sense, we must liberate men, especially from ignorance and their unadmitted but real fear of women. This is because what lies at the root of subjugation – the stereotyping, the silencing, the mutilation, and the sexual and other physical violence is men's pathetic fear that if they let women live their lives in freedom, they "will get out of hand."

Bukenya (2014) proceeds to note that for us in language and literature, our main contribution to the empowerment effort is to expose and purge those nuances in speech and writing that promote and perpetuate sexist attitudes and practices because once we learn to listen with informed ears, it is surprising how embarrassingly gender-insensitive our language can be. While recognising that a language is a major tool towards acculturation, this paper seeks to establish how the Ameru people use

language precisely in that way to devalue and degrade women and therefore diminish their standing in the eyes of their male counterparts.

The Ameru are an agricultural Bantu Community found on the eastern slopes of Mt. Kenya. The community is highly patriarchal and gender roles are socially constructed, meaning that society and culture create the roles and that these roles are what is generally considered ideal or appropriate behaviour for a person of that specific gender. This paper seeks to establish the fact that this social construction of roles and attitudes towards gender are propagated not only in the day to day execution of these roles but also is entrenched in the language of the Ameru. To do this, this paper explored the proverbs, wise sayings and riddles found in Kimeru folklore.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The expositions in this paper have been discussed in the light of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice. Scholars working in the tradition of CDA generally assume that social practice and linguistic practice constitute one another and focus on investigating how societal power relations are established and reinforced through language use. CDA highlights issues of power asymmetries, manipulation, exploitation, and structural inequities in different domains. CDA has been used to examine political speech acts, to highlight the rhetoric behind these and any forms of speech that may be used to manipulate the impression given to the audience. Fairclough (2001) posits that many interactions are 'unequal encounters' and that language choice is created and constrained by certain social 'power' situations or 'power type' discourse of kinds accepted as 'normal' for that kind of encounter, e.g. a manager/worker or doctor/patient conversation or, in a text, the use of stereotypes or other ideological ideas. Fairclough discusses the idea of 'power behind discourse' and 'power in discourse'. He believed that social situations are shaped by power dynamics. His idea of 'power behind discourse' looks at power dynamics between the two speakers, and how their current situation affects their power asymmetry or difference. He argues that language should be

analysed as a social practice through the lens of discourse in both speaking and writing. This theory is appropriate in discussing the language choices entrenched in Ameru folklore as a way of playing down the potentials and abilities of women and manipulating them into containment within a particular mindset to maintain patriarchal domination.

PROVERBS AND WISE SAYINGS

For Masculinity

This paper makes a critical analysis of the proverbs with a gender inclination from a collection of proverbs from the Ameru community. Mbabu (1978) records 281 proverbs drawn from the Meru community. Out of these, 27 carry a message with a gender inclination. A critical analysis of these proverbs reveals that 18 of them have a message relating to the feminine gender, while 9 of them bear a message relating to the male gender. Of note and interest to this paper are the messages, values and qualities exalted in these proverbs. Closer scrutiny of these proverbs reveals that the society pre-constructs and associates men and boys in the Ameru community with qualities such as bravery, courage, aggressiveness, wisdom and respect. On the other hand, women and girls are painted as possessing such qualities as pride and vanity, laziness, shyness, and generally ill-mannered behaviour, with their main contribution in society being as domestic workers and mothers. This judgement is based on the analysis of the following proverbs.

- a) Arũme nĩ arũmani (*Men are biters*).
- b) Arũme nĩ nkũ jiotanaga (*Men are flames that feed on each other*).

These two proverbs will be used as a warning and commentary on the aggressive and merciless nature of the men, which qualities were viewed as a measure of machismo and masculinity among Meru men. A man was expected to be tough and fearless in the face of aggression. Further to this impression is the message in the proverb:

- c) Arũme tĩ ba nyũkwe (*Men are not your mothers*).

