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OSSREA's Research Report Series

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THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN ORAL LITERATURE: A CASE STUDY OF GIKUYU ORAL LITERATURE

*Catherine M. Ndungo**

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the image of women as portrayed through oral literature in the Gikuyu society. Its aim is to find out whether there is a stereotypic view of women and how this view has been perpetuated through oral literature, specifically through the proverbs, narratives and songs. It will therefore concentrate on these genres of Gikuyu oral literature though they are by no means the only vehicles through which one can study the attitudes of a society towards women.

Oral literature cannot be studied and analysed meaningfully outside the socio-cultural forces of the society that created it. This is because, like other vehicles of culture, they serve as carriers of a people's culture and history. Nevertheless, in such a short report, it is impossible to present a comprehensive study of the socio-cultural forces of the Gikuyu society. Consequently, we should be content with a brief outline of the Gikuyu just before the break up of the traditional social organization through colonial conquest in the early 1900s. This conquest, as Muriuki (1974) observes, served as the beginning of a new era for the Gikuyu as a community:

The end of 1904 marked the eventual defeat of the determined pockets of Kikuyu resistance to the establishment of British rule. By that date the elements that were to affect the development of the Kikuyu society in the twentieth century were beginning to emerge. This modernization weakened their traditional religion, beliefs and habits and culminated in a social upheaval . . . The manner in which the Kikuyu adjusted themselves to the problems and challenges of the new system of government, economy, religion and education were to become the key issues of their modern history (Muriuki 1974, 179).

Though culture is not static, we will attempt to analyse oral literature in the cultural context of the period before the colonial conquest as mentioned above. We will also try to point out what implications such an analysis has on the modern Gikuyu society (the Gikuyu society after the colonial conquest and especially today).

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1.1 Area of Study

The research was carried out in Central Province of Kenya, the homeland of the Gikuyu people. The Gikuyu people occupy the Central Province and part of the Rift Valley. They are commonly referred to as *Kikuyu*. In the preface to *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kenyatta (1938) explained the appropriate spelling of the name “Kikuyu”:

The usual European way of spelling this word is Kikuyu, which is incorrect; it should be Gikuyu, or in the strict phonetic spelling, Gekoyo. This form only refers to the country itself. A Gikuyu person is a Mu-Gikuyu; plural A-Gikuyu (Kenyatta 1938, XV).

Central Province is divided into seven administrative districts, namely Nyeri, Murang'a, Kiambu, Nyandarua, Kirinyaga, the newly created Thika, and Maragwa. Kirinyaga, Thika, and Maragwa are new districts created as follows: Kirinyaga was carved from Embu district; Thika from Kiambu, and Maragwa from Murang'a districts respectively. It is noteworthy that Nyandarua district was created immediately after Kenya's independence in 1963. However, this study excludes Kirinyaga district, where the Ndia and Gichugu speakers are found, though some linguists regard them as Gikuyu speakers (cf. Mutahi 1977). Although we lack linguistic evidence, we feel that the exclusion is necessary because the varieties of Gikuyu spoken in Kirinyaga district would only hamper our progress as they are distinctly different from the varieties spoken in the other districts.

According to the 1989 census, the Gikuyu numbered over three million. They make up the largest group of the North Eastern Bantu, a group that includes Gikuyu, Embu, Mbeere, and Kamba, among others. It is estimated that about five to six million people live in Central Province. Not all Gikuyu people live in Central Province. They inhabit other provinces as well. The majority of them settled especially in the Rift Valley Province, Nakuru and Laikipia Districts. The total Gikuyu population at present could be about six and a half million.

1.2 General Background

1.2.1 Physical Setting

According to Muriuki (1978, 1), Gikuyu land is approximately 160 km from north to south and about 50 km from west to east. Its altitude ranges from about 1,200 metres to over 2,500 metres above sea level, and has many natural landmarks. To the north, it is dominated by Kirinyaga (Mount Kenya), which rises to 5,250 metres.

To the west, the border of Kikuyu country follows the Kikuyu escarpment of the Rift Valley, and includes the Nyandarua or Aberdare Mountains. . .
To the east and south the country can be said to end roughly at the

mountains the Kikuyu call Kianjahi (Ol Donyo Sabuk) and Kiambiruiru, the Ngong Hills (Muriuki 1978, 1-2).

The Gikuyu people border the Maasai to the north and west. To the north-east, they are neighbours of the Meru: to the east lie the Ndia, Gichugu, Mbeere and Embu, and to the south-west, the Kamba.

In the Gikuyu land, like in the rest of the country, there are two rainy seasons because of the effects of the south-east and north-east trade winds blowing from the Indian Ocean towards the equator. The long rains last from March to May, and the short rains from mid-October to December.

Since Gikuyu land is in a high altitude, it receives a higher rainfall than the lowlands of Kenya. The Gikuyu, who are deeply attached to their land, are chiefly agriculturalists and their country is endowed with adequate rainfall and moderate temperature. Its deep-red volcanic soil is very productive. The main traditional food crops include bananas, sweet potatoes, yams, arum lily, millet, sorghum, and cowpeas. "Maize, which constitutes the staple food, was introduced only probably towards the end of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century" (Muriuki, 33). The Gikuyu also keep livestock, chiefly sheep, goats and cattle.

1.2.2 *The Origin of the Gikuyu*

The Gikuyu people have not lived in Central Province for a long time. Like other illiterate communities, the Gikuyu do not have documented history. As noted by Muriuki (1974, 2), "faced with scarcity of written sources or even their non existence, historians have primarily relied on oral traditions for the reconstruction of African history."

This approach of reconstructing a people's history has its own drawbacks. As a result, it has been argued that history can only arrive at probabilities but never at certainties (Muriuki 1974, 3). The beginnings of the Gikuyu are discussed in line with this view. There are two different accounts of their origin and history: one scientific (linguistic, historical, oral), and the other mythical. These two accounts are as follows.

A study of Gikuyu language shows that it is akin to a group of related languages found around and near Mount Kenya. These are classified under the name Thagicu, which includes the Mbeere, Embu, Chuka, Mwimbi, Igoji, Tharaka, Igembe, Tigania, Meru, Kamba, and Gikuyu. Based on linguistic data, scholars, such as Ehret (1972), have noted that the name Thagicu was derived from the people called Thagicu who occupied the North-east, the east, and south sides of Mount Kenya. Today, only remnants of Thagicu are left, specifically in Tharaka and Mbeere areas. It is noteworthy that the Mavuria location of Mbeere is traditionally known as Thagicu (Muriuki 1974, 52).

However, according to oral traditions, the Gikuyu have an earlier origin in the Igembe and Tigania areas of Meru District from where they migrated

south to Thagicu or Tharaka area (Muriuki 1974). The migration took place approximately in the middle of the fifteenth century (Muriuki 1974, 55). It has been observed that the harsh climatic condition of Tharaka, which still exists, must have compelled the Gikuyu people to migrate. Historians have noted that the migration continued and led the Gikuyu people to other places such as the famous Mukurwe wa Gathanga area in Murang'a District (Muriuki 1974).

The linguistic and historical accounts regarding the origin of the Gikuyu people are further supported by oral traditions. According to Muriuki (1974), the ancestors of the Gikuyu came from Meru, Igembe, Chuka, Mbeere, or especially from Ithanga. It is also reported that some Gikuyu sub-tribes claim that their ancestors came from Kambaland, Mbeere, or Thagicu. The available linguistic and oral evidence reinforces the fact that the Gikuyu are fairly recent immigrants to Central Province having descended from people who lived in the North, East, and South of Mount Kenya. Formerly they have been referred to as "Thagicu" but today, they are termed the "Proto-Gikuyu".

Generally, myths explain the origins of natural phenomena, including that of people's. They are an embodiment of a dogma and are accepted on faith. The major functions of myths are to offer explanations, descriptions, as well as justifications of aspects of social and human existence.

According to Muriuki (1974), there are two main myths which attempt to explain the origin of the Gikuyu. The first one goes like this. Once, a man who had four sons called them at his deathbed to divide his possessions among them. He had four articles – a herding staff, a quiver of arrows and a bow, a stabbing spear, and a digging stick. Depending upon their choices, the four sons became the ancestors of the pastoral Maasai, the Kamba, the Athi, and the agricultural Kikuyu respectively.

The second and the most popular myth is the one which claims that the Gikuyu originated from Mukurwe wa Gathanga in Murang'a district. According to this myth, God appeared to Gikuyu and allotted to him all the land to the south-west of Mount Kenya. Gikuyu and his wife, Mumbi, made their home at Mukurwe wa Gathanga. Here, they had ten daughters who became the founder mothers of the ten clans within the Gikuyu tribe.

However, Gikuyu people would never tell one openly that there were ten clans within the tribe because mentioning things by exact numbers is believed to be a bad omen. Hence, people were discouraged from saying that the clans were ten because they feared that this would bring a gradual end to the whole tribe. If one were therefore asked how many clans the Gikuyu tribe consisted of, one would always reply something like "nine plus one" or "nine full".

As Muriuki (1974) contends:

These myths are clearly unhelpful and only two points are worth noting: first, there is the implication that the Kikuyu might have migrated from beyond Mbeere and that they may be related to their neighbours. Secondly, the possibility that the area around Mukurwe wa Gathanga was a significant one in the evolution of Kikuyu. While Mukurwe region retains significance, it can no longer be regarded as the cradle, for there is evidence to show that some of the Mbari (clan) came from as far as Meru, Mbeere, Chuka and Ndia. Igembe, Tharaka, Ithanga and Thagicu.

The myths on the origin of the Gikuyu seem to have been invented after the advent of colonialism. Muriuki (1974) notes that the ethnic history of the Gikuyu is much intertwined with the right to own land. It was therefore taboo for any Gikuyu to discuss the past frankly, particularly if this seemed to remotely contradict or undermine their claim to land ownership of before the colonial era.

The myth associated with the origin of the Gikuyu can only be understood in the light of its close relationship with the ideology of Gikuyu ownership of land. The main function of myths is to justify historical intention. Therefore, the Gikuyu may have stuck to this myth of their origin so as to justify their land rights. As Mpesha (1979, 123) rightly states, "The Gikuyu myth of origin gives them confidence and sense of belonging".

1.2.3 Social Structure

The Gikuyu society has always been patriarchal. There is however a tribal legend which claims that the Gikuyu society at one time was matriarchal, and that the men folk staged a coup d'état which ended the female rule. The story goes that while women were in power, they acted ruthlessly towards men and subjected them to all sorts of unjust and cruel treatment. The men reached the point where they could not tolerate it any longer and therefore they revolted against women and overthrew the tyrannical rule.

The family consisted of a man, his wife or wives, and their children. The father was the head of the family and in his absence or death, the eldest son or the eldest son of the senior wife performed his duties. The head of the family was supreme in all family affairs; therefore, in the family group, the father was the most important person, and his position in the community depended on his ability to organize his family group.

Hence, it was very important for a man to have male children in marriage. Firstly, the male children were expected to carry on the line and to increase the number of people in the family because the Gikuyus believed that if a man died without a male child, his family would come to an end and this would break the continuity among the living, the dead, and the unborn (Muriuki 1978, 5).

Secondly, male children were preferred to female ones because the males would remain in their homes for the rest of their lives, mostly helping the family. The females, on the other hand, would eventually get married and hence abandon their homes. This often led to the fear that if a man died without a male child to perpetuate his lineage, it would very likely bring an end to his family since all his daughters would get married (Mugo 1982, 6). It was also expected that since male children became warriors, they would protect the society from attacks. This preference of male children among the Gikuyu persists until today. This is evident in the proverb: *Mwanake ni kienyu kia Ngai* which means, the young man is God's generous gift to mankind.

At a level higher than the family, the Gikuyu society is subdivided into *mbari* (sub-clan or kinship groups). The sub-clans are the focus of the social and political interaction. For example, the settling of quarrels and the regulation of local affairs are carried out at a clan level. A *mbari* might inhabit a whole village depending upon its size. "Each *mbari* traced its origin to one of the ten Kikuyu clans and, hence, regarded itself a direct descendant of the mythical ancestors of the Kikuyu people, Gikuyu and his wife Mumbi" (Muriuki 1974, 113).

1.2.4 Education

Education in the Gikuyu society was a life-long process. Children were informally taught the tribal traditions through tales, riddles and proverbs from an early age. Such forms of oral literature also formed an important source of amusement for the young as they sat round the fire in the evenings waiting for the meal to cook.

Initiation ceremonies for males and females served as one of the main educational channels. "This education was both practical and theoretical and covered such fields as tribal traditions, religion, folklore, mode of behaviour and the duties of adults, taboos and sex . . ." (Muriuki 1974, 119). Circumcision was therefore a vehicle for the transmission and perpetuation of cultural norms and values. Circumcision ceremonies have ceased to take place with the advent of formal educational systems, transformation of families into nuclear units, and other changes brought about by the socio-economic pressures of modern life.

Oral literature, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, forms an important part of the culture of the Gikuyu people. Its chief purpose was to transmit knowledge and therefore each genre of oral literature teaches a specific aspect of Gikuyu life. Riddles, for example, teach the characteristics of natural things like the plants and animals, and proverbs contain the wisdom of the people and express the morals and ethics of society.

1.2.5 Social Roles of Men and Women

The Gikuyu society had well defined roles for both men and women. The primary duty of the men (warriors) was to defend their tribe against attacks and raids from other tribes. They were also entrusted with the more difficult tasks, which were regarded as a man's job. "... such duties included the clearing of virgin land and cutting poles for building houses and cattle kraals. They also planted specific crops such as yams, bananas, and sugar cane" (Muriuki 1974, 121). The major role of the young uncircumcised boys however was to herd the cows, the sheep and the goats. When the warriors retired, they served in various councils of elders in which they were entrusted with legislative, executive, and judicial matters. The tasks specifically entrusted to women and girls included household chores such as cooking, looking after children, fetching water and firewood, and weeding. Today, the traditional roles of men and boys have changed tremendously. Men are no longer required to defend the tribe as the Gikuyu tribe today is part of a unified Kenyan nation with a centralized defence system. Boys are no longer expected to spend most of the day herding livestock as the demands of formal education have taken up most of their time. However, women and girls are still expected to perform their traditional roles in addition to their modern ones which include paid employment for women and schooling for girls.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

In this study, we attempt to identify and analyze the image of women as depicted in Gikuyu oral literature. For the purpose of this report, oral literature will be taken as the form of literature that is very much dependent on verbal performance for its dissemination.

