

Construction of Antithetical Feminine Identities in Gusii Special Purpose Oral Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Socialization of human communities through oral poetry is most effective because of its appealing endurance and versatility. Arguably, oral poetry is the most powerful force for moulding public opinion and possibly, it induces certain characters into the souls of people who perform and consume it. Despite its versatility and efficacy in inducing peculiar characters into the souls of its composers and consumers, Gusii special purpose oral poetry has not received sufficient literary attention, more so, over its ability to construct antithetical traits in Gusii females. This paper thus surveys the Gusii special purpose oral poems as semiotic systems of encoded signs which embody the antithetical ideals, values and feelings through which Abagusii females experience, feel, perceive and consume their world at various times. In the analysis of the sampled poems, this study uses an eclectic theoretical framework developed from the Chandler strands of semiotics in which it is argued that a culture produces signs and attributes meanings to them. Secondly, sociological literary theory strands by Rosenblatt and Albrecht are used in which, literature is seen as a mirror of a society as well as a central part of a people's values and belief systems. This study has used an analytical study design. Secondary data was obtained from a review of published and unpublished works. Primary data was obtained from close textual analysis of nine special purpose oral poems that were purposively sampled from a universal population of thirty oral poems. The study findings are firstly, an intellectual contribution towards the already existing discourses on the role and place of oral poetry as a vehicle for human socialization as well as a subtle means for indoctrinating members of gender into a social enclave in which they inadvertently "enslave" themselves. Equally, this study established that Gusii special purpose oral poems employ a wide range of encoded linguistic devices which make them beautiful pieces of art. In totality, the findings of this study are important because they will be part of the reference points for future related studies. The study thus concluded that there is a close correlation between Gusii special purpose oral poems and the Gusii feminine world, a world that at times exhibits antithetical traits. In totality, the study recommends that there is need for further research on the efficacy of Gusii special purpose oral poetry with regard to its power to influence the thought patterns of Abagusii females.

Key Words: Construction, Antithetical, Feminine, Identities, Special Purpose Ritual Poetry

INTRODUCTION

According to Ochieng's (1974) historical perspective, Abagusii are a Bantu speaking community currently occupying the South West portion of the Kenyan highlands. Abagusii recognize a common ancestor named Mogusii, hence a common ancestry and a common socio – cultural, economic and political heritage. The community is divided into seven clans and it neighbours unrelated language families except the Abakuria. These are the Nilotic-speaking Luo to the North, West, and to the South West; the Nilo-Hamitic Kipsigis to the East, and the Nilo-Hamitic Maasai to the South East. Finally, to the South, are the Kuria (Abatende), whose language is mutually intelligible with Ekegusii. The Gusii area extends over 800 square miles with a mean altitude of 6,500 feet above sea level. Some ridges extend over 7000 feet, and many of the ridges are curved into wide flat-bottomed valleys which separate the ridges and these valleys are occasionally choked by swampy streams and rivers, which are fed by approximately 100 inches of rainfall annually. Such heavy rains, in addition to fertile volcanic soils are an incentive to heavy cultivation and close settlement. The population, according to the 2009 census and demographic survey stood at approximately 2.2 million people. Abagusii grow bananas, maize, millet, sweet potatoes, coffee, tea, sorghum and assortment of fruits and vegetables.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

According to Habib (2005), human communities are socialized to operate within prescribed yet mutating ideologies. The ideologies to which human communities are conditioned to be subjects are constructed and inculcated into people's mindsets continuously from their early childhood days till the time they are old. The inculcation and indoctrination into respective ideologies are achieved through various vehicles available to human socialization, more so, literature. Habib further postulates that of all artistic vehicles available for human socialization, oral poetry, the oldest and most versatile of the genres of literature and one which has had an intimate relationship with people for eons is the most effective. Given its versatility, are there remote chances that people could be [mis] using this form of art to perpetuate both their well – intended and genuine as well as their parochial interests? Equally, from the fact that inculcation of mindsets is continuous, what is new in the mindsets of Abagusii and how has this been midwived by the community's oral poetry? Right from this point, this study conceives the idea that culture – based oral poetry as well as ideologies are dynamic; hence, the need for their nature to be studied from time to time.

Firstly, Habib notes that unlike other genres of oral literature such as proverbs which are almost a reserve for use by the elderly, it is only oral poetry that is available to all people of a community across all age groupings and social classes. Children enjoy oral poetry when they play, mature people too enjoy oral poetry whether it is during their leisure time or when working, when celebrating, worshipping and even in mourning. Basically, majority of human activities such as ceremonies, rituals and festivals are interlaced with oral poetry. At this point, one question begs for answers; what is so unique in oral poetry that it should be the form of art that is at the centre of virtually all human activities? What makes oral poetry to be so versatile and at the same time the best vehicle to rely on when investigating a dynamic socio – cultural, political and economic human phenomena, such as the ideologies which bind people of a community together across age brackets, class and status?

In the perspective of Eagleton (1976), ideologies are the sets of beliefs, ideas, values and feelings by which men (and women) experience, perceive and consume their societies at various times. These sets of beliefs, according to him can be extended to accommodate the economic or political perspectives of a human society. The notion “men conceiving their world at various times” creates an interest worth investigating. It foregrounds the aspect of constant change or transformation of ideologies from time to time. The question then is; could there be something unique in people's beliefs, ideas, values and feelings that they must change to reflect the needs of a society at various times? With this in mind, this study narrowed down to the choice of oral poetry as the best vehicle for investigating the construction, present nature and components of the Gusii socio – cultural, economic and political ideologies together with possible contestations to these ideologies. In this regard, it is the premise of this study that oral poetry then socializes individual members and human communities as cooperate entities to operate physically and psychologically within the precincts of constructed and prescribed socio - cultural, economic and political ideologies.