This proverb exalts the male character of abrasiveness while at the same time portraying the woman as soft and timid. It would be used as a warning to a person, especially a young woman, to be wary of certain men as they cannot be expected to treat her with care and consideration as one's mother would do. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it will be observed here that the message of scorn and/or low expectations on the part of the woman is especially carried in the word “*nyukwe*”, derogatory for *mother*.

This exaltation of a man's physical strength is also the message in the proverb:

- d) Kabũbũ ka arũme gatiagaga ũkathua (*Where there is men's activity we won't miss the one who limps*).

This proverb emphasizes the man's natural inclination towards being physically aggressive and abrasive, which is a display of one's physical might. It must be noted here that the one most derided quality that could be found in a man in the Meru community is timidity, cowardice or any show of “womanish” behaviour. Again, while this is not necessarily a bad thing, however, it becomes a problem where the very show of abrasiveness precludes diplomacy as a means of resolving conflict, as any suggestion of the same is interpreted to be a sign of fear or cowardice. This fear and cowardice are further castigated in the following proverb.

- e) Mwĩjĩ agĩkĩra augaga nĩ nkoma ikwaria rũgũrũ (*When an uncircumcised boy is in fear of facing the knife, he claims spirits are instructing him from the hill*).

Rather than admit to being fearful, a small boy about to face the knife in the traditional (and still upheld) rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, would rather invoke the supernatural: a claim that the gods are telling him it is not time yet! The elders will probably listen to this and therefore help him ‘save face’ or shame among his peers and the community at large. But the wording and tone of the proverb already suggest that the community scorns such a show of fear.

One other thing brought out in these proverbs is that men are dressed with a sense of purpose and direction. Consider the following proverb:

- f) Kĩarago kĩa arũme gĩũmbũkaga ngi (*No flies hover over a men's sitting*).

This proverb communicates a message that men do not break up a meeting unless they have come up with a solution to the issue that necessitated the sitting or meeting! Men are associated with wisdom and will be depended upon to guide the community. This message about men's wisdom is especially perpetuated through riddles, discussed in later pages. The sense of purpose expected of men is also the message in the proverb:

- g) Ndaka jia Mũruarĩ jiautata itiutatũkaga (*The young men of Mũruari –now Mwĩmbĩ – do not turn or look back*).

This proverb is widely incorporated into everyday conversations, usually metaphorically, or as a simile, to denote both literal and figurative meanings of the proverb. Literally, it is meant to express how it was considered somewhat unmanly to turn one's head while one was walking unless a man was answering to a perceived whistling call that could be specifically meant to attract his attention. Figuratively, it is meant to be a commentary on how men walk with their destination in mind and will not allow themselves to be derailed by sideshows along the way like the women who will forget their mission and stop for hours to chat (gossip) along the way, at the expense of everything else! In conclusion, it will be noted that all the above proverbs associate men with positive qualities and values: strength, courage, wisdom and a sense of purpose, among others.

About Femininity

The following is a discussion regarding how women have been portrayed in Kimeru proverbs. In child upbringing, and as a commentary on positive values, we often hear the following proverbs quoted:

- a) Mwana ũkabua athekaga arĩ nda ya gina (*A child with a promise smiles while inside the mother's stomach*).

- b) Mwana ũkabua athekagia gina na mũniũ. (*A child with a promise smiles at the mother with toothless gums*).

To be fair, these proverbs acknowledge the woman as the custodian of human life, at least in the first nine months while also upholding the role of the woman as the principal caregiver to the child. They also establish a bond that exists between the mother and child from an early age. But in the same breath, the proverbs also begin to establish the woman's chief role as a mother and domestic caregiver. While it may be a true assumption that as a matter of natural endowment and advantage women tend to spend more time with their children than fathers, the following Kimeru proverbs fail to declare/recognise parenting as a shared and inclusive responsibility. Instead, they choose to blame the mother for a child gone astray thus:

- c) Kabũri ka mbũri mbamba kaiaga ta gina (*The kid of a thief-goat steals like the mother*).
- d) Kĩana gĩa nkarĩ gĩkunyaga ta gina (*A leopard's kid tears like the mother*).