Oral literature genres act as very important vehicles through which the attitudes and beliefs of a people are expressed. The images used in oral literature can therefore be used to reveal a great deal about the attitudes of a society. Oral literature is a crucial tool in shaping social life in the Gikuyu like in any other communities. Society is a manifestation of culture and culture encompasses all agents of socialisation such as folklore, religion, rites of passage, and all other institutions used to achieve societal goals. One of the principal aims of society is to achieve harmony among the various members of the community. The most crucial relationships are related to gender.

It is in the light of this crucial role played by oral literature that we want to find out how the genres of oral literature have been used to create the image of women in the Gikuyu society and how the image created has served to relegate women to a subordinate position in the society. In other words, our interest is to show how the genres of oral literature have been used to

perpetuate the myth of women as “second class citizens”. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How are women depicted in Gikuyu oral literature: what kind of images do women project?
2. How does the portrayal of women in Gikuyu oral literature reflect the socio-cultural attitudes of the community?
3. How have men and women been affected by such attitudes?
4. What gender messages are embedded in the image formation of women in Gikuyu society?

1.4 Justification

Currently, there is a global emphasis on the study of women issues such as their role and status in societies. Many studies that attempted to trace the core of women marginalization have been carried out. Oral literature, as a vehicle of cultural transmission, has been identified as one of the important vehicles used to marginalize women.

In many societies, it has been observed that women occupy lower status as compared to their male counterparts. This, it is argued, has been perpetuated through oral art forms. The cultural images associated with women reflect and promote the social ideologies and beliefs of society. Polemics against women are common in many societies.

According to Okombo (1992, 11), “There are numerous publications on oral literature of many Kenyan communities, but very few have gone beyond the stage of recoding the art forms”. In conducting this study, we hope to go beyond the mere recording of oral literature and contribute towards the analysis of art forms. We also hope to contribute to the studies on women and oral literature in general.

According to studies carried out on the image of women (cf. Chesaina 1991 and Kabira 1991), there is no doubt that the woman has been given a negative image. She has been depicted as an idler, gossip, cowardly, foolish, to name but a few characteristics. We hope to shed further light on such studies by looking at the underlying factors that relegated women to these kinds of negative images. We will therefore attempt a literary analysis of proverbs, narratives and songs, and in so doing we hope to rectify the shortcoming pointed out by John (1968, 23) who observed, “Oral literature has not yet been subjected to literary analysis”.

1.5 Objectives

This research hopes to achieve the following two main objectives:

1. To identify and analyse the images used to describe women in Gikuyu oral literature. Our intention is to find out the mitigating

factors which make artists portray women the way they do assuming that artists are influenced by the societies and vice versa. Our aim is to find out the attitudes of the society towards women as reflected in the proverbs, songs and narratives.

2. To find out the socio-cultural and economic factors which contribute to the negative portrayals of women. The emerging images will shed light on the cultural values and attitudes which shape the stereotypic images of women in African oral literature. The study will help elucidate and expose the current cultural ideology that forms and sustains a subordinate position of women in society. Through the study, we hope to show that the position of women as exemplified in Gikuyu oral literature is inferior to that of men.

1.6 Premises

This study is based on the following premises:

1. Women are depicted negatively in Gikuyu society.
2. Women are portrayed negatively because the society is male-dominated and oral literature reflects the views of the society, depicting women as inferior.
3. Socio-cultural and economic factors contribute to the negative portrayal of women in Gikuyu oral literature.

1.7 Literature Review

Lakoff (1974) uses linguistic evidence like colour, words, and tag questions to show that the marginalization and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the way women are expected to speak and the ways in which they are spoken to. Lakoff (Ibid.) shows that in what is assumed women's appropriate speech, strong expressions of feelings are avoided and expressions of uncertainty are favoured. He further argues that what is said about women shows them as objects whose social roles are derivative of and dependent on their relation to men. For this reason, language works against the treatment of women as rational people with their own views. Lakoff (Ibid.) concentrates on language and how it is used by both men and women, and does not confine himself to the language of oral literature. This study however will concentrate on the language of literature, namely the use of imagery in proverbs, narratives and songs.

According to Ngugi (1975), language has been used to perpetuate the myth of female inferiority, and he recommends examining social and economic structures of our society in order to place and define women more meaningfully. He further observes that those who control the means of production in a society also control, to a certain extent, the positions and the

dominant images of women. He succeeds in showing how language has served as a crucial tool in shaping the image of women in society. Unlike Ngugi's work, this study looks at proverbs, songs, and narratives to investigate the kind of image they projected of women, and to find out how these images affected the attitudes of the society towards women.

Mugo (1975, 210) shows the impact of language on women in society. According to her, "The biggest enemy to be reckoned within the battle for the liberation of the abused female image is first and foremost language, its concepts, implications, and the whole emotive stimuli behind the actual utterances". Mugo emphasizes cultural attitudes towards women, but not as they are reflected through the genres of oral literature. This study focuses on such cultural attitudes towards women as expressed through some genres of oral literature, namely proverbs, songs and narratives.

Oduol (1990) gives some linguistic evidence on the sexist ideology in Dholuo. The work is an attempt to:

provide a case study of the relationship between language and gender in Dholuo by providing linguistic evidence of sexist ideology reflected in the vocabulary and expressions associated with women. It, in particular, aims to demonstrate the role that language plays in the social categorization and cultural evaluation of the Luo, the extent to which patterns of language use is reflective of Luo social structure and cultural values of inequality and oppression, and that Luo linguistic practices tend to sustain the existing gender arrangements.

The current study differs from Oduol's (1990) in that its focus is on the language of literature. It however concurs with Oduol's (1990) in that it will show the existence of "cultural values of inequality and oppression", and that this bias can be demonstrated through the analysis of the image of women as reflected through the oral literature. It also shows how oral literature has been used to project a negative image of women.

Chesaina (1991) in her paper, *Images of women in African oral literature*, observes that the Kalenjin regarded women as children who need to be guided and protected. She reported that this view was held by both men and women and according to her, any woman who did not live up to that description was considered as 'westernized'. This view was also held by the Maasai men and women who argued that "inferiority of women was a natural law since the jobs done by women were not as demanding as those done by men". Nevertheless, a close look at the tasks done by women refutes this view. As Kipury (1983, 9) argues:

In Maasai society, women do most of the work in the home. The numerous chores for which they are responsible include gathering material for and building houses, fetching water and firewood, milking and distributing food, cleaning milk utensils, sweeping the cattle, calf, sheep, and goat

enclosures as well as bearing and caring of children. Although the duty of grazing and watering the stock is normally a man's job, women are frequently called upon to give assistance when the need arises.

Chesaina (1991) concluded that the portrayal of women in Kalenjin and Maasai oral narratives was very negative. Her work, though very much like this study, concentrated on the oral narratives of the Maasai and Kalenjin. The present study looks at the oral literature of the Gikuyu, and like Chesaina's (1991), it will show how oral literature is used to portray a negative image of women. The main differences between this study and Chesaina's (1991) are in the genres of oral literature used in the analysis, and in the communities investigated: Chesaina's deals with narratives of the Maasai and the Kalenjin communities while this study looks at oral literature of the selected genres of the Gikuyu community.

1.8 Methodology

This study was conducted in two ways:

1. **Through Library Research:** A library research was conducted to find out what has been done in the field of oral literature and women studies in general. It enabled us to peruse through works written on women and on oral literature and this in turn helped us to consolidate our research problem. It also enabled us to collect more data to add to what we obtained from the field.
2. **Field Research:** The field research was done in two stages:

Pilot Survey: We undertook this stage to familiarize ourselves with the respondents and the areas of study. It also helped us to survey the kind of data we could expect to collect. This helped us to decide the number of respondents we would use in the main research programme. Therefore, the pilot survey enabled us to improve on our methodology during the main fieldwork.

The Main Fieldwork: The fieldwork was undertaken in four districts of the Central Province, namely Kiambu, Murang'a, Nyeri and Nyandarua. The districts were sub-divided into divisions, and from each district, one division was selected randomly to represent the other divisions in that district. We felt that since oral literature was based on the lives and experiences of a people, there would be no significant differences between data from different divisions of a single district. The major differences between data, if any, would only be among the data obtained from different districts. From each division, we sampled two locations that do not border each other. In some areas, we used friends or relatives to help us approach members of the community and select appropriate informants. This helped to build a rapport with the informants. We also enlisted the

help of local people as research assistants. The informants of both sexes were of various ages. This was necessitated by the fact that oral literature is used by all the people in the society. We collected all data on the three genres of oral literature without selecting any particular type. The sorting out was done after we felt that we had acquired a representative sample of the data required.

1.8.1 Data Collection

Data were collected mainly through the following methods:

- i. *Taping the genres from the informants.* We taped the genres mostly in cases where we sent our research assistants to the field. This enabled us to not only save time but also get the data verbatim and therefore get the informants' version without any alterations.
- ii. *Writing the genres down.* Since we did not have enough tape recorders to be used by everyone who participated in the data collection, we were forced to collect some of the data by taking notes of what our informants said.
- iii. *Using unstructured interviews.* This was done in addition to seeking information concerning the meaning of the proverbs, songs, or narratives, the occasions or situations in which they were used, the purposes they served, and their effect.

1.8.2 Data Analysis

The first step in the analysis of data was transcribing the genres from the tapes. In the second stage, literal translation of the genres was carried out because the data were collected in the Gikuyu language. From the literal translation, an actual or free translation was undertaken. After this, the genres were divided into groups according to the themes and images. An analysis was then carried out to find out the images of women depicted by the genres under study. The analysis was undertaken in two main ways:

- i. *Thematic analysis.* In this analysis, the genres were grouped into major themes according to their subject matter. Such themes included religion, family, economic and social affairs, to name but a few. They considered the issues raised concerning these themes vis-à-vis women.
- ii. *Analysis of the images of the women.* From the themes identified, we looked into the images of women that arose from them. We also looked into the symbols that are used in creating the various images of women. Lastly, we discussed the images of women in Gikuyu society as portrayed by those genres and their implications for the women's position in the society. Finally, we drew our conclusions based on the discussion of the images.

1.9 Scope and Limitations

The study has focused on the image of women as portrayed in Gikuyu oral literature. Oral literature reveals the social, religious, economic and even political aspects of a society. We have therefore investigated how women are depicted in these aspects of society as portrayed by the genres of oral literature in Gikuyu. The material was collected in Gikuyu language, so translation was functional.

However, due to cultural differences between the Gikuyu and English societies, a great deal was lost in terms of the cultural-bound concepts in the attempt to communicate meaning. In order to minimize this problem, the material was presented in both Gikuyu and English languages, and a free translation was attempted to try and give the meaning that was intended in the Gikuyu text.

2. THE ROLE OF ORAL LITERATURE IN SOCIETY

Before we begin analysing the image of women in Gikuyu oral literature, it might be necessary to start with the definition of oral literature and then point out what role it plays in the society.

The term oral literature has raised eyebrows among many scholars. Some argue that the term itself is a contradiction since oral means spoken while literature means written. Among the definitions given are:

Akivaga and Odaga (1982, 1) say, "Oral literature is spoken, acted (performed) art whose media is like that of written literature in words". From Akivaga and Odaga's definition, we deduce that oral literature is the aspect of literature which is acted (performed) or spoken. Its mode of communication is word of mouth.

This definition is supported by Okot p'Bitek (1973) who argues that literature is, "All the creative works of man expressed in words . . . whether sung, spoken or written down". Okot gives a definition for literature in general, written or oral.

In order to differentiate between oral and written literature, Nandwa and Bukenya (1983) say:

Oral literature may be defined as those utterances whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression.

They continue to elaborate that narratives, songs, proverbs, and other forms of oral literature are referred to as oral because they are composed of and performed through word of mouth, which is the meaning of *oral*. They further argue that this form of art is literature because it uses language as its

medium of communication and it employs artistic devices which makes it appealing to feelings and easier to understand.

Liyong's definition of oral literature is too broad and oral literature is just a part of Liyong's definition. Liyong's definition would best define oral traditions rather than oral literature.

Having looked at these definitions, the efforts that some scholars made to get alternative concepts for oral literature would not surprise us. Among the concepts suggested are *orature* (Zirimu), verbal arts, *oracy*, oral performance (Bukonya), etc. However, in this study, we take oral literature as all the artistic actions and utterances of humans which use language as their medium of communication.

Narratives, songs, riddles, poetry, proverbs, myths, legends, etc. are among these artistic expressions and performances. Having looked at the term oral literature, the next question we have to address is what the role of oral literature in society is and why we have to pay attention to it in relation to the woman's question.

In order to have a full understanding of any community, it is important to have a thorough knowledge of their literature, whether oral or written. Literature reflects and shapes the lives and ideas of a people. It reflects the philosophy and values of the society that produces it.

The bulk of the literature of many African communities, Gikuyu being one of them, is still in its oral form. Hence, if we have to understand the women's issues in the Gikuyu community, it is very important that we have to study their oral literature. Oral literature serves as a vehicle or a medium through which the basic societal morals, concepts, beliefs, values, attitudes, or their total philosophies are transmitted. Therefore, in order to appreciate people's feelings, hopes, fears, aspirations, philosophy, and aesthetics which show the totality of people's way of life, we have to study their oral literature which serves as a reservoir of the people's cultural heritage. It is especially crucial to study oral literature with the view that the Gikuyu society, like many African communities, largely transmits its history, values, aspirations and attitudes using the oral mode of communication.

Oral literature is a dynamic medium of communication and transmission. From that premise, it is our strong belief that it is impossible for societal philosophy to survive without the support of the oral artist. Therefore, any society which is concerned with understanding itself cannot do so without paying due attention to its oral literature. Oral art plays a major role in shaping and perpetuating the society's image. Oral literature serves as a vehicle through which cultural heritage is recorded and transmitted. It is the same oral literature which the society uses to evaluate and re-assess itself.

Hence, it is not far fetched to argue that oral literature is of enormous interest in its own right to anybody who wants to study any aspect of

society's life. It provides a vital and often neglected key to understanding societal values.

What do we mean when we say oral literature is a vehicle through which a community's traditions are transmitted?

Traditions in our study will be taken to refer to all habitual deeds, habits, and customs from the most religious rites to the conventional way of saluting a foreigner. Oral tradition therefore implies a situation in which the transmission is carried by word of mouth through the direct contact between individuals, depending largely on memory and habits of thought, action, and speech for cultural community. Culture in this study will be taken as explained by Ngugi (1972, 4):

Culture in its broadest sense is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment. It is the sum of their art, their science, all their social institutions including their system of beliefs and rituals. In the course of their creative struggle and progress through history, there evolves a body of material and spiritual values that endow that society with unique ethos.

