

A Socio-Cultural Discourse Representation of Women in Bukusu and Gusii Proverbs

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Abstract

This paper examines the main attributions attached to women in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs. Specifically, the paper reports on how women are represented in proverbs in these cultures; which aspects of their lives are highlighted and how such representations define the social fabric of the society. Data of the study comprised thirty-three (33) Bukusu and Gusii proverbs related to the portrayal of women encapsulated in proverbs. Ethnography was used to collect the proverbs; the data analysis focused on the examination of the respective proverbs as a semiotic system of signification grounded within an African social cultural approach to discourse analysis and in the Africana Womanism framework. The findings reveal that women are expected to promote morality, good conduct, fidelity, respect, productivity, nurturance and beauty which are pillars on which the family as a social unit is anchored as opposed to misconduct, and arguments/gossiping which are vices that may easily break the social fabric of a society. The paper thus concludes that women should embrace the indigenous values in word and deed for a sustainable social growth while also advancing our understanding of the persistence of alternative and resistant gender identities in contexts of domination.

Key Words: Women in Proverbs, Representation, Semiotic Signification, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, African Womanism

Introduction

Proverbs were and still are important in traditional societies because they are relevant in several ways. Unfortunately, despite proverbs being the backbone of a lot of societies by helping to identify and dignify a culture, their potential value for modern thought and life is still to be recognized. Even in Africa, proverbs appear to be a vanishing heritage associated mostly with the rural world. They seem to have not found a comfortable home in the modern world, especially in the handed-down colonial system of education because schools do not bring out enough of the great importance of proverbs in the lessons taught. Africa is a rich source of proverbs and sayings, encapsulating in a few words profound principles that bespeak wisdom. Proverbs are a storehouse of cultural beliefs which guide the young and the old, the ruler and the ruled to make appropriate choices in different situations (Jenjekwa, 2016). In line with this, *Ngano: The Journal of Eastern African Oral Literature* Number 2, 2023

Mapara (2009) asserts that as a pillar of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, proverbs are educative and their value lies in their being used by the elders to teach the experiences of the past that they should emulate or avoid.

Several societies have underscored the role of proverbs in sustaining the culture of the community. As such the Akan of Ghana have a proverb which says: *se wo werefi wokurombene abentia a woyera wo adwabo ase* (Lit. that anyone who forgets the tune of his or her chief's trumpet/horn gets lost at a durbar). This proverb underscores that any group of people who lose their culture (indigenous system) do so at their own peril. Further, the UN has observed that the basic component of any country's knowledge system is its indigenous knowledge (Jenjekwa, 2016). Africa's developing problems can thus be attributed to the neglect of African indigenous systems for the wholesale adoption of Western epistemologies to African developmental agendas (Mawere, 2010). In addition, before the encounter with western civilization, people lived sustainable lives, hence the need to integrate the two cultures- indigenous and the western – to tackle social problems. It is therefore arguable that indigenous knowledge can solve Africa's social problems.

Several scholars have examined the position of women in traditional cultural practices (Hussein, 2004; Wang, 2012; Lee, 2015, Diabah & Amfo, 2015; Hagos, 2015; Ardakani, Aliakbari & Hajjari, 2015). However, despite the many such studies taking the feminist approach, few studies have examined the utilization of proverbs in the expression of positive images of women, especially from the African Womanism perspective. Further, little attention has been paid to the role of proverbs in creating, sustaining or promoting social growth in Bukusu and Gusii societies, hence the need for this study.

Literature Review

Indigenous knowledge on its part refers to what indigenous people know and do, and what they have known and done for generations (Melchias, 2001). Mapara (2009:140) defines indigenous knowledge systems as “a body of knowledge, or bodies of knowledge of the indigenous people of particular geographical areas that they have survived on for a very long time” which are linked to the communities which originate them. These indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) are “the sum facts that are known or learned from experience or acquired through observation and study and handed down from generation to generation” (Mwaura in Chirimuuta et al 2012:2). These knowledge systems cover all spheres of life of the people concerned. Thus, indigenous knowledge systems are “African ways of knowing” which define the African's worldview and ways of knowing (Ngara, 2007:7). For this study, IKS refers to the traditional wisdom. Unfortunately, these systems are fast eroding due to colonialism, commercialization, globalisation and modernisation, lack of efficient codification, breakdown of the traditional family structure and function (the institution that helps in the socialisation of tacit knowledge and many other reasons. Despite this, Viriri and Mungwini (2010) observe that the African IKS proverbs were looked down upon by shutting them out of school curricula and instead promoting foreign ones, although most proverbs promoted moral uprightness, respect for authority and elders, cooperation, forgiveness and self-restraint. This study sought to understand the role of proverbs as a form of indigenous

knowledge systems within the discourse on representation of women and social sustainability in Bukusu and Gusii societies in Kenya.

