

# Language, Gender and Power Relations: A Study of Power Structure in Dholuo Dirges

Lencer Achieng' Ndede\*

Department of Literature, University of Literature, P.O. Box 30197 - 00100, Nairobi, Kenya

Richard Ochieng'

Department of Social Sciences, University of Eldoret, P.O. Box 1125 - 30100, Eldoret, Kenya

## Abstract

This paper examines the image of women emanating from the Luo dirges and their implications in gender relations. It identifies the expressions and idioms used in Luo dirges, describe the gender biased expressions in these linguistic items and show how the terms both reflect and structure power relations between the females and males in the said community. It provides a case study of the relationship between language and gender in dholuo by providing linguistic evidence of sexist ideology reflected in the vocabulary and expressions associated with women. It, in particular, aims to demonstrate the role that language plays in the social categorization and cultural evaluation of power in Luo community, and the extent to which patterns of language use is reflective of Luo social structure, cultural values of inequality and oppression, and sustenance of the existing gender arrangements. It will achieve this through an analysis of the imagery embodied in the language used in Luo dirges. The hypothesis underlying the study is that language has been used to project a negative image of women and sustain patriarchy. This paper provides data on gender discrimination in language and how language reflects social structures and patterns in the society. It shows the impact of language in the society and how it can promote discrimination as well as mirror the injustices in our societies. It shades light on how language in literature plays a major role as far as structuring patterns in the society and socialising members of a society in to the structure is concerned.

**Keywords:** Luo, Dirges, Gender, Language

## 1. Introduction

Differences in biological functions of males and females are genetically determined, but the significances of those differences for social roles are determined by cultural belief systems. The cultural values and meanings attributed to gender identity are encoded, preserved and transmitted in public symbols that are shared by members of a certain community, these symbols are the vocabularies and conventions of language used in cultural practices and performances such as dirges. Language is thus one of the most observable expressions of cultural principles of social order and system of belief.

The Luo are generally known in Kenya as a people who are seriously concerned with their funeral and burial place far more than any other ethnic group (Howell, 1989; Stamp, 1991). Their attitude towards their burial place evidently shows how they fear and respect the deceased. They perform a total no of fourteen different rituals for one deceased, most of which are accompanied by dirges, they include:-

- i. Death announcement (*golo ywak*)
- ii. Vigil (*budho*)
- iii. Grave digging (*kunyo*)
- iv. Burial (*iko*)
- v. Accompanying the spirit of the deceased to the former battleground (*tero buru matin*)
- vi. Shaving (*liedo*)
- vii. Mourners' departure for their houses (*kee*)
- viii. Serving a meal to the deceased and its family by married women (*yao dhoot*)
- ix. Serving a meal to the deceased and its family by married women (*tedo*)
- x. Going to the former battleground with the spirit of the deceased (*tero buru maduong'*)
- xi. Visiting the widow's natal home (*tero cholla*)
- xii. Dividing articles left by the deceased (*keyo nyinyo*)
- xiii. Remembrance (*rapar*)
- xiv. Serving a meal to the family of the deceased by affines (*budho*)

The funerals, rituals stretch over a long period of time. After the death announcement, close relatives of the deceased such as the spouse(s), parents, step-mothers, brothers and sisters, and first and second patrilineal cousins, must stay within the compound of the deceased throughout several nights until the burial day, a ritual the Luos call 'butho e liel'(vigil). Ohangla, a dirge is sung during this time of vigil, during which men and women sing dirges and chant in order to stay awake and to sustain 'tugo'-playing which is done to ask for donations to cover expenses for lamp oil, food, and other expenses consumed during the funeral period (Shino,

1997). They dance, solo chant in self praise and praise the ancestors, and women dance and ululate (sigalagala). After the burial the surviving family and other relatives eat and sleep inside the compound of the deceased for one full week, followed by *tero buru* which involves accompanying the Spirit of the deceased to the former battleground (*tero buru matin*). During *tero buru* the participants sing dirges in form of war chants and engage in mock battles with clubs spears and shields wearing *chieno*(a cloth/skin tied around the waist) and *ligisa*(head gear) and carrying *kuot* (shield). *Tero Buru* is a form of dance-drama/opera that combines acting, music, spoken dialogue, mime, solo chants (*gweyo*), individual performance in self praise (*pakruok*), dance and dramatic chasing of evil spirits, it is accompanied by musical instruments such as *bul*, *frimbi*, *tung*, and *oporo*. The Luo dirges are shaped by their total way of life.