Such values are often expressed through songs, dances, folklore drawings, sculpture rites, and ceremonies.

Oral cultures are relatively homogenous since oral transmissions depend on face-to-face contact and ensure common customs, belief techniques, sentiments and general outlook. Individuals tend to share moral attitudes and concepts of the good life, and of the rights and obligations of the individuals to the community and vice versa.

As Taiwo (1967) reckons, oral traditions form an integral part of the culture. Pre-literate societies transmitted their traditions orally from one generation to the other. The most important elements of people's cultures were preserved through word of mouth. Gikuyu community was no exception. In the Gikuyu community, the transmission of values and attitudes in the face-to-face contact remained the primary mode of cultural orientation.

Even after the invention of printing, oral literature in Africa has not been wiped out though it is less widely known and appreciated as Finnegan (1970, 1) points out. The elders in the communities continue to transmit the customs, beliefs and expectations of their people to the young ones.

In Africa, as elsewhere, oral traditions reflect the people's way of life. Oral literature results from the conscious efforts of people in the society. It is a product of people's intellectual and creative activity, and embodies in words and images the tensions, conflicts and contradictions of the community's being. It throws light on the aesthetic and imaginative efforts of the community to come to terms with its whole environment and to

produce the basic clothing and shelter, creating and recreating itself in the process as Ngugi (1981) would put it.

Oral literature is a powerful instrument in evolving the cultural echoes of a people. It has been used as a tool for socializing, and indeed, anchoring people's image of themselves.

Therefore, studying oral literature of any community is a major step in understanding the cultural values and overcoming some of the obstacles that hinder growth and development of the community in question. Study of oral literature can enhance the awareness of the cultural values and literary structures that persist as part and parcel of the understanding of the community. Oral literature can enhance our understanding of the past and contemporary social situation of the community under scrutiny. It is a conscious craft that bears aesthetic and artistic expression. It is stimulated by physical and socio-economic environment; that is, the reflection of the collective preferences of generations as well as talented people's creativity. Oral literature is dynamic for it has a history of changing when the social, economic, and political structures change and develop.

Hence, when we discuss any aspect of culture, like the woman's question, we are focusing on the activities which are derived from people's beliefs and attitudes. The beliefs and attitudes can change with the passage of time.

Culture is not static. It changes in the physical, social, political and economic environment, following changes in the modes of life of the society that in turn changes the thought and life of the people. Culture is an instrument which unites the people by enabling them to have common beliefs, actions and values.

Culture identifies a people. It is the mark of uniqueness of people's life, and embraces people's total mentality as expressed in their social institutions and instruments such as their oral literature, language and philosophy. It is manifested in the various forms of performances and creative arts such as dances, sports, music, painting, textiles and carvings among themselves and with the rest of the world.

The present study treats the concept of culture as a dynamic force that is shaping the destiny of the people in the quest for freedom, peace and development.

In reference to the Gikuyu community, the cultural values, beliefs and attitudes were expressed through their oral literature genres. Oral literature was utilized as a tool for instruction and transmission of knowledge. The knowledge transmitted emanated from oral art forms used during initiation rites, marriage, death and religious rituals, or from public forms for behaviour appraisal, criticism and control.

Oral literature played a central role in the cultural transmission of the Gikuyu people. This is because oral literature speaks of a way of life one ought to live. It outlines the social responsibilities and speaks of family loyalties. It speaks clearly and sharply with respect to the role, the relationships, and the responsibilities of the Gikuyu community. It is used as a tool to make members of a society to accept certain common values; thus, it contributes to the control and integration of feelings and beliefs. Oral literature therefore plays a decisive role in instructing the community members of the values and the socially required attitudes. The Gikuyu community's history and religious beliefs, as well as social attitudes were handed down from one generation to the other through the medium.

In recent years, a lot of research has been carried out in the discipline of oral literature. Among the researchers are Rose Mwangi (1970), Nandwa and Bukenya (1983), Kieti and Coughlin (1990), Kipuruy (1983) and Lusweti (1984).

However, most of the studies have concentrated on the collection of oral literature genres. Very little has been done in the area of relating oral literature to the society and more so in relation to the women's question in oral literature. Our aim in this study, as pointed out already, is to find out how women are depicted in oral literature and what we can deduce from the depictions.

The next chapter looks at the image of women as portrayed by the Gikuyu proverbs.

3. GIKUYU PROVERBS AND THE IMAGE OF WOMEN

This chapter examines the concept of proverbs in the Gikuyu community, their functions, and the image of women emanating from them. It goes on to make conclusions based on the emerging images of women, societal attitudes towards women, and their implications in gender relations.

3.1 Introduction

Proverbs are widely used in the Gikuyu community. The following proverb, for example, shows the importance of proverbs on bringing out the fine shades of meaning in the Gikuyu language:

Ciunagwo rukomo Kimenyi akamenya ikiunwo
(We speak in proverbs; he/she who is intelligent will understand.)

In the Agikuyu society, the term used to denote the proverb is *thimo*. This is a noun derived from the verb *guthima* which means to measure or to gauge (Mpesha 1979, 135). With regard to the term *proverb*, it refers to words that are seldom quoted in full or sometimes quoted as just a single word.

Nganga (1996) defines Gikuyu proverbs as:

Thimo ni ciugo ciaragia uhoro na njira hithe, na ii uugi muingi na munene muno na ihinya kuiguo na kumenyeka ni mundu utoi thimo. Ihuthagirwo na kwaria, na kuheana uhoro uria utekwendwo umenyeke ni andu othe aria mathikiriirie na uhoro ukwendwo kuhithwo mundu uria utoi thimo

(Proverbs are words which discuss an issue in a hidden manner with a lot of wisdom, and they are difficult to be understood by somebody who does not know them. They are used in speech and in the discussion of issues which are not supposed to be understood by everybody listening and especially those who are not familiar with proverbs.) (*Our translation*)

Munene (1995) explains that proverbs are used to pacify, or to give people food for thought. In the Gikuyu society, proverbs are very important because they are used to inculcate the Gikuyu philosophy, cultural values and attitudes, or the whole spectrum of the Gikuyu social life. Like other genres of oral literature, Gikuyu proverbs are as old as the people themselves are. Thus, Munene states (1995):

Agikuyu maturaga na ndundiro ciao cia ihooto (thimo) kuma kimerera kiao.

(Gikuyu people have had their proverbs since their origin.)

Njururi (1983) notes that Gikuyu proverbs are as old as the language itself. Among the Agikuyu people, the handing down of proverbs from one generation to another through word of mouth is a custom closely associated with the education of the young. Gikuyu proverbs are based on the day-to-day affairs of the people and hence have a close relationship to life.

Proverbs are used in many spheres of Gikuyu social life. They are used to support or reject arguments. They are used to start discussions; explanations and elaborations follow later. They are also used as granaries of advice or stores of knowledge that the Agikuyu have accumulated over the years. They are accepted by the Agikuyu community as denoting wisdom. They signify truthfulness. Though some people use proverbs in ordinary speech or casual conversation, they are not meant for use in such a manner: they are to be used mostly in important gatherings such as in settling disputes. Therefore, leaders (*athamaki*) know more proverbs than the ordinary people do as they use them in their day-to-day duties of administration in the community. They discuss people's lives in proverbs so as to conceal the contents of the discussions. They also use proverbs to display their intelligence and sober-mindedness. They use the proverbs to add flavour to their speech so that they can influence decision-making. Hence, in such circumstances, proverbs are used as a tool for oratory and enhancement of one's public image. Children from families in leadership have opportunities

of learning more proverbs than children of the ordinary folk. The proverbs are valued for the wisdom they carry in them which would help to mould people into responsible citizens as illustrated in the following example:

Ngarari ni kamena
(Discord breeds scorn.)

Such kinds of proverbs are used to "help" women avoid unnecessary disagreements, especially with their husbands. Women were further warned that:

Kirema arume ni kigariure

(That which defeats men is thoroughly tested over. That is, men are not easily defeated.)

This proverb is used to discourage women from arguing with men because they will face the consequences of men's wrath if they ever dared to oppose them. This is in view of the fact that men do not give up easily. Even when they are faced with a difficult task, they fight to the end. Women are therefore supposed to be cautious when dealing with them on account of this characteristic.

Proverbs are regarded as spears which pierce people's hearts, and it is believed that whoever is pierced cannot sleep until he/she understands the message contained in it. As observed earlier, proverbs are a difficult form of speech and people normally should struggle to understand the message contained in them. This is because some of the proverbs contain words which are no longer in use while others are expressed in archaic forms. However, some proverbs are relatively newer for they contain words which refer to events which took place after the establishment of colonial rule. All the same, the whole repertoire of Gikuyu proverbs is derived from the community's conditions of life and is based on experiences of the people.

Proverbs are based on experiences and observations of people's characteristics as they interact with their environment and with the social institutions of the Gikuyu community. The messages expressed in the proverbs give an insight into the people's attitudes to life. Proverbs are therefore considered as expressions of wisdom, justice, judgement and equity. They are viewed as small windows into the soul of people's philosophy about life.

Ng'ang'a (1996) notes that Gikuyu proverbs can be divided into three categories:

In the first category fall proverbs which are easy to understand or whose message is obvious. The following is an example of such proverbs:

Wahira ihu wi kirona niwe ukagura
(If you impregnate one with a wound, you will marry her.)

This message clearly states that if a man impregnates a wounded or disabled girl, he will be obliged to marry her. The proverb has however been extended to mean that one should be careful about making choices, especially choices which may oblige him to take certain measures.

The second category of proverbs includes those whose meaning is concealed and are difficult to interpret. An example of such proverbs is:

Ciunagwo rukombo/rukomo kimenyi akamenya ikiunwo
(We speak in proverbs, he who is intelligent will understand.)

Thirdly, are proverbs which consist of one, two or three words but talk about a comprehensive situation or a summary of a situation. An example of such proverbs is:

Ugi ugi gu
(wisdom, wisdom, no wisdom)

This proverb means that the secret has been revealed. The proverb is used to warn people who use duplicity to trick others that their tricks will sooner or later be known and they will eventually be exposed.

This chapter focuses on all the three categories of proverbs with special focus on the way women are portrayed either literally or metaphorically.

3.2 The Image of Women as Wives

In the Gikuyu society, both men and women are encouraged to get married. The wives' role is believed to be the company of men. They are expected to be good and responsible wives to their husbands. A good wife, first and foremost, is supposed to take care of her husband, attend to all his needs and desires, and then play the rest of the household roles. As a good wife, she is also expected to obey the husband, share his likes and dislikes and respect his relatives. The importance of the position held by women in the society is best captured in the following proverb:

Nyoni ya njamba ndiri gitara
(A male bird has no nest.)

This proverb shows that as far as the society is concerned, the home belongs to the woman. Various attitudes towards women seem to have stemmed from the numerous roles assigned to them by society. By the process of social conditioning or socialisation, women came to accept the social attitudes towards them. For example, they came to accept that they are inferior to men and should occupy an inferior position in society. They also came to believe that men are biologically stronger which implies that they are superior. They came to believe that since they are not endowed with the same strengths that would enable them to perform similar activities as men, men's roles are more important than theirs. The society endorsed these

beliefs by all means possible and inculcated the inferiority of women through the oral literature forms such as proverbs, songs and narratives. The distorted images of women became part of the attitudes and beliefs of the society.

3.3 The Image of Women as Mothers

Among the Agikuyu, as in other societies, the woman's primary role is that of motherhood. A woman is brought up right from childhood knowing and realising the importance of that role, and cherishing it. Hence, her training right from childhood includes this important aspect, and it is emphasised thereafter.

In the Gikuyu society, a woman is considered as a mother. As a result, she is seen as the cornerstone of the family. She forms the foundation of the homestead, and without her, the homestead is broken. As she is the homemaker, there is no home without her in the sense of Gikuyu social life. This role of the mother is well documented in Gikuyu proverbs. As a mother, a woman is supposed to cook for children as well as her husband as illustrated in the following examples:

Mundu utathiaga oigaga no nyina urugaga wega.

(The person who does not travel thinks that his/her mother is the best cook.)

Though this proverb refers to people with limited experience who assume that their position or view is the best, the message is derived from the image of a woman as a cook for her family.

Another proverb which brings out similar sentiments is:

Muria ngime ni ari mukimiri.

(He who asks for mashed food has someone to mash it for him.)

This proverb means that anyone who chooses to eat mashed food has someone else to mash it for her or him. However, according to gender roles in the Gikuyu society, the task of cooking is the woman's and hence the proverb cannot be treated as gender neutral.

Although the role of women as mothers is the cornerstone of the home and is viewed positively by the community, it has been used by the society to deny women the chance to participate in the economic development of the society. Women have been constantly reminded that their place is in the kitchen and hence they have no business participating in other areas of social life. Yet, there is ample evidence to show women's role in various aspects of the economy.

In the Gikuyu society, as in most parts of Africa, the whole of a girl's life is one long preparation for the useful role she is supposed to play. The role

pertains mainly to marriage and child bearing. Women are seen as procreators, and perhaps the mother image stems from this role. As wives and mothers, women provide their husbands and the society at large with the most important assets— children. Until he was married, a young man remained a dependant who owed total obedience and economic service to his father's household. The latter was the head and patriarch in the home.

After marriage, a man was expected to start his own homestead, cultivate his own land, and acquire his own property, including livestock. Marriage was the beginning of a man's economic emancipation. Once married, a man could control the labour and output of his wife and eventually exchange his daughters in marriage for new wives if the need arose.

Marriage imposed new roles and expectations on women. They are expected to bear children: a sacred duty of women since children are regarded as the future of a society. This perspective prevails in Gikuyu today; so, the children are believed to link one generation to the other and one clan to the other through marriage. Children bring pride and honour to a family and the whole society. So in her role as a procreator in collaboration with the man, the woman is almost worshipped, even acquires a new identity as a mother of so and so (Kenyatta 1978). After all, the survival of the whole society lies in her hands. Therefore, the woman has to be kept satisfied with her role as procreator. This role is so crucial and central to her life that if she fails to fulfil it, though giving and rearing children was a social duty for both men and women, she is considered incomplete.

