

Literature

Gender Roles in Initiation Songs of the Igembe People of Kenya

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Abstract

This article examines and critically analyses gender images in initiation songs among the Igembe community, an African ethnic group of Eastern Bantu in Kenya. The article traces the evolution of the concept of gender from Plato's time to the 21st Century and places it within the Igembe people's worldview using initiation songs as a point of reference. It is revealed that both man and woman play a crucial and complementary role in the socio-economical life in Igembe community. However, despite the crucial role that women play, they are devalued due to societal attitudes and beliefs as evident in the initiation songs analysed.

Background to Igembe People

This article focuses gender roles in one of the African communities, the Igembe people of Meru of Kenya. The Meru are a Bantu speaking community with nine sub communities. These include the Imenti, Tharaka, Mwimbi, Chuka, Mitine, Tigania, Muthambi, Igoji and Igembe (Laughton 1944, Nyaga 1997). Due to their diverse cultural differences, this article focuses on one of the nine subcommunities- the Igembe. The Igembe people inhabit Igembe North and Igembe South Districts in Eastern Province of Kenya.

Like other Meru groups, the Igembe trace their origin from *Mbwaa*¹. The Igembe people are neighbours to Tharaka, Tigania, Kamba and Boran. Basically, Igembe people are agriculturalists. They grow crops notably maize, beans, millet, coffee, tea and *miraa*² as well as rearing of livestock like cattle, goats, sheep and donkeys. Like most African societies, the Igembe are patriarchal. The husband is the head of the household and the natural leader in all matters pertaining the family and the wider community. The traditional Igembe society had elaborate and well designed rituals. Among these rituals is circumcision for boys and clitoridectomy for girls. In all these there were songs that accompanied each ritual. Songs are important agents of gender socialisation in Igembe society.

¹ According to oral traditions, *Mbwaa* also *Mboa* or *Mbwa* was a mass of water, that the Meru people crossed. They were in bondage by people who were called *Nguo ntuune* because they wore red clothes. For a fuller discussion of the origin of Meru community of Kenya, see Nyaga (1997).

² *Miraa* (also known as Khat) is a mild stimulant shrub grown in parts of Meru North District in Kenya, scientifically known as *cathadulus edis*.

The Concept of Gender

The concept of gender does not refer to woman only as has been misconceived or misunderstood in some quarters. Gender entails the “relationship between man and women, the ways in which the roles of men and women are socially constructed and to the cultural interpretations of the biological differences between men and women” (Suda, 2000:302). In an attempt to define what is gender, Mrutu (1998) states that it is a set of cultural roles, a mask, a straightjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance. It has been argued over the years that women play unequal roles compared to their men counterparts. This is even reflected in most African oral literature, including the song.

Gender as a social construct is acquired, constructed and can be deconstructed by the society through various agents of socialisation, and oral literature is not an exception. Gender roles in the society are socially and historically constructed through socialisation. In most African communities, gender socialisation starts at home, reinforced in the education system and perpetuated through social institutions especially rites of passage. In African societies, song is an important and versatile vehicle of gender socialisation.

One of the important rites of passage in most African communities, Igembe included is initiation. Initiation ceremonies for boys and girls are accompanied by songs which serve multi-dimensional functions. Through circumcision songs, boys are socialised to be men (that is courageous, to rule) and girls are taught how to be proper women (submissive) in the community.

This discussion is guided by the gender perspective approach in the analysis of initiation songs to identify gender roles evident in them. Gender perspective interrogates the conditions of and relationships between men and women as well as how these relationships are structured along gender lines (Brettel and Sargent 1993).

In Africa, the song is one of the most important and cherished form of social discourse. The song is a vehicle through which a community’s aspirations, hopes, frustrations and worldview on any issue can be reflected, and articulated. Among the issues include the roles that men and women are assigned in the community. In most African communities which are patriarchal, gender roles are assigned on the basis of sex.

Early Scholars’ Views on Gender Roles in the Society

Earlier scholars like Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Augustine and Luther had interesting views on gender roles in the society. For instance, Augustine’s views on gender roles are best captured in this excerpt, “The union of male and female should be for procreation. A woman’s role and only purpose is to help man in the work of procreation; otherwise in all other matters a male friend is more efficient helper than a woman”.³

³ Cited in Ruth James Muthei. “Women’s Theological Education in Kenya” in *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays*, 2003 pg 109.