The above proverbs fully rest the responsibility of parenting on the shoulders of the mother. It is like the father has no input at all and so cannot be depended upon to correct a wayward child, not even one who has been misled by the father himself. This is obviously an unacceptable state of affairs and it is even more unacceptable that as a community we continue to perpetuate the claim as community wisdom, the literature fully attests that successful parenting in today's world demands that both parents be active participants in a child's life and that the extent to which fathers and mothers equally share childcare responsibilities promotes even the positive cognitive development of a child (Keizer et al., 2020).

This perception of a woman as a nurturer and caregiver is not restricted to the children domain, hence the proverb:

- e) Ũĩgĩdagendaga augaga no gina wijĩ kũruga (*One who doesn't travel yonder believes the mother is the best cook*).

Of course, it is the adults (read unmarried young men) who would be expected to venture beyond

their locality, where they have been, till then, under the care of their mothers, enjoying her cooking. A similar message is carried in the proverb:

- f) Gankwerũka maguta muntũ arĩ na mũka akĩerũkaga matanda (*My burp contains fat while that of the married man contains vegetables!*).

This proverb was used as a consolation to young warrior men, usually unmarried, who were charged with the responsibility of guarding the community. They spent their time away from home, usually in the forests, and their meals consisted mainly of meat from the game they hunted. Now the men who were left at home ate vegetables (here considered inferior) because these were usually part of the dishes their wives prepared. Once a man got married the wife was solely responsible for what he ate and this particular woman's lack of industry and creativity is communicated in the fact that she feeds her husband only on vegetables.

This negative portrayal of women in Kimeru folklore is further demonstrated in the following proverbs:

- g) Wona mwarĩ mũchungo athambagia nkunyũ marĩma (*If you see an adorned girl, she cleans her nails during farming times*).
- h) Mpara na ũthao nĩ muntũ na mwarĩ wa gina (*Hunger and laziness are a person and the sister*).

Clearly, the wording of these proverbs tends to connote that laziness was a tendency to be found in women only. The Ameru are a farming community and their main farming tool was a panga (a large knife). Weeding requires much contact with the soil and mud-caked hands; chipped nails are testimony to engaging in the activity. A lady who groomed her nails during the weeding season had no intention of weeding, an unacceptable state of events not only because industry was a definite point to earn oneself a suitor, but also because this was a sure way to court hunger in a family. My worry with this portrayal is based on the mature recognition of the fact that in any community there will be found both lazy women as well as men, just as there will be hard-working men as well as women! It can only mean that in blatant failure to acknowledge this the

proverbs are designed to make it look like laziness is a preserve of women, hence the metaphorical reference to laziness as a sister. This is, of course, biased use of language. Proverb (g) above also has overtones suggesting vanity, where the lady places more importance on the beauty of her nails than on her responsibilities as a provider of the family. This vanity is also communicated in the following proverb:

- i) Gakenye gakumua kwina nyai gaturamagĩra ba ĩthe (*Praising an uncircumcised girl for dancing “nyai” beautifully caused her to bare herself before the elders*).

Simply put, this proverb declares that praise easily goes into a woman’s head, hence, we should go easy when we praise women. The extent of the vanity is communicated in the consequences of the praise: baring oneself before elders was a taboo in many African societies; it would be crazy to even contemplate it! As a matter of fact, for a woman, baring oneself is the last resort action that women use in protest when all other forms of negotiation fail, an action which is equivalent to invoking a curse. In Imbuga’s *Betrayal in the City* (1978, p. 14), Nina threatened to do it to protest against the authorities’ refusal to let her carry out a burial rite for a son they had murdered. Ihimaera (1987, p. 64) presents Mihi Kotukutuku who bared herself just to put a man and the chief at that, in his place. Closer home, and away from fiction, in 1994 a group of Kenyan women clamouring for the release of their sons and relatives (jailed as political prisoners) staged a strip protest, led by none other than the fallen Nobel Laureate, Prof. Wangari Maathai. So, to suggest that a girl will strip naked before the elders just because she couldn’t handle praise is ludicrous and outrageous; a testament to how women have been slighted as far as their mental capabilities are concerned. The Kiswahili equivalent of this proverb is gender-neutral, and the consequence of the praise is something perfectly possible: adding water to liquor as a consequence of praising a good brewer, as communicated in the proverb: *Mgema akisifiwa tembo hilitia maji*.

