

## **EXAMINING THE INDIGENIOUS WISDOM IN EKEGUSII PROVERBS**

**Zipporah Otiso**  
**University of Nairobi**

This paper examines the cultural values and wisdom that are transmitted through Ekegusii proverbs. It demonstrates how proverbs are used to comment on a variety of human experiences and to maintain societal order. Some of the cultural issues that the paper examines include gender construction, paradoxical experiences, as well as the perception of death. The paper further shows that even in instances where the proverbs appear contradictory, there are sociological reasons to explain and unravel the apparent incongruity. In addition, the paper reveals the existence of synonymous proverbs which are a result of cultural contact, arising mainly from the translation (into Ekegusii) of English and Kiswahili expressions.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Mother tongue plays a key role in all the communication undertakings of any society. Besides the everyday interactions, it has a role of preserving a people's culture and oral traditions. Oral traditions have been passed down through the various forms of oral literature namely: narratives, proverbs, sayings, songs, legends, myths, fables and oral poetry (Boateng 1983:323). It is in genres such as proverbs that sage wisdom is preserved. The societal morals of any given society are overtly and covertly passed down through such oral traditions. As has been stated by Bosire-Ogechi (2006:122) proverbs are used in "...conversations to prove or provide a short precise answer where a long-winded and complicated explanation would otherwise have been used."

The proverbs have a literal and a hidden meaning and a listener who is well versed in this genre is supposed to interpret the hidden meaning since this is the message that many of them aim at communicating. Malunga and Rick (2004:1) argue that elements of African traditional heritage (and proverbs are part of this heritage) are used:

... in times of peace, uncertainty, birth, life and death.... This heritage provides a foundation for leadership, guidance, problem solving, decision-making, self-reliance and development.'

The proverbs in Ekegusii are used to comment on almost all issues of life and they can thus be viewed as a holistic mode of education from a traditional perspective. Another important element about proverbs is that they can be understood by even the illiterate, which makes them a unifying

factor among members of a society regardless of one's level of education. They can also be understood by the young as has been observed by Fayemi (2009:5), who suggests that proverbs are at the disposal of "everybody who is rational and capable of drawing inferences about life experiences and not only restrictive to the old..."

Proverbs embody what has been learnt through life experiences and observations. This makes it easy for them to comment on life without much question from both the literate and illiterate since they are usually accepted as true. Dogbevi (2011) in Asmeng-Boahene (2013:124) posits that proverbs are "... the ore from which Africans mine the meaning of their past, present and future of their cultural beliefs, and practices..."

This paper examines the various beliefs and practices of the Abagusii as preserved in the sage wisdom of proverbs. The proverbs that are analyzed are selected from three writings on the Ekegusii language and culture.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. THE SAGE WISDOM IN PROVERBS

### 2.1 Proverbs as a gendering tool

Proverbs construct gender besides aligning the gender roles of men and women. Gender construction and gender roles are intertwined since a person's sex presents the ground for gendering and assignment of the gender roles. While gendering in many patriarchal societies is criticized as presenting uneven representations for men and women, it can be viewed positively as it ensured that there was gender order. Men and women knew the societal expectations that were laid out for them and worked towards meeting them. A few examples of proverbs that present gendering in Ekegusii are presented.

#### 2.1.1 Construction of masculinity

##### (1) *Eero n' eyabagaka* (The sitting room is for men)

The proverb asserts that *eero* (the sitting room) is a preserve of *abagaka* (adult men). This is a room that is usually reserved to entertain important guests and it also serves as the dining room. These functions ensure that it is usually furnished with comfortable chairs. As such it is also used for holding important meetings such as negotiations or solving conflicts. Since it is not a taboo for women and young males to sit in the sitting room, the social context reveals that the designation of the room for men is symbolic. The

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<sup>1</sup>These writings are by Mandi 2012. *Chinkwana chi' Ekegusii: Emabayeno, Emerabaro, Ekegusiikiaime*, Otiso n. d. *Emabayeno ye' Ekegusii (Gusii proverbs)* and Mogere, 2008. Abagusii wisdom revisited.

proverb hints at the roles that men take part in, which include being the decision makers in the family and taking part in family and clan negotiations. The roles of men which are implied in the proverb show that women and young males are excluded from certain roles.