According to Steger & James (2013), ideologies are patterned clusters of normatively imbued ideas and concepts, including particular representations of power relations. These conceptual maps help people navigate the complexity of their political universe and carry claims to social truth. The notion created by the concept of ideas being imbued brings some sense of a construction, a construction from something else and that is why they are infused or instilled. Equally, in any arena where there exist power relations, aspects of complimenting, domination and suppression, contestations are within. Equally, in the matrix of power relations, especially when the phenomenon in question is gender relations, issues of domination and suppression may not be automatic. There can exist a possibility that members of one gender can outwit the supposed and presumed dominant gender in their own game. At this point then, the claim of the “normativeness” of clustered ideas and concepts is put on trial. Can the enforcement of any clusters of ideas and concepts, especially with regard to the realm of gender power relations be automatic? Aren't there possibilities of the supposed dominant group getting into a trap and ending up serving the interests of the suppressed, albeit inadvertently?

According to Tyson (1999), art is an outgrowth of human experiences and therefore, it reflects human desires, conflicts and potentials and its interpretation helps humans in learning something important about themselves. Consequently, with regard to the interpretation of art, Tyson avers that literature focuses on the ideological and

aesthetic structure of the text plus the culture in which the text was produced from. When the views of Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus and the PanHellenic movements discussed above are merged with these views of Tyson, they distil a clear idea that art, in this case the oral poetry of Abagusii is a constructor of ideologies. How then, does the oral poetry of Abagusii construct the ideologies which bind the community together? In which ways and to which socio – cultural and political direction do the constructed ideologies steer Abagusii to? This study takes the position that Abagusii enjoy consuming their oral poetry and that is why they have preserved the poems this study collected. Could there be a possibility that these songs/poems Abagusii love to perform are undermining their internal positions and relations as males and as female of a community? Could there be a possibility that the ideas and beliefs produced by Gusii oral poems could be antagonizing Abagusii with their neighbouring communities? Well, these are some of the questions that this study grappled with.

Habib (2005) has delved deeply into the works of various classical theoreticians and has recounted their various postulations with regard to poetry. The first one is Plato and his allegory of the cave. According to Plato (in Habib 2005:25), literary works expose images and that through these images, man is cast as chained deep within the recess of a cave. Accordingly, humans are bound and as such, their vision is restricted. In this regard, this study intimates that what binds people and restricts their vision to prescribed paths are the various ideologies some of which are the ones constructed and inculcated into their mindsets through oral poetry and its associated images. Ultimately, people's conception and perceptions of their world is conditioned (bound) to subscribe to the specific ideologies as they are constructed through their oral poetry. The curious point here is that poetry chains man. Various, chains have the possibility of evoking images of negativity such as imprisonment or enslavement

Wasamba (2015) has echoed Habib's sentiments with regard to oral poetry when he opines that it mirrors with elegance, intensity and compassion people's daily experiences of life. He further notes that apart from it being the oldest and the most versatile of all genres of literature, it is original and dynamic. It is part of people's religious rites, rituals and festivals. It is therefore, a document that can provide unique insights into human experiences, values, thoughts, ideals, achievements, disappointments and hopes with deep empathy hence, the best vehicle for handing down the stories of people's struggles, trials, travails and triumphs. The sentiments of Wasamba and Habib (2005) are further shared by Mutere (1999), who on his part says that oral poetry is part of the body of orature and one of the timeless genres of literature. As a discipline, it mirrors the protocols of the society which produces it. He further says that through oral poetry, artists and critics air their experiences, observations and opinions and artistically prescribe guidelines for their different communities. At this point, this study can decipher the truth that oral poetry has the power to construct and transmit different ideologies that govern the thinking and actions of any human community, and in the case of this study, the Gusii community. Given that protocols and experiences are dynamic, the questions to grapple with right from this early stage of the study are; what is the present nature of the Gusii experiences and protocols as reflected to us by the community's oral poetry? How has the oral poetry of Abagusii midwived the community's protocols so as to align them with the present global realities? Or, has the community's oral poetry alienated Abagusii from the current global socio – cultural, economic and political trends?

In relating ideology to oral poetry, Plato (in Habib 2005:24) has claimed that education through oral poetry is most sovereign. This is because more than anything else, rhythm and harmony combined as it is found in oral poetry find their way to the innermost soul of an individual and they take strongest hold upon it. The aspect of rhythm and harmony is echoed by Ayioka (2014) when he says that oral poetry is a composition in verse or language exhibiting conscious attention to patterns and can be performed through singing. Plato, (in Habib 2005:27) further says that ideology operates and continues to operate by its formal expression rather than by its explicit content; thus, making oral poetry a powerful force in moulding public opinion in socio - cultural, political and economic spheres. This he argues, is achieved through oral poetry's inbuilt ability to present arguments coherently and persuasively. Firstly, it should be deciphered at this point that perhaps it is this power in poetry to shape public opinion that is driving the composers of the Gusii oral poetry to be fanatical with this form of art as a vehicle for shaping the public opinion of Abagusii. The second premise of this study is that the composers and performers of Gusii oral poetry are themselves active consumers of the Gusii ideologies and therefore, they are keen on perpetuating what they feel is advantageous to them with regard to the power politics of Abagusii.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Finnegan (1970) has strongly averred that oral poetry emanating from Africa has not received sufficient attention. Nevertheless, she points out that most African panegyrics act as the medium of public opinion through which present status is validated and military exploits are glorified. She further observes that African panegyrics are vital in praising the power of the royal dynasties, the high deeds of the past kings and the glory of the present rulers. That in the adulatory aspect of poetry, especially the panegyrics, there is the aspect of profound political significance as a means of political propaganda, pressure, or communication which in turn validates the existing and new status of kings and dynasties. When poetry is seen as a vehicle for validating status and as a tool of political propaganda, it begs a number of questions. Isn't oral poetry a vehicle for constructing false identities? Is it not a vehicle for constructing mangled identities which in turn give people elusive and or, antithetical identities and phony hopes? Is it possible that oral poetry of a community could be used as a vehicle for marginalizing social classes while at the same time creating pockets of discontentment within the cultures that produce it? Well, these are some of the questions that led this study to analyze oral poetry of Abagusii to determine how it constructs various traits some of which outrightly are in opposition to one another.