This tendency to want to paint women as laying more emphasis on beauty than on anything else must be what motivated the proverb:

- j) Kũbua mũno nĩku gwatũmire mwarĩ agĩra ng’ondu (*Too much beauty is what caused the girl to go for the sheep*).

Now in the Ameru tradition, when a girl got married and the first-born child became sickly, she would go to fetch sheep from her former suitors as goodwill so that the child may get better. It goes without saying that a beautiful girl had had more suitors and would, therefore, end up collecting more sheep! This proverb implies the use of beauty to unfair advantage; therefore, a beautiful girl might even falsely claim that her child is sick just to be able to collect the sheep. This is an outrageous connotation that goes against the grain of true motherhood!

This degradation of women as vain (discussed further under riddles) is attested to in the tendency to portray the “physical” woman as opposed to the “mental” woman. How else can one explain the proverb:

- k) Muntũ atĩtumaga nguo na ĩtina rĩa mũka ũrĩa ũngĩ (*A person should not tailor his/her clothes according to the size of another woman’s buttocks*).

Now, why in the name of a woman’s body would community wisdom pick on a part of a woman’s anatomy, normally referred to in euphemisms, and incorporate it in a perfectly sensible proverb? Is it not in the perpetuation of the common view of the woman mostly as a sensual and sexual (pun intended) being? Why the buttocks? Why not the hips, for example, or the bust, which we know are actually standard tailoring considerations? As I noted earlier, this can only be a deliberate attempt to portray the woman in physical light. At least the English restricted their wisdom to the cloth and advised thus *to cut the garment according to the size of one’s cloth!*

As if the above is not bad enough, our elders of yore went a step further with this clothes thing and firmly installed in their community folklore the following gem of true wisdom:

- l) Mũka nĩ nguo.

Literally translated, the above means ‘a woman is clothes.’ I cannot find an English equivalent,

grammatically speaking! Ignore everything else – a woman’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, achievements, morality and whatever other parameters of judgement and perception – and just judge her by the clothes she wears! Unbelievable and unacceptable! A perception that must be stopped, which is a tall order because, sadly, this is one of the most repeated sayings in the community. In my opinion, this is a retrogressive and narrow-minded portrayal and I beg to reject any wisdom that might have motivated the forming of the above saying. While I am all for smartness and good grooming in women, I refuse to accept that it alone can communicate the total sum of what a woman is all about!

Last among the proverbs recorded in Mbabu (1978) is:

- m) Mūthekwa nĩ twana nĩ ta mūthekwa nĩ mūka
(*One laughed at by kids is like one laughed at by a woman*).

Can you believe that? This proverb is one of the strongest statements yet as to how men viewed women in society no better than children. Now we know the qualities associated with children namely immaturity, jumpiness, and dependability, among others. It is my stated opinion that this proverb is tantamount to an insult and as has been demonstrated elsewhere, the perpetuation of such as community “wisdom” is retrogressive in modern society where women have proven themselves as possessing the same, and sometimes higher, levels of intelligence as their male counterparts.

The above message is the same one captured in the following saying:

- n) Mwiga ciri na mwĩjĩ akenaga akūra; mwiga ciri na mūka akenaga akua
(*He who keeps a secret with a boy is happy when he matures; he who keeps a secret with a woman is happy when she dies*).