### 1.1 Statement of the problem

Language reflects the social order and system of speech communities. It reveals the unequal social status and positions which different social systems assign to femininity and masculinity. Language therefore is at the centre of structuring power and socializing communities in to those power structures, it is thus seen as one of the most observable expression of cultural principles of social order and system of belief. This language is embodied in cultural practices and performances such as dirges. This paper critically looks at how Luo dirges express inequality and the different social statuses and positions of women and men in the speech community.

### 1.2 Objectives of the study

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- i) To explain how the use of the sexist expressions in the Luo dirges reflects and structure unequal power relations between males and females in the speech community.
- ii) To pinpoint the ways in which dirges of the Luo legitimize and maintain patriarchal authority.
- iii) To identify and analyse the sexist images used to describe women in Luo dirges.

### 1.3 Theoretical framework

The study was based on feminism, stylistics and sociological theory.

Stylistics is the study and interpretation of texts from a linguistic perspective; it attempts to establish principles capable of explaining the particular choices made by individuals and social groups in their use of language. It determines the connection between the form and effects within a particular variety of language. The theory enabled the study to analyze the expressions and idioms used in Dholuo dirges to establish the sexist expressions in them and establish the images, symbols, personification, similes, metaphors and other features used in the expressions and their implications.

Sociological criticism introduced by Kenneth Bruke in 20<sup>th</sup> C is used to analyze social structures shaping the society, it analyzes how literature works in the society, it considers art as a manifestation of the society. This theory enabled this study to analyse the functions of the Luo dirges.

Feminist criticism seeks to distinguish the human experience from the male experience. Feminist critics draw attention to the ways in which patriarchal social structures have marginalized women. This study specifically used postmodern feminists which argue that sex and gender are socially constructed. It argues that patriarchy is a social system in which the role of the male as the primary authority figure is central to social organization, and where fathers hold authority over women, children, and property. It implies the institutions of male rule and privilege, and is dependent on female subordination. Feminist theory typically characterizes patriarchy as a social construction, which can be overcome by revealing and critically analyzing its manifestations. Feminist theory guided this study to analyze the patriarchy in the Luo society through the gender biased/sexist expressions in the Luo dirges.

## 2. Material and methods

The study involved field research as its methodology; it also used interviewed Luo speaking resource persons to get the dirges, their translations and implications. The study closely focused on the Luo dirges with emphasis on the language they use. The methodology was guided by the following question: ‘does the Luo dirges show gender bias in the Luo community?’

## 3. Results and discussions

Oral literature, as a tool of cultural transmission, has been identified as one of the important vehicles used to marginalize women. In many societies, it has been observed that women occupy lower status as compared to their male counterparts. This has been perpetuated through oral art forms such as dirges, since the cultural images associated with women in these art forms reflect and promote the social ideologies and beliefs of society. Gender discrimination is thus embodied in language use, since language reflects social structures and patterns in the society. According to Mugo (1975, 210) “The biggest enemy to be reckoned with in the battle for the

liberation of the abused female image is first and foremost language, its concepts, implications, and the whole emotive stimuli behind the actual utterances”.

Luo dirges are performed during funerals, to praise the departed, to console the bereaved, to keep people awake at night during vigil, to express pain and agony and to accompany the spirit of the dead to the former battle field (tero buru). The Luo dirges are shaped by the total way of life of the Luo community. Because of this, they have characteristic messages which socialise the members in to the society. Although some of the Luo dirges are of solo-response style, most of them are solo performances. The most common forms of solo performances are known in Luo as ‘Gweyo/sigweya’ translated to airs. These ‘sigweyas’ are recitatives with irregular rhythms and phrases, which carry serious messages. The ‘sigweyas’ involve an individual taking up the performance in self praise, referred to as ‘pakruok’ in Luo. Below is an example of a Luo ‘sigweya’-funeral chant:-