Ngara (1990) says that poetry is an artistic production and a medium of human consciousness through which human conception of religion, politics, morality and science is deeply influenced. At this point, the question that begs for answers is; why should the conscious of human groupings such as cultural entities be influenced and to which direction? Could oral poetry be a vehicle for influencing humans to think and act out of the norm? Why for instance influence people to think towards a specified direction with regard to religion, politics and morality? When Ngara's views about the power of poetry to influence thought patterns are aligned with Althusser's (1970) view that art and religion are ideological state apparatuses that indoctrinate the proletariat to the advantage of the bourgeoisie, this study thus poses that; could members of the Gusii community be enjoying a form of art that is cryptically formulating ideas that instill in them identities that are at times in opposition to themselves?

Ngara (ibid) further singles out categories of ideologies which are products of poetry. They are: The dominant ideology, the authorial ideology and the aesthetic ideology. With regard to the dominant ideology, he avers that these are the views, beliefs, assumptions and sets of values that inform the thoughts and actions of the influential group(s) of people in society. Now, how does oral poetry, especially that of the Gusii community construct beliefs and assumptions that inform the thought patterns and actions of Abagusii? What is the exact nature of these dominant sets of values, especially in the Gusii cosmos? Are they really dominant or they are empty beliefs and sets of values which have created in gender groupings illusionary ideals which in turn promote false identities?

Njau's (1994) has posited that most African communities are patriarchal societies and often want to extol male virtues while playing down the abilities of females. Given that cultures replenish and rejuvenate themselves by borrowing from other cultures in a give and take basis (Ngugi 1978), are there chances that the Gusii brand of patriarchy has inadvertently contributed towards creating mixed traits as loads itself on the community's femininity? In the spirit of give and take, it has been constructed by the community's oral poetry to reflect present times where calls and discourses for gender equity are loud and clear? Therefore, one of the gaps this study grapples with is that it analyses Gusii oral poems with a view to establishing the construction and nature and constituents of the Gusii patriarchal ideology (ies), and this is what informs the first objective of this study.

Secondly, the position taken by Njau (1994) to the effect that patriarchal cultures dominate African cultural set – ups and exalt male virtues while playing down the abilities of females raises other pertinent issues. One of the pertinent issues raised is the question of whether the said dominant patriarchy is outrightly oppressive or it is a brand of patriarchy in which males are oppressing themselves through overburdening themselves in a futile attempt to try and prove a nebulous point that they are the stronger sex, and by extension, inadvertently becoming the weaker sex? The other issue emanating from assumption that patriarchal cultures are dominant is that of femininity in African cultural contexts. If indeed the exalted male virtues down – play the abilities of females, is it true that the abilities of females are down – played? Which specific abilities are being down - played and in which ways? How is this down – playing of female abilities a construction of Gusii oral poetry? Further still, Muleka (1999) says that when it comes to the singing and performing of nuptial oral poetry, females are at the

forefront given that weddings are largely female affairs. Given this situation, could there be a possibility that the females in the Gusii world are enjoying singing and performing the oral poems that are undermining their social standing, abilities and status in the Gusii cosmos? It is out of these questions that this study got the interest to investigate the construction and portraiture of femininity in Gusii oral poetry.

In the foregoing, a number of questions emanate from the position taken by Ngugi (1978) and Njau (1994) in relation to the interrogation of Gusii oral poems and the ideologies they construct. One question is; now that patriarchy/masculinity is supposedly the dominant ideology, has it in any way ceded grounds to accommodate the realities of the ever – changing world alongside the feelings and perspectives of femininity for the purposes of harmonious co – existence or is it still the traditional and rigid brand of patriarchy that is deaf to concerns of modern-day trending discourses of gender balance? And if indeed it has ceded grounds, what exactly has been shed off from the Gusii traditional patriarchy and what is new in it that is designed for the purposes of accommodating the feelings of the female gender. Equally, feminism is of various strands, Charlotte (2010) as well as Budgeon (2015) have among other strands singled out and discussed the nitty – gritty of Liberal feminism and Radical feminism among other brands of feminism. In view of the two, radical feminism offers extreme resistance to known forms of exploitation that are directed towards the exploitation of the female gender while liberal feminism is a little mild and accommodates elements of patriarchy. Therefore, if patriarchy has to cede some ground, then it is envisaged by this study that feminism too, has to surrender some of its belief systems so that the two ideologies can accommodate each other in the same socio – cultural environment. How has this been constructed by the Gusii oral poetry? It is therefore on these grounds that this study unpacked the oral poetry of Abagusii and how it constructs the twin ideologies of patriarchy and femininity.

Alembe (1991) has echoed the views of Finnegan (1970) with regard to oral poetry not receiving sufficient scholarly attention but still, he has proceeded and studied two classes of children's oral poems namely, the lullabies and play poetry. His study is based on content and the social context of the children's poetry of Abanyole people, a sub – community of Abaluhya community of Western Kenya. Like the study of Akivaga and Odaga (1982) which concentrates on lullabies, Alembe's study extends from the lullabies and includes children's play poetry. It also extends from the social significance to content and social context of children's oral poetry. It is a worthy contribution because it contextualizes oral poetry, a very significant elucidation in the study of oral poetry. However, his study, though important, it leaves an academic gap. First, the gap is that there is still a lacuna in the study of oral poetry in general. Secondly, the gap is to bring in other classes of oral poetry and not only in contextualizing their content, but to analyze them with a view to arriving at and understanding the concealed ideas and the peculiar ways through which oral poetry constructs the said ideas and values which in turn shape the thinking and actions of individuals or collective human population of a specific community. Therefore, from Alembe's (1991) study, this study gains the perspectives on contextualizing oral poetry and using it as a vehicle for studying the ideologies of Abagusii. Equally, this study moves a notch higher to document how elucidations from oral poetry of different classes in combined ways from a particular culture (Gusii culture) converge to construct unique ideologies – the patriarchal, economic and political ideologies which interpellate Abagusii into becoming subjects of ideas, ideals, values and feelings that are peculiar to their cosmos.

