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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Women's Silence amongst the Banyakitara.

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Article history: ABSTRACT

11 May 2022 The Banyakitara cultures today bring together the Banyankore, Bakiga, Banyoro, and Batooro people of Western Uganda. These are modern era Bantu remnants of

Keywords: the ancient Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom which at the height of its expansion, extended from the Karagwe area in Tanzania to the northern shores of Lake Kyoga. Among the Banyakitara, the women were typically assigned a subordinate status in the home and they in turn were inclined to use their silence for expressing submission, consent, indifference, and objection according to each situation. Based on the foregoing, the overall objective of this qualitative study which is based on conversational interviews was to interpret women's silence among the Banyakitara, with a focus on the Banyankore- Bakiga. This overall objective was supported by specific ones aimed at investigating the linguistic, cultural, and ideological significance of women's silence using the Critical Discourse Analysis approach. In the final part, the researcher also applied the African Feminist Framework to gauge whether women's silence is a projection of the muting of their voices and whether public silence has private outlets within the power relations framing gendered discourse among the Banyakitara.

Critical Discourse Analysis, Women's Silence, African Feminist Framework

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INTRODUCTION

The Banyakitara cultures today bring together the Banyankore, Bakiga, Banyoro, and Batooro, who are Bantu ethnic groups of people from Western Uganda. These are the current remnants of the ancient Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom of around the 13th Century which at the height of its expansion, extended from the Karagwe area in Tanzania to the shores of Lake Kyoga (Natukunda-Togboa et al., 2012). Among the Banyakitara and the Bakiga in general, it was "natural" to assign a woman a social and linguistic subordinate status because of women's economic dependence on men. Since the males in the Banyakitara family had to provide food for the household, the roles of production, such as hunting and agriculturally producing food, took on a more powerful discourse than that of women.

Regrettably, despite the major shift in the conditions of living and workforce, which has reduced the over-reliance on men to the inclusion of women, this has not yet effectively transformed the image of womanhood prevalent in many patriarchal societies, including those from the Banyakitara region of Uganda. Examples of such images of women as inferior, weakling, subordinate, mediocre, dependent, and subsidiary have lingered into the 21st Century, largely on cultural and religious bases (Uchem & Ngwa, 2014).

In the Banyakitara setting, it was "natural" for women to listen to conversations that were exclusively male-dominated as they and their daughters were encouraged to stay "*Ekaanyima*" (in the kitchen area, keeping behind the main house and the major discourse, busy with domestic chores) In essence, such a system stresses "the traditional communal 'values' that their patriarchally dominated communities have prescribed for them... in opposition to individual rights of women"

¹ The Banyankore/Bakiga are historically the cattle keeping and agriculturalists Bantu patriarchal communities that are most western and southern placed among the Banyakitara. Current

(Mfusi'2013)" Under such circumstances, women were typically controlled under threats of fear, and thus, their witty use of discourse could be said to subvert pre-constructed gender roles.

Problem Statement

Women among the traditional Banyakitara were inclined to use their silence as a means of expressing themselves without violating the cultural code of conduct. In terms of power relations, women's silence, if it is imposed, positions them below the male-dominant voice (Gal, 1998, p.4). The main question this study is investigating is: how do "Cultural constructions like language, gender, and power shape men and women's ideals about their own linguistic purposes"? How do women's silence influence gender perception, its re-enforcement, or its subversion?

General and Specific Objectives of the Study

The overall objective of the study was to interpret women's silence among the Banyakitara, with a focus on the Banyankore/Bakiga cultures.¹ The overall objective was to be operationalised through the following specific objectives:

- To examine how language shapes men and women's ideals about their discursive purposes.
- To investigate how women's silence influences their perception of gender.

To analyse how women's silence ideologically reinforces or subverts their power relationship with men.

Methodology

This study was conceived as one with a mixed-methods design where the initial documentary

debates have tried to distinguish their languages which have such a high degree of inter-intelligibility that they are like two dialects of one major prototype.

research through textual analysis explores the existing literature to analyse past research on the question of women's silence. That qualitative part is supplemented by a simple descriptive quantitative inquiry that was meant to collect data on the women's opinions about how and why they use silence. The quantitative part was done in the capital city through individual personal interaction with Banyankore and Bakiga women administered using an interview guide by the principal investigator. For the urban sample, about 50 respondents were interviewed in the Kampala city outskirts of Bugolobi/Luzira among Banyankore/Bakiga families. This sample population was purposively selected because the respondent had to be fluent in Runyankore/Rukiga. The third and last part was undertaken in rural Kabale District (Southern Uganda) among the Bakiga in order to bring in the attitudes and opinions of the less exposed and less formally educated but culturally very endowed village women in this location.