(2) *Omosacha omuya noyokoringa nkundi kagoso mochie mogoko osara nyomba* (A good man is the one who hides something in his fist so that when he gets home he brings joy to his family).

This proverb uses the term *omosacha*, which is derived from the verb *gosacha*. The verb translates to ‘to look for/ gather wealth.’ The term used to refer to the men, thus presenting them as the bread winners in the family. A man who goes to his home with something in his fist (usually something good and beneficial to the family) brings joy since he is fulfilling his duty. The proverb is thus a reminder of what is expected of men in their families. Men should endeavour to ensure that the needs of their families are catered for.

(3) *Omosacha karebwoye ne ritiiro rire enyasi* (A man who is in his home is a pillar on a wall).

The third proverb picks its literal interpretation from the construction of houses. Pillars are erected in/between walls to reinforce the strength of a wall and by extension a house. Men are symbolically viewed as the pillars in their homes, due to the roles that they take up. Men are expected to provide for the family, run the affairs of their families and solve any disputes that may arise. Comparing men to a pillar shows the pivotal role of men in families.

### 2.1.2 Construction of femininity

(4) *Omokungu siomiasiomia ng'ai akomanya bwarugeirwe gose mboke gose mbwa mwana?* (How will a wife /woman who roams from place to place know where the *ugali*<sup>2</sup> has been cooked and whether it is just a little meant for the child?)

The term *omokungu*, which refers to a wife/woman, is derived from the verb *gokunga*, which means ‘to take care of’. The Gusii community views a good wife/woman as the one who keeps to her homestead and manages the affairs of her home. The duties that such a woman should do include cooking, fetching water, gathering

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<sup>2</sup>Although the term *ugali* has not been mentioned in the proverb, this is the only type of food that is prepared by *korugwa*, from which the verb *bwarugeirwe* is derived.

firewood, taking care of the children and keeping the home tidy. A woman who roams from homestead to homestead is discredited since this is not the socially accepted behaviour. The rebuke of such a woman is done by using the duties that are culturally feminine, that is, cooking and taking care of children. A roaming woman does not know the pan that has been used to prepare food, a duty which she should ideally do. She may also expect to be served food which is meant for the child, ridiculing her further for losing even her motherly instincts.

(5) *Okoibora nokuya gwakorete omokungu monyaka ntin'gana*  
(Giving birth is good because it made the despised wife/woman to be a queen)

The term '*monyaka*' literally translates to a person of loose morals, but it can also refer to anyone who is not respected in the society. The act of giving birth by such a woman especially when the children grow up and become successful makes that woman respected. The proverb views the responsibility of child bearing as a noble role since it can transform the status of a woman. The Gusii community genders women towards some roles and accepted behaviour. They are for instance encouraged to give birth and to be dutiful in managing their homes.

### **2.1.3 The discreteness of gender**

There are proverbs which make reference to both men and women. These representations usually accentuate gender constructions by demarcating the roles of men and those of women. Some examples of such proverbs are presented below:

(6) *Omosacha asache n' omokungu akunge* (Let the man/husband look for/gather wealth and let the wife/woman take care of (the wealth)).

As has already been pointed out, it is the duty of men to look for/gather wealth while the duty of women is to take care of the same. This specialization of the roles for men and women facilitates effectiveness as each person concentrates on specific duties. It also enables people to judge the efficiency or inefficiency of a particular person based on the performance of their gender roles in case of conflicts.

(7) *Abasacha mbaniberani na abakungu mbaiborerani* (Men help one another to beget wealth while women help one another to beget

children).

This proverb originates from the context of marriage. If a man wanted to marry but his family did not have cattle for dowry payment, the relatives were required to contribute. The ones who were to contribute were the men since they are the ones who own livestock. The men thus help one another in getting wealth through such contribution. On the other hand, if in a polygamous marriage, a daughter got married and dowry was paid, it was acceptable for the same dowry to be given out to facilitate a step-son's marriage. The proverb shows the importance of communal sharing along gender lines. The men share that which they have accumulated while the women share through their children. A woman would not be expected to donate livestock because this is beyond the permitted gender responsibility.