In the Gikuyu society, a woman who has not produced children is embarrassingly referred to as *thaata*, which means barren woman. In traditional society and even today, women were and are blamed for childlessness in marriage. When a woman turns out to be barren, the husband has the right to divorce her and if necessary, marry another woman or other women. As Taiwo (1984) notes, childless marriages had no place in African traditional life. However, the society did everything to help a woman to fulfil her role as a procreator. For example, if she did not procreate with her husband, the husband would allow her to have sexual intercourse with other men of his age. If that failed, she would be taken to a medicine man who would try to investigate the cause of her barrenness. It is only after all avenues had been exhausted that the woman would be labelled as barren, and in most cases, divorced because of this.

The examples discussed below bring out the image of a woman as a procreator and the joys and sorrows associated with this role.

Mutumia angikura atari mwana ndangiona mutahiri mai
(The woman that gets old without bearing a child will have nobody to draw water for her; that is, she will have nobody to help her.)

The above example literally highlights the society's attitude towards motherhood. This aspect is a blessing since it brings forth children who will take care of their parents in old age. As far as the society is concerned, a woman without a child for her husband is a failure because children are perceived as belonging to a man, the clan and the society. Children are also used to enhance a man's social status. Hence, a woman who is unable to bear children is seen as a liability to the family. She is not a contributor to the general welfare of the clan. This implies that the society overplays woman's biological function of procreation.

It is important to note that only those women who were identified to be barren suffered the consequences of childless marriages, not sterile men. This is because society blames barrenness only on the woman and never on the man. Consequently, the worth of the woman in the Gikuyu society is measured in terms of her ability to give birth. In fact, women who have mothered but lost their children are treated with more sympathy than the barren ones as brought out in this proverb:

Mukuithia ari itigi kuri muthati

(One whose child has died is more worthy than a barren one.)

If a woman lives up to the social expectations of motherhood, her worth is celebrated in various ways as in the following proverb:

Kungu maitu na hunyu wake

(Behold my mother despite her shortcomings.)

This proverb emphasises the importance of a mother and the central place she occupies in the hearts of the members of her family. Despite her shortcomings, a mother is very important in the lives of the whole family. She is seen as the cornerstone of the family and therefore regarded with a lot of warmth as the above proverb shows. Gikuyu men, especially when drunk, sing boasting that they belong to their mothers.

As mothers of children, it is the women who feel the pain when children are in distress. They also bear the burden of their children who misbehave. This is shown in proverbs like:

Mwana mukigu/mwaganu aturagia nyina na maithori/kieha

(A naughty/foolish child brings grief to the mother.)

A child who does not live up to the expectations of the society either due to lack of intellect or because it does not conform to the societal code of behaviour is a disgrace to the mother. In dealing with such children, the mother is reminded to be extra vigilant as the following proverb points out:

Mureri kirimu ndaigaga muthigi thi

(One who rears a foolish child does not keep the rod down.)

This is similar to the English proverb, *Spare the rod and spoil the child*.

In the Gikuyu society, it is the woman who is rebuked for the children's failure. A woman has even more problems to deal with if she happens to have male children. This is brought out in the proverb:

Haaro ni ya muka uri ihii
(Quarrels are part of life for a woman who has sons.)

The above proverb reveals not only the mother's responsibility when children quarrel but also the attitude of society towards males. This proverb could mean that sons are troublesome, but it must be born in mind that male children are socialised to be more aggressive than female ones. Female children are expected to be docile and timid and therefore compared to their male siblings, they give their parents less trouble. Due to this expectation, a woman is expected and tends to be docile and timid. Any girl child who behaves contrary to this expectation is called *Wanja kiki*. (*Wanja*, is equivalent to the English *tomboy*)

The above expression is used to describe a girl of unfeminine behaviour. It implies that even though she is a girl, she behaves like a boy and this is a negative mark on her personality, as a woman who shows aggressiveness is frowned upon. When children misbehave or fail to live up to the expectations of society, the mother takes the blame as expressed in the following proverbs:

- 1) *Mwana wa ngari akunyaga ta nyina*
(The cub of a leopard scratches like the mother.)
- 2) *Kori kaiyaga ta nyina*
(A kid steals like the mother.)

Among the Agikuyu, a woman is charged with the responsibility of bringing up children. This is because as a mother, she spends most of her time tending to the needs of the children and moulding their character to ensure that her children conform to societal norms. As a result, if the child fails, the mother is considered to have failed. To fulfil this duty, the mother tries very hard to ensure that the children grow not only physically but also emotionally, spiritually and intellectually. She makes sure that she brings them up strictly in accordance with the customs of her people and that the children are properly introduced to the societal beliefs, values, attitudes and customs. This is because the safe and proper upbringing of children has always been the mother's main concern.

A mother uses riddles, proverbs, songs and nuptial chants to inculcate morals in the children. Examples of such proverbs include:

Cia haramu ititugaga
(Material goods amassed corruptly bring no profit.)

Gutiri muici na mucuthiriria

(There is no difference between a thief and his accomplice.)

These proverbs also show that a child learns its habits from the mother since it spends most of the time with her. This gives another image of the woman as a teacher. The education of children, especially at their tender age (the formative stage) is the responsibility of the mother. The above-cited proverbs emphasise this central role of a mother in the development of a child as she acts as a role model for the child. There are conventional and cautionary riddles, proverbs and folktales, to make women accept these roles. Conformity to societal expectations is an important aspect of traditional life. Any person who tries to upset the societal values does so at their own peril. Hence, women do everything possible to train the children to meet the societal standards; if they fail, they face the wrath of the community.

However, it is important to note that the Gikuyu society has proverbs which portray the difficulties encountered in child rearing. Such proverbs include:

Guciara kunaga irigu ngingo

(Giving birth breaks the neck of the banana plant; that is, the woman who gives birth is like the banana tree that breaks under the weight of its fruit.)

This proverb shows that maternity means pain to the mother. This attitude is captured in the following proverb, too:

Guciara ti kumia

(To give birth is not to defecate.)

This implies that having a family brings with it certain responsibilities. It also means that giving birth is not a useless task for it brings benefits of providing the parents with children who are expected to look after them in old age. However, the above proverb shows that the task of rearing and training children is demanding and therefore women have to be adequately prepared and committed in order to accomplish it.

It is interesting to note that though the society blames the mothers for the ills of their children, the same society has proverbs which show that it is not any parent's wish to bring forth children who are not well behaved. Such proverbs include:

- 1) *Guciara uru ti kwenda kwa mwene*
(No one wills to have evil offspring.)
- 2) *Kuri guciara uru ta kihia gigiciara na mutwe*
(There is giving birth badly like a sorghum which breeds through the head.)

There are women who give birth to bad children just like the sorghum that bears its fruit on the head unlike most Gikuyu crops. However, according to the Gikuyu society, since the mother was responsible for the early education

of the children, what the children practised was what they learned from her. This is implied in the following proverb:

Ngari ndioi gukunya nikuonio yonirio
(The leopard was ignorant of scratching but it was taught.)

The above proverb means that any knowledge displayed by a person must have been acquired through some form of training. In regard to children, it is assumed that they must have learnt the behaviour from the mother who is their role model and trainer. Hence, the habits of children are normally attributed to their mothers'.

This means that whatever behaviour a child manifests, it must have learned it from some source, and whatever the source, the mother is to blame for she is charged with the responsibility of moulding the behaviour of children. As a result of this ideology, the Gikuyu lump mothers and children together and the action of one automatically affects the other. They are expected to share sorrows and joys. Hence, we have proverbs such as the following:

Kugunirwo mwana no ta kugunirwo nyina
(To aid the child, is to aid the mother.)

Another proverb which shows the close relationship between the mother and the children is:

Ndundu ya nyina na mwana ndiingagirirwo
(The assembly of the mother and the child is never interfered with.)

Due to this bond between mother and child, people who interfere with the children's happiness know that they are attacking the mother. Hence, it is common to hear people making taunts such as:

Ngukuringa nyukwa aimbe nyondo
(I will hit you till your mother's breasts swell.)

This is because anything to do with children has a direct effect on the mother. No wonder there is a proverb which mourns the death of this relationship.

"Mbeca itiri mwana na nyina"
(Money does not take into account the relationship between mother and child.)

This proverb seems to have entered the Gikuyu society after money, as a medium of exchange, had come to replace barter trade. The relationship between mother and child is a very special one as already revealed above. However, the coming of the money business seems to have destroyed even the most sacred relationships. As the saying goes, *money is the root of all evils*; so, when it comes to money matters, this special relationship is often

forgotten and a child can quarrel even with the mother because of money. Another proverb which brings out the mother's image is:

Kirimu kiongaga nyina ari mukuu
(A fool sucks the mother when she is dead.)

This proverb emphasises the central role of a mother in the life of a family. A foolish person tries to derive benefits where they do not exist. Such a person will not distinguish beneficial situations from the ones that are not beneficial. This is because they have limited intelligence and hence, have no wisdom to discern situations. In order to pass this message, the image of a mother is used to imply that though a mother is expected to nourish the children with her breast milk, she cannot fulfil that role once she is dead. The above proverb emphasises that the mother's biological and social tie with her children is so deep that the death of a mother occasions untold suffering to the children especially if they are still dependent.

The mother still takes the blame if anything goes wrong even with natural characteristics like beauty. This view is well captured in proverbs like:

Muiritu njong'i akiuhwo nyina athekaga na kamwena
(When an ugly girl is being wooed the mother rejoices secretly.)

It is shown that the mother will suffer the consequences of giving birth to an ugly daughter. Hence, when a suitor appears to woo such a daughter, the mother rejoices because she would be the one to blame in case the daughter does not get a husband. Even if she gets a beautiful daughter, she will still have some problems. This sentiment is expressed in the following proverbs:

- 1) *Nyina wa thaka ndari matu*
(The mother of a beautiful girl has no ears.)
- 2) *Mwari mweru ni magambo*
(A light skinned (beautiful) girl is a problem.)

These two proverbs indicate that the mother of beautiful girls has no ears in the sense that she has to plug her ears so as to avoid hearing what people have to say about her daughters. Beautiful girls are the targets of every suitor and jealous women. Men seek for beauty as one of the characteristics for their future wives and, hence, anybody who met the beauty test is bound to have very many prospective suitors and those who do not get the girls admiration were likely to talk evil about them. Furthermore, the same girls are likely to experience rivalry among other girls of their age because of jealousy. Many Gikuyu narratives focus on problems faced by beautiful girls as they overcome the treachery and betrayal of their jealous age-mates or cruel stepmothers (Finnegan 1970, 358). In such circumstances, the mother has to avoid listening to what people say about her beautiful daughter whether positive or negative.

As minders of children, mothers are not expected to desert their homes for the sake of their children. This is clearly stipulated in the proverb below:

Muka uri mwana ndoraga
(A woman who has a child does not desert her home.)

The above proverb emphasises the self-sacrifice expected of a woman as a mother. Despite all the problems a woman may face in her home, she has to stay for the sake of her children so as to bring them up and ensure their welfare because a mother is expected to have unwavering devotion towards her children.

The mother is also seen as a bridge between the father and the children and other members of the community. This is expressed in the following proverb:

Ndugu ya mwana imatagio ni nyina
(The friendship of the child is strengthened by the mother.)

The relationship between the father and the children is determined by the relationships between the mother and the other members of the community. This is even more so with regard to the relationship between husbands and wives. If the relationship between mother and father is good, so will be the relationship between the father and the children and vice versa. Hence, the mother's image is very central in the Gikuyu social life. This view is best summed up in the proverb:

Mwana amenyagwo ni nyina
(A child is known by the mother.)

3.4 Women as Economic Assets

Apart from their domestic roles, women are also looked upon as economic assets. A woman is an economic asset for her father because the father is paid dowry when she gets married. Bride price in many African societies is regarded as a major source of family income. It is a token of a union between the two families that is meant to connect and cement their relationship, and paid by the prospective husband and his family to the bride's parents.

The two major criteria used to determine a good wife are her character which includes her behaviour and industriousness, and her physical appearance. Beautiful girls are a target for every man looking for a wife. The more beautiful a woman is, the more valuable she is to her parents. An example of such a proverb is:

Mwari mwega ahitukagira thome wa ngia
(A good /beautiful woman passes by the gate of a poor man.)

A variant of this proverb is:

Nyanja njega ithukagira thome wa ngia

(A good gourd (beer container) bypasses the gate of a poor man.)

Beer and cows were some of the commodities used in paying bride price and it is no wonder that women are normally equated with them. From the above proverbs, it is implied that a poor man cannot afford a beautiful woman because she is bound to be betrothed to the richest suitor. Propertied men end up with the most beautiful women since they are able to pay higher dowries. This is verified by the proverb below:

Mwanake wi indo ndoihanaga

(The youth who has enough to pay for his bride need not beseech her.)

It is no wonder that poor men marry when they are older. This is because their economic circumstances force them to longer bachelorhood. Girls are therefore seen as a form of investment for the parents and parents do their best to get their daughters beauty adornments such as bangles, necklaces and ochre which they smear on the hair and face. A parent will go to any length to ensure that the daughter looks beautiful. If something seems to endanger the girl's beauty and welfare, the parents will visit even a medicine man. The following proverb illustrates that the parents of a beautiful girl do not have to bother with visits to a medicine man because their daughter is sure to get a husband.

Mwari mweru ndaraguragirwo

(A beautiful girl is never treated by a medicine man.)

However, in their choice of husbands, women are discouraged from looking for handsome men. Most fathers constantly remind their daughters that:

1) *Uthaka nduriagwo*

(Beauty is not eaten.)

2) *Mundurume ti magego*

(Manhood is not determined by the teeth.)

These statements are used to encourage girls not to consider the physical appearance in their choice of husbands. No matter how ugly a man may be, he could be a target for many women who wanted to get married as long as he is wealthy. Hence, we have proverbs like the following:

Mwanake wi indo ndoihanaga

(A youth who has enough to pay for his girl's need does not need beseech her.)

The proverb implies that a youth who is well to do economically does not need to go out of his way to woo a woman because many of them would be after him on account of his economic status. Men need not be handsome in

order to get wives. As far as physical appearance is concerned, it is not considered as a criterion to judge the worth of a man. This is captured in the proverb below:

Hunyu ni umwe na arume
(Roughness is synonymous with men.)

Such proverbs are used to justify men's rough appearance. In fact, when people want to criticize women whose skin is not smooth, they compare her to an uncircumcised boy.

Ahunyakite ta kihii
(She is as rough as an uncircumcised boy.)