The urban study sample included 40 females and 10 males about 20-60 years. The men were included as a control group to objectively portray reflections on the women's main group's opinions. These men and women happened to be mostly of secondary or tertiary education level, and about 50% of the men and women were married. They were purposively selected from the Bugolobi urban outskirts community because they came from Western Uganda and practised the Banyakitara cultures. For the rural sampled population, ten women from Kayoorero and Kanyamatembe villages, in a sub-county, under Rubanda District, in southern Uganda, near the border with Rwanda, were invited to a focus group discussion on the study topic of women's silence. These women were less educated; some did not know their age. However, in general, they were older, from 50-70 years old, culturally wiser, and socially mature, with a 60 – 40 % split of those either married or widows. Apparently, in the narrative research approach, old age brings with it deeper perspectives (Molly Andrews et al. 2004). The interaction was conducted at a government primary school which could host all the respondents without any conflict of religious or political affiliations. The conversational style, it was felt, brought out more possibilities of generating personal experiences and diversely projecting related actions. The focus group discussion was

single-sex and composed of only participants of the female gender because they would not feel comfortable and be able to open up if there was an imposed dominating male presence.

The information collected from the individual respondents was collected using non-structured interviews. They had open-ended questions that allowed the respondent to comment freely and give his opinion about how she/he interprets women's silence. For the rural sample, the focus group discussion was conducted using an interview guide. All the interviews were administered using an open conversational approach. In these narratives, we acknowledge that the individuals are not only generating knowledge about their personal experiences, but their homogenised subjectivities are, as observed by Molly Andrews et al. (2004), illuminating broader social processes; and this includes women's silence. There was, in addition to the conversational analysis, some Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), especially with regard to components that deal with gender, power, framing and positioning (Fairclough, 2003; Janks, 2006). Finally, a review of the African Feminist Charter and its pertinence in terms of the findings of this study was also undertaken to identify ideological tenets that can be applied to examining women's silence through the conceptual lenses of African women.

Study findings and their Discussion

One major assumption that we have made in this study is that silence as a form of expression is part of social practice. As CDA analysts like Hillary Janks argue, indeed, all social practices are tied to specific historical contexts, and these are the means by which existing social relations are reproduced or contested, and different interests are served (Janks, 2006). The historical context provides the means by which the social practice and its connected agent, social relations, are produced or contested. In terms of women's silence, we can ask the same question posed by Hilary Janks concerning "positioning". "How is the silence positioned? Whose interests are being served by this positioning? Whose interests are being negated? What are the consequences of this positioning?" (Janks, 2006). The answers to these questions will help us understand how

women's silence is implicated in the relations of power.

From the introduction of this paper, we note that women's turn-taking in public speaking is traditionally assigned a subordinate place among the Banyakitara because they too occupy a subaltern position in the social hierarchy. Such a subordinate positioning is preceded by the dominant male voice, well-positioned among the patriarchal Banyankore/Bakiga. The apportioning of the interests being served according to Janks (2006), depends on whether the silence is reproducing unequal gendered social relations or whether it is contesting the existing societal power structure. When the silence reaffirms the unequal gender relations, it is most probably negating the interests of women. When projected forward into the consequences, we note that silence is conceived as a tool of power control. But alternatively, when it is used as a tool to subvert the male's dominant voice, it is serving the interests of women. The weakness of this conceptual framework is that it keeps on oscillating depending on whether the silence is strengthening women's subservient status or whether it is protesting and it is contesting the positioning of women's silence at that subordinate level.

Another critical discourse analyst, Fairclough (2003), refers to the same levels of analysis as dimensions of analysis. We can extend Fairclough's reasoning and make an equivalence of Janks' questions. Question 1, which deals with "positioning" in Jank's work, is seen as "description" in Fairclough's discourse analysis. Then questions 2 and 3 of Janks would be equivalent to Fairclough's "interpretation" of stances in discourse. Lastly, question no. 5, which deals with the "consequences", can be equated to the final step of "explanation" (Fairclough, 2003). This juxtaposing allows us to understand that there are 3 aspects that are prime to the critical analysis of any component of language: the historical determination of the utterance, how it is regulated as part of the language process and finally, how we can offer a social explanation to its positioning.

