

“Innovation and Change in Social Construction of Gender as Depicted in Gikuyu Songs”

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the transformations in social construction of gender among the Gikuyu community in Kenya. The article does this by interrogating how modern Gikuyu songs have been modified to remove gender misrepresentation and create new identities. Data was collected through field research and the songs discussed here were purposefully sampled from the reservoir of the data collected during the field work. The discussion shows that songs are adapted and adjusted to suit the occasion or situation. This adaptation and change was necessitated by the fact that Gikuyu traditional songs were despotic to women hence modern singers have found the need for modification to counteract the oppressive nature of traditional songs. As a genre, song is seen as the most flexible in Gikuyu oral literature and has contributed enormously in bringing about change in social construction of gender in the community.

Key words: Oral Literature, Songs, Gikuyu, Innovation, Gender, Social Construction

1. Introduction

Most communities in Africa have cultural reservoirs where oral literature genres like proverbs, narratives and songs, to mention only three are stored, mostly in people's minds. All societies in the world have experienced several transformations with the passing of time, and such transformations are often perceptible in these societies' oral literature. Of all the genres of oral literature in Africa, proverbs undergo minimal changes while other genres like narratives, riddles and puns keep changing to suit the audiences and the context of performance. However the song genre seems to have experienced more changes than these other genres often revealing some innovations that become necessary due to the changing nature of the society where it is performed. Innovation in this study refers to the modification of the traditional songs to suit modern set up or current events. In the process of modification, some stanzas of a song may change in order to convey the preferred messages, while other stanzas still carry traditional messages. Wordings of the whole song may also change to address current issues while the tunes or melodies and dancing rhythms remain the same. Innovation helps in discarding the outdated ideas and words which have been overtaken by time and introducing new ones which are useful in modern set up. Change refers to introduction of fresh music in terms of wordings, ideas and methods of dancing. In this study, it refers to removing all the misrepresentation of gender and creating new identities. In this paper we examine how songs have brought about innovation and change in social construction of gender in the Gikuyu community in Kenya.

The study seeks to answer two questions:

1. Have Gikuyu traditional songs been transformed to suit modern set up of the Gikuyu community?
2. Have Gikuyu modern songs been used to outline past misrepresentation of gender and to bring about changes in social construction of gender?

This article is a part of an extensive research that was done within a sampled region in Gikuyuland in Kenya, and therefore the data discussed here forms only part of the major research. The songs utilized here were collected through field research whereby the researcher visited the sampled region and witnessed the performances and recorded the data; sometimes participating in the performances. The paper has sampled eleven (11) songs in an attempt to answer the research questions.

2. Innovations and Change in Social Construction of Gender

This part discusses the modifications visible in Gikuyu songs and also attempts to demonstrate what necessitated such transformations. In the song, *Gikuyu niatumire nguo* (Gikuyu sew the dress) the soloist improvises words to pass the necessary information of how women dressed differently from men; what they used to wear in those days and show their differences. The soloist mentions *murekio* and *muthuru* as kind of dressings for women to show gender differentiation. She describes to the audience how they used to dance while “selling” their daughter, that is, marrying them off: “We used to dance with shoulders and when we got tired we danced with our legs”. She then addresses the dancers telling them to dance and show the audience how they used to do it, which is an innovation. This song is a traditional women’s dance which was sang during wedding of their children. However when used in the modern set up, the wordings change to give room to explain the transformations that have taken place in the traditional Gikuyu dress code.

According to Olielo (1992), songs are open to modification and are products of the social conditions that give rise to them. Songs reflect the organizations and dynamics of a society. It is evident that the traditional words used in the above mentioned song may have become irrelevant in the modern set up forcing the traditional dancers to modify their songs. Such words that imply obsolete activities are reflected in the last stanza of the song:

Did you cut the vine?
Did you cut the vine?
Good dancer?
Or you will go home to be quelled?

These words are irrelevant in contemporary times because women are no longer confined to the work of cutting vines for sheep and goats. Instead, women are involved in various other jobs, including white color jobs, and that is why the singer urges the dancers to show the audience “how it used to be” as things are no longer happening presently. The content of the song also demonstrates or states what was referred to as “women’s jobs”, in the Gikuyu traditional society, which often confined them to the home.