Women constitute 51% of the population in Kenya and 80 % of them live in rural areas (FIDA, 2006). Women's responsibilities include being mothers, wives and home administrators. They are also responsible for the education of their children, which resonates with Malcolm X's pithy saying: 'If you educate a woman, you educate a nation, if you educate a man, you educate an individual'. The crucial role that women play in their families is summed up in the words: 'Behind every successful man there is a woman'. Kolawole (1997:63) cites a similar proverb in Zimbabwe: 'Musha mukadzi', which loosely translated means "Behind the successful family there is a woman"

To understand what has changed and what has not changed it is crucial to accurately determine the challenges and opportunities in the lives of the Kenyan woman today. The data exploring social change in women comes from two distinct sources. Proverbs served as a source of information about "the traditional Kenyan woman." Contemporary information was obtained from the results of the 2014 Kenya Demographic Health Survey. The 2014 Kenya Demographic Health Survey (KDHS) reveals that the state of the Kenyan family, and the experience of being female have undergone change. For instance, a decline in parental involvement in spousal selection an increase in marital instability, resulting in an increase in women-headed households. There are also changes in the number of child births, decision to own property and to get employment. Kenya has also witnessed the fastest decline in total fertility rates from 4.9 births per woman in 2003 to 3.9 births per woman in 2014, a one-child decline in the past 10 years. Such social changes have resulted in increased domestic violence due to dissonance between the roles of women and men in the society. However, domestic violence is still on the increase (KDHS, 2014). Based on the results of this survey, this study posits that IKS comprised in proverbs could be adopted and adapted to mitigate the negative effects of western civilisation and restore the values and expectations of an African family.

In most studies on representation of women, women are usually given negative images. Conversely, in his study of portrayal of women in Tigrigna proverbs and proverbial expressions, Hagos (2015) argues that there are also folk tales that praise females. This indicates that there are attempts to illustrate women positively. The problem, however, is that women are portrayed positively in very few cases. And the positive images of women revolve only around conceiving, rearing children, taking care of spouses who play major roles in social activities. The following Tigrigna proverbs depict wisdom of women. *Blhat kem sebeyti girma kem leyti* (Wisdom is to a woman as "girma" is to a night). *Sebeyti zbeleto aykewnin sebeyti zbelotoke aykern* (What a woman says is never listened to but happens). These proverbs indicated that women can serve as advisors to their husbands. There are also common beliefs that even kings and famous warriors get advice from their wives whenever they face critical problems. (Hagos, 2015). According to Hagos (2015), "Blhat" (wisdom) is to a woman as "girma" is to a night." Blhat" refers to the wisest idea forwarded to solve a certain problem. Therefore, the proverb indicated that, the advice and recommendations gained from women is always noble and desirable. The Proverb which says "What a woman says is never listened to but happens also shows the insightful and wise nature of women. The proverb shows

that despite its importance and nobleness, what women say is never listened to. This proverb further illustrates the society's prejudice against women's thought and practices (Hagos, 2015).

A study by Ardakani, Aliakbari and Hajjari (2015) on the portrayal of women in Persian proverbs established that there are proverbs which exalt the position of women in the society and calls upon men to respect them. For instance, there is a proverb that says: "never beat a woman even with a flower stick" (Ardakani, Aliakbari & Hajjari, 2015). Regarding loyalty to one's wife, there is a proverb which says: "To kiss one's own wife is to bark up the wrong tree" (Ardakani, Aliakbari & Hajjari, 2015). The above examples about beating or respecting a woman, demonstrate the ambivalences and contradictory nature of subjectivities within intersecting gendered power systems. The first proverb has a moral lesson whereas the second indicates human desire for holding onto power and apparent fear of non-conformity.