⁴Ibid pg. 110.

To Augustine, the role of woman is to assist man in the process of procreation. Although, this is an important role, it should be emphasized that the union of male and female is not only restricted to procreation but also companionship. Luther's opinions indicate that women cannot do what men can do. Luther observes that, "For the whole of the female body was created for the purpose of nurturing children ... in everything else they are inferior and incompetent. They cannot perform the functions of men (like to) preach, rule."...4

Earlier scholars summarised the role of women as that of motherhood while man was the ruler of woman. These traditional roles assigned to women led to their subordination, a feature that is common to all cultures of the world, including traditional Igembe community. Women, over the years have been depicted as people who cannot do anything on their own without men. This is a traditional viewpoint, which has no place in the modern world, affected to a large extent by globalisation. The concept of gender roles needs to be redefined in a contemporary and changing society.

Women are not spared even in religion. In most world religions, a woman's vital role is a wife and a mother. For instance, in Judaism a woman was "expected to keep out of public eye and in public activity, she was to assume a passive role" (Kahumbi, 2001:198).

The Song as a Genre of African Oral Literature

The song is a genre of oral literature that is most powerful in terms of versatility and communicability (Chesaina, 1997). Due to its powerfulness, the song has been used by even politicians to drive their points of view home. In Igembe community, almost all aspects of life of a person can be expressed through the song, including gender roles. Olielo (1997) maintains that the song is a reflection of people's socio-political as well as economic experiences.

Oral literature, being an artistic form which exhibits a people's culture, is analogous to a mirror on which a community's social conventions and values are reflected (Ajuma, 1997:33). The various genres of oral literature are proverbs, riddles, narratives, tongue twisters and songs. Through a critical analysis of songs, we can allude the roles of men and women in any particular society and compare the roles to find out whether they are in tandem with current developments in today's world. This article seeks to analyse the gender roles in Igembe oral literature using initiation songs as a point of reference.

Songs are a very important component of rituals as those connected with birth, naming ceremonies, initiation and weddings (Chesaina, 1991:11). Most Igembe songs are performed by a number of people. For instance, initiation songs are performed by an audience comprising of the boys to be initiated, the parents, relatives, young circumcised men and the circumciser.

In African traditional life, there is a particular song for a particular stage and occasion in a person's life from birth to death. Initiation stage, for communities that practice it, like the Igembe, is not an exception. Some initiation songs ridicule a cowardly boy and urge him to face the 'knife' bravely. The initiation songs as powerful agents of socialisation, communicate cultural-specific messages on gender roles.

Gender Roles in Initiation songs Among the Igembe

The data for this paper was collected through participatory, in-depth interviews and observational methods in Igembe East division of Igembe South District, Eastern Province Kenya. A total of 12 initiation songs were analysed using a gender perspective approach.

Gender roles refer to a set of behavioral norms associated and expected of males and females, in a given community. Every known community in the world has its own set gender roles and they vary from one community to another. Cultures and societies are dynamic and so are the gender roles.

Gender role in Igembe community as in many communities is as a result of agents of socialisation. Socialisation being a process, by which individuals learn and accept roles they are assigned by the society, has a deep impact in defining gender roles. Among the agents of socialisation in the society include home, school, media and oral literature. In Igembe community, song as a genre of oral literature plays a significant role in gender role socialisation. Women have been used as agents of entertainment especially by political leaders not only in Igembe community but also in other African countries. In Malawi, for instance, the former President Kamuzu Banda said:

Women were trampled down by everybody... everybody... Nobody thought about women except to make them cook for them. That's all.. So, I made up mind even before I came that I was going to do something about my women. Therefore when I see women happy and dancing with their heads high, their necks bent with pride like that... it makes me happy, very happy (Banda cited in Hirschmann 1995:251).