Since critical analysis demands that we place our discussion in a relevant "framing", we can project that this study was aimed at passing women's

silence through the lenses of African Feminists. These are the women of Africa who have put together the African Feminist Charter (AFC). A charter is a monitoring tool for African Feminist ideology. The AFC provides a framework within which to critique "patriarchal ideology which legitimises the structuring of every aspect of our lives by establishing the framework within which society defines and views men and women and constructs male supremacy (African Feminist Forum, 2016, p. 1). In this study, I will analyse findings on women's silence to gauge whether it has been used as part of constructing male supremacy. As part of AFC ethics, the women who subscribe to the AFC believe in gender equality based on feminist principles. They also encourage women to engage society through: "A critical engagement with discourses of religion, culture, tradition, and domesticity with a focus on the centrality of women's rights" (African Feminist Forum, 2016, p. 2). In the study, women's silence is examined in order to confirm or refute the probability that the discourse of culture, tradition and domestication has been practised and developed through daily conversation or silence that socialises women into a subordinate or backstage space.

Language Shaping Men and Women's Ideas about Discursive Purposes

The first specific objective of this study was: To examine how language shapes men's and women's ideas about their discursive purposes. It was noted that all the respondents recognised that women's silence is actually a way of sending a message to the interlocutor facing the silent women. Most urban respondents, 60% of the females and 60% of males tended to think that women's silence is intentional. The big majority of both males and females (80%) state that the interpretation of the women's silence will depend on the context. i.e., whether "there are many people around and yet you wanted to discuss a personal question" For some. (30%), it may depend on the age of the male initiator of the dialogue and the female interlocutor. For most female respondents (70%), the interpretation depends on the status of the male interlocutor. That if it is a boda-boda rider trying to engage a university student (aka 'Campuser'), the silence will mean "obviously a dismissal of the conversation" (Respondent 3 female).

For most rural women, in public, for instance, in the courts, they keep silent out of fear; the fear of being labelled “the one who speaks a lot” or “the trouble causer”. They also keep quiet because the husband would say that the one taking the floor is “cutting him short” or “daring him”. It was also observed among the rural that the women who talk a lot are considered “not to have any word of wisdom”. It was suggested that “if a man has been troubling you and mistreating you if you talk a lot, the people around you will confirm that you are difficult”. The fear of “the other” here plays a big negative role in dissuading women from talking about their well-being at home and in society.

It was interesting to note that for many men in the urban sample population, 40% of the silence was attributed to a “lack of interest in the topic”. Another big section of the men, 30%, attributed the silence to shyness or timidity. It was also important to note that 20% stated that the closer the female interlocutor is, the higher the probability of her keeping silent” just to dismiss your conversation” (Respondent 6 male). A few female respondents (25%) associated women’s silence with taking time to understand what he is saying” and some other (25%) of the females stated that “*You may keep quiet in order to study him and make out his reaction ...or his facial expression*” (Respondent 1 female). It was explained here that if you take time to see the male interlocutor’s reaction you have a better chance of answering “strategically” according to the right mood. Under this objective, I tried to find out how the woman who is silent is positioning her silence. Some male respondents (40%) indicated that when a woman is of a better social status or level of education, she places her silence higher in terms of her perception of “the other”. She will “ignore” the invitation to the conversation or sabotage its sustainability by keeping silent. In this case, when I applied Hillary Janks CDA questions, I noted that it is not clear whose interests are being negated because the female speaker “is not interested” in the conversation, so here we cannot say that the silence was due to the non-cooperation of the male, through the tone and the facial expression. To quote one member of the focus group discussion (FGD), “*If a person has wronged me, for example, if his goats have eaten my crops, if he calls me, I would answer but keep my hurting inside my heart.*”

Is there any consequence of the silence? Most female respondents (60%) said they keep silent to keep the peace after withholding their speech. Does this mean that their interests were served by the silence? Not necessarily, as one respondent put it, “*you may keep quite in order to keep peace and the guy just goes out*”. So, “keeping the peace” may not always be emotionally or publicly beneficial.