The song *Kworirio nuu nau?* (It was asked it is who and who?) by Peter Mwangi Gachago is a traditional song named *mwomboko* which was sang by men and women and it is modified in a way that the tune and the dancing rhythm are retained but the wordings change to suit the current performance and also to serve as a learning event. The song which was used to praise important people in the traditional set up is improvised to praise the people present at the event/performance, specifically women. It is modified to encourage women to press on with education and not to be defeated. The soloist sung: “Wanjiru hold your degree and do not be defeated”, demonstrating that the soloist must have been aware of the many obstacles facing women in their effort to be educated and how they have been discriminated in the past where often boys were taken to school and girls were left at home. This innovation in the song is in line with the modern changes and female empowerment campaigns taking place in the Gikuyu community, and the Kenyan state at large.

What was evident during this research is that a soloist is not restricted in composing, so long as the song identifies and conforms to the Gikuyu community. There is freedom for creative originality and a singer is allowed to exploit his or her creativity to the fullest. The songs instruct, or teach the young people on behavior, warn, inform and entertain the community and they are modified depending on occasion of performance.

According to Njogu and Maupeu (2007) a song is a product of social process and it is not separable from society’s political and critical issues of the day. They explore social cosmology, world view, class and gender relations, interpretation of value systems and other political, social and cultural practices. This means that songs have the capacity to indicate changes in the society and can deal with any subject including social construction of gender and gender power relations.

The song, *Mwaari wa Maitu* (My sister) by Mbiri Young Stars, is an exchange between brother and a sister. The brother expresses Gikuyu traditional view of how wives should treat their husbands while the sister expresses change in gender power relations. The brother advises the sister never to be stubborn to her husband and never spy on him when he goes out with other women; that a husband should never wash his clothes when the wife is there. The wife should also never go to bed before the husband because she has to be there to serve him even if he comes late in the night. The girl in return complains that she should not be made to sit the whole night waiting for the man to come home. She says that the rule of punishing and oppressing women has not been passed and signed; it is men who have made the rule to suit themselves, implying that rules or societal norms in patriarchal societies are made by men for their own benefit. In this song, it emerges that living together as husband and wife depends on how well the woman serves the man. The sister is warned that if she does not adhere to the brother's advice, she will be beaten by her husband and sent back home without teeth: "Stay where you are and do not ever think of going away...do not ever be stubborn to him...let me tell you, you will come back here without teeth and find me." This song demonstrates that women in the Gikuyu community are sometimes intimidated by men through beating them and this confines women into subservient roles. Beating seems to be an accepted norm since the singer in this song (the brother) does not promise to show any remorse in case the sister is beaten up in her marriage. There is therefore an implication that for a husband and a wife to live in peace, a wife has to be ready to put up with all the oppressions and mistreatments. She has to turn a blind eye to all the wrongs done by a man. However, in the response from the sister points to a resolve by modern women to refuse any demeaning demands from their male counterparts. The girl tells the brother, "I spend the night waiting for him...that rule is not passed or signed...it is your rule that you men made for yourselves." The utterances by the female singer in this song demonstrate women should be crusaders of their own liberation, while men on their part wish to maintain status quo. The exchange thus shows that women are aware of their suffering in the society and they are ready to push for modification of this state of affairs.

Through the songs collected in this research, it was possible to decipher that in the olden days, women's place was often at home where they were expected to carry out domestic chores while men went to socialize or carry out other activities like hunting. Therefore in the traditional set up, it became ingrained in people's minds that women should not be found following their husbands in public places as that was not women's space. However because of modern changes, women have been empowered and they hitherto patronize spaces that were previously a male preserve and such behavior by women is not accepted by men. Modern singers, especially the male tend to criticize this modern behavior in their singing. The song, *Wendo wa baku* (Fake love) by Simon Kihara presents a woman who follows her husband wherever he goes. The man complains that the woman is embarrassing him in public and tells the wife to go "look for another one who needs a bodyguard". This shows that men are not comfortable with the change taking place, especially getting empowered to fight for their rights. But the male character in the song is not innocent either, because we discover that the main reason why he chases his wife is because he has another lover, whom he speaks to on a mobile phone. What comes out clear here is that men in African societies seem to prefer that women remain in their traditional roles while they continue benefitting from modernity. Commenting on the east African situation Obbo (1980) argues that:

The forces of urbanization and international influences have imposed rapid changes upon East African societies yet men expect women to be politically conservative and non innovative. Socially women are accused of going too far when they adopt new practices usually emanating ultimately from the capitals of the metropolitan countries. (143)

Obbo is therefore in agreement that women are changing with time and men are not impressed with the changes; instead they feel threatened.