According to Davis (2001:36), "marriage and raising a family is the goal for which girls are prepared almost from birth". Differently put, for Davis the girl is often perceived as a responsible person from her early childhood. The way she is brought up qualifies her to maintain the role of her mother. She has to be restricted to the domestic sphere, to be a good wife and avoid some flaws. This is illustrated in the Moroccan proverb: *El-mRa hiya qfel elbi: t* (A woman is the key to her house). Referring to the indigenous knowledge systems, a woman is entrusted with the wellbeing of her family. Without her, the family may not hold. Such a proverb underscores the crucial role women play in bringing up and sustaining a family. This is the same import this study sought to demonstrate from the perspective of the Bukusu and Gusii proverbs.

Hussein (2004) investigated the representation of women in Oromo folk-proverbs and folk-religion, and analysed the position of women in the traditional Oromo cultural practices. Some observe that despite all the barriers of patriarchal power, Oromo women had an influential position in the past although this has now declined following the decline in the people's indigenous cultural practices. Oromo proverbs about womanhood were categorized into cultural stereotypes. Although the majority of the sample proverbs were basically disparaging, the semantics were shown to depend to a large extent on the complex whole of their context of use.

The African cosmology provided ways of how people were supposed to behave in society. This cosmology is portrayed in the proverbs which abound in Bukusu and Gusii societies. Throwing away our IKS, we seem to have broken down the social fabric of the society and sadly gotten caught up in a vicious cycle of family feuds, domestic violence, divorce, prostitution among other social evils. Unfortunately, these problems were minimal in the traditional African society because the informal education system inculcated the right values to an individual from childhood to adulthood. The argument in this paper is that the Bukusu and Gusii proverbs have vast potential in possibly preventing such social evils and also in maintaining good social relations in the society. This agrees with Mawere (2010) who argues that IKS hold the key for Africa's future by nurturing a morally correct and virtuous society. More so, Gwavaranda (2011) observes that some proverbs are used to prevent and mitigate the effects of HIV/AIDS through promoting morally responsible citizens. Based on these views, this paper argues that the Bukusu and Gusii IKS encapsulated in proverbs can be

harnessed to inculcate positive moral and family values in women towards enhancing social growth.

Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by the social cultural approach to discourse analysis and Africana Womanism theories. The social-cultural approach relates to this study because it relates to the aspects of how language, culture and indigenous knowledge systems interrelate in conceptualizing reality. The Social-cultural analysis approach of discourse analysis regards discourse as interactional activities and emphasizes the social function of language (Brown and Yule, 1983). According to Brown and Yule (1983), discourse thus refers to language in use, as a process which is socially situated. The social-cultural approach to discourse analysis not only analyses word and sentence expression form and meaning, but also analyzes social cultural factors related to discourse. This method insists that the speaker as an individual and one entity of a society not only wants to transmit information or express thoughts, but also attempts to engage in certain social activities in different social situations and social institutions. Most discourse analysis concentrates on form, meaning, interaction and cognition, while social-cultural analysis emphasizes the function of context besides what is mentioned above. Since language interaction involves social-cultural contexts, we cannot fix the meaning of language elements in terms of their places in the sentence. We should also take the context in which the discourse is produced into consideration. On the different levels of the discourse, we can see that the social features of the participants play an important role in the context, such as gender, classes, ethnics, age, social status and so on.

The relationship between discourse and context is dialectical. Discourse is not only in and under the effect of context, but also influences, establishes or transforms context. Social-cultural analysis regards discourse as interactional activities and emphasizes the social function of language. This method not only analyzes word and sentence expressions, form and meaning, but also analyzes social-cultural factors related to discourse. The speaker, as an individual and one entity of a society, not only wants to transmit information or express thoughts, but also attempts to engage in certain social activities in different social situations and social institutions.