This means he who tells a secret to a little boy should relax only when he’s grown up (circumcised, the main rite of passage from boyhood to manhood among the Ameru), while he who tells a secret to a woman should relax only when she is dead! This, of course, suggests that even a young boy can be expected to display more

maturity and tact (what it takes to keep a secret) than a fully grown woman. And that it is a given that when he is a grown man, he cannot give the secret away, while a woman cannot be trusted not to reveal a secret. The same message is stated in the following saying, often repeated matter of fact:

- o) Mūka aĩ ciri (withũ) (*A woman has no secret*).

This is a common saying regularly repeated by the menfolk, usually as a complaint against a man who might have shared something they consider confidential with a woman. This saying generally alludes that women have loose tongues and cannot be depended upon to keep a secret. Further to this, a man who has committed this “heinous crime” and as much as attempts to defend this woman against that common perception will be admonished thus:

- p) Ūritĩte ta nyūkwe (*You are as foolish as your mother*).

This is a common insult levelled at an individual who displays tendencies towards stupidity and general lack of intelligence. It directly indicates that a woman is perceived to possess less intelligence than the man. It follows that a child who, for example, does not perform well at school will be judged to be taking after the mother, while the one who is doing well will be said to take after the father, despite all evidence to the contrary! In itself, of course, the saying is an insult to all women as lacking intelligence, a fallacy that should be discarded in any right-thinking society. There are intelligent men as well as women, and the opposite is also true. Indeed, science has recently established that children inherit their intelligence from their mothers (Flores- Mendoza et al., 2017).

Another common expression used as an insult meant to belittle the woman is:

- q) Gwĩkara nyomba ta aka (*Staying indoors like a woman*).

The proverb is said to a man who tends to keep at home, and it upholds the man as the provider of the home and the woman as the provided, together with the children. Surprisingly, this saying continues to be in common use even with the clearly changed society where both the man and the woman are now bread earners. Or maybe it assumes that even in

such circumstances the man will be expected to bring in the larger share. Little wonder, again, that the Meru man shows distinct discomfiture when faced with a woman who seems to bring in the larger share.

Now this state of affairs is aggravated by the fact that women themselves have accepted this position they have been consigned to by their society. How else do we explain a situation where the woman of the house joins the children to refer to their patriarch as “*Baaba wetu*” (our father, or Daddy). An informant, a man, expressed his consternation on learning that his co-interlocutor had all along been referring to the husband by that term, and not her biological father as he had thought all along! This can only mean that the woman has been so brainwashed by society into accepting her position as junior to the man and a beneficiary of his providence, such that out of sheer gratitude she has to refer to the husband, her benefactor, as “Our Father” (only lesser to the one in heaven, hopefully at least!). For the record, the above-referred man strongly observed that he would absolutely hate it if his wife took to referring to him as such, which I think is a beacon of hope right there, that even some men hope that one day in time women may grow out of this mental-set of equating themselves to their children in the family setting.

It must be this association of women with weakness that leads men to refer to other men as women. This is, of course, a derogative reference where a man will dismiss another man as a woman. This metaphorically stated insult is meant to suggest that the man in question behaved in a manner to exhibit tendencies that can only be associated with women, for example, cowardice, lack of physical strength, crying, laziness, gossip, and the like. It is taken as a fact that no matter what the Meru woman displays in terms of courage, hard work, resilience and tact, it still cannot match up to a man’s. Therefore it is common to hear expressions such as *cried like a woman* (men are not expected to cry, not in public at any rate) or *gossiping like a woman* (again suggesting a woman’s loose tongue and a tendency to be lazy and negligent of their duties because they spend all their time gossiping).

This also implies that women have simple minds that can only be occupied with mundane issues (or

non-issues). After all, great minds discuss ideas, a preserve of the men while simple minds discuss people and events, a woman’s part-time job. Meru men, even when caught red-handed are not said to be gossiping but sharing ideas, too bad if the ideas are about certain people!

The Kimeru language is a colourful and highly expressive language with a lot of figures of speech. Unfortunately, some of the common expressions in everyday use portray the fact that society views the woman as inferior to the man. For example, it is common to hear the Chuka and Mwĩmbĩ speakers introduce their wives thus:

a) Ũũ nĩwe muntũ mũka (*This is the woman*).