Urbanization has also brought about changes in social construction of gender, especially the power relations in Gikuyu contemporary society. The song, *Kandogo*, which translates into person's name by Queen Jane, tells of how women leave their children behind to go and look for jobs in towns, thus refusing their prescribed roles of giving birth and bringing up children the right way in accordance to the Gikuyu traditional customs. This translocation to the urban centers could be attributed to the tough economic times. So women move to the cities to seek economic independence which was not possible for them in traditional set up. The singer in this song is supposedly a sister to the one who relocated to the city and she accuses Kandogo of having run away to town; that "even when parents write to you letters you do not reply...." The singer also supposes that the children are suffering at home without food or any help from the mother. This song can be interpreted as caution to women regarding how far they should go in seeking liberation.

It could also be argued that such kind of behavior by women makes men to justify confinement of the women at home.

From the songs, it was also clear that there is criticism with regard to the way marriage engagements are carried out in the modern set up as opposed to the traditional society. According to Kenyatta (1978):

When a boy falls in love with a girl he cannot tell her directly that he loves her or display his devotion to her in public, as this would be regarded by the Gikuyu as an impolite and uncultured. He therefore discusses the matter with one or two of his best friends in the age group to which he belongs. They then pay a visit to the girl's home. On their arrival at the girl's home they enter the mother's hut. The girl and her mother exchange greetings with them. The mother then offers them refreshments and immediately goes away (159).

The song, *Ndigatiga* (I will never stop) by Mbiri Young Stars, is sang by a man who explains how a girl saw him at a fund raising meeting, went up to him, asked his name and then introduced herself. That same day, she gave him her telephone number and asked him to try and see her the following Sunday. After seeing each other for sometime she suggested that he should go and see her parents which he did and they were allowed to marry. This song subverts the role of a man in love and marriage in the traditional Gikuyu community, demonstrating that in the modern set up, the female character has decided to take her destiny in her own hands; she chooses the person she would prefer to marry rather than wait for any man to pick on her or the father to select for her. The man in the song also appreciates the fact that the girl approached him first and show this appreciation he puts a ring on her finger. This then suggests that men are receptive to change so long as such transformations do not interfere with their position in the social set up. Modern technology, represented by the phone in this song acts as a catalyst for change, making courtship faster.

Despite the man in the above song appreciating the gesture by the girl, the woman was constantly referenced to have changed for worse in many of the songs, especially those sung by men. For instance, in the song *Wendo wa ukombo* (slavery love), Simon Kihara explains the changed behavior of a wife. The man says that when he comes home late at night, the wife never opens the door for him because she does not like him going out to socialize with other men. The man is therefore worried that this matter of his oppression by his wife might reach the elders which might end up being a great embarrassment for him as a man. This song is meant to demonstrate that empowerment of women is a disaster in the home causing suffering to men. The man in the song demands that the woman changes and behaves like a traditional woman who does not sleep until the husband comes back home at night. He says: "... I cannot have heart failure when I am young, and people will be asking what killed me". The man would not stand elders knowing that he has been unable to control his wife and that is why he cannot share with anybody about what the wife does to him. This song depicts change in the societal norms and how most men are suffering psychologically, not knowing how to deal with their empowered wives.

There is a feeling among Gikuyu men that when women are educated, they get good jobs and much money, and subsequently they do not respect men anymore. The young men feel that once women have much money from employment or business they do not accept to be married by men who have no money. The role of men as providers is therefore diminishing in the modern society; women have also become providers and men are losing power over women and they feel threatened. Agoya (2013) exposes this threat in his article when he writes about three women who were expelled from a golfer's club for challenging gender disparity in its affairs and later gagged from speaking to the media. The all male board members of the club say the women would negotiate their reinstatement if only their lawyer desists from making statement on the matter in the media. Wafula (2013) writes:

A united nation agency has reported two incidents of women being beaten by their husbands for voting for particular candidates in the just concluded elections... The two cases were among the five cases of gender based violence that were filed to the UN team, which was situated at a hotel in Nairobi" (Sunday Nation, March 10th, p. 17).