#### **Dholuo**

Magunga okewgi lorry  
Iwewa nang’o omin gi liech  
Tho obuogowa x 3  
Tho odak kamadiny x2  
Tho wange tek! tho wange tek  
Imawa dichuo ma thiringinyi  
Tho onge wat, tho jachien  
Otho makonego ngato otho marach!  
Magunga Kwach rakido  
Jowi, jowi,  
Ae wi rwath

#### **Translation**

Magunga the nephew of Lorry  
Why have you left us you elephant’s brother  
Death has shocked me x3  
Death dwells in hidden places x2  
Death is daring, death is daring  
You have claimed a brave man  
Death has no relative, death is evil  
He has died without killing someone, he has died a bad death  
Magunga, a spotted leopard  
Buffalo, buffalo,  
Clear from the bull’s way

These ‘sigweyas’ can be done on their own or introduced in the middle of a musical performance (e.g. ohangla). The singing stops, the pitch of the musical instruments go down and the dance becomes less vigorous as one individual takes up the stage in a solo performance of self-praise.

Language influences culture and culture influences language, the language of the Luo dirges embody gender based linguistic expressions, which aids in the promotion of one gender and denigration of the other making the “inferiority of women a natural law.” Through the images used in Luo dirges, their attitudes towards women are expressed. Expressions embodied in the dirges such as ‘*Ogwang thur gi bor*’ which translates to ‘a wild cat’s home is far away’ shows how the Luo society perceive women. The implication is that one cannot domesticate a wild cat however much one tries, it will eventually go away to its home which is in the unknown. *Ogwang* is a metaphoric term used to refer to women in the Luo society. The patriarchal ideology embodied is that a girl/ a woman does not belong to her natal home, she will eventually go away to her husband’s home; she cannot be domesticated forever. This phrase makes a man to belong and a woman to be the other; who does not belong. She thus occupies a lower position in her home since she is ‘the other’ who belongs somewhere else.

When a woman eventually goes to her ‘home’ her area of operation is restricted giving her yet another lower position in her husband’s home. This position is seen in ‘sigweya’s’ such as ‘*dhako ipogo didek; kawiye mar dapi, kadiere mar nyathi to kumodong mar wuon dala*’ (a woman is divided in to three parts, the head is for the water pot, the mid-section for the child and the remaining parts for the owner of the home) this implies that a woman has three functions; domestic duties, bearing children and to meet her husband’s conjugal rights. This defines the role of women as domestic, leaving no room for leadership and intellectual activities. It also limits the woman’s area of operation to within the homestead, the world beyond the homestead thus becomes a man’s domain and out of bounds to women. Women thus are prevented from occupying positions of leadership, power and authority or from participating in significant roles leaving men to control the access to the decision-making sectors. This, the men achieve by dividing a woman in to three parts/functions namely; as a mother, a domestic worker and a sex object. The husband being referred to as *Wuon dala*; the owner of the home implies that a woman is just one of the properties owned by the owner of the home. This ideology is also reflected in the ‘*sigweya*’ ‘*Osiepna ma ok bed e ot ka dhako*’ which translates to ‘my friend who does not sit in the house like a woman.’ underneath this statement lies the ideology that in the Luo community a man’s place is out in the fields; to hunt for food, and to fight enemies in order to protect their families, women on the other hand do not occupy the public space, their place is in the house, this has been used to deny women positions of leadership in the public domains.

The language of the Luo dirges is sexist and typifies men as dominant and women as subservient. Language thus is the arena where the concepts of right and duty are created and shared. It therefore serves to create power as well as being the site where power is performed. Dholuo dirges reflect deep seated biases against women in several ways, in them it seems that it is the woman’s body which is important while for the man it is the strength, or his activities. The ‘*Sigweya*’ ‘*Tho omayu wuoyi mathiring’nyi Ratego to ber ka nyako, Magunga*

*kwach rakido, wuod Ogango liech*’ which translates to Death has robbed me of a brave man, strong yet as beautiful as a woman, Magunga the spotted leopard, son of Onyango the elephant, describes women using their beauty and describe men using their strength. The simile employed in the mentioned ‘sigweya’ implies that for women, beauty is the point of reference ( a beautiful person or thing is as beautiful as woman) while for a man the physical strength is the centre of focus. Men are described using words such as ‘Thiringinyi’ (great) ‘kwach rakido’ ( the spotted leopard) ‘liech’,(Elephant), leopard and the elephant being two of the big 5 animals associated with strength and courage. A man is thus presumed brave and is socialized to take full control of leadership of the family. They are daring, fortune hunters and protectors of the families. It is from this ideological context that the role and position of men as heroes and women as flowers is perceived.