A study by Tuladhar (1997) cited by Aderinto (2001) revealed that patriarchy is to blame for women's subjugated roles in the society. The study maintains that patriarchy affords women little or no reproductive rights, requires that women give birth and preferably to a son. In Igembe community, a woman who could not give birth was ridiculed and the husband was allowed by customary law to marry another woman (Kobia, 2008). Men are regarded as natural leaders and heads of households. Women are supposed to be submissive. This is emphasized during the initiation of women in Igembe community. Women are socialised to be second citizens in the world controlled by men. Through the use of initiation songs, women are taught and reminded that they are made for men and to be under men in all matters (Rimita, 1988).

Women play an important role in agriculture. In Igembe community, it is no wonder to see women going to till the farm and harvest the produce. Women are the backbone of the labour force in Igembe community, yet they do not own the farms they work on. A study by Aderinto (2001) in Nigeria reveals the same trend. The paradox in this role is that, the woman is viewed as the pillar of the community, that feeds and nurtures mankind, manages home but she is not the owner of land nor can she inherit it. However, despite women's contribution in the traditional society, she is not recognized let alone being valued. This has led women to protest against this discrimination and subjugation through various genres of oral literature. For instance,

in Igembe community, women protest and complain through this song:

<i>Ndirua ntikurima</i>	Am told, Am not farming
<i>Uu! ari!</i>	Uu! Uu!
<i>Ndirua ntikurima,</i>	Am told, am not farming
<i>Nika nkarima,</i>	Will I farm,
<i>Nkuire mwera?</i>	Till I die near the river?

This is a protest song by women. In spite of woman's effort in food production, she is not recognized hence the protest against the status quo. Division of labour based on gender is not a recent development. Even in the early history of humankind, 'hunting and processing of tough and hard raw materials were universally male activities' (Sanday, 1981:76). On the other hand, gathering, processing vegetable foods, cooking and other household chores were set aside for woman. This tradition was passed on from generation to generation through traditional education. In Igembe community, the song was and remains an important vehicle of gender role of socialisation.

In traditional African society, if a man does work that is designated for women, he would be ridiculed, mocked and he might even not get a wife to marry. Kenyatta (1953:54) informs us that in Gikuyu community, any man who engaged in feminine works like cooking washing or hauling wood would disgust women and would make it difficult for himself to find a wife to marry. The same can be said of a man in Igembe community. A man in Igembe community who indulged in roles designated for women not only found it hard to get a wife but was also punished heavily by his peers through beating and was even forced to pay a fine.

The gender roles in Igembe community were clearly spelt out. Men did the planting and weeding while women did the harvesting and prepared food for consumption. Hunting was a man's job and no woman was involved in hunting. Women were solely responsible for the care of children at home.

Women are natural children bearers. However, this noble role has made them to be under control of man just like animals. Sanday (1981:82) has this interesting observation regarding the role of women as child bearers, "In their capacity as child bearers women are often equated with animals' men control. Men carve a separate domain for themselves by taking public responsibility for female and animal fertility." Chesaina (1997:192) blames women's subjugated role on the socialisation process. She notes that the socialisation process for instance, among the Mbeere and Embu communities of Kenya whose climax is initiation ritual, at adolescence devotes a lot of time to teaching girls how to relate to their husbands as subordinates. Many initiation songs in Igembe community portray women performing feminine roles. For instance Kirarire's songs like:

<i>Mwekuru ni mumaathi,</i>	The woman is generous, (cooking food)
<i>Ni njara iri imwe.</i>	But has no helper.

Commenting on the role of a Gikuyu woman, Ndungo (1998:77) notes that 'a good wife was supposed to take care of first and foremost, her husband, attending to all his

needs and desires and then the rest of household roles'. In Igembe community, the role of women in attending to her husband's sexual desires is clearly emphasized in the following song:

Soloist:	<i>Kuri muka orirwe Ni kuthichwa x2</i>	There is a woman who died, due to having sex (with her husband).
All:	<i>Kuri muka orirwe ni kuthichwa x2</i>	There is a woman who died, due to having sex (with her husband).

5 Kirarire refers to songs sang during graduation ceremony of newly initiated boys. The songs are the climax of the circumcision ceremony among the Igembe people. Women's role in giving birth in Igembe community is highly respected. This is emphasized in various initiation songs. In the following song, the initiate is told that he was born of a great mother.

