

## **Social Construction of Gender in Gikuyu Community as Portrayed in Narratives, Songs and Proverbs**

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### **Abstract**

*This research seeks to uncover gender power relations in Gikuyu community through the analysis of narratives, proverbs and songs. The study reveals that narratives were significant in social construction of gender in traditional Gikuyu community, and in doing so, they evaluated women's political and social capacities negatively. In addition, the traditional knowledge from proverbs contributed to inequalities and discrimination in social construction of gender. Proverbs reveal a hierarchy between men and women, which enhances male rule over women; visible through the many positive qualities ascribed to them as opposed to the negative qualities attributed to women. Like with narratives and proverbs, this study has revealed that songs have the capacity to communicate the superiority of men and demean women in a patriarchal society. The study concludes that Gikuyu oral literature played a major role in social construction of gender, most often skewed towards favouring the male figure.*

**Key words:** Gikuyu, power, Social Construction, Gender, Oral Literature, Kenya.

## 1. Introduction

In many studies, gender has been defined or described as the social construct of biological categories of sex. It is the organization of the relationship between sexes or social classification into masculine and feminine. Foucault (1980) points out that like all social relations, gender relations are connected with power. Power is not located in any fixed manner, but it circulates and is contested by different groups. When power relations are imagined as one-sided the result is a hierarchy of these relations, even if in practice power relations are complex and shifting. Northrop (1983) argues that literature prescribes thought and action according to the dictates of certain ideologies just as it describes them. Every work of literature as something produced for its own time as an ideological document. In most societies, past and present, there are economic and social forms of dominance and submission that may, spring from the dominance and submission of the sexual paradigm. According to Aitken (1960) both the dominated and the dominant groups may employ literature as a vehicle to promote their moral imaginations. For instance, dominant groups can try to use literary texts to quell other views and justify their supremacy, while for dominated groups, the indirect way in which literature comments on social relations, makes expression of alternative imaginations possible without direct liability. In this way literature becomes a disguised form of resistance.

## 2. Objectives and Methodology

This article seeks to uncover gender power relations in Gikuyu community in order to understand power contestation between men and women. It investigates how narratives, songs and proverbs are used in this power game of the dominant gender and the dominated one. The analysis is based on the understanding that literature has been used as a source of cultural communication in many African societies. The article is a part of an extensive research that was done within a sampled region in the Gikuyuland, and therefore the data discussed here forms only part of the major research. The genre samples utilized here were collected through field research whereby the researcher visited the sampled region and witnessed the performances and recorded the data. In the case of songs the researcher also participated in some of the performances. The participants were men and women aged between thirty five (35) and sixty (60) who resided in the region. The data used here was purposefully sampled from the reservoir of the data collected during the field work. In this discussion the complete raw data is not included but comprehensive explanations and reference to the genres is made to make sure that the discussion is clear.

## 3. Traditional Views of Men and Women in the Gikuyu Community.

Aitken (1987) points out that throughout history and literature the woman has been portrayed as time wasting creature whose value is chiefly ornamental, or as one whose work consists of menial or non essential tasks. He adds that women have been effectively cut from power and decision making. From the interactions with Gikuyu elders during this research, it was evident that the most important thing in the Gikuyu community was to know the sex of a newly born child. The birth of a baby boy in the Gikuyu community elicited five ululations while that of a girl elicited four. According to Karanja, one of the informers, ululations were prayers to God. For a boy the five ululations represented five things which God was requested to give a boy. They prayed that the boy should be brave, king, rich, medicine man and seer or prophet. A girl's prayer represented four things that she should be given by God, i.e. all the qualities above but bravery. A brave woman was seen as a source of fear in the Gikuyu community. As children grew up, young boys were taught tasks such as house building and cattle herding, they were strongly discouraged from doing domestic chores or associating much with women. On the other hand, girls were taught domestic chores like cooking, fetching firewood and water, weeding and an additional etiquette of being pleasant to visitors.