Language and culture are intertwined and are not separable (Abdollahi-Guilani et al. 2012; Okon & Ansa, 2012). Proverbs from the folk are ‘the mirror of a culture’ (Ennaji, 2008, p. 168), as they can reflect the customs, traditions, values, opinions and beliefs of a particular society (Lee, 2015). They emanate from people’s experiences, mentality and ways of thinking at a certain point. The rich linguistic data found in proverbs enables us to study the cultural beliefs and social values of a society, including its attitudes towards the two genders: men and women. The present study focuses on the women’s “image” created by highlighting positive aspects or strengths of women as seen in proverbs. By comparing proverbs of the two cultures, the study brings to light similarities in the representation of women as pillars and catalysts of social growth in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs. The cultural concepts and norms of the language are imparted to children during their learning of a language. Some proverbs have been passed on from generation to generation for hundreds or thousands of years. Language is used to produce and reproduce cultural experiences. As a social and cultural

phenomenon, it is used to communicate about every aspect of cultural experience in a society. This means that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality.

Since gender is an important aspect of this paper Africana Womanism is also used for a framework. Africana Womanism has been propounded and furthered by Hudson-Weems (2004), Amadiume (2000) and Kolawole (1997), among others. Africana Womanism has arisen as a necessity to present a more accurate, afrocentric experience of the African woman that is not well-captured by Western led feminist theories (which are accused of having racist roots and white-women agenda). Africana Womanism, on the other hand, has many tenets that speak to the African woman's struggles, strengths and victories. Dove (1998: 535) declares: 'Africana Womanism brings to the forefront the role of African mothers as leaders in the struggle to regain, reconstruct, and create a cultural integrity that espouses...reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness, order, and so forth'. It also foments the Pan-Africanist agenda, applying to African women whether on the African continent or in diaspora since the challenges experienced such as patriarchy and stereotypes are very similar despite location. Concepts such as 'wholeness', 'family centered-ness', 'role-flexibility' 'adaptability' 'strength', 'male compatibility', 'respect for elders', 'ambition', 'mothering', nurturing, and spirituality are all valued within the African woman's practice. The proverbs will be viewed in this light to examine their portrayal of the woman.

Nothing defines the position of women as clearly as its language. This language encapsulates a society's thoughts, beliefs and values. The fact that proverbs are part of people's popular culture which includes language, makes it important to know how these proverbs function and how they are structured to both convey and maintain certain cultural values. Proverbs, in their concise forms, provide us with rich linguistic data to examine the cultural beliefs and social values of a society. A proverb becomes popular if the social experience depicted in the saying corresponds with social expectations (Lee, 2015). Through proverbs, this study looks into the socio-cultural perspective of the Bukusu and Gusii societies. The research questions in this study are: what is the nature of proverbs as indigenous knowledge systems, what is the relationship between proverbs and social sustainability and how are the proverbs perceived in the discourse on representation of women?

Methodology

The proverbs in this paper were collected from fieldwork among the native Bukusu in the northern and central parts of Bungoma County and the AbaGusii in Kisii and Nyamira Counties. The Bukusu are one of the seventeen sub-nations, or more, that comprise the Baluyia cluster of the Bantu groups of the East African region (Wasike, 2013). The other Baluyia sub-nations are: Baragoli, Batiriki, Bakabaras, Batachoni, Banyore, Bakhayo, Bamarachi, Banyala, Basamia, Babesukha, Babedakho, Bakisa, Barechea, Batsotso, Bawanga, and Bamarama. Bukusu inhabit parts of Bungoma district in Western Kenya and parts of Trans-Nzoia County of Rift Valley region. In addition, there are also several Bukusu clans in Eastern Uganda. The Bagusii are a Bantu-speaking people numbering close to 1.9 million and they are the sixth most populous community in Kenya (UNESCO in Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000). They are settled in the fertile highlands of Kisii and Nyamira Counties of Nyanza region. The Nilotic-speaking peoples of Luo, Kipsigis and Maasai surround them.

The research made use of informal interviews of randomly chosen five (5) respondents between ages 50-75 years as sources of data. The respondents were both male and female. An audio- recording of the interviews was done and one hundred and fifty (150) proverbs were collected. However, according to the themes of the study only thirty-three (33) proverbs were purposively sampled for analysis. Published literature on indigenous knowledge systems was also analysed as a valuable source of secondary data on indigenous knowledge systems. This study adopted a qualitative research design. Proverbs were categorized according to their content. The meaning of each proverb was discussed with reference to the social and cultural factors that influenced its production, adopting the subject method of classification to describe the representation of women in Bukusu and Gusii cultures. In the analysis of the data, some proverbs that look alike are discussed together. A point taken into consideration is that meaning is multi-faceted and proverbs may assume different interpretations based on the context in use. Based on this, the researchers analysed both direct proverbs that talk about women and the indirect reference embedded in the proverbs which do not explicitly refer to women. The focus of analysis was the discursive meaning underlying the proverbs. The proverbs were replayed to the respondents to corroborate the meaning.

