

Gender Biases in the Language of African Music: a Case of Classical¹ Compositions of two Kisii Musicians

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Abstract

The language used in African music at times denotes gender biases against women. This paper intends to explore such language and biases in the music of one African community. Gender biases are depicted in the language of Kisii classical music which in some cases is clearly against the women. This paper observes that the language used in Kisii classical music is meant to serve as a source of delivering entertainment to those who understand EkeGusii. The same music is also a source of information and communicates content replete with overtones that border on sexual harassment, gender imbalances and also depicts the woman as the weaker sex. The music in question, if not checked, may play a significant role in demeaning the role of women in their social, economic, and political existence in the society. An overwhelming majority of Kisii classical music seems to relegate the Kisii woman to the subordinate position. In this case, she is largely confined to household chores, besides giving birth, entertaining the men folk as well as ensuring that the home is hospitable enough to attract visitors. To this extent, she is barred by tradition from deviating from the norm, i.e., finding her rightful place in the kitchen, and if she ventures into politics, she is variously referred to as “*riraya*” (prostitute). If she tries her hand in economic related activity so as to contribute to the family income, she is seen as a threat to her husband’s manhood as the sole provider, protector and breadwinner of the family. This paper interrogates the function and relevance of the classical music, in light of the language that it uses and the information that it communicates.

Keywords: Kisii, language, music, communication, classical, gender, biases, women.

1.0 Introduction

The language used in Kisii classical meaning may be said to be demeaning. Perhaps, it is in the context of such communicative background that Piper & Grudem (1991: xxvii) states that:

Married or single, your manhood or your womanhood matters. You dishonor yourself and your maker if you disregard this profound dimension of your personhood. Our culture is pressing us on almost every side to discount this reality. We think of ourselves and each other merely in terms of impersonal competencies and gender-blind personality traits.... The failure to take into account the profound and complementary differences of masculine and feminine personhood is like *assigning a truck driver the task of writing choreography for two ballet artists*.

It is instructive to note that women the world over have largely been discriminated against. This research is of the view that there is need to support and identify with the Kisii woman who should be liberated from the seemingly oppressive activities and practices of men, through the demeaning classical music. It is apparent that the Kisii woman needs to be liberated from the kind of ignorance that she has sunk into. This form of oppression through the Kisii classical music, a form of orature, forms the basis of the present inquiry. This research recognizes a gap in the study of language use in Kisii classical music where issues such as gender biases and the depiction of women as the weaker sex are explored.

The findings of this research will be documented and stored for those that care to understand the dynamics and challenges that face a modern Kisii woman. We anticipate that it will create awareness in society and this may lead to a fair treatment of women. The aim of this paper is to investigate gender biases as depicted in Kisii classical music as exemplified in the songs of two reknown Kisii classical musicians namely; Christopher Monyoncho and John Arisi Sababu. The paper hypothesizes that African music, as exemplified in Kisii classical music, is largely biased against womenfolk and is insensitive to women issues and their lifestyle. It is important to note that, in keeping to its scope, the present research explores classical music of only two personalities although the language is rich in classical compositions.

2.0 Goal, Objectives and Research Questions

The goal of the research study was to investigate gender biases in classical music as depicted in such music. This goal was to be achieved through the following objectives:

1. To investigate the causes of gender imbalances in Kisii classical music.

¹ In music, the term “classical music” refers to music that is considered serious or intellectual and is usually written in a traditional or formal style, as opposed to such genres as pop, rock, and folk (Ms Encarta 2009)

2. To determine the extent to which language is used to portray the woman as the weaker sex. In light of the research problem that informed the research, this study set out to answer the following research questions: What are the root causes of gender biases in Kisii classical music? Can the biases be linked to the socialization of Kisii musicians? Are the biases as a result of the attitude of men to women and vice versa? Is there a crisis that relates to the conduct of women so that almost every Kisii classical musician sings about them, and if not, is there a possibility of such musicians tackling other themes and issues that relate to the society? How can gender equity and equality between Kisii men and women be enhanced through Kisii classical music?