<i>Kaana kaa tika muciere, Ni ka muka urumaa mainda.</i>	This child is not of a young woman, It is of a great great mother.
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Due to this role of motherhood and giving birth, the woman in Igembe community is viewed as a source of life and hence she was valued and respected. However, the woman is also depicted as one who is a sex object for any man. This is depicted in various initiation songs that portray woman as prostitutes. For instance in the song Nabui Ciaka Nibukwaria! (Even you women can talk!),' promiscuous women are told off that their behaviour will not be tolerated in Igembe community but to take it to far away areas like Kambaland. One of the song goes:

<i>Nuu ngutuma kiri Jerusha ii Amuire akendie kiino Ikamba?</i>	Whom will I send to Jerusha To tell her to go to sell her body to Kambaland?
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In yet another song, "Raamu Centera Kaloki" (Raamu, organise Kaloki for me), a brother Raamu makes arrangements for his sister, Kaloki is to have sex with various men. This depicts men as people who can do anything for their sisters. Although it was normal for brothers to seduce a boy for their sister, customarily it was not allowed to organise for more than one at the same time. The song goes like this:

<i>Raamu ncetera Kaloki Soloist: Nkima cia nyukwe mwiji, Bukaria nau mwiji? Centera Kaloki. All: Ramu uu i Centera Kaloki! Soloist: Watemwa umie mwiji, Centera Kaloki! All: Ramu uui Centera Kaloki!</i>	Ramu Organize Kaloki for me Your mother's food, you boy, Whom will you eat with? Organize Kaloki for me. You! Ramu Organize Kaloki for me. You will get pain of circumcision Organize Kaloki for me. You! Ramu Organize Kaloki for me.
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<i>Soloist: Utanwa ti muno mwiji,</i>	To be circumcised is nothing,
<i>Ja mwanki uri nyumba,</i>	Compared with fire in seclusion,
<i>Centera Kaloki!</i>	Organize Kaloki for me.
<i>All: Ramu uui Centera Kaloki!</i>	You! Ramu Organize Kaloki for me.

Women in Igembe community played an important role in male circumcision. In fact, according to my informants the first Meru man (Ikanga) was circumcised by a woman (Ruuju). Ruuju was Ikinga's grandmother and she used to tease Ikanga because he was not circumcised. Ikanga challenged the grandmother to circumcise him and as a form of punishment, Ruuju circumcised him. This is depicted in the song that is sang as ntaane (newly circumcised boys) are being escorted to their respective homes. They cite the first circumciser, Ruuju who was a woman and the first man to be circumcised, Ikanga.

Uu Ruuju anaruja Ikanga x2	Oh Ruuju operated (circumcised) Ikanga x2
Uu Ruuju anaruja Ikanga x2	Oh Ruuju operated (circumcised) Ikanga x2

Before the boys were to be circumcised, the mother had to smear ira (white dust) on their forehead and offer ululations as a sign of blessing. This was done very early in the morning before the circumcision and in the evening after their arrival from circumcision ground. The ululations were done by women as a sign of welcoming the initiates back home.

This role of women is depicted in kuriria (crying) circumcision songs that boys sang asking their family and relatives to support them during the phase of circumcision. For instance in the song Muili, below, the boy is begging the mother to ululate for him as she is 'the one who is kind to the child'.

<i>Ii muili: ciaciu mbangira,</i>	Ii muili: my mother ululate for me,
<i>Ii muili: niwe uri kiao kia mwana.</i>	Ii muili: you are the only merciful one,
<i>Iii muili.</i>	Ii muili.
<i>Ii muili: nkenye nitanwe,</i>	Ii muili: girls should be clitoridectomised,
<i>Ii muili: ireke kumia njirene,</i>	Ii muili: so that they can stop defecating on the roadside,
<i>Iii muili.</i>	Ii muili.

However, note that in the above song, the women especially girls are subjugated heavily. The girls are blamed for defecating on the road. The boys suggest that the solution to this is to have the girls clitoridectomised so that discipline is instilled in them. Whichever, way we look at it, is that this is Igembe's way of subordinating women. Our informants revealed that the act of defecating on the road was done at night. When we further inquired, who normally used to travel at night in Igembe community, most of our men informants didn't answer the question. Then one wonders, who used to do the act; men or women?