We classified our data according to various themes that we found relevant to shed light on the social status of women in Bukusu and Gusii societies. We started from the home, the theme that defines women according to the domestic sphere. Choosing women and the domestic sphere as the first theme stresses that the family is the core of the larger society. The sub-themes in the domestic sphere included aspects of marriage, conduct of women, child bearing, nurturance and respect. The other following themes are classified according to the themes of women and beauty, fidelity, and productivity in the society.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented and discussed along thematic lines of Bukusu and Gusii proverbs. As IKS, proverbs are analysed as vehicles of nurturing social values in the society and using proverbs to sustain societal growth. It is observed that indigenous knowledge systems do not condone bad behavior and “bad families”.

Introduction to the Domestic Sphere

Almost every aspect of women’s lives is depicted in Bukusu and Gusii proverbial lore. Proverbs represent the traditional cultural expectations of women concerning their behaviours and familial roles. Women were traditionally subject to society’s close scrutiny and were expected to behave according to the norms and social values presented in proverbs. This is illustrated in the sections that follow.

Women’s Conduct

The following proverbs underscore the behaviour of women and girls in the Bukusu and Gusii societies.

1. *Embwa ebukulanga khuchochomala khwa mawe.* Bukusu Proverb (A puppy/dog squats like its mother) –Bukusu
2. *Nyang’era ndotungi ko n’emori yaye ndotungi* (The way a mother is so shall be the daughter) -Gusii

3. *Omokungu nyagetiara, moe boremo bwa mbororwa, akorema obwata omotwe* (A woman with bad manners, give her a bad portion of land that will trouble her)- Gusii
4. *Omukungu omobe nsagasaga ekobuga buna maemba a nkongo.* (An ill-behaved woman is as noisy as weevil-infested millet being rubbed together) – Gusii

Using the words, “mother” and “daughter” reveal that the daughter is the reflection of the mother. Therefore, what the mother says or does is eventually mirrored in the daughter. Traditionally, women were expected to guide and bring up their daughters to be responsible women in the society. Bad behaviour was never tolerated in society. A socially deviant mother is likened to the image of a bitch. As such dogs are perceived to be inherently promiscuous. In a similar way, the image of weevils negatively portrays bad-mannered women as a nuisance in the society. Such women are looked down upon in the society. The import of such proverbs was to caution mothers to take good care of their children. Specifically, it was the prerogative of the mother to ensure that her children, both girls and boys were raised properly. Unfortunately, this appears not to be the case in contemporary society where many women have relegated their roles to housemaid servants because of formal employment. As a result, the society is experiencing moral decadence among the youth. Nevertheless, it is a fact that nowadays many women have to look for work outside the home as they bear much responsibility. Africana Womanism acknowledges the woman’s necessity to work wherever opportunity presents itself to help provide for the family, so balance is required.

Women and Nurturance

5. *Ninde busie mayi alafuka endie.* (I shall wait till morning for mother to cook food for me to eat) –Bukusu. (*ninde* is a Bukusu word that is a lexical noun to mean “wait for me” or lexical verb to mean “I will wait”. This study adopts the later translation.
6. *Ere namage tiyana kunora, n’ena magena ekonora* (The one with young ones never fattens up; it is the one laying eggs that fattens)-Gusii
7. *Nyoni e’na mage teri konora, n’ena magena ekonora* (A bird with ‘children’ never grows fat) Gusii
8. *Baba n’omuya okomanya ka nomire* (mother is good for she knows when am hungry) - Gusii
9. *Baba n’omuya ondereire kwaa, na magega a boronge, na ngobo chi’marera* (mother is good she has taken care of me) - Gusii

The linguistic use of the words such as “mother”, “food”, “cooking”, “hunger”, “care” socially reflect the activities of mothers in the family. These social activities represent the cultural view of women as custodians of families. Women were traditionally expected to nurture their offspring. Mothers were very caring and loving. A woman unable to carry out this role could earn no respect in the society. As such cases of malnourished children were unheard of unlike what is happening in the present day. As shown in the above proverbs, the key phrases to describe a good homemaker or

caretaker is “cooking, fatten, taking care”. For instance, in examples 4 and 9, we note that only a good mother takes care of her children. These proverbs therefore highlight certain ideals of femininity – nurturance and mothering which are key tenets in African Womanism. Within the Bukusu and Gusii socio-cultural context, these attributes are what make a woman a good homemaker or caregiver.