Muleka (2009) has analyzed oral poetry (nuptial poetry of the Abakhayo) to establish the images of women in African oral literature. This study is great with regard to appreciating how a single class of oral poetry can be a vehicle through which a culture can socially programme and condition members of a gender. As much as Muleka's study is about a single class of Abakhayo oral poetry, it reveals the immense powers in oral poetry with regard to conditioning humans as well as studying any human phenomenon. Well, it leaves out the social programming of the male gender, and the programming of both genders with regard to matters economic and political consciousness of a community. The point of departure and the concern of this study here is; can different classes of oral poetry of Abagusii be studied together as semiotic systems of encoded signs which embody the ideas, values and feelings through which the Abagusii experience, feel, perceive and consume their world at various times? Well, this is the general gap that this study grapples with as it analyzes Gusii oral poems.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Kothari (2010) is of the view that research methodology is the systematic process of solving the research problem and the logic behind the procedure. In this section, the study too justifies the steps that were taken towards the discussion and the conclusions herein. This study adopted an analytical research design. This is because it is an in – depth investigation into the various character traits that are exhibited by the two genders in the Gusii cosmos. According to Konchar (1992), the analytical research design is an in – depth study of a phenomenon and it attempts to establish why the phenomenon is the way it is and how it came to be the way it is. Equally, according to Lipsey (1990), analytical research design is concerned with testing the hypothesis and interpreting the relationships through the analyzing of the facts or information that is available. This approach stands applicable in all stages of research, right from the articulation of research problem to the formulation of arguments on the issues mentioned in the research. In this regard, data and other important facts related to research are evaluated and the sources are used to prove a hypothesis or support the idea. The study population comprised nine Gusii oral poems that were purposively sampled from a universal population of thirty special purpose Gusii poems.

Femininity In Gusii Oral Poetry

Charlotte (2010) has posited that femininity is socially constructed, but made up of both socially-defined and biologically-created factors. These sentiments have been reinforced by De Beauvoir (2010) who has stated that no biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society and one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. This idea has equally been presented by Butler, (1999) who theorized that gender is not fixed or inherent but rather, it is a socially defined set of practices and traits that have, over time, grown to become labelled as feminine or masculine.

Erving (1959) has presented sentiments that were later echoed by Butler (ibid) when she argues that women are socialized to present themselves as precious, ornamental and fragile, uninstructed in and ill-suited for anything requiring muscular exertion and to project shyness, reserve and a display frailty, fear and incompetence. This observation is later amplified by Williams (2011) who says that feminine traits are not universally identical. These traits vary depending on location and context, and are influenced by a variety of social and cultural factors. But in the overall, she says that some patterns and behaviours associated with femininity encompasses a set of attributes, behaviours and roles generally associated with girls and women. These include gentleness, empathy, sensitivity, caring, sweetness, compassion, tolerance, nurturance, deference and humility.

Williams (2011) has further posited that characteristics of femininity are not universally identical, hence, the possibility of them being antithetical. This then elicits the need to examine Gusii special purpose oral poetry with a view to establishing the brand of femininity it constructs. This entails contextualizing the extent to which it conforms and or deviates from the attributes foregrounded above by Williams (ibid) and the levels to which the contemporary opportunities have altered the traditional femininity of Abagusii females. In the foregoing, this discussion at this point starts with examining the verse below extracted from poem (01).

POEM (01)

Omoiseke Gechemba kore omogenki	Gechemba the gossiper
Obere mino tocha kongenkera Sarange –	Stay away from inciting Sarange
Ing’ererie ekerori nyakobugeria ---	Hand me a flute to play
Nario Sarange atachi ande!	So, that Sarange doesn’t leave

Derald (2010) while agreeing with the observations of Williams (ibid) has noted that the ideal feminine is defined by each individual culture based on what that culture considers valuable, and is often the subject of heated debate. She further opines that to understand the term "ideal feminine", there is need to understand what femininity is. According to her, feminism embodies a constellation of meanings but it generally refers to the

attributes, behaviours, interests, mannerisms, appearances, roles, and expectations that we have come to associate with being female during the socialization processes.

In the verse above which is part of a Gusii nuptial oral poem, the foregrounded sign is that of Sarange. In agreeing with the observations of Derald (ibid) above to the effect that ideal femininity is defined by each individual culture based on what that culture considers valuable, this study posits that the portrayal of Sarange in the wedding verse above is what the Gusii culture considers to be of value for the females in a Gusii culture in regard to marriage. Though the name Sarange is generally given to females in the Gusii cultural atmosphere, in the verse above, the name is a semiotic embodiment of the construction of the fragile femininity of the Gusii cosmos. In fact, Erving (ibid) has reinforced this proposition by arguing in Africa, women are socialized to present themselves as precious, ornamental and fragile, uninstructed in and ill-suited for anything requiring muscular exertion and to project shyness, reserve and to display frailty, fear and incompetence. Alabi (1998) echoes the same sentiments by saying that the patriarchal African societies aim at creating a “virtuous woman” out of the girl child. In this case, the girl child is the one who is not aggressive but coy, not boisterous but quiet, not assertive but compromising.

Semiotics allows for multiple interpretations of cultural images depending on the environmental circumstances. Therefore, in the verse above that talks of Sarange, an additional interpretation is in order. In the verse, a man is asking for a flute to use in singing melodies to Sarange so that she can evade the negative influence from Gechemba. In this context, Gechemba is not only a Gusii feminine name, but in essence, it is a symbol of the destructive forces/voices who are out to destroy peaceful marriages. In the same breath, Sarange is a Gusii feminine name which in this context symbolizes somebody’s wife. In this verse then, the persona (a husband) is asking for musical means (Ekeroria) to lull Sarange into docility, shyness and a reserved character so that she cannot listen to “destructive” voices which in the present day can be equated to crusaders for feminine rebellion as well as gender equity. Though she is from one angle presented as “Alabi’s virtuous woman” who is frail, naïve, coy, quiet, and compromising, the contrary could be possible. The fact that the persona is making every effort to keep Sarange from the influences of “Gechemba”, cannot escape the eye of this study. Gechemba in this context represents the observations of Williams (ibid) to the effect that modern notions of femininity have shifted from the traditional gender roles of wife and mother. They have changed to reflect the opportunities that have opened up for women in society. Consequently, from the verse on Gechemba and Sarange above, this study can decipher a modern Gusii woman who may not be entirely coy but a silent schemer and lethal calculator of her independent destiny, one with tremendous ability to confound all and sundry in the Gusii patriarchal cosmos.