In the rural context of polygamous families, however, in situations of jealousy and extreme competitiveness, “silence may be a technique for keeping your dignity and social harmony”. That silence towards your co-wives, one rural respondent explains, “*allows you to hold your head above the troubled waters*”. The community members will see that you are focusing on issues of development rather than spending time quarrelling with your competitors.

The smaller proportion of the rural respondents who advocated for breaking silence observed that “*sometimes you can keep quiet and “your heart feels like bursting” and eventually “you may fall sick*”. One member explained that:

“...for most of the time, it is issued to do with land use. When the husband refuses you to use a certain plot when you first bring it out, you try to wait and ask again. But finally, you get to know that he wants to sell it. In this case, you can use the local Council leaders to present the problem.”

Another member noted that sometimes it is the speed with which we talk that needs control; “*sometimes you need to go slowly and not to talk so quickly. You may need personally to keep quiet and let his friend or a person he trusts do the negotiations for you*”. The observations of the rural women show that they have much more faith in negotiating through a third party in order to find a solution to the underlying cause of the tension or conflict behind the silence.

Women’s Silence and their Perception of Gender

The second study’s objective was: - To investigate how women’s silence influences their perception of gender. Female respondents in the survey seemed all aware of the fact having a male interlocutor in front of them changes the dynamics of the “silent

conversation". Many of them (60%) stated that a "silent" response indicates "shock", "being overwhelmed" "getting a question that you never expected from a person you know very well". A small proportion (20%) explained that when they kept quiet because they "do not want to hurt the one their hurt their loved ones".

In the above cases of shock and feeling overwhelmed or too mad, the woman who is silent is the one having to control her anger or shock. This does not help her to get her interests served. It was also not clear what the consequences of feeling shocked or mad would be beneficial to the woman. Indeed, when the female interlocutor gets annoyed and keeps the anger, this was more harmful than useful to her body organism. It is a double risk for the female speaker. The male interlocutor, on the other hand, may not be even aware of any anger or shock. He will not feel the negative consequences arising out of the woman's keeping silent.

The third objective was: -To analyse how women's silence ideologically reinforces or subverts the male-dominant voice. One respondent mentioned "keeping the missile checked in order to fight when the target is unsuspecting." (Respondent 40). Some male respondents seemed to be aware of the hidden gender dynamics of the women's silence. One respondent stated that "if it is a female older than you, then you should know that a report of poor performance is coming." (Respondent 35). This older woman, he explained, could be your mother or your boss. Do the women's interests get served? Yes, because the male interlocutor, like in the case above, is made aware that some serious offence has been noted. He either is ready to appease or amend the wrong thing he had done, or he may choose to ignore the discourse of appeals and negotiation.

It was also noted that in the context of wife/husband, boy/friend/girlfriend, in the urban context, the "silence" is made even more resounding by the emotional cuttings attached. This respondent had this to say "if the silence is from a wife, expect hot sparks and no peace at night" (Respondent 2).

This comment shows the recognition of the wife's anger and a reaction of worry and concern. This is the case where the relational weight of the silence has been taken into consideration. Most likely, the male interlocutor will seek to rectify the error or

smoothen out the misunderstanding. This occurs mostly when there are barriers on the relational level. If the relationship has already gone sour, then silent treatment will escalate the tension and most probably increase the non-communication.

The women from the rural context condemned "the cold treatment" in the strongest terms. This respondent commented: "if a person has wronged me and made me angry, I first have to tell him the wrong he has done to me". In different words, each intervener stressed the power of forgiveness. For instance, one member said: "For me, if my husband has annoyed me, I remain in the house for some time. But after a while, I forgive him and start talking with him". All the women in the focus group hinted at the fact that even when they were annoyed, they would still respond in one way or another. This member pointed out:

"Most of us would try to explain the wrong that has been done. We would not use the silent treatment. But if, for instance, a Priest has used a word that has "strangled me", I will keep away from him, and I would not engage him in the conversation for fear of using bad or insulting words".

A person who is concerned about communication with others, the member explained, would notice that something has gone wrong if you avoid him twice or three times at the church.

According to the response of the rural women, questions of positioning, interest, and consequences in this last scenario presents some interesting points. Whereas the interests of the silent person will be taken into account when the relationship with the male is sour, the silent treatment, these women argue, will worsen the communication situation and could escalate the conflict.