Women and Generosity

10. *Sio omwimani osilia nali mwibo* (You can take advantage of a mean woman and eat her portion when she is nursing a baby) –Bukusu
11. *Nisio okisa omusecha wowo olisilia ne chimbeba* (Whatever you hide away from your husband you will share with rats) - Bukusu
12. *Ekiomogoko, no mwana ogatoere* (If you need to eat from a selfish woman, wait until she gives birth) –Gusii

Selfishness is expressed in the words *omwimani* and *omogoko* from the LuBukusu and EkeGusii languages respectively. Consequently, a woman nursing a baby is helpless and requires assistance from other family members. If a woman is selfish, all that is hers will be used by the family members since she won't be in control at all. Rats (*chimbeba in Lubukusu*) are destructive rodents which slowly and secretly eat away what is hidden. Socially, honesty and generosity and sharing are virtues that were valued in the society. A woman who is selfish is socially and culturally despised in the society. This was partly attributed to the fact that since the men were expected to be the breadwinners, wives were expected to share all that the husband had brought home. Selfishness was a vice that could attract penalties, such as being sent away by the husband. These proverbs thus represent women as socially tasked with the virtue of generosity. These proverbs urged men to be good providers and encouraged women to be generous. Due to these, there were no cases of vagabond children because a mother could share her food with all children, not only hers.

Women and Fidelity

13. *Kumwikale kwa bene, kumwikule kukwoo.* (The closed door is not yours but the one which is open) -Bukusu
14. *Ekhafu yabene okhama nololelela musilibwa.* (You milk someone's cow while watching the gate) –Bukusu
15. *Enjofu eyebwayiayia siekhusia musanga* (The elephant that engages in risky behaviours will not grow tusks). –Bukusu
16. *Abakungu abaya nyakomogania mbari getaa ki'amarura amasangi nguragura.* (Good women do not speak foul words; neither are they found in adultery). -Gusii

The Bukusu circumcise boys and teach them important life skills during initiation seclusion. Proverb 13 is usually used to admonish newly circumcised men before they come out of seclusion to avoid adultery. The social import of the proverb is that a Bukusu man should behave as society expects him to and avoid other people's wives. The metaphor of an open door (*kumwikule in Lubukusu*) has a deeper meaning of something that is free or available for use by anybody. The vice versa is true in using a

closed door (*kumwikale* in Lubukusu). A similar meaning is reflected in the use the expression *enjofu eyebwayiayia* in proverb 15 in Lubukusu and *amasangi* in Gusii which whose linguistic import translates to that a woman who wanders about aimlessly and engages in risky behaviours never brings up a family. Further, the import of availability in proverb 13 concerns sexual undertones. Traditionally, women were expected to observe fidelity. They were to preserve their honour and that of the family. Specifically, with reference to proverbs 12 and 13, married women were not expected to be freely available to commit adultery.

Literally, proverb 14 urges men to be self-reliant and avoid borrowed things. It also teaches against adultery as one has to be on the lookout for the 'owner'. If caught, the fine was very expensive to pay. The implication thus in proverb 14 is that women, especially, the married should observe fidelity. Women were also expected to observe verbal hygiene as illustrated in proverb 16 among the Gusii. Since the women were entrusted with the upbringing of the children, such values ensured that children do not copy undesirable behaviours from their mothers. This is in contrast with what happens in the society today where many women engage in adultery and even use disrespectful words in public space. So the moral fabric of the society is waning. Truth and integrity are core to African Womanism.

The Importance of Women as Life Givers

The following proverbs, 17-22 underscore the importance of women as givers of life in the Bukusu and Gusii societies.