The role of reproduction in Igembe community was highly respected. A woman who was unable to give birth was teased and looked down by the community. This

role was for both men and women. The initiation songs sang by boys during kuriria (crying out period) emphasized that what they carried was not only prepuce but also tools of life.

<i>Ii muili: Cietu ti ncabu,</i>	Ii muili: Ours is not prepuce,
<i>Ii muili: ni mbulubulu ee musinka,</i>	Ii muili: they are bullets from the gun,
<i>Ii muili.</i>	Ii muili.

The images of bullets in the above song represents the sperms from a man's reproductive organ (gun) which are very important in reproduction. From the song, they are perpetuating masculinity in the society. However, it is worthwhile to note that men and women are crucial elements as far as reproduction roles are concerned. Women blessed their sons before and after circumcision. This is clearly portrayed in the song "Mwekuru Chuunga Mwana" (Mother, Bless the Child). The women's role as circumcisor is also featured in men's initiation songs like:

<i>Muntu ukiraga no Mutune,</i>	The person I fear is Mutune,
<i>Utanaga muka,</i>	Who clitodectomises woman,
<i>Mwatuka mpaara,</i>	As she puts the legs apart,
<i>Naatiukira kugwata mai.</i>	And she does not fear to touch faeces

Women's role in the kitchen is also depicted in initiation songs especially Kirarire songs. A woman is portrayed as generous and one who cares for the family and social gathering. Look at the following excerpt from Kirarire song, Muuthi Muua (Hello Soloist):

<i>Mwekuru o mucii ju,</i>	The woman of this homestead,
<i>Ni mumaathi,</i>	Is generous (she feeds people well),
<i>Ni njara iri imwe.</i>	It is only that she has no helper.

Kirarire is a graduation ceremony also known as "burning ceremony" where the initiate is taught what is expected of him in the community as a circumcised man. In the above song, the mother of the initiate is being praised by the warriors as generous by providing food. However, they complain that the mother has a lot of household chores to attend to in the kitchen without a helper.

Girls performed the role of singing in praise of their boys during the circumcision ceremony. The girls would mention the names of the age-set of their fathers in the songs. In the following song, the girls are very happy that their brothers have been circumcised hence they will not be mocked again as a "wife of uncircumcised boy".

<i>Uui ni uni nau?</i>	Uuu whom am I?
<i>Kaali ka Ratanya,</i>	Daughter of Ratanya,
<i>Ngutarirwa nthaka,</i>	My brothers are being circumcised,
<i>Nkirite kii,</i>	As I wait,
<i>Ntigatue witagwa,</i>	So that I will not be called,

<i>Muka o ijiji x2.</i>	Mother of uncircumcised boys x2.
<i>Kugitukatuka!</i>	As darkness approaches!
<i>All: Muka o ijiji x2.</i>	Mother of uncircumcised boys x2.

Women in Africa in general and Igembe community in particular are great performers and singers of circumcision songs. In fact in Igembe community, a song is not well received by the audience, if there are no women as part of the audience. One of the Igembe proverbs states that: Mwinira kithia kiatha ni ura uri nkenye ciao (He who sings far from his country is one with girls from his area). Women performed the core business of dancing and singing to encourage their sons or if girls their brother to face the 'knife' of the circumcisor.

Before boys were circumcised, they were required to get a special stick (ithiri in singular and mathiri in plural). They also had to kill a mole as a sign to prove that they are ready for circumcision. They would skin the mole and use part of the skin in ithiri. After they were circumcised, the boys threw the mathiri and each girl picked the ithini (stick) of their brother. They carried the mathiri towards home singing the song "Ni uni nau". (Whom am I).