The language of the Luo dirges portrays a male centred worldview, which devalues or excludes female perceptions, critique and contributions. This is seen in how women are not permitted to define themselves or their roles but simply discover that they have been defined and categorized by the others so they become the silent other. Women are then perceived as non-men, those who have neither the status nor the roles of men. Very often women are defined in terms of their relationships with other people. e.g the mother of, the wife of the daughter of etc an example of this is captured in the ‘sigweys’: *An ayuag minwa ndalo giko, Rapudo, nyar go Okoth, Osiepna min chwo, nyar gowete* which translates to ‘I’m mourning the death of my mother, a light complexioned lady, Okoth’s sister, my friend mother of men (sons), my mother of many brothers’. Given focus in this dirge is not the woman herself but the fact that she is a mother of sons; (men) and having brave brothers; (men) without which she is nothing.

The dirges present women as wives. In the Luo society, the wives’ role is believed to be the company of the husband; a subordinate. A grown girl who is not married is a disgrace to her people and is held in contempt by everyone including animals; both domesticated and wild animals. This is captured in the following ‘sigweya/pakruok’ *Mano Auma nyako mochwe otamore dhi katedo ogoyo paka gi luth paka yuakne ni iroma ok idhie ka tedo ayue.* (Auma, a mature girl who is not yet married has knocked a cat who laments saying; Auma why don’t you get married so that I can at least have peace in this house) this imply that a cat has more right in a household than an unmarried girl. In another example *‘Achieng nyako ma raracha odhi e gunda ngwedo omboga to obwogo mwanda e gono, onyiso mwanda ni kik itug koda naseneni chon! to mwanda dwoke niyaaa; nyar wegi wang’i minena go go kinee go chwo* (Achieng, an unmarried girl has scared a trapped gazelle as she goes to pluck vegetables that, she tells the gazelle ‘you can’t scare me I had seen you long before’ and the gazelle tells her: ‘ why don’t you use those eyes you are using to see me to see men’ (so that she can at least get married).

Luo dirges perpetuate a patriarchal ideology that once a woman is married she no longer belonged to her father’s home but her husband’s home. Such a woman has no right back in her father’s home. This position is clearly captured in the ‘sigweya’ *“Migogo modenyo ocham thunde*’ which translates to ‘A hungry *Migogo* to eat her breasts’. This should be understood in the context that when a girl is married she no longer belongs to her father’s home to which she only goes back to for visits or for funerals during which she cannot assert a right as a member of the home. *‘Migogo*’ is a term the Luos use to refer to a married girl when she is at her natal home for funeral or visiting purposes. During her time of visit she should be patient and not try to call shots. If she is hungry she has to wait for the owners of the home to give her food and if she cannot be patient then she can go ahead and eat her breasts. The underlying meaning is that a married woman does not belong to her father’s home.

Various attitudes towards women seem to have stemmed from the numerous roles assigned to them by society. By the process of social conditioning or socialisation, women came to accept the social attitudes towards them. They came to accept that; they are inferior to men and should occupy an inferior position in society. The society endorsed these beliefs by all means possible and inculcated the inferiority of women through the oral literature forms such as dirges. The distorted images of women became part of the attitudes and beliefs of the society. The images show that among the Luo, as in other societies, the woman's primary role is that of motherhood. A woman is brought up right from childhood knowing and realising the importance of this role, and cherishing it. Hence, her training right from childhood includes this important aspect, and it is emphasise thereafter; the whole of a girl's life is one long preparation for the useful role she is supposed to play. No wonder an unmarried girl is an embarrassment to her family. The worth of the woman in the Luo society is in her ability to bring fourth children.