These proverbs enhance the separateness of gender roles in the community. They culturally show the men as the wealth creators and thus the wealth owners. Proverb 7 presents men as the ones who can give out livestock in case of need. Women on the other hand take care of the wealth that men create. When the wealth is gained in the form of dowry, it still does not belong to the women but to the men.

### 3. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTROL AS REFLECTED IN PROVERBS

The community advocates for responsibility for both men and women. People who fall short of societal expectations are ridiculed. Proverbs entrench some of the values of the society as exemplified below:

(8) *Mosaiga Siberia ong'e toa monto okobayabaya, ng'ai akomanya chiariseirie?* (My hut-brother, take a sip and pass it to me; do not give the wanderer, does he know where they have grazed?).

This proverb indicates the punishment that was traditionally meted out on young men who did not do their duties such as herding cattle. Such irresponsible people would be denied milk for a few days so as to discipline them. Although young men do not herd cattle any more, the proverb is still relevant since its interpretation is not restricted to one duty. The proverb conveys a general message that avoidance of duties can attract various forms of punishment and the person who receives punishment should not complain since they deserve it.

(9) *Omote nigo ogokumbwa kore omoke/omorere* (A tree is bent/shaped when it is young/tender)

Tending to trees and ensuring that they grow straight as opposed to crooked

is a duty that is undertaken even in modern Gusii society. This is especially if the tree is intended for purposes such as sawing timber. Straightening a crooked tree is easy when the tree is still young as this can be done without breaking it. This proverb is commonly used in contexts that deal with the discipline of children. Mandi (2012:133) and Otiso (54)<sup>3</sup> suggest that a child should be disciplined when he/she is young otherwise it will be difficult to correct any bad behaviour when they are grown up. The proverb may thus be a reminder to parents to ensure that their children are instructed on relevant values early in life. Accordingly, children should not be left to grow up without any instruction and guidance.

(10) *Karie bike otigarerie aba inani* (Eat a little and leave some for those who are in the forest).

The Gusii community views a forest as thick enough to conceal people. The phrase ‘those who are in the forest’ is a metaphorical reference to the unseen people, that is, the future generations. The proverb employs an expanded meaning of *karie* (eat), to remind people to leave something behind for those yet to be born. In its expanded meaning, resources such as land, money and other possessions can be ‘eaten’ especially if one is squandering them. The proverb encourages careful use of resources by being mindful of the future generations. A proverb that carries a similar message is: *gokoria chiombe, karie korwa ebirenge, toria korwa omotwe* (While eating cows, eat from the legs, do not eat from the head). Such proverbs show that people have a duty to leave resources as inheritance for future generations. Such a piece of advice ensures that people do not sell or misuse the resources they have since these have to be passed down as inheritance to several generations.

These proverbs illustrate that the community members have responsibilities to accomplish otherwise they face some consequences. The duties are to be taken up by the young and the old alike. Further a responsibility such as careful use of resources transcends the current generation to future generations.

#### 4. CAPTURING PARADOXICAL EXPERIENCES

One of life’s experiences is the unexpected turn of events and happenings. A person may give their best effort in a situation but they do not get any positive returns. This may have puzzled people to the extent that it was enshrined in proverbs, not with the intent of getting an explanation but to suggest that inconsistencies are part of human existence.

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<sup>3</sup> 54 refers to the page number.

**(11) *Gokora buya ngosaria, Bogiita*** (To do good is to spoil/ mess, *Bogiita* or any other name)

*Bogiita* is used as a person's name and it can be replaced by any other name of an addressee. It is expected that when a person does good acts they should be appreciated and be contented with what they have done. This proverb, which takes the structure of a person addressing another, by the name *Bogiita*, however shows a case of someone who seems to regret over some good that they did. By admitting that 'doing good is spoiling', shows how the person wishes they would not have done something good. The person who acted right may have faced unexpected consequences or the recipient of the good acts did not reciprocate to necessitate the lament. While the proverb does not discourage good behaviour, it reveals that there are instances when doing the right thing may put one in trouble since such acts are not always be accepted by everyone.

**(12) *Mbura nyinge ng'eti/mbura ng'ingi ng'eti***(The threatening heavy clouds do not bring rain)

Heavy clouds are a sign of a heavy downpour. However in this case the proverb suggests that heavy clouds do not necessarily lead to rain. This is in spite of the preparations that one may have put in place in readiness for the impending rain. The proverb is used in wider contexts to advise that a threatening disaster passes by. As such the proverb is used to encourage people who fear doing certain tasks due to impending dangers or crises that such fears may not even be actualised. People's worst expectations, which may look real, end up not happening at all.