The essence of the above discussion is to emphasize that beauty which is natural and beyond any woman's control is used either to lower her social status or to elevate her to a higher social status depending on the man she marries. A beautiful woman has better chances of marrying a rich man than an ugly one.

Beauty alone is not enough to make a girl desirable. Other aspects of her character are also considered. Girls have to be industrious and well behaved to be able to get wealthy husbands. For example, as in many African societies, the Gikuyu strongly forbid their young boys and girls from engaging in pre-marital sexual relationships. As a matter of fact, virginity is highly rated as a virtue. Therefore, if a girl happened to get a child before marriage (which is a very rare occurrence) she can only be married to an old man as a second wife, or to an old man whose wife had passed away because no young man especially from a well to do family will marry her. A woman's chastity is therefore very important because a virgin is more valued than one who is not as illustrated by the following verse from a popular Kikuyu folk song:

Wanjiru wa Maitu
nyitia mwengu wega,
ngakwendia kindu kiritu
(Wanjiru, my sister
Tie the skirt tightly
I will betroth you
for something valuable.)

In this verse, the brother advises his sister, Wanjiru, to be careful and make sure that she guards her chastity properly so that the brother can get a higher dowry when she gets married. In the Gikuyu society, brothers also benefit from the wealth obtained from their sisters' dowries because some of this wealth would be used to pay dowries for their own wives. That is why the brother in the verse wants Wanjiru to maintain her virtue. This implies that a woman is a commodity or object whose price is negotiable depending on her state at the time of marriage.

(Ng'ang'a 1996, 61) reckons that after getting married and staying with her husband for about a week, the newly wed has to go back to her parents with a gourd of beer (*Gachohi ga gucokia muiritu gwa ithe*) – “A gourd of beer to return the girl to her father”. During that time, her status of chastity/morality is established. If she is found to be a virgin at the time of her marriage, the beer in the gourd is mixed with goats droppings (*mbimbicia mburi*) indicating that she was a virgin worthy of being married and her father has a right to claim more dowry because his daughter is chaste and honourable. However, if she is not a virgin, charcoal is put in her beer to show that she is already utilised and therefore was not chaste and her father has no business to ask for more dowry. The newly wed will be accompanied by a young girl carrying a small basket full of bananas, babies' food in the Kikuyu society, which indicates that the bride should have gotten a baby for she was a woman and not a girl. Women who lost their virginity before marriage are therefore considered a disgrace to their age mates, parents and the whole society. In the Gikuyu society, girls are not expected to indulge in premarital sex. If they indulge in such unacceptable social behaviour, their value diminishes greatly and their character is ridiculed as the proverb below shows:

Wega wariire karigu
(Pleasure destroyed the uncircumcised girl.)

This proverb means that if a woman is the type that does not guard her chastity, she will eventually find herself mothering a child. This woman, as noted earlier, would never expect to get married to a bachelor as a first wife. She could only be married to a man who had another wife/wives or a widower. She was derogatorily referred to as a *gicokio* which means a reject or one who has been defiled. The term was used to refer to divorcees. The kind of punishment a man faces, such as being ostracised by his age mates is not as harsh as that which the woman faces. Even the man who is responsible for violating the girl's chastity could insist on marrying a virgin.

Another sense in which women are depicted as economic assets is through the institution of polygamy or the marriage of several women to one man at the same time. Polygamy is usually taken as evidence of a man's wealth. As noted before, Gikuyu wives are acquired through the payment of dowry or bride price which is usually measured in terms of livestock such as cows and goats, and even in terms of beer. In this sense, a woman was basically regarded as a thing to be traded in. She is objectified. She has very few rights as an individual in Gikuyu society. It is either her family (parents) or the family to which she is married that controls her productive and reproductive outputs. The exchange of women for bride price between one family and another is to be understood as part of the total exchange system involving economic transactions. The alliance contracted between the two families is asymmetrical and matches the whole fabric of the Gikuyu society which is founded on basic premises of inequality, differentiation,

super-ordination and subordination. For example, the society is stratified according to one's economic power. There are the rich and the poor. This is clearly stated in the proverbs:

1. *Itonga ikiaria, ngia ndingimira*
(When rich people are talking, a poor person cannot blow his/her nose.)
2. *Uthuri wa gitonga ndunungaga*
(A rich man's fart does not smell.)

In the first proverb, it is clear that poor people are not given a chance to express their views especially before rich people. The second proverb indicates that the habits of the rich, no matter how unbecoming they may be, are not scrutinised because their positions and status give them licences to do whatever they want. The stratification of the society is extended to gender relations.

By paying bride price, a man acquires full rights over his wife/wives as well as the children. In the light of this, bride price is seen as an indemnity paid to the girl's father for the loss of a member. This is clearly captured in the proverb that follows:

Igitunywo mwana ni iikagirio mungu
(When a child from a monkey is taken away, it is given a young gourd.)

This proverb means that in order to retrieve a baby from a monkey which often snatches babies who are kept under the shade while their mothers work on the farm, one has to give it a young gourd so that it relinquishes the baby. This shows that you should be careful when people offer you a "bribe" since they may want something precious from you in return. It also shows that once a price has been offered, liberty is compromised. This proverb is frequently used during marriage negotiations among the Gikuyu people. The future bride's kinsmen insist that in order for them to relinquish the girl and her rights, they should be compensated adequately. A marriageable woman is regarded as a liquid asset. It is therefore common to offer Gikuyu girls for marriage to the highest bidder. Mugo (1982, 6) reckons that:

the females were treated with great respect and caution. They were the means by which a certain family would have expected a little bit of more income, in the form of dowry. Sometimes the parents would be tempted to sell their daughters to the highest bidder.

In some other cases, a woman is equated with cows: a woman and a cow are given an equal economic status and one is seen as an equivalent to the other. For example, if one incurs a debt whose value is equivalent to that of a cow and if the debtor has a marriageable daughter, one could offer her hand in marriage to the creditor as a form of compensation. In other cases,

if a father is given material support, he could offer his daughter as a form of paying off. The relationship between two families based on marriage contract is a reflection of the commercial exploitation of women. Women are looked upon as articles of trade whose value is determined by other parties. Generally, it is a reflection of gender stratification where women are looked upon as inferior. The commercial element in the dowry is clearly captured in the proverb:

Cia uthoni ciambaga nguhi

(Goods to be used in payment of dowry start from small quantities. The settling of a dowry is done gradually.)

Though the above proverb could mean that the building of strong relationships start slowly, it could also show that the bride price is not likely to be settled fast and could take a long time and therefore one is expected to do the payment gradually. This shows that a girl is an investment whose returns will be accessed for a long time. In fact, families prefer those who pay the dowry in instalments rather than the ones who pay in lump sum. This is revealed in the proverb:

Muracia umwe utatira

(One who pays dowry daily without missing.)

This proverb show that the social bond developed between two families through marriage is never to be terminated. However, it could also show that once a woman is married, her family will be assured of economic benefits from the family she is married to and their relationship is continuous.

The worth of women and material possessions is seen as equal, and one with many daughters could see the number of cows or goats one could expect from prospective husbands. Conversely, one who has cattle could see the number of wives one could anticipate marrying. One has to forego the cows in order to acquire wives. Hence the proverb:

Aka na ng'ombe matiri ndugu

(Women and cows are not friends.)

The same virtue which sees women as goods of trade also encourages men to work hard to acquire wealth to get wives. Lazy people are castigated since they are not expected to get wealth to marry many wives. This is clearly stipulated in the proverb:

Ng'ombe ndionagwo ni ithayo

(A cow is never acquired by an indolent person.)

As noted earlier, poor men could not expect to acquire wives because of the reasons expressed in the following proverb:

Mwana ndaheanagwo

(A child is never given away.)

In his attempt to explain this proverb, Barra (1960, 74) says, "The proverb is used especially by a father to the young man wanting to marry his daughter. It must be born in mind that the Kikuyu girl is not given to her husband but she is bought by him."

It may be argued that Barra's views are a reflection of colonial mentality and ignorance of the significance of bride price. Bride price serves many purposes such as establishing relationship between the two families, and acting as a sign of commitment on the part of the husband to the girl he intended to marry. The child is valued and cannot be given away just like that. Nevertheless, women in a polygamous society are treated as marks of wealth, prestige and economic assets for the man.

3.5 The Image of Women as Stubborn, Destructive and Dangerous

In the Gikuyu society, women are generally portrayed as people who can be very destructive, dangerous, and unreasonable. There are several proverbs in the language that point to this attitude. This image of women as a dangerous element is seen in the proverb:

Aka eri ni nyungu igiri cia urogi
(Two wives/women are two pots of poison.)

This proverb could be interpreted that two women, especially co-wives will always quarrel for they are competitors for one husband. This rivalry arises from a competitive situation.

The wisdom in African culture expresses that polygamy has social and economic advantages. It is also portrayed as an institution which is accepted by both men and women. Kenyatta (1938) reckons that women in Gikuyu society would labour to get cows and money to be used as dowry by their husbands to acquire more wives. It is expected that women who would go to the pains of assisting their husbands in acquisition of new wives would live in harmony with them. Hence, the picture created is that women should calmly agree to share their husbands and show no feelings of jealousy. However, this rosy image of polygamy is negated by the proverb quoted above. There were many reasons why the Gikuyu people practised polygamy. Among them are:

- (1) To increase labour force. It has already been noted that the more a man prospered in terms of land and livestock, the more wives who would look after the animals and farm on the land he acquired. Kabetu (1961, 14) reckons that in marrying new wives, men looked for farmers, especially hard working ones.
- (2) To subsidise each other sexually. According to the Gikuyu culture and beliefs, a woman is not expected to have any sexual relationship with her husband while she is pregnant or lactating. In such cases, a man is expected to meet his sexual needs by making

love with the other wives who are not in a similar state. Once a woman gets pregnant, she cannot have sexual relationship with the husband until the child is born, weaned, and until she is old enough to deliver food to the father. Also after reaching menopause, women are not expected to make love with the husband unless it is for ritual purposes like cleansing. This is clearly stipulated in the proverb:

Muka mukuru acokagirirwo na gikuu
(One goes back to an old wife during bereavement.)

Hence, men marry young wives to satisfy their sexual needs after retiring the old ones.

- (3) Polygamy also serves to increase the number of children in the family.

Children are a mark of wealth and prestige and hence each man strives to have as many children as possible. These could only be acquired through polygamy (c.f. Kabetu 1982).

- (4) Polygamy could also be practised to fill the gaps in the gender of children. For example, if one wife has only girls, the man will marry another wife to beget sons. In addition, if a man marries a barren woman, he can marry another wife to beget children with her.

Despite these reasons for polygamy, the above proverb emphasises that trouble is always expected in a household where there are more than one wife or woman. Women are portrayed as people who cannot deal with each other sensibly and will therefore brew trouble all the time. The imagery used here of two pots of poison brings out the idea that women can be very dangerous, almost lethal in their rivalry. The evil nature of the women's character is often emphasised in Gikuyu proverbs and other genres of oral literature. Hence, it is stressed that the more wives there are in a household, the more trouble is expected. Despite this state of affairs, the Gikuyu have a proverb which stresses the disadvantages of a monogamous marriage.

Mutumia umwe ni rigu wa gatema.
(One wife is the last morsel of food you take when you have dysentery.)

This proverb shows that although polygamy has problems, the society values it more than monogamy. Monogamy is seen as portending more ills than polygamy. The above proverb shows that a man with one wife is like a person who takes his last piece of food when in diarrhoea, which implies that death was eminent after that. Probably, this attitude is propagated because society looks at many wives as a sign of wealth since poor men have no chance of acquiring many wives. Hence, proverbs such as the following sanction polygamy:

Gutiri njamba ya mwera umwe
(There is no cock which belongs to one hen.)

Certain practices within the Gikuyu culture also portray women as people who are unreasonable. This view is perpetuated through the proverb:

Haro ni ya muka uri thiiri
(Quarrels are part of a woman who is in debt, or a woman in debt is a quarrelsome woman.)

The proverb shows that a woman is a less responsible person because she hides behind her bad moods in order to escape her creditors. Unlike men, women are seen as bad debtors and the warning being sounded here is that one should never trust a woman to honour her debt because she is not only unreliable but also unreasonable. According to Gikuyu culture, when one incurs a debt, one is expected to pay back.

Kuria thiiri ni kuriha
(The way of settling a debt is paying it off.)

Hence, it is irresponsible for women not to honour their debt for that is an indication of irresponsible behaviour. This attitude denied women credit facilities because they are not trusted to repay their debts.

Another proverb that emphasises the image of a woman as destructive, dangerous, and unreasonable is the one that states:

Giathi githaragio ni gaka kamwe
(An assembly can be spoilt by one small woman.)

A variant of this proverb is:

Gaka karia kahunyuku niko gatharithagia giathi
(The small rough woman is the one who causes the destruction of an assembly.)

This proverb points out that a single woman is enough to disrupt an orderly gathering by creating chaos and destruction. The use of a diminutive form *gaka*, small woman, stresses the fact that a woman may be insignificant in terms of size and appearance but she can be very dangerous and destructive. She may be insignificant as far as the society is concerned but the effects of her cunning and scheming nature can be disastrous. The possibility of a woman creating chaos and misrule in man's orderly life is also illustrated by the proverb:

Njamba ya mundurume irundagwo ni aka
(A warrior's downfall is caused by women.)

Although this proverb could mean that men are weak and women are strong, it could also be understood as suggesting that women are cunning and dangerous. The proverb reminds us of the story of Delilah and Samson

in the Bible. Samson was a powerful and successful warrior but a woman, Delilah, caused his downfall and destruction.

Apart from being destructive, women are portrayed as stubborn. This aspect of their personality is brought out in the proverb:

Kiringiri gia aka ni rwenji rukirega
(To force a woman to do something she doesn't like is like forcing a blunt razor to shave.)

The above proverb shows that women cannot be convinced to do something that they are against irrespective of whether it is good or bad. They are portrayed as being as stubborn as mules. This implies that once women form an opinion, it would take a lot of persuasion to change their mind or to make them think otherwise. Some say that the above proverb depicts women positively for they emerge as people who are principled, strong willed, and full of determination. This view solidifies the fact that proverbs can be given different interpretations. Though this may mean that women are strong willed, which is positive, their inflexibility is negative. This stubborn, dangerous and destructive nature of women is further stressed in the proverb:

Marakara ma arume matituraga ta ma aka
(Men's anger does not last as long as women's.)