Men are seen as insiders who will remain in the households/homesteads as opposed to women/girls who will leave their homes to go to their husbands’ homes, this is captured in the ‘sigweya’ *‘Ogwang thurgi bor’ and ‘jaber thurgi cho!* Cho is an exclamative which expresses ‘extremely far’. In the Luo community, life begins at immortality and ends in immortality. A man who begets daughters therefore has no continuity. Girls are seen as people who go to build other men's immortality rather than their own fathers'. It is no wonder then that a woman's main role to her husband lies in her ability to ensure his immortality by bearing him male offspring to ensure the continuity of his line and hence a boy child is seen as the pillar of his father's homestead. A boy is seen as the symbol of protection, security and permanency. He is also seen as the provider of the family. This is illustrated in the ‘sigweya’: *“Omin Limumba wuoyi siro”*. *Siro* is a pole/pillar that supports a house without



which a house cannot stand. This imagery is to be understood in the context that the Luo built their traditional huts with a 'siro' pillar in the middle of a house to support it, without which the house could not stand strong. A man is symbolically this pillar that supported the house; the 'Siro'

The Luo dirges serve as a vehicle which transmits the values embodied in them from one generation to the next. Through them, the norms and conventions of the community are passed on by the participants and listeners for the stability of the community. During these participations the patriarchal ideologies are learned and internalised. The dirges serve as a reservoir for the culture of the community, since the teachings they embody are transmitted from one generation to the other and through them, the societal and cultural values, customs, and traditions are passed from generation to generation thus they construct the socio-cultural history of a society. These patriarchal gender characteristics are learned at a very tender age and continued in everyday interaction. The internalisation of patriarchy is seen through women themselves chanting these slogans during funerals. As such women themselves have internalized this subjugation and have become compliant victims since they have accepted the order and systems of the powerful. Internalized oppression becomes something of a vicious circle and the women made by the society to accept the judgments of patriarchy.

Looking at these expressions used in the Luo dirges through a feminist lens reveals that a woman's experience is determined by the fact that she is treated as a commodity to be acted upon she is considered as something to be marketed or manipulated as an object whose value is conferred upon her by others and who is forced to consider herself to a large extent as an object.

#### 4. Conclusion

The images created through the sexist language in the Luo 'sigweya' as discussed so far clearly depict women as inferior to men, especially in their physical and intellectual capacity. From the analysis of the language used in the dirges, it is obvious that the society has given men power to control the social, economic and political structures of the community. This power has been used in the image formation among the community members. Women's images seem to emanate from the social roles and their position in the society. It emerges that the females in the Luo society are not construction of the physical sexual organs but are created by and in the interest of men.

The study has demonstrated that female subordination is a cultural attribute, which is deep-rooted in socially sanctioned beliefs and norms that devalue women and feminine attributes, and positively value men and masculine attributes. These institutions, in turn, find expression, validation, and maintenance in various forms of oral literature, especially in oral performances like dirges. Viewed in this light, the Luo dirges play a vital role in shaping, justifying, and transmitting gender biased attitudes, behaviours, norms, ideologies, and stereotypes from generation to generation, and in socialising the individual to conform to them; by so doing they maintain the stability of female subordination.

This study thus concludes that the Luo dirges structures power in their society and socialises the Luos in to the power structure. Freud argues that the conscious mind relies on the unconscious; the values imparted in subconscious are filtered through the conscious determining our actions. It follows therefore that the Luo dirges may be a domain of communicating their values and customs which in turn shapes their behaviour.

#### 5. Direction of future research

The study has looked at the impact of language on women in society and concluded that the biggest enemy to be reckoned with in the battle for the liberation of the abused female image is first and foremost language, its concepts and implications since language is the vehicle of cultural transmission. It suggests further Research on how to subvert cultural attitudes towards women to improve the image of women through the genres of oral literature.

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**Bio-data**

**Lencer Achieng' Ndede** holds a Bachelor of Education (Arts) from Moi University, Masters of Arts in Literature from The University of Nairobi and Currently a PhD Student in Literature at The University of Nairobi. She is a National Adjudicator in Music and Drama. She is passionate about development of Literature and has written and presented a number papers at various Literature, Drama , Film and Music conferences. She teaches Literature at Egerton and Kenyatta University.

**Richard Ochieng'** is a Lecturer at The University of Eldoret, Department of Social Sciences. He hold a Masters of Science Degree in Geography and currently a PhD student in Geography at Egerton University. His main research interest is in Climate Change Adaptation and Low Carbon Development. More so, he has interest in oral literature and has carried out a number of collaborative researches in Cultural Studies.