The same sentiments of a feminine world that is ruthlessly shifting from the tight grip of the traditional Gusii patriarchal order which is putting in place every effort to “tame” an increasingly independent femininity are advanced by the two verses below extracted from wedding poems (01) and (03) respectively.

POEM (02)

Ekonde seito	While at home
Nkaigwa nyancha aberegete	I heard
Onchong’a ominto	Onchong’a, our brother
Nkaigwa nyancha aberegete!	Has drowned in the lake
Nyagetwoni akabutora egetinge	Nyagetwoni has cut a legring
Kabutora egetinge	Cut leg ring
Onchong’a kare moyo	Yet Onchong’a is still alive

POEM (03)

Omokungu kwabwate ong’anyire	The wife you had married has divorced you
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Oboremo kwabwate okaonia You have sold the piece of land you had

Esuuti kwabwate okaonia – baito! You have sold the suit you had

Aye baba ominto, baba ominto You! Oh, my mother, Oh my mother

The conflict in the verse from poem (02) rests on the basis that a woman stereotyped as Nyagetwoni has initiated a divorce process (cutting off her leg ring) in a supposedly Gusii patriarchal culture which does not permit such a process to be initiated by women. Such a process, the study infers, can only be initiated by the male. Therefore, Nyagetwoni's "shameful, nefarious and rebellious" action has driven her husband – Onchong'a (a symbol of Gusii Patriarchal/Masculine Ideology) into committing suicide by drowning himself in the lake. Given that Nyagetwoni is not an emblematic feminine name of the Gusii culture, it is in the context of this discussion treated ideologically as a semiotic sign which captures not a coy female, but an assertive version of the previously gentle female.

The term Nyagetwoni is a kind of derivation. Nya – ge – twoni. The first and second syllables mean 'as does' while the root word 'twoni' means a cock. Therefore, the word implies a woman who does what should be done by the cock – symbolically stating that Nyagetwoni is a woman who has defied the confines of the Gusii traditional femininity and has veered off into doing what should be done by males in the Gusii socio - cultural context. Nyagetwoni is therefore a Gusii cultural sign/stereotype of feminine rebellion while Onchong'a is a Gusii cultural sign whose signified is the Gusii macho man – the proud and imperious emissary of Gusii's patriarchal culture. The use of the term Nyagetwoni to refer to the Gusii female gender could as well be a stereotype designed to counter the defiance and continuously conscious and independent female. The above verse therefore attempts to construct a sociologically stereotyped and stigmatized female who is coy and silent but at the same time, it signifies an independent and macho woman.

According to Rudman & Glick (2001), stereotyping is a form of labeling whose objective is to stigmatize the targeted groups and finally dissuade and derail them from achieving their objectives in life. In the context of this study, stereotyping is a form of discrimination of the female gender deployed by the patriarchy so as to maintain its domination and social control. The stereotyping of the female gender (Nyagetwoni) in Gusii special purpose oral poetry is a harsh verdict of having been found guilty of driving Onchong'a into his premature death. The oral poem however does not provide Nyagetwoni's side of the story as to what compels her into initiating a divorce process. Therefore, the use of stereotyping here appears to be a form of intimidation towards the female gender and its projected result is to maim any form of abrasiveness and assertiveness in females hence, constructing a humble and tolerant female who cannot question the largesse accorded to the male gender in the Gusii patriarchal culture. Unfortunately, the oral poem, though perpetuating patriarchal order from one angle, the other side of the coin shows an oral poem that is constructing some kind of modern femininity in the Gusii cosmos. This is the brand of femininity that is assertive and keen on constructing a paradigm shift in the way a Gusii female is perceived. These same sentiments are captured in the beer drinking verse extracted from poem (04) in which a line states that Omokungu kwabwate ong'anyire meaning the wife you had married has divorced you. This is the construction of an independent minded femininity which is devoid of childlike passivity and dependency.

From the above argument, it is clear that there is the construction of a hybrid kind of femininity. By hybrid femininity, this study means that the traditional form of femininity as envisaged in the works of Erving (ibid), Ogunsina (ibid) and Alabi (ibid) have partly shed off and a new brand of relatively masculinity and femininity as Hofstede (1998) observes is cropping up. Though the idea of masculinity and femininity is alive in Gusii oral poetry, the idea of Gusii patriarchy constructing a quiet and coy female is still strong in the Gusii cosmos. This sociologically dominated brand of femininity is amplified in the verse below which is part of poem (01):

Omoiseke omomwamu nyakebwato Dark lady with big thigh

Komonyene chimori namoroche Owner of cattle has noticed her

Ing'erie chimori ntangere nyakebwato Hand me calves to prevent her

Tanya kona gotira Emanga.

From wandering in Manga

This is a Gusii nuptial oral poem. Nyakebwato, just like the term Nyagetwoni in the verse that has been referred to earlier in this section, is not a Gusii cultural name for females but a coined term, a kind of stereotype that is of semiotic significance. It is part of the ideological use of diction in Gusii oral poetry in the sense that it is a coinage of two words Nya – meaning “the woman owner of” and kebwato - which means big thigh hence the overall meaning decoded to signify the “owner of a big thigh”. As intimated earlier in the words of Rudman and Glick (ibid), stereotyping is a form of labeling whose objective is to stigmatize the targeted group(s) and finally dissuade and derail them from achieving independent objectives in life. In Althusserian Marxism, art is an Ideological State Apparatuses (I.S.A). In a Gusii cultural wedding, when an oral poem with labels such “Nyakebwato” are performed, all mature ladies are slowly but steadily interpellated into perceiving themselves as humans who cannot live happily on their own and that marriage is the ultimate heaven in their lives.