It is commonly believed that when men are angry, they act immediately and their anger is let off and forgotten. This indicates that men settle their disputes faster. This is revealed in the proverb below:

Mwaki wa arume ndutogaga keru
(Men's fire does not smoke twice.)

This proverb shows that men sort their issues fast without brooding or delaying, unlike women who tend to keep their anger boiling inside them for a long time and as a result, become quarrelsome and vengeful. This fact, as emphasised in the proverb, is used to stress the negative nature of women. It suggests that they are potentially dangerous, destructive and vengeful because they nurse and harbour their anger longer than men. This attitude is also brought out in another proverb.

Mbaara ya aka ndiri horohio
(Women's quarrels are endless).

This proverb also stresses the unforgiving nature of women. Since women can keep their anger inside them for long, it makes them engage in endless fights and quarrels. As a result, their fights and quarrels are not taken seriously. This is brought out in the proverb:

Mbaara ya aka ndiri ng'ondu
(Women's quarrel has no sheep. Sheep were used in payment of fines.)

Since women's quarrels are incessant, nobody pays much attention to them. They are seen as part of women's nature and therefore the Gikuyu society never fines people for such fights. However, if men quarrel or fight, there are specific fines to be paid in sheep or cows because this is regarded as a serious matter. It is believed that men do not quarrel unless there is a serious reason, unlike women for whom quarrels are considered the order of the day. This reflects the attitude the society have towards women. They are considered emotionally weaker since they cannot subdue their anger or other emotions and therefore look for outlets to vent their emotions. However, men are displayed as people who have a higher capacity of suppressing their emotions without letting them spill over.

3.6 Image of Women as Unreliable and Unpredictable Beings

Another negative image that emerges from Gikuyu proverbs is that of women as unreliable and unpredictable in their actions and behaviour. This image can be illustrated in the proverb below:

Aka matiri cia ndiro no cia nyiniko
(Women have no upright words, only crooked ones.
Women conceal all they know not.)

This proverb is used to state that women never keep secrets and they seldom tell the truth. The attitude about women expressed in this proverb is used by the society to keep important matters of society from women. Since women cannot keep secrets or tell the truth, they are not to be trusted. This is captured in the proverb:

Aka matigagwo ndundu
(Women are never confided to.)

The rationale is that women cannot equal with men, especially where important matters are concerned for they cannot keep secrets. This proverb can be compared to the one below:

Cia mucii ti como
(Home affairs are not divulged.)

A variant of this proverb is:

Kagutwi ka mucii gatihakagwo ageni
(Domestic issues are not to be divulged to visitors.)

Gikuyu people have the ideology that domestic issues should never be discussed in public circles. This is clearly stated in the proverb:

Cia mucii itiumagirio magiri-ini
(Family affairs should never be taken outside the boundary
of the homestead.)

Women are seen as people capable of divulging even the innermost secrets of the home, thus jeopardising this principle. They are therefore unreliable and untrustworthy unlike men as shown in the proverb.

Cia athuri ni thure
(Elders activities are well thought out.)

Men knew what to discuss in what forum but women could not be trusted to do the same.

Another proverb that emphasises the unpredictability and unreliability nature of women is:

Gitiiro kia muka wene gitikagio athii
(One does not respond to the dance of a strange woman until she has left.)

Gitiiro is a group dance for women where one group challenges the other to get up and dance. When the challenging group finishes its part of singing and dancing, the other group responds to the challenge and this can go on for some time. The proverb therefore means that one does not respond to the challenge of a stranger, especially if the stranger is a woman because you do not know her intentions. Similar sentiments are expressed in the proverb:

Aka a kwene ni irima iriku
(Strange women are a deep hole.)

The above proverb reveals the suspicion with which strangers or outsiders are treated, especially if they are women they are believed to pose a danger or threat to the welfare of the community. Therefore, strangers, especially women are not to be trusted because one would never be sure of their real intentions. Strange women especially are not to be trusted because they could be used by the enemy to lure men and subdue them. Women's untrustworthiness is also expressed in the following proverb:

Muici na mundu muka atigaga kieha akua.
(He who steals with a woman will live in fear until she dies).

The proverb highlights the Gikuyu belief that a woman can never be trusted and if she knows your secret, you will live in fear for the whole of your life. This is because she could let the secret out any time. The proverb portrays women as untrustworthy and unreliable, and it implies that a man is more reliable and trustworthy. This aspect is captured in the following proverbs:

- 1) *Uhii ni umagwo no uka ndumagwo*
(One outlives boyhood, but one never stops being a woman.)

- 2) *Muici na mundu muka akenaga akua no muici na kihii akenaga kiarua.*
 (One who steals with a woman will live in fear till she dies, but one who steals with an uncircumcised boy lives in fear until the boy is circumcised.)

These two proverbs dwell on the negative aspects of a woman. A woman will always be a woman, untrustworthy and unpredictable. However, a boy grows up to be a man and a man is trustworthy and reliable. It is interesting to note that both girls and boys undergo circumcision as initiation from childhood to adulthood. However, circumcision seems to change only the boys to become mature and responsible adults. Other proverbs which show the static nature of women are:

- 1) *Mureri kihii ni mwirereri mundurume*
 (He who rears a lad rears a man for himself.)
 2) *Muruithia arume ari kihii*
 (The circumciser of men was himself uncircumcised.)
 3) *Kiguta kia mundurume ni kigutukaga, no kia mundu muka gitigutukaga*
 (A lazy man ceases to be lazy but a lazy woman never ceases to be lazy.)

These proverbs show that as a boy grows up, he will mature and become a man just as the circumciser was once uncircumcised but was circumcised to become a man. However, women never change even if they become circumcised and hence they have no age group as indicated in the following proverb:

Atumia matiri rika
 (Women have no age group.)

This could mean that women have natural traits while men have cultural traits which can change. A lazy man can change to become diligent, but a lazy woman would always remain lazy. This attitude explains the reason why men were very particular on marrying hard working women because if they marry a lazy one they will be doomed for the rest of their lives for the belief is that women never change. The unreliable nature of women is also revealed in the proverb:

Mundu muka na iguru matimenyagirwo
 (A woman and the sky/weather are unpredictable.)

The woman's behaviour is as erratic as that of the weather. Like the weather which can change anytime to bring out sunshine, rain or wind, the woman can also change any time. The proverb emphasises the idea that a woman is unreliable because one can never predict her behaviour. She changes like the weather without any warning.

In order to curb this erratic behaviour that stems from the fact that she cannot be trusted, the society has proverbs like:

Nyamacucu, kanua ni koinagirwo ithigi.
(Woman, remember that the mouth is sometimes covered with a twig.)

The proverb warns women that they should learn to keep some secrets. The Gikuyu believe that since a woman cannot be trusted to keep secrets, her words cannot be taken seriously until they stand the test of time. The following proverb illustrates this:

Kia mundu muka gitikagio kiarara.
(A woman's word is not believed until the following day.)

Because of this view about women, society tends to ignore women completely. They are neither consulted nor trusted even with issues which concern them- issues such as family control. Women are expected to be passive consumers of male policies and decisions. This is expounded in the following proverb:

Waturwo thingira nduregagwo nyumba
(Whatever is decided in the hut (men's house) is never objected in the house (women's residences).)

A variant of this proverb is:

Ciaririo thingira itiregagwo nyumba
(Whatever is discussed in the hut is not rejected in the house.)

However, it is important to point out that women are not totally excluded from making decisions though in most cases men do not expect opposition from women on any decision they make.

3.7 Image of Women as the Inferior and Weaker Sex

Among the Gikuyu, as in many other African societies, the division of labour is gender based. Each member of the family knows their role and responsibility in the economic production and distribution of family resources to ensure the material prosperity of the group (Kenyatta 1938, 53). The "light" duties such as cutting grass, thatching and plastering the walls are the work of women. The men do the heavy work of clearing the fields and breaking the virgin ground for cultivation of crops. Division of labour has symbolism attached to people. There are certain symbolisms attached to gender roles beyond the biological disposition. The division of labour among the Gikuyu is carried out on the premise that women are the "weaker" sex and men are the "stronger" sex. Women's duty is reproduction, and rearing of children and other domestic duties. This ideology has resulted in social attitudes in which people believe that males are supreme and females subordinate. This led to the coinage of a number

of proverbs that emphasise the difference between men and women. The following proverb for example points to the weakness and inferiority of women.

Mutumia na kionje ni undu umwe
(A woman and an invalid are the same.)

The comparison here to an invalid refers to a woman's physical and mental state. In war, for example, nobody will be expected to fight women because that is not heroic. Similarly, no man is expected to argue with women since men are expected to lead in policy decisions, especially those pertaining to community such as entering into war or settling of legal disputes.

Some argue that the equating of women to invalids is meant to protect them, especially during wars. Gikuyu and Maasai communities used to fight especially over cattle and during such fights women and children were protected and they were always seen as weaklings who should not be involved in wars. Hence, there are proverbs such as:

Mundu muka ndoragagwo
(A woman must never be killed.)

This proverb is used to show that a woman is a weak and helpless creature and therefore must be protected, as she is incapable of defending herself. The woman must also be protected because she is the procreator and if she is killed the process of procreation will be endangered. She is the lifeline of the community. This is because the society looks upon the woman as the symbol of fertility and vitality. That is why female animals are usually not slaughtered for meat until they are too old to give birth. This view is best captured in the proverb:

Mundu utathiaga athinjaga mwati
(A person who does not travel slaughters a virgin ewe.)

Only someone whose knowledge is limited and hence acts out of ignorance can do this. Society's position concerning women is that the woman is weak and vulnerable though she has the central part to play in ensuring the continuation of the human species. For this reason, during a war, women will be taken away while men are killed. For the same reason, women in the Gikuyu society are never allowed to go to the battlefield.

Atumia matithiaga ita
(Women never go to war.)

Women and children have to be protected at all costs. Accordingly, women are not sent to places where trouble is likely to occur. For example, women should not be sent to collect debts as the following proverb shows:

Mundu muka ndatumagwo thiri-ini
(A woman is not sent to collect a debt).

Another reason why a woman could not be sent to collect a debt is probably because she cannot be trusted as some Gikuyu proverbs allege. An example of such a proverb is:

Aka matigagwo ndundu
(Women are not confided in.)

Probably, a woman could not be wise enough to know how to go about asking the debtors to pay up.

In contrast to this weak image of a woman, men are portrayed as strong, brave and assertive. This image comes out well in proverbs such as:

Mureranirwo na ihii ndahomokaga/ndabuaga
(A girl who is brought up among boys does not improve in health.)

This proverb hints that since boys are aggressive and fast in their activities, they eat faster and hence eat more and therefore a girl brought up among them becomes weak because she will be under-nourished. This is because her weakness will not allow her to compete with boys and therefore she will not grow up healthy. The view that men are stronger is also brought out in the proverb below:

Mumbia arume omburagwo na njuguma
(One who refuses something offered by men gets beaten with clubs.)

This proverb shows that when women are dealing with men, they are expected to be agreeable for if they are not, they are likely to get hurt because men do not accommodate any nonsense, least of all from women. Men's superior strength is also highlighted in the proverbs:

1. *Mwana ndahuragwo ithe ari ho*
(The child is not beaten when the father is present.)
2. *Mwana wi na ithe ndanyuaga muma*
(The child who has a father takes no oath (for the father defends him and if necessary takes the oath himself instead of the son.)

The above proverbs emphasise the fact that the man, being strong, is capable of defending his children whenever the need arises, unlike a woman who cannot do so on account of her weakness.

In view of the above, the society took advantage of the biological differences between men and women to place women in a disadvantaged position. The roles performed by women are therefore looked down upon as inferior. The roles played by men became the most important and superior ones. This discrimination against the roles played by women, and exaltation of the ones played by men is illustrated in the following proverb:

Mutumia ndaturaga mutwe na ndaikagia ndahi ndua

(A woman does not split the head (of the slaughtered goat) nor does she dip the cup into the beer-pot because both are men's jobs.)

This proverb means that some duties are assigned to men while others are assigned to women. As this proverb shows, the duty of splitting the heads of slaughtered animals, especially cows and goats is done by men, and so is that of checking whether the brew is ready. This could imply that women's sense of judgement could not be relied upon where important matters were concerned. For instance, widows have to rely on their brothers-in-law to perform such tasks for them because the society will never allow a woman to get involved in such activities. It is also important to note that those who perform such tasks in their homes are perceived as the heads of households even when they are widowed.

The society uses these kinds of proverbs to deny women of any participation in important matters concerning the society. Such proverbs are also used to deny women meat from some parts of animals and reserve such meat for the males. These meats included ribs, legs, and African sausages (*mitura*). Women and girls are mostly given meat from the stomach and intestines while the boys are given the neck. In the same way, women are denied beer except in rare occasions and specific ages when men felt women could now handle beer as "men". It is only women who are past menopause and whose sons are circumcised or married who are allowed to drink since they are through with their reproductive roles.

Other proverbs that emphasise the inferiority of women in the society include:

Gutiri ii kahii itakarugwo mutwe

(There is no household with a male child where a head will not be cooked.)

The implication in this proverb is that a household with a boy, no matter what problems they go through, has hopes.

The preoccupation in Gikuyu and many African societies on the continuity of the family line is not just with a desire for children but a preference for sons. A high premium is put on male children in Gikuyu society as shown by the following proverbs:

- 1) *Mwana wa kahii ni igiri ria mucii*
(A boy child is the hedge of the home.)
- 2) *Mwanake ni kienyu/githendu kia Ngai*
(A young man is a chip of God.)

These proverbs show that male children are more celebrated. Boys are seen as part of the divine plan of God. The proverb originates from the fact that

young circumcised men in the Gikuyu community are greatly respected. The Gikuyu people consider male children more important than female children because they would not leave their homesteads as girls do when they get married. They remain at home and marry to perpetuate the family lineage, unlike women who are seen as sojourners destined to join other families.

Mundu muka ni munoria/mutuga kwene
(A woman benefits others.)

Men are seen as insiders who will remain in the households/homesteads. To the Agikuyu, life begins at immortality and ends in immortality. A man who begets daughters only feels he has no continuity. Girls are seen as people who go to build other men's immortality rather than their own fathers'. It is no wonder then that a woman's main role to her husband lies in her ability to ensure his immortality by bearing him male offspring to ensure the continuity of his line and hence a boy child is seen as the security of his father's homestead.