3.0 Theoretical Perspectives and Literature Review

This paper is guided by the feminist theory which emphasizes the dignity and rights of a woman, revealing her as a creature with ability to do all that a man can do. This theory arouses, in the minds of the members of society, the knowledge that women should liberate themselves from their own selves first, then from men. In the feminist debate, women have addressed fundamental issues pertaining to masculinized writing and art composition in general through male gendered language that may not serve to accommodate the literary understanding of women's lives. Such "masculinized" language that feminist theorists address is the use of, for example, "God the Father" which is looked upon as a way of designating the sacred as solely men (or, in other words, biblical language glorifies men through all of the masculine pronouns like "he" and "him" and addressing God as a "He"). Feminist theorists attempt to reclaim and redefine women through re-structuring language.

In terms of literature, several findings exist about language and gender in literary art. Previous researches show that language bias against gender is due to culture, which is transmitted from generation to generation, handed over from father to son and from mother to daughter. Culture can be described as a system of knowledge shared by relatively large group of people, and is transmitted from generation to generation. It refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, religion, among others. Iribemwangi (2013:111) defines culture well and shows the relationship between it and language, he states that:

Culture can only be described and understood through language; consequently, language is the vessel that transports all cultural practices. The vessel called language may carry culture from one generation to another or from one group to the other. The cultural practices that are passed on through language include, but are not limited to, people's beliefs, their behavior, their objects as well as other aspects that are common to a specific group or society. These and many other aspects may be said to be the culture of that given society ... Culture is important to every social grouping for it is through culture that people and groups define themselves, conform to society's shared values, and contribute to their society. Given the above, it is obvious that culture includes many societal aspects like a society's customs, values, norms, mores, rules, tools, technologies, products, organizations, and institutions.

In childhood, parents and teachers teach girls not to try out things, because their efforts either do not make any difference or may result in failure or danger. Boys are encouraged to do something in a better way than girls¹. It is here that the feminist theory, upon which this research is founded, is defined as an approach that encompasses women's roles and lives and feminist politics. It aims to understand the nature of inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. While generally providing a critique of social relations, much of feminist theory also focuses on analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, interests and issues. Themes explored in feminism include discrimination, stereotypes, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, and patriarchy. According to Piper & Grudem (1991):

Evangelical feminism argues that God created man and woman as equals in a sense that excludes male domination. Feminism acknowledges no distinction or domination imposed upon Eve as a penalty for her part in the fall. He continues to say that men often have hurt women. They have treated them as lesser citizens of the Kingdom, and some men have denigrated or overlooked women's contribution in the Ministry.

They give one reason for the current feminist movement, although not the only one, as due to some women being responsive to men who have oppressed them and treated them poorly.

Thus, there is need for full positive inclusion and participation of African women in music, Kisii music particularly. The roles that women play in Kisii classical music and the implications of the roles as depicted in language use are of importance. This argument is the basis of this research for it aims at considering the evidence and arguments of those who think there are no limits on women in classical music.

Language is a very powerful element, which has been used by every individual to express their own feelings. There are some languages forms prescribed by the society for use by males only while other forms are meant to be used by females only. Generally, there are generalizations which are meant for both male and female². It is

¹<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/feminist>

² For more details see: <http://www.indiasocialstudy.com/2009/1/gender-bias-in-language,culture&theory>.

instructive to note that women, the world over, have largely been discriminated against. Piper & Grudem (1991:45) report that:

Black revolution of the 1960s and 70s along with the rise of the Women's Movement in America, stimulated the emergence of an African-American Women's Movement committed to challenging the barriers of sexism that burdened minority women with their racial communities and in the larger society.

In their study, Cameron & Kulick (2003) say that language and sexuality study should encompass not only sexual identity but also other dimensions of sexual experience, such as "fantasy, repression, pleasure, fear and the unconscious". They continue to say that "... our erotic lives are shaped by forces which are not fully conscious." Social actors internationally lay claim to particular identities; people use language to make claims to sexual identity. This raises the complexity of the relationship between language and sexuality. It provides the present research the parameters of sexual harassment and embarrassment in the women that listen to the classical music in question.