Of course, this meaning would be positively affective if only he would say:

b) Ũũ nĩwe muntũ mũka *wakwa*. (*This is my woman*.)

Referring to her in the former sense depicts her simply as a female being, while the latter reference denotes the fact that he is proud to declare her his woman. Alternatively, a man will say:

c) Ũũ nĩwe gina wa jiana (*This is the mother of the children*).

This reference foregrounds the woman’s role as a child-bearer and caregiver at the expense of the person herself.

It does not help matters that the Meru man will rarely if at all, call his wife by her maiden name. As a matter of fact, from the moment a woman brings forth little ones her title changes immediately to reflect her new-found status as a mother. Henceforth she is referred to as the mother of so and so. While the man may also be referred to as the father of so and so, this reference does not stick with as much finality as for the woman, and the man who dares to refer to his wife her name may even be considered ill-mannered! In fact, for a woman, even a stranger who does not know the exact name of the child she mothered will seek to be on the safe side by referring to her generally as *gina wa jiana* (mother of the children). The tragedy of this reference is inherent, in so far as it presumes that a woman of a certain age, or at least of certain

physical looks, should be a mother, which again sets the stage for the deriding and devaluation of the barren woman.

Another expression frequently heard among Kimeru speakers is:

d) Mūka atĩ mwĩrĩga (*A woman has no clan*).

The Meru community is socially organised through the clan system. Each male member belongs to a certain clan and this is a source of pride as pertains to one's sense of belonging. A child, or more precisely, a male child, inherits clan membership from the father. For the girl child, however, this belongingness lasts only up to the time of her marriage, during which she automatically shifts membership to the husband's clan. By saying a woman has no clan it is, therefore, an assumption that every woman is expected to get married, and that she doesn't really belong with her father's people! Little wonder, therefore, that one of the hardest things for many Meru men to take is the issue of daughters inheriting their father's land, even now when the constitution of Kenya recognises this as a right.

e) Gũtĩ ncamba ya mwera ũmwe (*There is no one-hen-cock!*).

Loosely translated this saying means no cock owes allegiance to only one hen. While I am not aware of any saying even remotely suggesting the opposite, it goes without saying that this saying is a blatant endorsement of infidelity and unfaithfulness on the part of the men. One will hear it pronounced in a dismissive tone to conclude a discussion of a man whose extra-marital dalliances have been exposed, observing that it is no big deal after all, especially if his general demeanour indicated that he was not capable of being unfaithful to his spouse. Granted, the Meru community was basically polygamous until the onset of Christianity, which the community has largely embraced. However, it is a fact that the church's teachings on marriage have also been the pitfall for many a Christian, who have found themselves in a dilemma much like the one that faced Nyabera in *The River and the Source*.

Ameru Riddles

Mbabu (1978) records approximately 140 riddles drawn from the Ameru community. Out of these, 31 register messages with gender inclination, 18 in favour of the feminine gender and 13 in favour of the masculine gender. Once again, as with the proverbs, the riddles with a male-inclined message register positive qualities as exemplified below:

Q: Baaba mũũgĩ (*Wise father*).

A: Aajaga mwatũ ekarĩrĩte ũngĩ (*Carves a beehive as he sits on another*).

This riddle recognises the industry of the wise man; he is not content to own just one bee-hive. To be fair (and noted only in this instance) a similar riddle with a message that favours the woman also exists, only in this case the wise woman is weaving a mat as she sits on another.

A further testament to the man's expected industriousness is demonstrated in the following riddle:

Q: Ndaka itĩrĩmaga na irĩ irio irĩ mũrĩo mũno (*Young men who don't farm but have such tasty food*).

A: Njũkĩ (*Bees*).