A boy is seen as the symbol of protection, security and permanency. He is also seen as the provider of the family. This is because in the traditional Gikuyu society, one of the jobs of men is to provide the family with meat. This is done mainly through the keeping of livestock, which is mainly men's duty. A boy is therefore considered as a future provider of the family. A family without a son is regarded as lacking in a future provider since girls could not undertake such roles of protecting, providing, and continuing the fathers' family line. Boys are therefore preferred to girls as far as the family welfare is concerned.

Another saying which diminishes the worth of women as compared to that of men is:

"Gwethera gitahi muka"
(To get the belly a wife/woman.)

This saying implies that there is parallelism between getting a man a wife, and getting something to eat. Just as food satisfies the belly, the woman satisfies the needs of a man. Such needs include social material, and sexual satisfaction. A woman is seen as an object to satisfy the needs of a man just like food satisfies the belly whenever one is hungry. This expression brings out another aspect of a woman as a man's object who should be ready to meet all his needs. This is also brought out in the following proverb:

Muka wa mwathi ahingaga na kuguru etereire kigurumuki oke
(The hunter's wife, awaiting her husband's return, closes the door only with her foot; leaves the door unbolted so that her husband may enter quickly with his prey.)

The above proverb shows that a wife has to bear with the responsibilities of her husband since they also fall squarely on her shoulders. She has to bear his absence and be ready for his return at any time and that is why she is

expected to close the door with her leg awaiting her husband's return. This means that if the husband is away, a wife cannot sleep soundly lest the husband comes and he has no one to open for him. Hence, she needs to be alert so as to provide the necessary service to the husband in his hour of need.

A woman is not just inferior to a man; she is also part of his property. This view is well stipulated in the following proverb:

Aka na ng'ombe matiri ndugu
(Wives/women and cows have no friendship.)

According to the ideology expressed in the above proverb, there are things that friends can share freely but a wife and cattle are not some of them. This indicates that wives and cattle are some of the most precious properties for a man and it is no wonder that a man's wealth is measured in terms of the number of cows and wives he owns. Hence, women and cows are seen as commodities whose value is at par. For a Gikuyu man, there can be no ground for friendship with one who seeks to deprive you your land, cattle or women. The image brought out here is that of a woman as the man's valuable asset.

That a woman is seen as a sexual object for the man is also captured in the following proverb:

Muka mukuru acokagirirwo na gikuu
(A man goes back to an old wife when death occurs.)

When a wife is past childbearing age, the husband rarely goes to her hut for sexual satisfaction. This gratification will be provided by the younger wives. However, when death occurs in the family, the husband has to engage in ritual sex with his old wife to protect the family from further loss and to cleanse the homestead. The proverb therefore emphasises the fact that it was only in special circumstances such as when death occurs in the family that a man should visit his old wife for sexual purposes. What is implied is that an old woman/wife is no longer useful as a sexual partner of the husband but when tradition requires it, she could be used to fulfil the social duty of cleansing the homestead from evil spirits, especially from spirits of death.

The image of women as weaker and inferior sex is best summarised in the proverb:

Arume ti aka
(Men are not women.)

This proverb stresses the fact that men and women are different and their differences should be respected. However, the proverb covers differences beyond the biological level. It also covers differences expected between the

two sexes in the social sphere. This is apparent when we consider that the proverb is never used the other way round.

Aka ti arume
(Women are not men.)

The proverb therefore emphasises the negative characteristics of women and cautions that these are absent in men. Such characteristics traditionally associated with women include cowardice, unpredictability and stupidity. The proverbs discussed above have brought out these characteristics, revealing the attitude of the Gikuyu society towards women. When one uses the above proverb, one is saying that men unlike women do not possess the negative characteristics associated with women.

The contempt with which weakness of women is treated is demonstrated in the following proverb.

Igukura iriagwo iguku ni aka
(Once old, its hump is eaten by women.)

This proverb means that the hump of an old bull is eaten by women. According to Barra (1960, 22), the hump is a favourite morsel for young men when the bull is young. However, if it is old, women eat it. He continues to give an English equivalent of this proverb which says, *Rubbish is women's portion*.

According to the Gikuyu culture, the meat of a bull or ox hump is a delicacy, especially for young men whom, as pointed earlier, are regarded with awe and reverence for they are part of divinity as implied in the proverb:

Mwanake ni kienyu kia Ngai
(A young man is a chip of God.)

However, the bull is a very fierce animal and can only be handled by strong and young men. The proverb therefore brings out the fact that when a bull gets old, it becomes so harmless that even women who are traditionally believed to be weak can take care of it. This is because the fury of the bull abates with age, rendering it weak and therefore incapable of resisting those who the society considers weak. Hence, this proverb also perpetuates the ideology of the woman as the weaker sex.

3.8 Conclusion

The images created through the Gikuyu proverbs as discussed so far clearly depict women as inferior to men, especially in their physical and intellectual capacity.

From the study of the proverbs, it is obvious that the society has given men power to control the social, economic and political structures of the

community. This power has been used in the image formation among the community members. Women's images seem to emanate from the social roles and their position in the society. In the agricultural sector, they are treated as an asset because of their cheap labour. The more land, goats, cows, and sheep a man acquires, the more wives a man marries so as to increase his labour force. Kenyatta (1938, 176) notes that the wealth accrued through the woman's sweat is used by the husband to pay dowry for new wives. It is even clear from the proverbs that women and cattle are symbols of prestige and comprise the most valuable assets a man treasures. Hence, men use the wives who are seen as symbols of social status as ladders in advancing themselves economically, socially and politically. A man who cannot run his house effectively is never given a public office.

From the proverbs studied, the only positive image of women is that of a mother. However, even this one leaves a lot to be desired. The mother figure is treated as sacred, an idol which is almost worshipped. However, through the images in the proverbs, the mother has a lot of problems which emanate from her role as a mother. The society blames her for the mistakes that are committed by her children. She is even supposed to persevere even if the husband mistreats her because she is a mother and a mother cannot desert her children. This shows that no matter what happens in her home, the woman is not expected to leave her home for the sake of her children.

From the analysis of the images of women in the Gikuyu proverbs, it is clear that women are depicted positively only as mothers; otherwise, they are seen as dangerous, stubborn and unreliable to name but just a few of the negative attributes associated with their personality. They are also portrayed as incapable of keeping secrets. As Kabira (1993, 104) rightly states, "For a society to depict a category of its people in this manner, there must be a good reason. Wives are seen as a great threat to male dominance and therefore, there is need to keep them down."

Proverbs therefore emerge as an ideological tool which the society uses to regulate roles and behaviour of its members and they are used to make gender inequalities look natural and acceptable to all the members and also to make them look unchangeable.

4. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN GIKUYU ORAL NARRATIVES

One major problem encountered in the study of oral literature is the question of classification. Many researchers in oral literature find it difficult to solicit data using classification since the categories the researcher uses may not sometimes be compatible with the categories the community has. For example, Gikuyu oral literature has the following genres:

<i>Ng'ano</i>	–	folktales, narratives
<i>Nyimbo</i>	–	songs
<i>Marebata</i>	–	poetry
<i>Ndai</i>	–	riddles
<i>Thimo</i>	–	proverbs

The genre of *Ng'ano* (folktales and narratives) is the focus of this chapter. *Ng'ano* in Gikuyu comprises of two sub-genres, namely

- 1) *Ng'ano cia marimu* (ogre narratives) and
- 2) Historical narratives

These two sub-genres are usually referred to as prose narratives. Traditionally, these were stories which were handed down from one generation to the other through verbal means of communication.

Though prose narratives are told by individual oral artists, they are well known in the community. The function of a story depends mainly on what prompted a person to tell it. The function of stories has been used as a way of classifying narratives. According to functions, we have sub genres such as legends, myths, trickster stories, etc.

For the purpose of this report, I am concerned with the portrayal of women in the Gikuyu community. The sub-genres which are ideal as far as the portrayal is concerned are:

- 1) Myths
- 2) Legends
- 3) Ogre tales
- 4) Human tales

4.1 Myths and Legends

Myths are a form of narratives that are told in a society in order to explain a historical reality. Myths are narratives often created to justify a certain reality. Some myths embody customs that are still very strongly observed. Others serve the interest of community by justifying good as well as bad behaviour.

Myths are stories which are believed to be true. They are concerned with the origin of things. Myths are told in order to educate and socialize children. They are used to transmit moral lessons and also to warn people not to break the rules of the community.

Myths and legends are generally associated with historical facts. They are explicitly or implicitly believed by the society. They express social forces, laws, traditions as well as cosmic forces surrounding the community.

In Gikuyu, there are many myths; a case in point is the myth about the origin of Gikuyu community from Gikuyu and his wife, Mumbi. For the purpose of this study, we will only deal with the myths that explain the origin of the patrilineal society among the Agikuyu. These myths and legends serve certain functions in the society. They serve to justify the past and perpetuate the status quo as in the myth that explains the patrilineal nature of the Gikuyu society.

In this myth, women are supposed to have been the original rulers and were said to have been very cruel and unsympathetic to their men. They ruled with an iron hand; they were cruel, merciless and unjust: they made men do everything. Men cultivated, planted, harvested, prepared the food and babysat (jobs traditionally meant for women). It is implied that women did nothing: hence, they are given the image of an idle or lazy person.

In addition to all the tasks above, men did their jobs of hunting and protecting the community, too. Men were overburdened. During women's rule, men did everything without women raising a finger. Though they were treated as beasts of burden, they did their work diligently. Despite their obedience, women continued to be cruel. In these myths, women are depicted as unreasonable, irrational and ungrateful. They are depicted as tyrants who terrorized the community. As a result of that tyranny, men conspired to overthrow the women's tyrannical rule. They planned to impregnate all the women at the same time. When women became pregnant and were heavy with children, in their moment of weakness, their rule was overthrown. Polyandry was replaced with polygamy. Young men did all the work while the old ones sat down and gave advice. A new world order of men as rulers was created. Rule of peace, justice, love and harmony was created. This myth is used to justify why men rule the Gikuyu community. It is also used to perpetuate the male domination and justify why women have to be content with being ruled by men.

To strengthen that myth, the Gikuyu have another story of a specific woman who was called Wangu Makeri (Liyong 1972, 83). According to this story, Wangu was a historical figure who ruled in the days when women were rulers during the era of women rule. Her Government was tyrannical and oppressive to men. Women were allowed to have many husbands (polyandry) and they tended to be partial to the young ones. The old men did all the work until they could stand it longer. They therefore decided to

overthrow Wangu wa Makeri and made sure that women never ruled again. The way this plan was executed is given in various versions. In the myth of Wangu Makeri, it is said that she was a chief in Murang'a who was cheated and lured to dancing naked in public which was an abomination in the Kikuyu culture. Through the image of this woman who was easily cheated and behaved irresponsibly, women have been denied leadership in the Kikuyu society. These myths are used to bar women from ascending into positions of authority. They are used to explain that women had a chance to rule, and they demonstrated how cruel they can be.

The story of Wangu Makeri is used to strengthen the ideology that women cannot be rulers. Wangu thought she would be like men and this is what brought her downfall and this episode destroyed the chances of Kikuyu women ever ruling again.

Another myth which is significant to us in regard to the image of a woman is the one which explains that women cannot own property. According to Kenyatta (1938, 70-71), we have a myth which explains that in the beginning, God (*Mogai*) meaning divider, divided the animals into two groups and gave one group to men and the other to women. Women started to slaughter animals using blunt wooden knives. This inflicted a lot of pain on the animals. It reached a stage where the animals could not stand it any more. One night, when the women were sleeping, the animals gathered and ran away from "these cruel human beings". In this myth, women are depicted as very cruel, irrational, senseless, and people who are devoid of feelings. Because of this cruelty, women lost their animals and with the animals went all the rights to property. From that time, God gave the men the right to own "animals" – implying property.

Through these myths, women's economic and political power has been curtailed and the supremacy of male authority has been perpetuated.

The next category of narratives is the ogre stories. The Kikuyu people refer to these stories as *ng'ano cia marimu*. As Kabira (1988, 5) explains, ogre stories in Kikuyu society refer to fictional stories. The characters in these stories are imaginary. The characters could be ogres, human beings, birds, animals or all of them combined.

In the fictional stories, the implication is always that what is narrated is not a historical fact. The stories are imagined.

In all fictional stories, there is a specific formula used to start the story. The narrator always starts his/her story using the following words:

"uga itha" – "say itha"

These words are used to signal to the audience that they are about to be taken into a fictional world. At the end of the story, the narrator always informs his/her audience that the story ends there. That is, the storyteller

says, “That is the end of the story”. This again signals to the audience that the story is over and they can come back to the real world.

In these narratives and/or stories, human beings are very important. They are concerned with everyday events and characters. They are concerned with well-known problems like relationships between girls, brothers and sisters, and co-wives, and with how all these relationships affect the smooth running of the society.

Stories change both in content and style to suit the needs and beliefs of the community. Fictional narratives are among the most popular of all genres of oral literature. Much of the morals and ethics of the community are taught using fictional narratives.

Stories are usually told during the evenings. Children gather around storytellers to listen to stories while waiting for food to cook. Hence, stories are used as a form of entertainment to prevent them from sleeping before food is ready.

Apart from preventing the children from falling asleep before eating, they also help them to relax after working all day long either on the farms or in the forests, grazing cattle.

In order to achieve that goal, most stories are accompanied by dramatic and musical performances. Narrators try to identify themselves with the characters in the stories as closely as possible. They try to imitate their actions, sounds, gestures, and as they unfolded their stories, the audience participates in the performance by singing, beating drums or playing other instruments in order to make the drama in the story lively.

The success of the story is measured in how much the narrator influences the behaviour of the youth. The young are expected to derive knowledge and wisdom from the stories. It is through the stories that the young are taught the beliefs, customs, traditions and religion of their society. One major function of the stories was to mould the young generation for their future social roles. This function was crucial because oral stories were derived from day to day experiences of the society and thematic content usually reflected the world view of the society.

Storytellers are predominantly women in the Gikuyu traditional culture. Old women were considered appropriate artists for story telling. Since the role of baby-sitting fall squarely on their shoulders, they find themselves with the children most of the time after their mothers went into the fields. In addition, because of their age, they were considered conversant with customs and traditions of the society. All the same, we have a proverb which contradicts this view and it is given below:

kirira ti ukuru
(Old age does not imply wisdom.)

Apart from old women, the parents of the children as well as the older brothers and sisters also tell stories to young children. Young children also learn to tell stories by repeating the ones they had heard from the older members of the community or by creating their own.