Feminists also point at the economic inequality where historically men have been paid more than women on the grounds that they are responsible for the financial support of their households, while women are expected to contribute most of the unpaid domestic labor. This research has presented these (radical) feminist ideas because they are relevant to the history of the field of inquiry this research deals with: gender biases as depicted in the language used by Kisii classical musicians. Some lines of investigation e.g. the special vocabularies associated with sexual Subcultures will be investigated.

Gender stereotypes feed directly into social and particularly into educational policy, with arguments that gender equity in "left-brain areas" as mathematics and engineering is impossible (Eckert & McConnell: 2006). The book presents evidence that gender differences in what happens to men and to women derive in considerable measure from people's beliefs about sexual difference, their interpretations to justify the unequal treatment of women and men. Eckert & McConnell explain that the dichotomy of male and female is the ground upon which people build themselves from the moment of birth and these early input acts (like linguistic event of naming) set up a baby for life, launching a gradual process of learning to be a boy or a girl. Each and every person is expected to pattern all kinds of things about themselves as a function of that earlier dichotomy. This book is relevant to the present study as it examines fundamental issues pertaining to gender, sex as a biological event and linguistic stereotyping that leads to gender imbalances between men and women as found in Kisii classical music.

On his part, Coulmas (2005) asserts that, "Language is in large part what users have made of it." He draws from the dominant approach which "focuses on power and inequality". Sex specific variation in language behavior is seen as expressing and reinforcing power differentials. For example, naming conventions such as the wife's adoption of the husband's surname upon marriage and the use of patronymic surnames for the offspring are interpreted not as a neutral practice, but as a manifestation of male dominance. While the dominance approach stresses the instrumental function of language as it is being used in various ways to shore up male domination, it also credits language itself with the power to influence or determine thought. Language is an open system which allows us to make choices including those concerning the avoidance of sexist or otherwise offensive language. Coulmas considers "gender as a holistic and dynamic concept that influences language use as one of several factors constituting the social context". What is clear is the fact that though not all, some aspects of sex-specific speech behavior can be explained in terms of power.

Siundu (2004), drawing from two works of Yusuf Dawood interrogates Dawood's portrayal of women characters against the background of post-independence multiracial Kenya. Dawood's portrayal of women differs substantially from that of other authors or artists. The article sees these women as subverting the traditional notions of cultural and racial purity. Siundu's article will provide a ground for challenge to the Kisii musicians on how possible it is to create women as useful and independent beings in the society.

Wellek & Warren (1970) show how women, in many African societies, are depicted as unable to accomplish any task without the help of men. Thus, in many pieces of literary works, women are given miserable roles. The literary pieces (poems, proverbs, novels, plays, songs etc.) depict a woman as an incomplete creature who needs a man so as to be complete.

All the above literature shows that there is a relationship between language use and sexuality albeit dependent on the culture of a people. The works cited above mainly concentrate on language and gender. However, at a different level, Harper & Marcus (2003) provide information on (procedure) purposeful sampling. Examples of case studies are provided in this text. This text is relevant in this research since it (present research) employs a case study nature of survey. Nieswiadomy (2002) also provides information on purposeful sampling, also known as judgmental sampling, a research method that the researcher will employ in this present study. This method involves "handpicking" of subjects who are chosen by the researcher which s/he believes are 'typical' or representative of the accessible population, or someone who is an expert may be asked to select the subjects.

4.0 Methodology and Data Analysis

The geographical location of the research was in two districts of Kisii County in Western Kenya. The research is a case study where the researchers identified several tape recorded material by the two Kisii classical musicians: Monyoncho and Arisi. Both primary and secondary data was used whereby in primary data, the sampled songs were transcribed for easy readership and analysis. Some were short statements, some lines and yet others were in form of long texts. The original text in EkeGusii was translated into English. In secondary data the researchers got data from the internet, journals and books. In data collection, the researchers fully explained the research interview in advance and gave a summary of the results to the participants afterwards. The explanations were essential to gain informed consent from the respondents. In the interview, the researchers ensured the correct numbers of simply-framed questions were asked. An advance letter to the sample respondents was sent, explaining the purpose of the study. Some of the respondents did not have a mastery of the English language, in which the interview questions were written. The researchers had to effectively translate the questions into EkeGusii language.