The Gikuyu myth of origin forms an important base in understanding gender constructs in the Gikuyu community. According to the myth which was narrated by Karanja mentioned above, Gikuyu is the father of the Gikuyu people and he was promised the land flowing with milk and honey, and full of rivers and forests by God (*Murungu/Ngai*) On his way to the land he was provided with a wife, Mumbi; and when they arrived in this land of plenty they were blessed with nine daughters, whose names are used to name the nine clans of Gikuyu community. Originally the community was matriarchal because the reproductive role women gave them the right to own the children and to establish matrilineal clans. The women wielded political, social and economic power. During this time men played subordinate and subservient roles, while women practised polyandry and caused untold suffering to men. However, there occurred a power shift from female gender to male gender when men arranged to make all women pregnant at the same time; and at that point of women's weakness men seized power and all the other values associated with women's power and authority were inverted. For instance, polygamy replaced polyandry as the source of power; women became subordinate and subservient. From that time, the only other time that women's rule is mentioned in Gikuyu traditions is during the historical "headman" by name Wangu Wa Makeri. The title 'headman' was given to Wangu since the terminology came with the white man and there was no equivalent for it in Gikuyu land since there were no other women leaders. Wangu Wa Makeri's rule was not appreciated because by the time she was born in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, patriarchy was well entrenched in the Gikuyu society. The next section interrogates whether these patriarchal tendencies are possibly revealed through the community's oral literature.

#### **4. Social Construction of Gender in Narratives, Songs and Proverbs**

Mr. Karanja (informant) explained that traditionally Gikuyu children were taught through narratives, songs, proverbs, riddles, poetry and being talked to by the parents and elders, an explanation that concurs with suggestions by Kenyatta (1978) in *Facing Mt. Kenya*. When the children learnt how to speak the mothers taught them good manners and the names of important people in the family, and when they were fluent in their speech they joined other children in listening to counsel from other members of the community. This was done through oral genres that amused the children. Later in life children started playing games which were often gendered, but we will not discuss such games here, as they are outside the scope of this research.

Narratives were often used to teach, warn and advise, but the young were also told narratives about the heroes of the tribe like Ndemi, the hard working leaders who cleared the bushes and started farming in Gikuyu land; Mathathi who introduced traditional medicine to make soup; and Mugo wa Kibiro the Gikuyu overseer who prophesied the coming of the white man. These stories of the Gikuyu heroes demonstrate that women had no place among the big names in the society, since they were all men. Such heroic stories ensured that from an early age, Gikuyu children were made to understand that power lay in the hands of men. In many patriarchal societies in Africa, there is a constant guard of power by men so that women do not access it.

##### **4.1 Narratives**

In the narrative *Mbogo na Thia*, (Buffaloes and Antelopes), by Chege Ndongo, buffaloes and antelopes are shown to have been cows and goats owned by women. The woman is said to have been very proud mistreating her animals asserting: "These are my animals to create and to throw away." Then one day when there was a very heavy rain, the man took his animals home but the woman left hers in the bush. When she went later to look for them, they had disappeared in the forest and it was dark, so she went back home

without them and she never found them again and her animals became forest beings (Buffaloes and antelopes). This story portrays the woman to be careless which later leads to deprivation of property, thus justifying why all animals belonged to men in the Gikuyu community. The woman is also presented fearful because when the rain ceases, she goes back into the forest to look for her livestock but she fears the dark thick forest and goes back home, thus losing her livestock. Consequently, the man becomes the only owner of animals. This fact is also reflected in the proverb, *mbu ya arume itikagwo ni athamaki* (men's alarm or shouts are answered by elders), showing that men do not just shout for the sake of it because they are brave and so their shouts are always answered promptly as it is assumed that there must be something important. This implies that women can raise fake alarms and nobody takes notice of their shouts. The oral narrative mentioned above is a reflection of a patriarchal society and how men justify themselves as the owners of property and more so animals. It suggests that women had a chance to own their own animals but their inability to look after them turned them into wild animals. Since such narratives are part of cultural reservoir, its attitudes are inculcated in the minds of children as they grow.