Of note here is the fact that the proverbially industrious bee is equated to a young man, not a young lady. Where the bee is equated to a woman, the woman's physical attributes are also commented upon, precisely her shortness, as if, perhaps, to neutralise the message of industriousness also conveyed in the riddle thus:

Q: Mūka mũkuĩ ũkĩrĩtie nyũkwe kũthia (*A short woman who outshines your mother at grinding*).

A: Njũkĩ (*Bee*).

Now shortness is a physical attribute that in the Meru community is considered inferior to its alternative; being tall, so it is no wonder that it is being associated with the woman. For the record, Meru women are normal-sized human beings and looking around you see many women much taller than the men around them. As with the proverbs,

the portrayal of the woman as more of a physical being is further emphasized in the following riddle:

Q: Mwarĩ mwende kĩmontoore (*What a beautiful woman!*),

A: Chiringi (*A shilling*).

Money, well-loved by communities the world over is equated to a woman, who no doubt is an object of desire for many. Further to this message is the view of the woman's obsession with beauty, a vanity, as communicated in the following riddle:

Q: Ndachooria na mũuro ngĩchũa kĩrũithania nkenye (*I've gone round the river looking for what is making the (uncircumcised) girls fight*).

A: Kaarĩ.

Kaarĩ is a rare plant with perfume extracts and once sighted girls would clamour for it because, of course, it assured the wearer of a sweet-smelling scent hence promoting desirability. While this is not a bad thing, the problem and motivation for this paper arise when we liken the cause of the fight for young men and men in similar riddles as follows:

Q: Ndemanania na mũuro ngĩchũa kĩrũithania akũrũ (*I've gone down the river looking for what is making the old men fight*).

A: Karia ka thano (*Fodder in the dry season*).

Q: Ndemanania na mũuro ngĩchũa kĩrũithania akũrũ (*I've gone down the river looking for what is making the young men fight*).

A: Kiriiri or Mbũĩ ya nkĩgwĩ (*Kiriiri or Nkĩgwĩ's feather*).

Now *kiriiri* is a rare, big red flower found only in extremely rainy seasons. Possessing it was a mark of bravery. On the other hand, *nkĩgwĩ* is a rare bird with coveted feathers whose possession was a testament to the bravery, the wearer must have shown in getting them. It will be noted that a comparison of the above three riddles suggests that elders and young men fight and squabble over noble and honourable things while women squabble over items that can only promote vanity! This message is already predisposed towards degrading a woman's sense of judgement and this same attitude

must have motivated the fashioning of the following riddle:

Q: Abagu na nyakwe barũmanĩra kĩreru mbi? (Why are your father and mother biting each other's chins?).

A: Mpando cia nyomba (*Rafters*).

Literally translated the riddle poses the question as to why the man and the woman are fighting. Now the traditional Ameru hut was a grass thatch and rafters affair; grass and rafters as the roofing, and rafters and mud or more grass to make the walls. Over time, the rafters that started green would completely dry up. In particularly wet seasons, and after a woman's supply of firewood had run out, there was always a strong temptation to reach out and pull out "just one" of the admirably dry rafters to enable the woman to ignite the wet rafters to life in order to light a fire. Of course, if the woman reached out one too many times the result was gaping holes and empty spaces on the roofs and walls, which led to the family being exposed and vulnerable to the elements! Now it was the man's responsibility to build these huts, and so gaping holes in the walls and roofs would indicate laziness on the part of the males in the house. To stop this behaviour, the man resorts to violence. This riddle communicates its message in three ways: It portrays the woman as lazy and that is why she fails to prepare adequately by storing enough firewood to see her through the rainy season. Secondly, It paints the woman as capable of doing a most irresponsible and thoughtless thing: tearing down her own family house thereby leaving the whole family exposed. Lastly, It spells out the consequences; the woman is beaten up for doing the above, thereby endorsing wife-beating as a form of disciplining wayward wives.

The riddle does not seem to trust the woman with much in terms of wisdom, and the fact that it suggests that wife-beating can be a solution to tame laziness in a woman is patriarchy in its best manifestation. This portrayal of the men as the only sages in the community is further perpetuated in a riddle such as the following:

Q: Nchabĩ jia Kĩrĩnyaga nĩndĩ jiaraa (*The peas at Kĩrĩnyaga have flowered*).