To check response bias, the researchers had to eliminate their own theories, beliefs, and perceptual view of the community where the research was carried out. They did not influence what the informant said by adopting a stance of neutrality to the phenomenon under study. The data was not manipulated to arrive at predisposed truths nor did the researchers set out to prove a particular perspective about the social aspect of the Kisii society. The researchers went out into the field with no theory to prove and no predetermined results to support the hypotheses. Errors were avoided while asking the questions and the responses were coded correctly.

In terms of population, the subjects in the study are Kisii classical music about women. These belong to a class of music known as classical music. The music is got from four audio tapes, one containing 10 songs, another containing 7 songs, and two containing 12 songs each. In total, these are forty one songs. From these, the researchers picked two songs from each tape that are relevant to the study. The size of the population therefore is 8 songs; four by each of the two classical musicians picked. Since this research is not experimental in nature, the researcher did not have two groups: control and sample group. The basis on which this choice was made is that the eight songs were identified for they are relevant to the issues and the objectives that guided this research.

In terms of sample procedures, this research used purposeful sampling. This is because it is specifically interested in certain themes which were largely identifiable in the songs as sung by the two classical musicians. Here, the researchers selected cases (audio tapes) that gave the researchers information to help answer the research questions raised in the research. The instruments used in this survey were interview schedule to solicit verbal data from one of the two classical musicians from Kisii. The researchers also interviewed four Kisii classical music fans (two of each sex). The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed and used to supplement the transcribed songs. The research instruments were developed by the researchers.

The dependent variables in the study are: language use in Kisii, classical music and the thematic structure of Kisii classical music. The independent variables are: biases against women and insensitivity to women. The variables were measured by identifying specific language structures that are evidently biased against women. Particular themes that demean women were also identified. These include direct and indirect attack on the woman as being irresponsible.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The researchers had five interview questions to be answered by four Kisii classical music fans, and twenty questions to be responded to by one of the two Kisii classical musicians. In the sub-sections below, the responses that were given are stated.

4.1 Interview Results for Kisii Classical Music Fans

Table 1: Gender of fans in the study

Gender	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	2	50
Female	2	50
TOTAL	4	100

Table 1 shows the number of fans interviewed by the researchers. There was a total of 4 fans: 2 male (50%) and 2 female (50%). The researchers positively and conveniently picked the four fans, based on gender so as to have a fair representation of unbiased views, given that this research has one of the research questions focusing on gender equity and equality between Kisii men and women as depicted in Kisii classical music.

Table 2: The length of time they've been fans

	Below 10 years	%	Over 10 years	%
Male	1	25	1	25
Female			2	50
TOTAL	1	25	3	75

The fans that were interviewed were not of the same age bracket. The one fan that has been listening to the music in question for less than 10 years is twenty years old. The other three are above 40. The fans were picked randomly considering only their gender and not their age. This was done so that the responses given could not portray gender bias.

Table 3: The regularity of the theme of women in the songs

	Regular	%	Very regular	%
Male	-	-	2	50
Female	-	-	2	50
TOTAL	-	-		100

All the 4 fans seemed to agree that Kisii classical musicians have a very high preference rate of singing about women; that the musicians don't conclude their compilation of music without singing about women. This response is in agreement with the one given by the musician that was interviewed who stated that he receives positive comments from his fans that encourage him to sing more about women¹.

Table 4: The language used by the musicians

	Friendly and Pleasant	%	Unfriendly and Demeaning	%
Male	-		2	50
Female	-		2	50
TOTAL	-		4	100

All the four fans interviewed agreed that the language used by the musicians is unfriendly and demeaning but the male fans, unlike the female ones, indicated that there could not be a better language that the musicians could use as the women deserve such a language used on them because they don't respect men. This explains why the classical musicians continue using such a language.