Notice in the last line in the verse about Nyakebwato that this mature woman is restlessness. She is wandering up and down the Manga Escarpment - Kona gotira emanga. In the wedding cultural context of Abagusii where this wandering is to be interpreted from, the constant walking up and down the Manga escarpment by a woman implies that she is single in her marital status and therefore, the restless movements is a muted but eloquent sign of wanting to get into a heterosexual relationship which can possibly lead into a marriage. Curiously, her socio – cultural conditioning does not permit her to verbally vent out her feelings, emotions and intentions. When such poems are performed in wedding ceremonies, the spinsters in attendance, this study avers, are socialized to take up a mellow and passive trait – “just to wander along the escarpment” and wait to be noticed by a man. She is made to be an object – coy and her movements up and down the Manga escarpment are just but signs of emotional restlessness. The crux is that she cannot voice her concerns because of being socialized to being passive even in issues that are central to her feelings and emotions.

The dominant patriarchal ideology which cryptically constructs femininity as one of the Gusii ideologies projects the male as the initiators of social processes such as love relations at the expense of the females. Sample the verse below which is extracted from poem (04) which is a special purpose Gusii nuptial oral poem:

Ing’ererie orotambe	Get me a long fishing line
ong’e nduserie abanto roche	For fishing humans
Orweng’e ne engegu rwaereire!	The shorter one ends at the bank
Ing’ererie orotambe,	Give me a long rope
Nduserie engoncho ere ekenagwa	To help me chase away the parrot
Nduserie engoncho	A parrot at the hedge
Ere ekenagwa teira emeino bogirango.	So that it cannot hear our secrets
Ing’ererie orotambe	Get me a long fishing line
Ong’e nduserie abanto roche	For fishing humans
Orweng’e ne engegu rwaereire!	The shorter one ends at the bank

In the verse above, the persona, obviously a man, is using dowry (Orotambe) to fish out engoncho from her maiden home. Engoncho is a bird, a parrot with many “words” and therefore a noisy bird. In this nuptial poem, this bird has been used symbolically to refer to unmarried women, who are stereotypically viewed as noisy. Once again, in the Gusii nuptial cultural context, the talkativeness of women is construed to mean defiance that is associated with spinsters who are seeking attention from males. The symbol of a fish being pulled out of water constructs images of being “coerced” and being taken to unfamiliar territory. Though one is “willing” through her wanderings at the escarpment and her talkativeness, her being socialized not to openly talk about her feelings,

emotions and intentions but “keep parroting” over inconsequential issues signifies the constructs a suppressed femininity in the Gusii world. It thus can be deduced that the oral poem here constructs a coy female, one on one side who is lackadaisical trait in her character but at the same time, one who is relentless and subtly combative when it comes to the time of her getting what she wants. According to Erving (ibid), this is a kind of woman who is socialized to present herself as “precious, ornamental and fragile, uninstructed in and ill-suited for anything requiring muscular exertion” and to project “shyness, reserve and a display of frailty, fear and incompetence” but in the ultimate end, she is the commander and determiner of her destiny.

Further into the efforts of constructing a coy female, one who is “kitchen minded” in the Gusii world is through the use of symbolism in the verse below which, like poem (04) above is a verse extracted from a nuptial poem (05).

Omokungu siomia siomia	A vagrant woman
Omokungu siomia siomia	A vagrant woman
Kayi akomanya bwarugeirwe	She tells where food is ready
Komanya bwarugeirwe	Where food is ready
Gose mboke gose mbwa’mwana.	Whether little or for child

The verse mocks the careless and aimless movements of omokungu - a woman, just like it is the case with Nyakebwato and Gechemba which are discussed earlier in this section. In this verse, there is the symbolic portraiture of a female gender (omokungu siomia siomia) who requires to be contained because of her wanderings. Visiting friends and relations is not a bad idea but the constant visiting of one homestead to another within the same locality and from time to time (siomia siomia) is symbolically injurious to good neighbourliness. It is undignified and nefarious more so, when her sole mission is to find out what types of foodstuffs have been prepared. The poem therefore is to deter women from free movement and visitations and therefore contain them at home. The same constructions of Gechemba and Omokungu siomia siomia as explained earlier are further amplified in the verse below from poem (01) and whose sections have been discussed in earlier sections of this study.

Omoiseke Gechemba kore omogenki	Gechemba the gossip
Obere mino tocha kongenkera Sarange –	Stay away from inciting Sarange
Ing’ererie ekerori nyakobugeria ---	Hand me a flute to play
Nario Sarange atachi ande!	So, that Sarange doesn’t leave

Here, Gechemba, a feminine character is reprimanded for being a gossip. Just as it has been discussed in the earlier parts of this section, singling out a gender and tagging it as gossip is a form of stereotyping. This sign of a gossip that is attributed to the female is equated with the sign of omokungu siomia siomia - vagrant woman in the poem that has been discussed earlier herein. Given that in all the verses quoted in this section, the persona is apparently a male, then the admonishment towards the female gender is to construct a socio – culturally mellow (confined) female who is modelled to be coy and occupy the innermost orbit, the orbit where she is in some confinement in the Gusii world. In the two verses above, it is stereotyped that the female gender possesses an innate instinct to cause discomfort in the Gusii world. In the verse about Gechemba being a gossip, and therefore being a threat to Sarange’s marriage just like Omokungu Siomia siomia – vagrant woman is projected to be a threat to the spirit of good and tranquil neighbourliness. As intimated earlier, stereotyping is a form of labeling whose purpose is to stigmatize an individual or a group with the hope of derailing them and making them lose self-esteem. From this point of view, it is clear that the females in Gusiiland are driven towards exhibiting humility, passivity and sensitive lest derogatory epithets like siomia siomia, Nyakebwato, Nyagetwoni and others be tagged on them. Though this may be the overt effort of patriarchy, it is obvious that the same oral poems

cryptically construct traits in females which make them assertive and combative, where situations demand that they be combative.