17. *Wandala yesi aliesilongo* (Be proud of what is yours even if it is only one)-Bukusu
18. *Sisa siambanga owasaala* (Those who have given birth are the only ones who have sympathy) Bukusu.
19. *Endubi yomuleme ekhila owafwa* (The basket of a lame person is better than a person who is dead)-Bukusu
20. *Otabwati omwabo, obwata moraa mumwo, oyobwate oyomwabo obatwa koboko, ocha kaa* (He who does not have a sibling, if injured will use a walking stick, but he who has a sibling, will be supported back home)-Gusii
21. *Basacha bagira bakungu ng'a nda chiagira bana.* (Men reject barren women like wombs of barren women)- Gusii
22. *Koibora nkuya, gwakora mokungu monyaka ting'ana* (Giving birth is good it earns a disregarded woman respect)-Gusii

Proverb 17 traditionally means that even if you have one cow, you must take it to the salt-lick. Given the import of the word cattle in Bukusu society, contextually, the proverb is used to remind people, especially women that having one child is better than nothing. In this women are encouraged to be proud of the children they have, even if it is the only child (*wandala* in Lubukusu). This aspect is corroborated with the attitude in Proverb19 which warns women against looking down on their children who are physically challenged (*umeleme* in Lubukusu). This is because, such children are valued (as expressed in using a basket: *endubi* in Lubukusu which represents provision)

because they are better than the one who is dead. The discursive import of the proverb lies in the imagery being used: basket. Accordingly, such a proverb is used when a woman is barren to show that you better have a child even if it is lame than none at all. This is also stated in proverb 21 (a woman who has never given birth is always rejected by men). In a similar way, in proverb 18, sympathy (*sis*a in Lubukusu) is a virtue found in women because of motherly instincts. The linguistic import is the focus on “birth”; which appears synonymous with woman. Proverb 21 and 22 underscores the value of children in the society and as such women are praised for giving life. This is illustrated in the use of the words such as (*omwabo, oyomwabo, koibura* in Gusii). The general representation of women as expressed in these proverbs is that of life givers. On the flip side barren women suffered stigma due to no fault of their own. Arrangements were always made for such to adopt and bring up some children either from their sisters or some other relatives. This ensured they also nurtured children.

Women and Beauty

In many modern societies women are generally judged by their physical appearance. The value of women in the cultures of the Bukusu and Gusii is measured not so much by appearance as by productivity. This is reflected in the following proverbs:

23. *Ekhabi ekhila lukondo* (Luck is better than beauty) –Bukusu
24. *Notaba kieni, obe negesio, ogoziaboria ogotema* (Luck is better than beauty) – Gusii
25. *Bulayi bwobukhana bukusia ekhafu* (A girl’s beauty may steal a cow) - Bukusu
26. *Omiseke omuya omonyene eng’ombe namoroche* (A good girl is eyed by the owner of cattle) - Gusii
27. *Tosemeria moka-momura otaramorora* (expect little from a daughter in-law whom you have not seen and interacted with) –Gusii
28. *Totogia moiseke kieni, motogie mwana* (Do not praise a girl’s beauty; praise her for bearing children)
29. *Okhalola mawe nasilimukhana aloma ali rarawe katibia chikhafu* (A person who never saw the mother at the height of her beauty may say the father wasted his bride-price)-Bukusu

Proverbs 23-29 show that beauty is one of the positive qualities that abounds in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs. In these two cultures, though beauty (*lukondo* and *ekieni* in Lubukusu and Gusii respectively) is valued, it is not the only measure of a good wife. Good character and good luck (*ekhabi* and *egesio* in Lubukusu and Gusii respectively) also matter. As such women and girls are expected to maintain and reflect both beauty and good manners. Such good women will always find favour in the society as they will gain respect socially and culturally; they will attract a good bride price- cattle (*ekhafu* in Lubukusu / *eng’ombe* in EkeGusii).

In proverb 29, men are cautioned against disrespecting their wives because of the declining beauty which is often because of child bearing. Men are expected to appreciate their wives despite reduced physical beauty. The mother-in-law’s love or

affection, particularly towards her daughter-in-law, was put in check by the norms of the society. Using proverb 27, mothers-in-law are also warned against encouraging their sons to only search for physically beautiful women who lack character.