**(13) *Marera mono taakiri*** (Wailing loudly is a sign that one was not beaten).

A person who is beaten or hurt wails loudly but this proverb presents a contrary argument. The idea in the proverb is that if one is beaten or hurt badly, they would not have the energy to wail. A bad injury or beating may produce astonishment and not a wail. A person who wails loudly therefore has not been badly beaten or hurt. The proverb discourages people from wailing or lamenting over small things and misfortunes. A person's lament should match the problem and not be exaggerated otherwise if one faces real challenges; they will lack what to say.

**(14) *Mori mono tari isangwa /nguru*** (The one who eats a lot has no skin /strength)

We would expect a person who eats a lot to be of a heavy build and strong.

However this is not always the case as the proverb suggests that some people eat a lot but they are feeble. Physical strength seems to be dependent on other factors such as exercise other than just food. The proverb thus seems to literally discourage eating too much as this may not be healthy. In wider contexts, the proverb is used to encourage people to do things in moderation.

(15) *Egiasireire nchera maate kerigerie nchera rogoro* (If you misplace something on the lower path look for it along the upper path)

People tend to look for misplaced items at or around the point where they think they have misplaced them, for example, in a particular room. This proverb nevertheless advises one to look for a misplaced item on the upper side although it may have been misplaced on the lower side. The misplacement that is implied in the proverb does not relate to an item which one had but has misplaced. It instead refers to something that one has been working hard to get such as a job. The people's literal perception of the lower side is that something is likely to be swept for example by wind or water from the upper side (a raised side) to the lower side. The opposite is rarely the case. The proverb however advises people that 'things' can be found where one least expects them to be. People are thus encouraged to try alternative methods and plans including those which had not been thought of or appear unlikely. The alternative plan might be very different from the initial one but it should be tried out. It would thus be imprudent to give up simply because one alternative does not succeed.

## 5. DEATH: ENVISAGING AN INEVITABLE REALITY

Death is an unwelcome reality in most communities. The Abagusii accept it as a painful experience but which must nonetheless not bring life to a standstill. Some of the proverbs that try to demystify death include the following:

(16) *Makweri tari getare getasuke* (Death is not an immovable rock which cannot move)

Death is something that people wish did not exist and when it happens they get various ways of minimizing its harsh realities. In this proverb it is presented as a mobile phenomenon and it moves from place to place taking one person after another. This proverb is said to encourage the affected persons that they should not imagine that they are the only ones who will ever be bereaved. Since the community also traditionally held a view that death was caused by someone, the proverb gives hope that even the one who causes death will eventually be affected by the same.



**(17)** *Maino nseki na ntondo kere nse* (The teeth show in laughter even when there is a corpse on the ground)

Although death is a painful experience it is possible for people to laugh during the preparations for a funeral or the burial ceremony itself. There are people who make jokes at funerals to lighten the sombre mood and to try to lessen the pain. The proverb suggests that there are some emotions such as hunger and laughter which have to be expressed even in the midst of pain. The implied meaning is that life must continue in the midst of loss and pain otherwise more pain might result.

**(18)** *Makweri imakoro* (Death is an old thing)

When death strikes, it is usually a painful loss to all. However this proverb encourages people that death is not anything new or strange. People should therefore be courageous even in the misfortune of death. The proverb is also used in contexts of risky ventures that require courage. Death seems to be the worst fear that people have, but in such contexts they use the proverb to encourage themselves that should the venture lead to misfortune they won't be the first ones to face such a disaster. People encourage themselves through this proverb that whatever may befall them in a certain situation is not uncommon to people.

The presentation of death in these proverbs is viewed as a sad experience but which at the same time should not bring life to a standstill. It is an ultimate misfortune but it is also implied in situations that require courage. It is thus portrayed as a misfortune which has to be dared since it has been in existence since time immemorial.