A: Mbuĩ (*Grey hair*).

Nchabi are a member of the bean family. When they flower, they have small, white flowers. Kirinyaga is the sacred mountain of the Ameru community, where they believed (and traditionalists still do) their god abided. Being a pillar of strength and wisdom for the community, the man developing grey hairs is likened to the ever-abiding mountain. The grey hairs are a testament to old age, hence wisdom, therefore noble and desirable. Old women, to the best of my knowledge, have never been equated to Mt. Kirinyaga, even if they are as wise as Akoko (Agola, 1994).

As earlier stated, industriousness in the Ameru community is normally associated with the man. Coupled with this is property ownership, as exemplified in the riddles below:

Q: Ng'ombe jia baba irĩ nkomango jia nda (*My father's cows have stones in the stomach*).

A: Nduru (*Sweet potatoes*).

Q: Ng'ombe jia baba irĩ kīreria.

A: Ntugatĩ (*Ntugatĩ are seeds from a Mūtugatĩ tree, which normally have red and black marks*).

This riddle takes it for granted that all hooved property in the homestead belongs to the father. This is presumptuous and therefore unacceptable.

The following riddles are also part of the Ameru folklore though not recorded in Mbabu (1978).

Q: Kuru matūmani (*Kuru in the arrow-roots farm*).

A: Rwĩro rwa aka (*Women's race*).

Literally translated, the challenger uses an ideophone, *kuru* to capture the movement heard in a farm planted with arrow-roots. Of note here is that this particular ideophone suggests a clumsy and disorderly movement, as can only be exhibited by the women. It does not help matters any when it is left to our imagination as to why the women are running in the first place!

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided evidence that language is a powerful tool of acculturation of boys and girls and “making” them men or women. Since it is in the best interests of the society that we mould them all into responsible adults into whom the best societal ideals and values have been inculcated, then we should start by re-examining our language use since language is a carrier, conveyor and teacher of these values and ideals. This re-examination should not spare the language used in long-accepted community folklore.

REFERENCES

- Agola, M. (1994). *The River and the Source*. Nairobi: Focus Publishers Ltd.
- Alsop, R., Fitzsimons, A. & Lennon, K. (2002). *Theorizing Gender: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Bukenya, A. (2014, July 26). *How I became an African Woman Writer*. Retrieved from Daily Nation, available at <https://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/weekend/How-I-became-an-African-woman-writer/1220-2398962-kk5t94/index.html>.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1949) *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. New York, Vintage Books.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and Power* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Longman.
- Flores-Mendoza, C. E., Santiago, B. M. C., Andrade, D. M., Fontes, W. P., Rodriguez, L. A. & Tuma, C. A. M. (2017). Mothers-Offspring Resemblance in Intelligence and Its Relationship to Socioeconomic Status. *Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto)*, 27(66), 98-106. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-43272766201712>
- Flores-Mendoza, C. E., Santiago, B. M. C., Andrade, D. M., Fontes, W. P., Rodrigues, L. A., & Tuma, C. A. M. (2017). Mothers-Offspring Resemblance in Intelligence and Its Relationship to Socioeconomic Status. *Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto)*, 27(66), 98-106.

Ihimaera, W. (1987). *The Whale Rider*. Heinemann

Imbuga, F. (1976). *Betrayal in the City*. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.

Keizer, R., van Lissa, C. J., Tiemeier, H., & Lucassen, N. (2020). The Influence of Fathers and Mothers Equally Sharing Childcare Responsibilities on Children's Cognitive Development from Early Childhood to School Age: An Overlooked Mechanism in the Intergenerational Transmission of (Dis) Advantages? *European Sociological Review*, 36(1), 1-15.

Mbabu, I. (1978). *Methali, Vitendawili na Mashairi ya Kimeru*. Nairobi: KLB.