The narrative *Hiti na Warubuku*, (the Hyena and the Hare), by Samson Karanja, tells of two friends Hyena and Hare. Their wives became disobedient and their husbands agreed to go and beat them. Hyena beat his wife to the point of death and the Hare beat the drum the whole night. The following day the Hyena had no one to cook for him. While the story is a trickster by the fact that the Hare cheated the Hyena, it in addition demonstrates gender based violence where women are not given a chance for dialogue or reasoning; she is beaten. The subordinate role of the woman is also revealed by the fact that women are supposed to cook and fetch water from the river while men rule and discipline them. It is a taboo for men to cook, which points to the authority bestowed to man in this community. While the character of Hare would be seen as representing those men who are sensitive, such narratives still ensured that boys knew they had powers over girls/women; even to beat them. Likewise girls would learn that their role is that of doing domestic work and serving men both at their father's homes and in marriage. Kabira and Mutahi (1988) highlight, that narratives provided secrets, knowledge or part of Gikuyu ways of living. "They are historical hence they provide arguments and counterargument, discussions on politics, gender, morality and identity". (5-7). Therefore it can be said that narratives contribute to social construction of gender because they teach children about gender identity, rules and expected behaviour.

*Muturi Ugutura na Mutumia Wake* (The Black Smith and the Wife), by Kabura, demonstrates the preconceived idea that women are jealous and that they cannot live together and help each other. The black Smith leaves his wife pregnant and goes to make tools at a faraway place where he could find the best sand for making tools. When the time comes for her to give birth an ogress who turns into a woman comes to assist her. The Ogress cooks and gives her food but when the woman attempts to pick the food from the ogre it takes the food away and eats. This ogress acts in place of a midwife who however, does not care whether the woman and her child die or not. She is jealous and her objective is to cause the woman suffering. The woman in this story is eventually saved by the husband showing that men have to be rescued by women from other evil females (the ogress). In addition women are presented as beasts of burden because the man travels and leaves her pregnant wife alone with all other responsibilities of working in the farm, taking the livestock out to graze and doing other domestic chores. The man is so engrossed in his manly jobs (blacksmithing) that it only takes the intercession of the bird that the woman sends for man to come back home to save the woman just before the ogress eats her and the baby. The subordinate nature of women in this society again comes out clear because it takes the intervention of the man for the woman to survive. The

creation of female ogre in the narrative perpetuates the gender differences ascribed to man and woman with the latter being evil.

The negative portrayal of women is further exemplified in the narrative *Mutumia uria uterikaga*, (the Disagreeable wife), by Kamau Kibe. This is a story of a wife who never used to agree with whatever her husband said. When one time she drowns in a river the man leads a rescue team to save her up the river instead of downwards saying that his wife's stubbornness could not have allowed her to be carried down the river. The woman therefore dies as a result because the search team did not go down the river. According to the husband she must have argued with the river and forced it to drown her upstream. This narrative enhances male dominance by insinuating that any woman who disagrees with what a man says deserves a severe punishment; even death. It demonstrates the fact that men are considered to be decision makers while women are expected to follow the instruction or else they face dire consequences like the woman in the narrative. The woman is presented as the opposite of man in a negative way, as Felman (1975) points out, that women are considered as different other, hence treated differently from men in many negative ways. Narratives are therefore seen as cultural tools that enhance male dominance and othering of women in Gikuyu community.