This paper argues that in contemporary society, many men and women value beauty more than character. In part, this could be a contributing factor to the changed women's lifestyle which portrays and exalts beauty at the expense of good morals. For instance, some women shy away from giving birth because it is believed that it would affect their body shape. This is partly why the birth rates in women are dwindling. The survey also indicated that lack of children has also been cited as a cause of domestic violence in families. On the flip side sometimes barren women are constructed with negative discourses and this plays a role in the way they construct themselves and their situation yet it is not their choice to be so. Thus, even though family centeredness is key to African Womanism, the unwitting barren woman's rights must be upheld and her self-definition respected.

We therefore contend that if women could nurture both beauty and character, such social evils as wife battering could be eradicated.

Women and Marriage

30. *Nisio umukhasi afuna sosilia mumulembe tawe.* (What a woman has earned, you will not eat in peace) –Bukusu
31. *Omwibo satila muningilo tawe* (A woman who has just given birth should not touch the cooking pot) –Bukusu
32. *Omukungu somiasomia, ngaya akomanya bwarugeirwe* (A woman who wanders about will not know where food is prepared) –Gusii
33. *Takona kondamera omosacha, bakungu, nere ritiro (esiro) rire (ere) nyomba.* (Do not despise my husband; he is the pillar in our house) -Gusii

The semantic import of proverb 30 is to caution men not to rely on what the woman produces. This is because the man was the head of the family and was therefore expected to provide for it in all ways. This was the mantle of a man. However, when a man overlooked this duty, his position as the head of the family would disappear. In light of the 2014 KDHS, it was revealed that because of formal employment, female-headed homesteads have increased and as a result, men have lost their traditional position of heading families. A similar meaning is expressed in the Gusii proverb 33 which underscores the importance of men as breadwinners of the family and thus that they should be respected. In proverb 32, women are expected to nurture their families by ensuring that they manage what their husbands have brought home.

This is one of the fastest changing aspects of family life and is well captured in African Womanism principles. Many African women are very active in the work force though many do menial jobs for bare survival rather than for luxuries. They are still required to be flexible enough to go back home and be domestic as required for example to cook for their families when from work outside the home. Adaptability enables them fit in the different roles life presents them with, with agility.

In Proverb 31, a woman who has just given birth is considered ritually impure. Therefore, she cannot cook for the husband until she is cleansed. The socio-cultural import is on cooking. It was considered a ritual for a woman who had just given birth or was in her flower days to cook for the husband- a concept that conceptualizes women to be unclean during very natural, life giving processes. This led to the sanctioning of polygamy to cater for the man, who could not enter the kitchen to cook for himself and his other children. The intention seems justifiable from the patriarchal perspective but nowadays fathers are even given paternity leave with the aim that they will not expect their fragile women who have just undergone the stressful process of childbirth to arise and cook for them but to instead participate in household chores to give her time to regain strength and nurture the new-born. Thus, we see that in proverbs 30-33, women are represented as home managers and without their domestic skills, no family can stand the test of time. On the other hand, men are presented as providers (*ritiro*) of the families and without such provisions, the family will collapse. Their key word today is balance and flexibility to help each other rather than insisting that some roles are cast in stone to the disadvantage of the community as a whole.

Conclusion

This paper has brought to light similarities seen in the representation of proverbs of the Bukusu and Gusii cultures. It has revealed that Bukusu and Gusii proverbs promote values such as morality, good conduct, fidelity, respect, productivity, nurturance and beauty in the society. These are the very values on which the family as an institution is founded. More so, the proverbs also indicated that vices such as family misconduct, and arguments/gossiping misbehavior were not condoned in the society. It is possible to conclude that despite the cultural differences and the geographical distance, proverbs in these two communities create an overwhelmingly positive impression about values in women regarding the social growth of the society. The study therefore recommends that all people embrace the indigenous values for a sustainable social growth. Using African Womanism as a framework has allowed us to argue for drawing the best from our indigenous knowledge systems instead of aping foreign values that are sometimes in contradiction with the African lifestyle and agenda. African Womanism promotes principles such as 'In Concert with Men which are more relevant to the African woman's agenda than general feminism would do. In concert with men is the African woman's aim to cooperate with and develop strong relationships with like-minded men. Working together shows the complementarity demonstrated in the proverbs and is necessary in the struggle for all-encompassing liberation as also advocated for in the social-cultural viewpoint. These proverbs can be compared with proverbs in other cultures and enrich the whole program of multiculturalism and appreciation of diversity among Africans in Africa and diaspora and to people of other cultures internationally.

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