Still on the same argument, it is worth noting that gossip, a negative tag and for this matter a stereotype has been attributed to Gechemba, a feminine name in the Gusii culture and therefore a cultural sign which constructs femininity in the Gusii world. When gossip is tagged to a gender by a community's oral poetry, (Omoiseke Gechemba kore omogenki - Gechemba the gossip, Obere mino tocha kongenkera Sarange – Stay at your home and avoid coming to my place to negatively influence Sarange), it overtly constructs a feminine gender that is both coy and sensitive in the sense that one lives in a “closet” but at the same time, a trait of one being a schemer is covertly constructed for the females.

Stereotyping and objectification go hand in hand. Their purpose is to derail the efforts of the target groups. The female initiation poetry of Abagusii is laden with symbols whose main purpose is to convert girls into wives soon after initiation. Sample the verses below taken from different female initiation poems:

POEM (06)

Oremire nchera igoro,	Has cultivated on the main path
Mboremo bwaborire	There is no land to cultivate
Tiga akwanigwe	O let her be saluted
Na moeti na mogendi	by those who come and go
Tiga akwanigwe	Let her be saluted
Nonde otaitongo	By the foreigner
Tiga akwanigwe	Let her be saluted
Na moeti na mogendi	By visitors

POEM (07)

Goko okorire buya	Granny has done well,
Abarete egeita	She is going to pass through the cattle pen!
Orenge moka abaisia	She was a wife to uninitiated boys,
Obeire moka abamura	Now she is a wife for men

POEM (08)

Orenge egesagane	She has been a lass
Obeire omoiseke	She has become a woman
Orange moka baisia	She has been a wife of boys
Obeire moka'bamura	She has become a wife of men
Otigire egosorio getii	She has left jokes in the field
Ise amosike	Her father to respect her

Anyore omosacha	To get a husband
Amorende anyone abana	To take care of her and get children

POEM (09)

Gwakunire	You have touched
Kuna	Touch
Nakunire	I have touched
Enyambu kuna	Touch the chameleon
Nakunire enyambu	I have touched the chameleon

In the verse from poem (06) above, cultivation is the symbol of having been circumcised. To be saluted by strangers symbolically means that the girl is now mature and ready for sex with “foreigners.” – meaning, men from other clans. In poems (07 and 08) the message of having been prepared for marriage to mature men is overt. In poem (09), the chameleon is the symbol for the clitoris. Chameleons change in colour constantly to camouflage in their different environments as they walk. Similarly, the symbol has been used to refer to the changing “moods” of the clitoris to respond to different “assignments”, that is, it behaves differently when the woman is in need of sex and differently when she is not in the mood to have sexual intimacy. Over and above the discussion, what comes out here clearly is the issue of objectification. Given that it is the women themselves who perform these poems during the female circumcision rituals, they inadvertently objectify themselves into being wives and childbearing conduits and that is all their world. When immersed into child – bearing and child - raising activities, they are literary confined to staying at home and it comes out clearly that the oral poems they perform make them coy and dependents because they have no ventilation like that of men to go out and improve their lot.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

If the female gender is socialized to stay at home, it is a social construction geared towards constructing a coy and mellow female. In the case of the poems quoted above, marriages are the ultimate goal in the existence of a female in the Gusii cosmos. Consequently, it is thus clear that the oral poetry of Abagusii constructs a feminine ideology which in one-way silences its girl – child, hence, a gender that is gentle, empathic, nurturance, fragile and ornamental. On an antithetical tone, it constructs an abrasive and assertive woman who cannot be intimidated by various stereotypes. In the foregoing, it is the strong suggestion of this study that more research is still required in this area of Gusii special purpose oral poetry.

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APPENDIX – ANTHOLOGY OF SAMPLED GUSII ORAL POEMS

Poem 01 - Love And Marriage Oral Poem

Omoiseke omomwamu nyakebwato ogotira	Dark lady with big thigh
Komonyene chimori namoroche	Owner of cattle has noticed her
Eee! Namoroche baba- monyene chimori	He has spotted her
Ing'ererie chimori ntangere nyakebwato	Hand me cows to prevent her
Tanya kona gotira emanga.	From roaming at Manga escarpment
Omoiseke Gechemba kore omogenki	Gechemba the gossip
Obere Mino tocha kongenkera Sarange –	Be at home, don't incite Sarange
Ing'ererie ekerori nyakobugeria ---	Hand to me a flute to sing for
Nario Sarange atachi ande!	To retain Sarange at home
Yaye abana baito – ee kwania Obino	Our children pass greetings
Ase rituko buna riarero!! Ooh!	On a day like this one
Abana baito mbarore, mbarore mbarore	Our children arise and be counted
Aye soma—	Get some education

Poem 02 - Love And Marriage Oral Poem

Konde seito	While home,
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Nkaigwa nyancha abenegete	I heard He's drowned
Onchong'a ominto	Onchong'a my brother
Nkaigwa nyancha abenegete	Has drowned in Lake
Nyagetwoni akabutora egetinge	Nyagetwoni had cut her leg ring
Kabutora egetinge	Cut leg ring
Onchong'a kare moyo	Yet Onchong'a is alive
Ekonde seito nkaigwa	While home,
Nyancha abenegete	I heard He's drowned
Onchong'a ominto	Onchong'a my brother
Nkaigwa nyancha abenegete	Has drowned in Lake
Nyagetwoni akabutora egetinge	Nyagetwoni had cut her leg ring
Kabutora egetinge Onchong'a kare moyo	Cut leg ring yet Onchong'a was alive