#### 4.2 Proverbs

The idea of women being the "other" in Gikuyu traditional community seen in the narratives above is also expressed in their proverbs. As part of Gikuyu heritage proverbs confirm societal norms and values. In creating the communal gender consciousness they reinforce the images and roles ascribed to men and women. They legitimize the roles and functions of men and women in the society, presenting men as conceptually different from women (Waita, 2003). This study has established that proverbs were used in daily conversation because they were considered to contain wisdom, authority and educational qualities. Proverbs have not been subjected to change although some may have more than one interpretation. Brinkman (1996) suggests that one proverb can be applied in many different contexts and thus acquire new dimensions and meanings. Through the discussions of most of the Gikuyu proverbs with the performers, this study noted that the genre deals with gender power relations in a specific way. The Gikuyu proverbs are predominantly male genre which encourages and enhances male domination and oppression of women. In most proverbs women and their presumed characteristics are negatively presented while men are positively presented. The status of women as expressed in most of the proverbs is that of otherness and outsiders as demonstrated in proverb *arume ti aka* (men are not women), meaning that women are different from men. This hints to the different obligations of men and women. The proverb *Muiritu ni mutuga kwene* (A girl is generous in other people's house or benefits others) further show this difference in a negative way; meaning that a girl is an outsider. In Gikuyu language a woman is referred to as *mundu wa nja* meaning one who belongs outside. She is an outsider before marriage and that is why she is often discriminated upon in terms of modern formal education and duties where she is born because one day she will leave the family to go and serve another family. When she gets married she is still considered an outsider because she did not originally belong to the family but came from outside to join it. In this way, women's life in the Gikuyu community seems to be that of the struggle to belong, a struggle that does not often succeed.

Women are also considered to be evil as demonstrated in the proverb *aka eri ni nyungu igiri cia urogi* (two wives are two pots full of poison). This proverb intends to show that women cannot live together because they are capable of hurting each other and in return destroy the whole family. The proverb was often used to advise men who wanted to marry many wives, to make sure that each wife has her own house to avoid every

day conflict between his wives. The proverb *giathi githaragio ni gaka kamwe*, (A market can be dispersed by one small woman), demonstrates the supposedly evil power of woman by the fact that even a tiny woman is able to disperse a gathering or implicitly disturb people's calm. This proverb uses the diminutive term *Gaka* [ka-woman] to make women even lesser beings. The two proverbs above are meant to make people aware that women are evil and dangerous. They are presented as destructive people who cannot live together peacefully even as wives or elsewhere. This fact can also be evidenced in the proverb *aka matiri cia ndiro no cia nyiniko* (women have no upright words only crooked ones); meaning women are destructive not only in their words but also in their deeds. On the other hand man is represented as the all-powerful saviour of the woman as discussed earlier in the narrative *Muturi Ugutura na Mutumia wake*; unveiling the patriarchal nature of this society. Women are therefore shown to be so weak that they cannot protect themselves even from other women as seen in proverb *Mutumia na kionje ni undu umwe* (a woman and an invalid man are the same thing). This means there are things women cannot do but men can do according to the beliefs of the Gikuyu traditional community and that is why roles are divided to make sure that each gender does its work perfectly. Consider the proverb *mutumia ndaaturaga mutwe na ndaikagia ndahi ndua* (a woman does not split the head (of a slaughtered animal) nor scoop the cup into the beer), which shows demarcation of duties according to gender. Many Gikuyu proverbs tend to imply that women's work is diminutive as seen in proverbs above. The idea of women being lesser beings that do lesser work and often needing help visible in oral literature has often been carried over into the writing of stories for children in many societies. Such narratives are often used to tame children to their jobs at an early age. Many critics have disparaged such books with a suggestion to write non-sexist books that can help combat gender bias. Stinton (1979) for example suggests that "the idea of older brother climbing a tree while little sister admires from below should be scrapped from children's literature because such ideas house harmful attitudes" (3). Such ideas beget girls who desist from attempting difficult tasks; girls who cannot face modern societal challenges. Boys and girls in the modern society should therefore be given equal opportunities to compete without any limitations based on sex in order to dislodge the already ingrained traditional values.

From the research it was also evident that Gikuyu proverbs imply that women are untrustworthy and unpredictable. Whatever they say is believed after some time so that one can give it time to see whether it is true or not. For instance the proverb *mundu muka ndatumagwo thiri-ini* (a woman is not sent to collect debt) shows how a woman cannot be sent to collect a debt because she cannot be trusted to bring the whole amount, while *aka na iguru matimenyagirwo* (women are as unpredictable as weather) emphasizes how difficult it is to understand or trust a woman as they are as unpredictable as the weather; implying that in the Gikuyu society, it is not easy to make deals with women.