## **6. CONFLICTING MESSAGES: CONTEXT OR TASK**

There are a few proverbs which appear contradictory to one another. Concerning such proverbs, Schipper (1991: 23) notes that proverbs do not have to be true because they sometimes contradict themselves. However, this paper takes the position that proverbs do not have to be falsified simply because they appear contradictory. Since proverbs are conceptualized around lifetime experiences, they need to be examined in terms of the context or task with respect to which they are cited in a particular discourse. This can be done by checking their lexical properties against the situational context of the relevant discourse. Proverbs (19) and (20) below provide suitable examples.

**(19)** *Mbeba nyinge tichiana korema mong'anyi ochie/oike* (Many rats

have never dug a tunnel successfully)

(20) *Nguba emo tekoira ng'ombe roche* (One shield cannot take the cattle to the river)

Proverb (19) seems to discourage the idea of having too many workers in a single activity while proverb (20) discourages carrying out tasks single handedly. The term *mong'anyi*, in proverb (19) is shortened from *omong'anyi*, a tunnel for rats, which is usually narrow. The term *nguba*, in proverb (20) is shortened from *enguba*, which is a traditional shield used during warfare. A tunnel that rats live in is dug by one rat at a time. If the rats are many, the tunnel may not be dug at all since the task of digging it may not accommodate more than one rat at a time. Proverb (20) encourages unity but the task is different. The use of *nguba* (shield) in this proverb implies that one may be faced with threats while taking cattle to the river. The journey undertaken while driving the cattle to the river may expose one to risks such as attacks by wild animals or cattle rustlers. People carry shields when going for combat and in such cases company is necessary. Although threats by wild animals are no longer common, it can be observed from these proverbs that the community holds the view that there are tasks that require many people while others require few people.

## 7. ANIMALS IN PROVERBS: AN INDIRECT ADMONITION

One feature of Ekegusii proverbs is the indirectness not only in meaning but also in address. The proverbs reflect human experiences and behaviour but some refer to animals, both domestic and wild, to covertly communicate their messages.

(21) *Engoko enganga tiyana goturagia bichuchu* (A wayward hen never hatches chicks)

A hen sits on its eggs for three weeks before they hatch. However this does not happen for a wayward and impatient hen. Though the proverb picks on a happening that is related to hens, the message that is conveyed is meant for people. The proverb expresses the advice that one should endeavour to meet the expectations for each task. A task that requires patience, for example, should be accorded the same if good results have to be achieved. The proverb has a similar meaning to another that says: *Binto mbiang'ora nsagasaga bikwanga* (Things require patience not haste). The use of *binto* (things) in this context is interpreted to mean or suggest success.

(22) *Enchara nembe yarusetie ekeongo igoro* (Hunger is bad because it made the eagle to come down)

Mogere (2008: 68) suggests that the proverb is created from a fable involving two birds, *ekeongo* (an eagle) and *egetabaramato* (a bat). It is believed that the two birds had a pact, in which the eagle promised never to come down from the air while the bat promised never to look up. Although the eagle rarely lands on the ground, the proverb suggests that it was forced to land because of hunger. The proverb however describes the behaviour of human beings since they too make promises just like the two birds. The proverb advises people to borrow ideas from the two birds' pact, especially from the side of the eagle, which made a pact which it was not able to keep. It can be deduced that people are advised against getting into tough pacts which can cause harm. Additionally they are advised not to be stuck on any promise if it turns out that breaking it is the best option.

(23) *Gechure keraire nkeroche* (An antelope that is asleep is seeing)

This proverb is paradoxical in that we do not expect a sleeping antelope to see. The proverb may have been constructed from people's experiences during hunting expeditions. The hunters may have got close to what they thought was a sleeping antelope, only for it to sprint away. One however has to find the relevance of this in people's life. The 'sleeping' antelope may have been watching the hunter's moves waiting to run away at the opportune moment. Likewise, people are warned that it would be reckless to assume that one is not being watched even when they imagine they are all alone. A person who plans to steal another's item for instance should be warned since the owner might be watching secretly. The proverb further communicates that one can't completely hide or fool people all the time as secrets are likely to be exposed some day.