Despite the role that girls play in carrying mathiri (sticks) of the initiated boys, they are abused because they are not clitoridectomised. The abusive language used against women in Igembe initiation songs not only devalues women but also portrays them as immoral and unimportant people in the society, yet they are creators of life. An example of a song that abuses girls includes:

<i>Yii! Mukenye,</i>	You! uncircumcised girl,
<i>Jii! Oba mwijji,</i>	You! sister of uncircumcised boy,
<i>Ari kingura,</i>	You have a vagina,
<i>Kiaikomba ja nkiberex5</i>	That has hooks like porridge spoon x5

Women are depicted as rearers of their children. They are concerned about their children's progress and growth including circumcision. In the song, "Ina o mwiji urirwa nuu?" "The boy's mother, who will tell you?", the mother is worrying about the bathing, sleeping, eating and waking up of her son before circumcision day. The song is sang thus:

Soloist: <i>Ina o mwiji urirwa nuu?</i>	Boy's mother, who will tell you?",
<i>Ui nanu urirwa nuu?</i>	Woo! who will tell you?
Soloist: <i>Kuthamba ii!</i>	Bathing yee!
All: <i>Ni maitha!</i>	It is a problem!
Soloist: <i>Kumama ii!</i>	Sleeping yee!
All: <i>Ni maitha!</i>	It is a problem!
Soloist: <i>Kuruma ii!</i>	Eating yee!
All: <i>Ni maitha!</i>	It is a problem!

In most initiation songs in Igembe community, mother is used as an image to encourage the initiates to endure the circumcision. Mother is seen as a symbol of

endurance. They are encouraged that if even the mother endured clitoridectomy, they should also not fear. This is portrayed in the following song:

Soloist: <i>Wakairu uu i mwiji,</i>	Do not fear, you boy,
<i>Nyukwe araibua buo,</i>	Your mother has faced it (clitoridectomy),
<i>Abau araibua buo</i>	Your father has faced it (circumcision).

Although the above songs, shows gender balance to some extent, they can be used to devalue or degrade women. The boy is encouraged not to fear because even his mother never feared clitoridectomy. It is as if women are people who are always afraid of everything.

Parents made every effort to make sure that their children are circumcised. They consulted the witchdoctor, circumcision fathers and warriors to sing and escort the boy to the river, to the circumcision field and back home (Nyaga, 1997:53). In fact, *nthaka* (warriors) praise the role of women in urging them to turn up to support the boy before, during and after circumcision. One of the songs sang by warriors as they escort boys to the river is:

Soloist: <i>Ucii!</i>	You boy!
ALL: <i>Yaii!</i>	Yee!
Soloist: <i>Uu ii!</i>	Yee!
ALL: <i>Tuu mwiji!</i>	There is the boy!
Soloist: <i>Mwiji!</i>	You boy!
ALL: <i>Kukea!</i>	Its already daytime!
Soloist: <i>Uu ii!</i>	Yee!
ALL: <i>Romba mbura!</i>	You just pray!

Soloist: <i>Ntiukia ui eku mwiji ii!</i>	I will not be merciful on you boy,
ALL: <i>Urambicia na muromo mwiji!</i>	You have said bad things about me boy!
Soloist: <i>Ninyunke urambitire mwiji!</i>	Its your mother who called me you boy!
ALL: <i>Nkwathurane na ikwale mwiji.</i>	Separate you from childhood you boy!
Soloist: <i>Utanwa ti muno mwiji!</i>	To be circumcised is nothing you boy!
ALL: <i>Ja mwanki uri nyumba mwiji!</i>	Compared with the fire inside the house!

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it can be observed that both man and woman play a crucial role in the socio-economical life in Igembe community. However, despite the crucial role that women play, they are devalued due to societal attitude and beliefs regarding them and because the Igembe community is a patriarchal community. This problem needs to be addressed because oral literature especially the song is a powerful agent of gender socialisation. There is need to deconstruct the initiation songs that portray negative roles of women in the society while praising only one gender – male.

The roles allocated to men and men in most African societies, seem to be sanctioned by both genders at the expense of the female gender. The female gender should refuse

this gender role socialisation in oral literature. The problem is that women have sanctioned these gender roles (King'ei 1992, 176). They need to awaken from this slumber and advocate for a fair, equal and a just society. And as Gachari (2002:91) concludes, "war against retrogressive cultural practices and attitudes should become a national crusade by all progressive forces in society". The academia and more so universities is not an exception. Hence the need to include and expand gender studies in the curriculum.

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