Men on the other hand are depicted as different from women in a positive way. Since Gikuyu proverbs are said to carry the wisdom from Gikuyu, the father of the tribe, to generations and generations to come, the community is made to understand that men are superior beings and should be respected and honoured by all. Many proverbs tend to praise men, as demonstrated in the following proverbs:

- i. *Arume ti aka* (men are not women)
- ii. *Mbu ya arume itikagwo ni athamaki* (men's alarm is answered by kings or elders)
- iii. *Cia athuri ni thuranire* (men's issues are well sorted out)
- iv. *Mundu murume ni wakarugi*, (Men act promptly)

In proverb number (i) above, men are perceived to be everything that women are not. This means that if women are foolish, men are not and if women are not wise men are; while proverb number (ii) implies that men's words are taken seriously because men do not just speak for the sake of it, but only speak when there is something important to say. This point is further emphasized by the proverb number (iii), which contrasts with women who are said to have crooked words. Proverb number (iv) implies that men are sharp and that they do not just talk like women but they are capable of making decisions and act upon them. This then explains why there were no women law makers in Gikuyu traditional community.

From the discussion above it is evident that there is a hierarchical order between men and women where men are viewed as superior to women, respected, clever, organised, and prompt in their way of doing things, while women are traditionally viewed to be everything that men are not. The proverbs we have discussed above support male dominance thus enhancing male rule over women because of the very many positive qualities ascribed to men as opposed to the negative qualities ascribed to women. According to Kabira and Mutahi (1988), occasions for performance of proverbs are many compared to narratives. These are occasions like legal cases, marriage contracts, discussions, criticisms, admonition and many others. This traditional knowledge from proverbs, just like narratives contribute to inequalities and discrimination in social construction of gender. That is why Beauvoir (1974) tells women that myths about them are lies and that they must escape, liberate themselves, shape their own future and deny all myths that confine them.

#### 4.3 Songs

Like proverbs and narratives songs have the capacity to communicate gender roles, traditional view of women and traditional view on gender power relations. For instance, the songs *mundurume* (man) by Simon Kihara and *ithui arume turi arume* (we men are men) by James Makibi, explain the status of men as that of great importance and different from that of women. The songs assert that the name man is not to be joked with because it is likened to a title deed. In Kihara's song, we are told that no other person can do the work that is done by man, for instance, managing many wives without any of them disagreeing with him. He further asserts that the man is the pillar of a home for if a man dies it is a great loss not only to his home but to the whole country. He insists that if a man was a title deed and you take him to a bank you could be given a loan without interest meaning that a man should not be taken lightly because when one has a man in their life [in this case referring to women], one has wealth. The only thing that is said about a woman is that if a husband dies, she would have to call people to contribute to educate the children because there is nothing she can do on her own. This is seen in verse four of the song:

If a man dies it is a loss to the country  
Because all those he was helping will be helpless  
They are forced to organize a funds drive to educate children  
And when he was alive none of them went without food.

[Translated to English by the authors]

According to the singer, a man is called a man because of the manliness in him. Even if he is thin he should not be belittled because if you look at his wife she is very huge because of being fed well and the care she is given by the man. Traditionally men were respected if their wife or wives were fat and healthy, because that was a sign that the husband was a good provider who fed his family well. This reveals the traditional concept of beauty in a woman as that of being fat. Any thin woman was associated with problems in her marriage. In Kihara's song, everyone is warned never to belittle a man regardless of their size because a man

is judged based on his intellectual capability and only women are judged by physical appearance, as they are considered to be sexual beings. When children grow up hearing such songs they tend to internalize the values therein; the fact that one gender is more important than the other, in this way, fear is instilled in girls while boys develop confidence. According to Odhoji (1992), folktales, myths and other forms of art like music sanction the dominant ideology of male superiority. Once men have acquired symbols of power, they go to extraordinary lengths to prevent women from taking these symbols back. Perhaps that is why Gikuyu men are reminded in Makibi's song that they are men, no matter what women do to them and that they should stand firm and defend their place and perform their roles.