These issues demonstrate that Kenyan men are not yet quite ready for gender equity in spite of the effort made by feminists to make this a reality. They reveal that men are not ready to let women do what they want and they would rather things go back the way they were in the olden days when women never used to question the authority of men. It also explains why women have to continue with the fight until they get their liberty and only then will the society have meaningful development because every member of the society will have a role to play regardless of gender.

As hinted in the songs discussed earlier, women's position in the Gikuyu community seems to be changing for better regardless of the opposition from their male counterparts. Men on the other hand seem to be getting less responsible. Modern male singers reflect this situation of men who are almost becoming subordinate in the house and blame it on love potion. For instance in the song, *Kaariki Wangundirie* (what did you give me) by Peter Kigia, the singer asks the woman what she gave him because the love he feels is like 'foolishness'. He says:

There is a kind of love that is like foolishness,
To be looking for somebody under the bed.
When you wake up and realize you are not together
You look for her in the cupboard
In the wardrobe and when you miss her
You feel like flying without wings.

The man continues to ask what the woman gave him so that he can be following her without giving up. Sexuality is a weapon that women use to weaken men: men are aware of this female power and are said to live in constant fear. It is this sexuality that weakens a man in a way that he has to spend all his days looking for the woman because he cannot live without her. The Gikuyu traditional men tried to subordinate their women to retain power but in the modern set up men seem to have no power at all as demonstrated by Kigia's song when he says that he cannot do without the woman and that is why he has to follow her whenever she goes.

More changes are seen in the song, *nindakwinyihiria*, (I humble myself to you) by Simon Kihara. The man in this song humbles himself to the woman, and even cries, something that was unheard of in the Gikuyu tradition. In Gikuyu tradition, a man who cries is said to be like a woman. This song therefore shows that the society is undergoing change as far as social gender construction is concerned. As a result, we see roles which were traditionally performed by men being performed by women. These changes will certainly become the new order in society because, since literature genres like songs are mediums of instructions, children tend to internalize what they see and hear as they grow, and therefore the modern children will tend to acquire different values compared to children in Gikuyu traditional society.

The song, *Wahura* (which translates into a name of a person) by Simon Kihara, is sung by a man whose wife has run away and he is pleading with her to come back because he cannot do without her, which shows a changing attitude towards women. The man says:

If I have wronged you I say sorry
No one makes a mistake willingly
Let our love go back the way it was.....

This scenario is contrary to what happened in the olden days, whereby if a wife ran away to her parent's house, she would have to be brought back by elders to plead her case, and she would have to come back with a sheep to pay for the days the man slept without her. Such transformations in the way women are treated in the society are further seen in Denis Mutara's song, *Mwendwa Wakwa Kindu wa Nii* (My Love my Own). This song praises the woman and the husband (the singer) says he has decided to make his wife happy by giving her all the pleasures. He takes her for tours to eat in big hotels, and when she is tired, he tells her good things to cheer her up. And when he attends meetings with her he is never ashamed to say, "This is the one who loves me." Mutara further calls upon men and tells them:

Men let us love these people.....
If you show her that you love her
Food will never be over salted
And love will never leave your house

This song is sung by a man who has accepted modern values as opposed to traditional society. He expresses the fact that genuine harmony in the home can only exist when women are treated well but not when they are oppressed and dominated. The singer intends to influence other men in the present generation to change their negative attitudes and presentation of women in the society. This is a sign that the effort made by female artists to try and plead their case is not in vain because fellow male singers also see the pains and heartaches caused to women through traditional construction of gender that does not appreciate the differences and instead use them for the wrong reasons. It could be argued that men in Gikuyu community have started realizing that taking a hard line of "know it all" is not helping them in the contemporary set up and they have started appreciating the good work done by women.

By suggesting that women should be taken out to eat, the singer seems to suggest that women should not be treated like beast of burden like in the olden days. He realizes that women are also human beings and they deserve to be happy.

3. Conclusion

It is evident from the analysis of the songs in this paper that modern music has shown changing attitudes towards social construction of gender in the Gikuyu community. The analysis has shown that women are gaining their voice in modern set up and that what was fixed as natural by the patriarchal society has been unsettled by modern music. New songs which have been composed bearing new messages, melodies and themes to suit current generation refer to women in a positive manner. Such songs emphasize on the importance of women in the society and the fact that gender roles are changing. It is also evident that some men wish gender relations would go back to the olden days when women took orders from men, while others appreciate the changes. However, most songs discussed here suggest that people should not be limited to traditional gender roles which have already been overtaken by time.

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