Table 5: The view of Kisii men on the Kisii women in the music of 90s and 2010-2013

	Respected in the 90s	%	Not respected in the 90s	%	Respected from 2010 - 2013	%	Not respected 2010 -2013	%
Male	-		2	50	2	50		
Female	-		2	50	1	25	1	25
TOTAL			4	100	3	75	1	25

This question was dual-dimensional; the fans were comparing how men view/ed women in their music during two periods; the 1990s and between 2010 and 2013, thus there were two responses from each of the four fans. All the fans agreed that women were not respected in the 90s, while 3 (75%) agreed that between 2010 and 2013, women were respected. Only 1 (25%) stated that even between 2010 and 2013, women were not respected.

Table 6: How the fans would portray women in classical music

	As having equal abilities with men and ought to be respected	%	As beings to be ruled by men whom they ought to obey at all times	%
Male	2	50		
Female	1	25	1	25
TOTAL	3	75	1	25

It is only one of the fans, a female that supported the idea that women have to be subordinate to their husbands and men in general. The other three fans indicated that women too can do what men can do if given the opportunity. It gives women an opportunity to make attempts to compete with men, including competition in the classical music industry. The male fans were of the opinion that Kisii women need to be depicted as such because they seem to find it exceedingly difficult to respect their husbands. They also seem to contradict their female counterparts who think that women don't deserve the unfriendly and demeaning language as used by the Kisii classical musicians.

3.2 Interview Results for the Kisii Classical Musician

In this sub-section, the researchers write the answers given to questions directed to one of the musicians. The first three questions were:

¹ See musician's answers to questions 17 and 18 below.

Table 7: Musician's responses

Question	Response
1. At what age did you start singing?	Twenty two (22)
2. Are the themes in your songs drawn from personal experiences?	Yes. Some are drawn from other people's experiences and some from my own imagination.
3. Who does the composition of songs for you?	I do it myself.

According to the responses provided in table 7 above, the musician is solely responsible for the language use in his music. He arranges the words of his musical composition. He looks at the way people live and then talks about it in his own language.

Table 8: Musician's responses

4. Is the language you use in your songs about women demeaning?	Yes and No. Sometimes it is demeaning, sometimes it is pleasant.
5. Were women more respected in the 90s than they are today (2010)?	In the 90s, they were disrespected, in 2010, they are respected.
6. Are your fellow Kisii musicians biased in their language use in music about women? What causes the biases?	Yes. In Kisii, women are supposed to obey men in everything. The women know this and they never question it.
7. Are the biases as a result of the attitude of men/women and vice versa?	Yes. Men don't want women to have a voice and women feel that men have so much pushed them against the wall.

The musician, in Table 8, just like the 4 fans is in agreement about the demeaning language used in Kisii classical music and this he attaches to the negative attitude that Kisii men have towards Kisii women. He feels that in the 90s women were respected and what he regards as respect is the fact that their husbands would punish them whenever these women messed.

Table 9: Musician's responses

8. Is there anything that you, (through your classical music) can do to enhance equality between men and women in Kisii?	Yes. To educate men on the need to change their view of women, as inherited from the men's grandfathers.
9. Do you have any recommendations to make to upcoming classical musicians as pertains to music about women?	Yes. They should look at the behavior of women objectively: bad or good, and talk about it without any flattery.
10. Is the Kisii woman lacking as a mother/wife, in so far as socio-economic and political life is concerned?	Yes. Kisii women are not empowered unlike in other communities where there are women politicians.
11. Can the Kisii women set out to tell their "own story" through classical music? If yes, how can they be encouraged to do so?	Yes. They should stop being shy and not fear such names as "prostitutes, rebellious beings", branded on them by the community whenever they venture into classical music.
20. Do you agree that: "what a Kisii man can do, a Kisii woman can do, even better"?	Yes. There are women that are as reasonable as men.
13. Have you ever had an opportunity to interact with classical musicians from other communities? Has that changed your worldview and perspective in so far as the Kisii woman is concerned?	Yes. In these other communities' e.g the Kalenjin and Kikuyu, women are free to do and participate in any activity of their choice; including singing classical music and vying for political posts. This has propelled me into viewing the Kisii woman as a being that is suppressed hence should be left to 'breathe'.
14. Do you think your themes would be different if you had female singers and composers in your band?	Yes. The female composers would be sensitive to issues concerning their fellow women and therefore condemn them with a 'female eye' for they understand them better.