Makibi also outlines the duties of men in this song. He insists that the work of looking after animals belongs to men, because all animals belong to them because animals signify wealth. In Gikuyu community, land and other commodities were purchased using animals. Bride price was paid using animals and even in the contemporary society money equivalent to the number of animals is paid for bride price. A man without animals was viewed as useless (Kenyatta, 1978). This idea of ownership of animals was echoed earlier in the story of the Buffaloes and Antelopes which explains how women lost their animals to justify men's ownership. In his song Makibi further voices that men are the heads of their homes while women are the necks; that the high priests were men and that every one in the community knows his or her work. This is a modern song that enhances traditional division of labour in the Gikuyu community, suggesting that there might be challenges in implementing male duties due to the changes going on in the society. The singer expresses this fear when he says:

Even if we are abused we are still men  
Even if we are beaten we are still men

This fear was confirmed during the interviews where both old and young men wished that things would go back the way they were in the olden days, when women remained silent, did their prescribed jobs and respected men. In the contemporary Gikuyu society, women often tend to perform roles that were traditionally meant for men. Thus the song is trying to encourage men not to lose hope no matter what challenges they meet, because according to the singer circumstances will not change their status as men.

In the song *Mwomboko wa 40* which mean sung of popular in the 1940s, Kariuki talks of the role of women as that cutting vines for the sheep and goats and the fact that even if women participated in dances, they had to perform their duties before they left home. It is worth noting that men's duties are not mentioned in this regard. This shows that men are not restricted in any way in terms of the chores they perform. The song also talks of old men who are liked by young girls because they have money, which is an indication that women are considered to be materialistic and that their only agenda in marriage is material gains. In the fourth stanza the man complains of the fact that he cannot be insulted by a woman he collected in the market and fed her well. The irony of it is that the woman has to work very hard to feed the family as it is her role and yet the man claims that she cannot feed herself. Schipper (1987) observes that "women do two thirds of all the work both within and outside the home, but only receive ten percent of all the money earned on earth" (35). Ogundipe (1994) also notes that in most African societies, gender supremacy was taken for granted and "women's work was viewed as unimportant with men wondering what makes them (women) tired at the end of the day" (34). This depicts discrimination and molestation of female gender where most of the work they do is neither recognized nor rewarded. The singer concludes that he is going to beat the woman until she calls her people. Such utterances of the man in this song confirms the fact that in Gikuyu traditional set up

women are viewed as outsiders and helpless, in their marital homes. Key to all feminist analysis is recognition of different degrees of social powers that are granted to and exercised by women and men (Hall, 2001). In this case we see that patriarchal societies in Africa have deemed men more powerful than women. In the last stanza of this song by Kariuki, the young man who lives in Nairobi is advised not to be “teased by skirts” but to go home and get married before good women are all married. Schipper (1987) argues that in any given cultural context, male and female behaviour patterns are fixed by norms and anyone who tries to break the rules can expect to meet with serious problems in a community in which the ruling group produces images and conceptions of the others to legitimise the status quo. It is clear that the singer uses “skirts” to represent the working class woman in Nairobi whom he thinks she is not morally upright and therefore not good for marriage. He considers rural and traditional women better and that is why he advises the young man not to waste his time with modern women in town but to go home and get married. The song criticizes the changes and risks that came with urbanization in the 1940s where movement of women to the cities was seen as ruining their morals. The singer is therefore not in favour of change for women but he does not mind the man working in the city so long as he marries a woman from the rural set up where morals are supposedly strong and intact.