Does it matter when the person you are dealing with is from a higher social-economic status? Apparently, one said the following: "If the person is rich and I am looking for something from him, I will bear the bad remarks because I know what I want from the interaction". This is the positioning that most rural women were supporting. They could manage their anger and keep their hurting checked in order to accomplish an objective or place themselves strategically.

It will be observed that in contrast to the position of the urban women, the rural women would be in favour of forgiveness and negotiating a solution to the impasse of communication. They argued that forgiving once or twice or thrice “prepares women for taking responsibility for problem-solving”. The fact that the rural women are more in favour of forgiveness does not take away their awareness of their rights. One respondent said:

“If you keep quiet when your husband beats you, and you keep quiet when he hits you the second and the third time, people, for instance, the church priest, would never know that you have a serious problem.”

In order to get help from the community, the rural women advocate for alternative peaceful solutions.

African Feminist Ideology and Silence

In a general way, African feminists have criticised the idea of trying to find solutions to our problems by means that are sourced from the Western world. They observe that Western feminism has influential powers in the global discourse on women’s issues. But it is exactly this influence that remains to be questioned as Western feminists commit similar aspects of silencing and remaining blind to the lives of women in Africa and the other third world countries who work from the margin (Maerten, 2004). An important difference between Western and African feminism is found in their conceptualisation of women as the subject of struggles. They are trying to address economic, political, and socio-cultural issues that they feel pertain to the complex experiences faced by all women of all cultures on the African continent. (African Feminists’ Forum, 2016). dependent on indigenous blueprints, they take from the histories and cultures of African peoples in order to create the necessary tools needed to embolden women and educate men. As Josephine Ahikire has rightly pointed out, “it is strategically necessary—to reconceptualise “African feminism” as an ideological force that poses fundamental challenges to patriarchal orthodoxies of all kinds. The point of departure here is that the feminist struggle on the African continent represents a critical stance against the mainstream patriarchal power (Ahikire, 2014). From the point of view of African feminists,

feminism is more widely defined as a struggle against all forms of injustice and also requires changes across the different fronts in order to attain advancements in women’s rights. This makes non-Western feminism face problems and pursues aims of great importance concerning not only women but also the entire societies in which they live (Bayu, 2019).

Linking this African feminist ideology to the paper requires us to pose the question: does the manifestation, response or reaction to the woman’s silence demonstrate male supremacy? From the findings, we note that social status, age, education, and emotional relationship are more important as variables that promote gender as an agency in the manifestation of this silence. Indeed, among the younger respondents (No. 45 & No. 50), their physical state of “Being Busy”, or a being psychologically pre-occupied by other serious matters or emotionally “being too tired” tend to matter more in deciding whether to keep silent or not. One can safely observe that in the context of younger, more exposed, more confident females, the tendency is going toward other socio-economic and identity bases for communication or the denial thereof. Among the rural-based women, however, the silence seemed to be culturally conditioned and self-censored and not physically imposed by a male. However, it will be construed by us as society setting the terms of cultural interaction and the imposition of the rules of social interaction, which is setting the inherently and specifically gendered. As one researcher puts it, not taking the interaction turn, especially among the rural-based women, could be seen as “doing” what society calls a “good” woman who conforms to the socially constructed feminine roles (Asiimwe, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Women’s silence as a discursive tool is a powerful instrument. It has been used effectively in the historical past of the Banyankore/Bakiga to subvert patriarchal power over women. But in the present circumstance, we noted that age, economic status, and emotional relationship tend to play a more significant role than just gender. Among the younger respondents, the context of the conversation, the social status of the interlocutor, and the physical state of mind of the female

respondent tend to play an important role in women's silence. In contrast to the urban respondents, the rural respondents tended to stress more the need for forgiving the male interlocutor several times over, if necessary, in order to give peaceful negotiations a chance. From the study, it was noted that as the social context of female discourse changes, so do communication practices among the Banyankore/Bakiga. Economic status, social standing, and emotional relationship tend to play a more significant role than just gender in the women's silence. Most of the respondents were not aware of African feminist ideologies like those contained in the African Feminist Charter that advocates for women's rights. African feminist ideology also seems to weigh less on gendered discourse such as women's silence that was investigated in this study.

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