In Table 9, the musician has a strong view that Kisii men need to change and abandon the old way of viewing women as helpless beings that depend on men for survival. He is of the view that other Kenyan communities such as Kalenjin and Kikuyu¹ are far ahead of the Kisii community in so far as gender equity is concerned. He suggests that Kisii women should rise up and liberate themselves from their men's attitudes towards them. He is of the view that Kisii women classical musicians can go a long way in changing the *status quo*, at least in so far as music is concerned.

¹ As is evident in question 13 above.

Table 10: Musician's responses

12. If you were to retrace your footsteps, would you still depict the Kisii women as you do today? If not, what steps can you and others take to promote the women's welfare?	Yes and No. Yes because women still continue to boast and lie to men, they run away from their husbands, get into prostitution etc. No, because there are some good women who should be praised. The women, in Kisii classical music, should be given credit where it is due.
15. Do you in your music depict all women in a negative light as if all of them share similar experiences and lifestyles?	No. Of course most of the women in my music are depicted negatively but there are a few, especially the elderly that I have portrayed positively.
16. Has any woman ever complained to you on the language in your songs about women?	Yes. One complained that I had told lies about her. She sued me in court. A Women's Organization raised funds for her so that she could pursue the case. Her husband rescued me by confessing to be the one that told me to sing about her.
17. Apart from the women in Question 16 above, has any men, including the youth, ever complained to you?	No. You seem to be the second one. Most people commend me for a job well done. They feel that most of the problems we encounter in everyday life are created by women.
18. Do you get good comments from your male fans about your music about women?	Yes. They encourage me to continue with my way of singing about women.
19. If you were told to stop singing about women and start singing about other themes, would you be agreeable?	No. Women are more than men, and do more bad things than men. More so, people, especially men, who are my greatest fans want to listen to stories about women

The socialization of Kisii men and Kisii women has created a wide gap between them to the extent that should a man offend a woman, the women swiftly hit back as a form of revenge. The response to question 16 above seems to support this claim as the Women's Organization raised funds for the victim so that she could seek for justice in the court of law. The men too want to defend their fellow men (also seen in question 16) where the husband of the lady in question came to the defense of the musician. The male fans commend the musician for his music about women, despite their gender insensitive language.

5.0 Summary and Conclusion

5.1 Summary

This study was guided by the hypothesis that Kisii classical music is largely biased against womenfolk and is insensitive to women issues and lifestyle. In order to test the hypothesis, the study made use of primary data which was obtained by transcribing classical music that was in audio form by two Kisii classical musicians: Monyoncho and Arisi. To understand the data, the study was guided by the feminist theory.

In the study, several issues were addressed and these include:

- The depiction of the Kisii women as the weaker sex in the language used in Kisii classical music.
- Gender biases and imbalances in the language of Kisii classical music.
- The cause of gender biases in Kisii classical music.
- Why Kisii classical musician aspires to sing about women.

5.2 Conclusion

This study focused on gender biases as depicted in the language used in Kisii classical music in which it specifically focused on such issues as depiction of Kisii women as weak beings that depend on men for survival and also the causes of gender biases in Kisii classical music. Following the hypothesis that was set to be tested in this study, specific conclusions arrived at. These were in line with the fundamental issues and concerns that are dealt with at length in the analytic section of this paper. The researchers explicated the coded data and arrived at the conclusion that Kisii women have been demeaned in classical music. Their worth is determined by their success in fitting into jackets designed and tailored for them by the society. Through Kisii classical music, Kisii women are degraded. They are depicted as:

- Liars, materialistic and the cause of evil and divisions in the family.
- Being boastful and foolish.
- Tillers of the land.
- Beings that depend on men for survival.
- Untrustworthy, unfaithful and easily cheated by men.
- Being fit for odd jobs only.

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