Peter Mwangi’s song *Kuini Maritati* (Beautiful Queen) describes a beautiful girl referred to as queen. The singer who is a man says he saw her at night and would like to be taken in day time to see her. When he sees her, he gets satisfied because of her beauty and he even wonders whether she cooks for him eggs meaning giving him something special. The implication of the first stanza in this song is that women are seen as sexual beings and that a beautiful woman must also be associated with good food as cooking is her most important role in the society. The second stanza expresses the idea of old age in relation to the queen, in that, when she grows old she will be reduced to cooking and mourning for her gone beauty while the young girls go out to dance. Again the discrimination of women is seen in that where old age is associated with men, it comes with a lot of wisdom and respect as seen in the proverb, *hari athuuri hatitagwo maai* (where men (elders) are gathered one must not pour water). The more a man grows old the more he becomes valuable to the society for he becomes an elder while old age for a woman means she becomes unattractive hence useless. Stanza 3 of the song describes a girl who men cannot get attracted to. She has never bathed and her feet are full of cracks; she will therefore be thrown out and become a toilet door. According to Frank (1987), the reason why old women want to see their daughters securely married and perpetually pregnant is because they cannot imagine a destiny for their daughters other than the one they have endured which is becoming “a male’s extension or somebody’s mother.” (17). This brings the idea that a woman without a man in her life is cut off from the community, making her useless, which is demonstrated in Mwangi’s song above.

The importance of marriage for women and negative images of single women is further explored in the song *niwe weneanire* (you gave yourself out) by Peter Kigia where a girl who refuses to marry, grows old and has no children which gives her a bad reputation. In the first stanza, she is referred to as a useless “dress full of patches” due to old age. In stanza 3, the woman is said to have been warned by the society about aging but she had dismissed the voice of the people as, “the cry of Wolves” saying that she was a grown up and no one should tell her what to do. Kigia’s song has no single kind word for the woman who is said to have turned herself into a “supermarket or an ATM machine”, implying that she accepted every man who came her way. In this song we notice that the patriarchal society dictates women’s behaviour, as the misfortunes of the woman came as a result of refusing to heed to the voice of the people. Presently, she has herself to blame because “life has no rehearsal”. This song is a manifestation of the negative attitude towards single women found in the society whereby women are not expected to move to the city with or without men. This

message is in agreement with the song analysed earlier, *Mwomboko wa 40* by H.M. Kariuki, in which the young man is asked to go home and marry before all the good girls go with other men, forcing him to marry left overs.

The assertions in the songs discussed above tally with Kenyatta's (1978) supposition that before the British colonization, single women were unheard of because marriage was a rite of passage which every woman had to undergo even if it meant marrying a man with many wives. Every man was also expected to marry and have children. Polygamy was encouraged in Gikuyu community to make sure that all the women were married and were subjected to the rule of men.

According to Cagnolo (1933), a girl in Gikuyu had no brilliant future; she was expected to work and cultivate her father's fields while she waited for suitors. Having found one, she cultivated her husband's fields and produced children for him. The interests of her tribe and country were of no concern for her. She had no will or claims of her own. Cagnolo adds that the despotic commands of a girl's father or brother were law to her and were sole arbiters of her future and she was only well fed and well treated because she represented future capital in the shape of livestock which was to be received when she married. Though marriage is considered as the rule for men and women, it is somehow more oppressive to women than men. In this way while the young men in Gikuyu society viewed marriage as an additional sign in all respects, women bemoaned their loss of independence.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that there is gender segregation in the Gikuyu community. It is evident from the narratives, proverbs and songs analysed here that in Gikuyu community's differentiation of gender status began from birth and continued until the end of one's life. Paradoxically, it is the social importance of gender statuses and their external markers, that is, clothing, mannerisms, gender roles and spatial segregations that makes gender binding and it is the same issues that make changes desirable (Buttler, 1990). Without gender differentiation, no one would desire to resist or even change. Differences in the way the two genders are treated make the oppressed gender to desire to fight in order to attain what they do not have. A Gikuyu man and woman learnt what was expected of them and thus constructed and maintained the gender order. While men and women could be different as far as sex statuses are concerned but equal in every other respect thus having equal distribution of labour, economic gains, education and equal human rights, the genres discussed here demonstrate that Gikuyu community considered women disabled because of their biology, thus placing men above women and often denying women opportunity to participate in decision making in the society. The male was the more powerful; owner of property, including women, to an extent that even young boys were viewed as occupying a higher position than females, including their sisters, and even their mothers.

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