Poem 03 - Beer Drinking Oral Poem

Mosacha kioyo baba ominto?	What kind of a man is this one?
Mosacha kioyo baba ominto?	What kind of a man is this one?
Mosacha kioyo otari gwesibia	What kind of a man who doesn't shower
Gaki ogotioka okage nemingichi	He stinks like a he – goat
Yamerire oronyo	One that has grown a beard
Aiye baba nigo atindete	Aiye mother, he is drunk
Baba akagokania tonywa amarwa	Mother advised you to avoid drunkenness
Baba akogokania otige enyasore	Mother advised you to avoid drunkenness
Baba akogokania otige esigara	Mother advised you to avoid cigarettes
Okamwena yaa tata ominto	You remained defiant
Ogakenda kendi okanga koigwa	You developed coldness towards advice
Ng'aki rende mogisangio oramenye	My agemate, how then will you live?
Ng'aki rende mogisangio oramenye	My agemate, how then will you live?
Omokungu kwabwate ong'anyire	The wife you had married has divorced you
Oboremo kwabwate okaonia	You have sold the piece of land you had
Esuuti kwabwate okaonia – baito!	You have sold the suit you had

Aye baba ominto, baba ominto	You! Oh my mother, Oh my mother
Ng'aki bwandire baba ominto	That is how I feel, my mother
Abang'ina baito bwatera abwo	Our old women, let it be so
Abang'ina baito bwatera abwo	Our old women, let it be so
Rero rero rituko rinene	This one is a great day
Rero rero rituko rinene	This one is a great day
Abagaka baito rero rero	Our elders, this is the day
Bare naintwe	They are with us
Karibu abagaka toraria amatoke	Welcome elders we eat bananas together
Eye nense entobu	This one is a fertile country
Ekwama mpaka amatoke	In which bananas flourish

Poem 04 - Love And Marriage Oral Poem

Ing'ererie orotambe	Get me a long fishing line
ong'e nduserie abanto roche	For fishing humans
Orweng'e ne engegu rwaereire!	The shorter one ends at the bank
Orotambe,	Give me a long rope
Nduserie engoncho ere ekenagwa	To help me chase away the parrot
Nduserie engoncho	A parrot at the hedge
Ere ekenagwa teira emeino bogirango.	So that it cannot hear our secrets

Poem 05 - Love And Marriage Oral Poem

Ing'ererie obokombe	Give me a hoe,
Nekebago egesera	With a strong handle
Ng'ende kwabusera omogondo	I can go and cultivate
Omogondo nyakieni kebariri	A beautiful garden with red soils
Omaiya chingero bonyangero	A perfect person sings and sings
Omokungu siomia siomia ee ee ee baba	A vagrant woman
Kayi akomanya bwarugeirwe	She tell where food is ready
Komanya bwarugeirwe ee ee baba	Where food is ready
Kai'komanya bwarugeirwe	She knows where food is ready

Gose mboke gose mbwamwana.

Whether little or for child

Poem 06 – Initiation Poem

Esabarianyi,	Esabarianyi
Nyasuguta abare!	Nyasuguta the novices
Aye makomoke,	O mother
Oremire nchera igoro,	Has cultivated on the main path
Aye tiga areme,	Let her cultivate
Mboremo bwaborire	There is no land to cultivate
Tiga akwanigwe	O let her be saluted
Na moeti na mogendi	by those who come and go
Tiga akwanigwe nonde otaiitongo	Let her be saluted, even by the unfriendly;
Tiga akwanigwe na moeti na mogendi	Let her be saluted by those who come and go

Poem 07 – Initiation Poem

Goko okorire buya	Granny has done well,
Abarete egeita	She is going to pass through the cattle pen!
Orenge moka abaisia	She was a wife to uninitiated boys,
Obeire moka abamura	Now she is a wife for initiated boys,
Igesora na igesora,	After harvest, after harvest,
Totegorere amaboba	We shall cultivate our second crops
Simbore yaito yarure rogoro	Our esimbore song has come from up yonder,
Nyambegera moka Asago	Nyambegera, the wife of Asago,
Oirire ebisono biaito	Has taken our clitoris
Ochire kogekera!	And has gone to roast them!

Poem 08 – Initiation Poem

Orenge egesagane	She has been a lass
Obeire omoiseke	She has become a woman
Orange moka baisia	She has been a wife of boys
Obeire moka'bamura	She has become a wife of men
Otigire egosorio getii	She has left jokes in the field

Ise amosike	Her father to respect her
Anyore omosacha	To get a husband
Amorende anyore abana	To take care of her and get children
Koboko kw'omokebi, kw'omokebi	The hand of the circumciser
Koboko, kobutoke kobutoke	The hand, let it be cut off,
Kobutoke, tokorobe tokorobe	Let it be cut off, let us join it on,
Tokorobe, Nakanaigo, nakanaigo.	Let us join it on; I have refused, yes, refused.
Otute, baba!	Good luck, mother,
Eroreire,	But it is sour flour you are giving us
Nche tingoreiri	My child is not an adopted one-
Ndora motangi	It is my own first born that I see,
Ngasamba keiririat	And so I have trilled a rapid trill,
Buna ororeire	Rapid as the evasive words of a woman
Nyamasenyente, Nyamaeyererio	A lying person, deceiving us with flour
Eke nekiomogoko!	This is the gift of a miser!
Nomwana ogetoire!	It is the child who has given it to us!
Nosabwa bieni tokobirwa	When asked for beauty, you cannot give it:
Nomwana ogetoire	It is the child who has given it to us!
Nosabwa nko, togochirwa!	You don't give faggots, even when requested to.
Nomwana ogetoeire!	It is the child who has given it to us!

Poem 09 – Initiation Poem

Gwakunire	You have touched
Enkuna kuna ee baba	Granny touch
Gwakunire	You have touched
Enkuna nkuna ee baba	Granny touch
Kuna Moyo are, ee baba kuna	Touch, she is alive, ee granny
Nakunire enkuna	I have touched
Kuna	Touch
Nakunire	I have touched



Enyambu kuna

Touch the chameleon

Nakunire enyambu

I have touched the chameleon

Kuna moyo are

Touch, she is alive

Baba kuna

Granny, touch

Kuna onkuneranie – kuna

Touch even on my behalf

Kuna onkuneranie

Touch even on my behalf

Kuna moyo are

Touch, she is alive

Baba kuna

Granny, touch