## 8. EVIDENCE OF CULTURAL CONTACT IN PROVERBS

Due to formal education, the Gusii community has had contact with other cultures such as English and Swahili. This is evidenced in proverbs that are either translated from these cultures or that use images that are originally not in the Gusii cultural setting. The Abagusii might have either appreciated the condensed knowledge in these other cultures or they simply did not want to put effort to recreate the experiences. These proverbs include:

(24) *Amanyinga namarito kobua amache* (Blood is thicker than water)

This proverb seems to have been translated from English and it is used to comment on the instances when people favour others because they have blood relations. This proverb appears in only one of the three writings on

Ekegusii, suggesting that it is possibly a borrowing or a translation. A proverb that captures the same idea and is presented in the three collections is: *omwana obande mamiria / mamira makendu* (Another person's child is cold mucous). This proverb implies that parents and other people in general prefer their own kinfolk. This is in spite of any weaknesses that such people may have such as being ugly, unintelligent or inferior. The weaknesses of a person who is not a close relative are usually exaggerated and held in distaste, just like mucous.

(25) *Amatuko y' omoibi nemerongo ene* (A thief's days are forty)

This proverb is a likely borrowing from Kiswahili, *siku za mwizi ni arobaini*. It is used to warn that a thief or any other law breaker will eventually be caught. A proverb from the community which communicates the same idea is: *noroga botuko getutu nkere maiso* (even if you bewitch others at night, the bush has eyes). Witches are abhorred in the community and they are used to represent negative practices. They are also believed to carry out their activities at night and this is probably why the proverb communicates the message that no matter how secret a vice is, it will eventually be exposed as implied by the bush having eyes.

(26) *Omochere nomorabuse, korende nobwate amagena* (Rice looks very clean/white but it still has stones in it)

The use of the lexeme *omochere*, meaning 'rice' in this proverb shows that this is a more recent proverb that was constructed when rice<sup>4</sup> was introduced in the community. The adjective *omorabu*, white, which is used to describe the rice is also used to describe something very clean or very white especially when the suffix *-se*<sup>5</sup> is added to it. However, the presence of stones in the rice which appears 'very clean' provoked the people to compare it to some life situations. Besides the white colour of rice which represents something clean, it also represents somebody who has a good/clean heart; one who is perfect or holy. The presence of stones in the white rice symbolizes imperfections in what would otherwise look perfect. The proverb compares people to white rice and conveys the message that no matter how good something looks, it should be checked for flaws. It conveys a similar message to the English proverb: all that glitters is not gold.

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<sup>4</sup> The traditional food among for the Abagusii is *ugali* and vegetables such as spider flower or African night shade.

<sup>5</sup> The suffix means 'very'. The colours black and red take different morphemes to show their intensity, for example *omomwamu/ emwamuti*. *Emwamu* refers to something black, while the morpheme *ti*, means 'very'

## 9. CONCLUSION

Our discussion of selected Ekegusii proverbs in this paper reveals that the traditional Abagusii people were not ignorant of their surroundings and reflected seriously on their experiences. This was a community of observant people who preserved their heritage through the sage wisdom of proverbs in various ways. The proverbs utilize declarative sentences, questions and even paradoxical expressions. The proverbs that appear contradictory are nevertheless understood depending on the context and message that is communicated. The discussion has also revealed that the community had a valve system in place to counter painful experiences such as death. For instance, despite death being an adversity in the community, one would not be punished if they laughed during the funeral preparations or burial ceremony itself. The construction of masculinity and femininity was also evident and this too is preserved in proverbs. The duties and expectations of men and women are clearly spelt out in proverbs.

A number of the proverbs also indirectly present their messages by making reference to animals instead of men and women or people in general. This may be a means of reducing the severity of the message and thus making the message more tolerable. There also seems to be pieces of advice that encourage people not to give up regardless of the situations that one may find themselves in. Cultural contact with both English and Swahili is evidenced in some proverbs which appear like direct translations. Such proverbs end up being synonymous with others which already depict the same message from the Gusii cultural perspective. In conclusion, proverbs comment on diverse areas of a people's life and the wisdom they convey appears to be well balanced in terms of gender, age, expected behaviour and even the bitter societal happenings. Although some of the duties that are used to communicate their morals are no longer undertaken, the implied message in the proverbs is still relevant.

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*Author’s address*

Zipporah Otiso  
Department of Linguistics and Languages  
University of Nairobi  
P.O. Box 30197 - 00100  
Nairobi, Kenya  
E-mail: wambuazippy@yahoo.com