These stories are a reflection of the societal attitudes and values. They act as mirrors of the societal life. They serve as a reflection of what the society cherishes- their values, joys, sorrows and concerns.

If these are the functions of stories, what can we deduce from them as far as the image of a woman in Gikuyu is concerned?

From the study of the stories, we can derive several images of the woman at various stages in her life.

4.2 Image of Girls

Girls in Gikuyu oral narratives are depicted as:

4.2.1 Objects of Beauty

In most narratives, many men prefer to marry the most beautiful girls in the community. Hence, we have several stories which depict beautiful girls as being targeted by many suitors. As a result, these beautiful girls get drunk with pride and arrogance and start asking for the impossible or difficult things from the prospective husbands. Some of them asked for feathers in the middle of the lake or sea, others asked for their mothers or themselves to be healed of diseases which every traditional doctor had failed to heal.

After the girls had made such unrealistic demands, they ended up marrying ogres. The ogre is a very popular character in Gikuyu fictional stories and this is probably why the Gikuyu refer to this category of stories as *ng'ano cia marimu* or ogre stories. The ogre is perceived as a frightening monster that is capable of transforming himself into human and other forms in order to hide his true identity (Chesaina 1991).

In Gikuyu folktales, the ogre is a symbol of deception and destruction, and the power of evil. The ogres' cannibalistic behaviours of eating the beautiful girls or all members of a village signify their lack of decency and humanity.

In many stories, the ogre is used as a rod for whipping characters who represent social deviants and those who act foolishly or unrealistically in order to teach them a lesson. They are taught that if they do not follow the expected code of behaviour of the society, they are bound to be destroyed by the power of evil in the society.

In Gikuyu oral narratives, beautiful girls who are proud and arrogant and who refuse all suitors end up marrying ogres. The ogres conceal their identity and disguise themselves as handsome men. The beautiful girls fall for the physical appearances of the ogres. The girls face the reality only

after marrying ogres when they discover that they are not true men. After these girls have learned their lesson however they are often rescued by men or voices which warn them of the looming danger.

4.2.2 Too Gullible

In many narratives, girls are portrayed as being easily cheated or swayed. For example, a story is told of a girl named Muthoni who made an agreement with her brother not to marry but rather to live together. However, Muthoni broke that promise after she was deceived by a very handsome man during a dance. However, Muthoni hardly knew that the beauty that attracted her was an ogre. She was however rescued by her brother who later decided to get married since Muthoni had failed to honour their agreement.

4.2.3 People Who Cannot Honour a Promise

A girl can also be portrayed as one who cannot honour a promise, as seen in the narrative of Muthoni and Thithia. In this story, Muthoni and Thithia used to graze animals together while they were young children. A relationship between them developed and they agreed that they would never break their relationship even if they grew up. In order to cement the relationship, they agreed that they would get married as soon as they reached a marriageable age.

However, Muthoni was circumcised before Thithia and she started telling him that she could not marry him because he was an uncircumcised.

In anger, Thithia throws himself into the river and only gets out after Muthoni reconsiders her decision. She promises to marry Thithia if he is circumcised. If Thithia had drowned, the society would have blamed Muthoni of breaching their agreement.

This story depicts girls as unreliable and as people who cannot be trusted and honour a promise. Through such stories and other genres of oral literature like proverbs, the society members were warned against taking women seriously. This myth undermined the role of women in society for society was advised to treat them with care and suspicion for they could not be trusted or relied upon. Hence, we have proverbs like the following:

aka na iguru itimenyagirwo

(Women and weather cannot be predicted.)

or

kia mundu muka gitikagio kiarara

(A woman's word is believed after it has passed the test of time.)

or

aka matiri kiriko

(Women cannot keep a promise.)

4.2.4 Dishonest

In many Gikuyu narratives, girls are depicted as dishonest. This image is captured in numerous stories as in the following example where we have three girls who went to pick fruits in the forest. The two girls belonged to one mother while the third one belonged to another mother. The three girls agreed to pick fruits with their eyes closed to test who would pick ripe fruits.

The girls who belonged to one mother conspired to open their eyes and picked their fruits with open eyes. Because of this conspiracy, these girls picked ripe fruits only while the one who honoured the promise ended up picking raw fruits.

The girl with the raw fruits persuaded the other two girls to wait for her so that she could pick ripe fruits but they refused. The story portrays girls as unsympathetic, malicious, dishonest and unreliable.

The girl with the raw fruits, out of desperation, decided to remain behind so as to pick ripe fruits, even after being left by her friends. This decision did not augur well for this girl. In Gikuyu community, girls are discouraged from walking alone as they are bound to get into problems. Girls are encouraged to be dependant and therefore they are discouraged from acting independently by their own.

Hence, when this girl decides to be left alone, narrators ensured that they faced problems so as to discourage such decisions among girls. Her decision was dangerous since it was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. As fate would have it, as soon as she embarked on her mission to pick ripe fruits, an ogre met her. The half-animal, half-human monster terrorizes the girl. She is asked to choose from being eaten right away or being put in a bag. The desperate girl chooses to be put in the bag. The ogre puts the bag on his shoulders and embarks on his journey back home where he intends to make a feast out of the girl.

However, on his journey back home the ogre gets thirsty and goes to a woman's house to ask for some water to drink. Since the girl in the bag is singing, she arouses the curiosity of the woman. Out of maternal instincts, the woman thinks very fast, which is not encouraged among women in the Gikuyu community. Women are not expected to be thinkers, leave alone fast thinkers. She hatches a plan on how to rescue the girl. She decides to trick the ogre. She tells the ogre that there is no water in her house, but promises to give the ogre a calabash perforated with holes to go and fetch water in the river while she keeps watch over his bag.

The ogre stupidly goes to the river and attempts to draw water with the perforated calabash with no success. After several attempts, the ogre discovers that it is impossible to fetch water with the punctured calabash. In the meantime, the woman has exchanged the girl in the ogre's bag with a

huge stone. The ogre returns from the river disappointed that he was unable to draw water to quench his thirst with the calabash given to him by the woman. He informs the woman that he was unable to fetch water with her calabash and he picks his bag without the slightest suspicion that anything amiss has taken place in his absence.

On arriving in his house, he invites other ogres to come for a feast of the girl and only realizes that there is no girl while his guests are waiting for the feast. They feel cheated and end up eating the host ogre.

This story depicts the girls who tricked this girl as dishonest, unsympathetic and sadist. In many trickster stories, the tricksters are depicted as wise and those who are tricked as dupes and fools who end up suffering due to their foolishness. However, this story depicts the tricked girl as helpless and only manages to escape through the mercy of the wise women. Such stories are used to teach the community members that evil forces are always at work in the society and people have to use their wisdom and intelligence to avoid falling prey to dishonest people like these girls.

4.2.5 Commodities for Sale

In the Gikuyu community, girls are regarded as investments or commodities for sale. A man with many daughters is assured of wealth in the form of cows, goats, sheep and other material things from prospective sons-in-law. Men with no daughters are often not invited to beer drinking parties since they have no hope of reciprocating such parties. Poor people sometimes stay long lives of bachelorhood since they cannot raise the required dowry in exchange of a wife. The amount required for a dowry varied from one family to the other but the amount required by the Gikuyu tribal law is thirty goats and sheep (Kenyatta 1938, 168).

However, the dowry is even higher if the girl is beautiful because that means she can get many suitors. As indicated in the Gikuyu proverb, *Mwari mweka ahitukagira thome wa ngia*, that is, a beautiful girl bypasses the gate of a poor man. This is because a poor man cannot dare ask for a hand in marriage of a beautiful girl since he could not raise the dowry required on her account.

Apart from the beauty, other factors like chastity and hard work were also considered in negotiating the dowry of a girl. This message apart from being transmitted through proverbs and stories is also transmitted through songs. In the following verse, we have a boy advising his sister to protect her chastity so that he can “sell” her dearly.

*Wanjiru wa maitu
nyitia mwengu wega
ngakwendia kindu kiritu*

(My sister Wanjiru,
Fasten your cloth tightly,
For I will sell you for
Something heavy.)

The wealth accrued through selling girls is used not only by the father but also by the brother who uses it to acquire wives and also by the clan at large. The following Gikuyu verse supports this view.

*Muthuri ni ukuhe kigacwa
nguire haria wateire makinya
Waingatire nyukwa ari mugima
ugiita njohi ya muhiriga.*

(Old man, pay me a fine,
I tell you where you lost direction;
You chased your mother when she was grown up
You poured the clan beer.)

In this verse, the man is being accused of losing sense of direction by sending his daughter away, probably with the mother. By so doing, the man has denied the clan their beer which they would have drunk after the girl married.

The image of a woman as an economic asset is best captured in the following tale. According to this tale, the man had a very beautiful daughter called Mwenje. As indicated earlier, beauty was a crucial characteristic in the choice of wives and the more beautiful a girl was the better her chances of getting married were and more so to a rich man.

Mwenje, like all beautiful girls in the oral narratives, had many suitors but she rejected all of them. However, after some time, she told her father that she wanted to get married. Her father organized for her a day when prospective suitors would come to try their luck in getting Mwenje.

However, Mwenje's father was greedy and took dowry from seven suitors despite the fact that he knew that he had only one daughter. In his attempt to keep the dowry from the seven suitors, he went to a witch doctor to get some advice. The witch doctor advised him to construct a house with seven rooms. In each of the six rooms, he was told to keep the following animals: a goat, a dog, a cat, a cow, a rabbit, and a frog. Each animal was to occupy one room but in the seventh room, he was told to keep his daughter. After doing that, he was told that on the wedding day, all those animals would

turn into girls who would be identical to his daughter. That man did as he was told.

On the wedding day, he told each suitor to open one door of the seven rooms and the girl he finds in the room would be his wife. Those suitors did as they were instructed. Those men did not notice anything amiss because the girls in all the rooms were identical to the man's daughter.

Through that treachery, the man succeeded in keeping the dowry from the seven suitors. However, when he visited their homes later, he could tell which girl came from which animal by the characteristics of the girls described by their husbands.

This story clearly depicts girls as commodities for sale and shows the pain society members can go through in order to use them as economic assets. The man in this story is a clear manifestation of greed.

4.2.6 Naïve

Girls in Gikuyu narratives are also depicted as naïve. They are portrayed as people who cannot think critically or reason. This image of the woman as an unintelligent human being is prevalent in many Gikuyu folktales. It is best captured in the following story that is about a girl who was given food by her mother to take to her grandmother who lived far away. On her way, she meets a fox which wants to eat her. However, there were people around and hence the fox finds it difficult to pounce on the girl. The fox asks the girl where she was going and the girl tells the fox out of innocence that she is going to her grandmother's place. As if that was not enough, she even gives the fox the direction of her grandmother's home.

Having gathered this information, the fox passes through a shorter route and gets to the grandmother's home before the girl. The fox eats the grandmother and then jumps into her bed and covers itself just like the grandmother, and waits for the girl so that it can eat the girl too. When the girl finally arrives and sees the fox in the grandmother's bed, she does not realize that it is not the grandmother. She embarks on a chain of questions on the characteristics of the grandmother. She asks, "Grandmother how come you have such big eyes?" she asks similar questions in connection with the ears, nose, hand, etc. and the fox answers each question and finally says it has big hands so that it may be able to hold the girl and eat her properly. At that juncture, the fox tries to pounce on the girl, but luckily a man comes in with an axe and kills the fox, thereby saving the girl's life.

Though we sympathize with the girl's plight, we cannot help feeling that it was the girl's naivety that led her to that state.

This same state of affairs is applicable to girls who are deceived by ogres who disguise themselves as handsome men. The girls do not realize that the ogres are not real men until they observe strange things like the men having

two mouths (a characteristic of the ogre in Gikuyu oral narratives). In other stories, they do not realize they are following ogres until they get to their homes and see many bones or are warned by a voice that they are in danger.

In all those kinds of stories, girls are portrayed as people who are naïve, stupid, irrational, and unintelligent. The purpose of these kinds of stories on the part of the society is to perpetuate the myth that girls' brains are not equal to that of boys. They are also used to make girls depend on men as far as decision-making is concerned, or else, face the consequences of wrong decisions, which they are bound to make as they are not intelligent enough.

The myth of women being incapable of making sound decisions is reinforced through other genres of oral literature. For example, in the proverb, *ciaririo thingira itiregagwo nyumba*, which in English means, *whatever is decided in the hut cannot be opposed in the house*. Huts were the men's dwelling place while the house belonged to the women. In the above proverb, it is implied that women have no choice but to be passive consumers or recipients of men's decisions. Men are supposed to be the policy makers in the Gikuyu community and women are meant to be silent receivers of all male decisions without any opposition whatsoever.

4.2.7 Weaklings

Girls in Gikuyu folktales are also depicted as weaklings who need to be watched closely either by their brothers, sometimes even by their younger brothers, or by the community at large. Due to this, the Gikuyu community came up with a lot of narratives which illustrated the calamities girls faced if they were left alone in the forest picking fruits or firewood. The same fate was bound to befall them if they followed a stranger or embarked on missions alone, such as taking food to grandmothers who lived far away or going back to the farms to collect forgotten items.

This image of the girls as fragile, vulnerable, weak, both physically and mentally, is best captured in the story of Wacu and Gacara. In this story, Wacu and Gacara, her brother, went to the forest to pick some firewood. On their way to the forest, Wacu voiced her fears that there were three men who she felt were a threat to her life. However, Gacara did not take Wacu's fear with the seriousness it deserved. As observed in the proverbs, women were never taken seriously in the Gikuyu community and hence Gacara dismissed Wacu's fears.

As a result, while they were deep in the forest, Gacara left Wacu there, and three men appeared immediately. She climbed a tree and from there, sang a song which alerted her brother, Gacara, that she was in danger. Gacara came immediately and the three men who were threatening Wacu's life fled.

This story depicts men as brave while it depicted women as cowards who have to be protected by men. Such stories, as observed elsewhere, are meant

to mould girls and women as dependant on men who they feel are stronger and braver and, therefore, capable of defending them from any danger.

4.2.8 Jealous

In Gikuyu folktales, another image of the girls which emerges is that of jealous human beings. This image is well manifested in the following story told about three girls among whom Wanjiru was the most beautiful. In order to enhance their beauty, they decided to go to a traditional dentist, who the community referred to as *mwehani*. This dentist's duty was to shape the teeth and also remove teeth to create gaps in the front teeth, which was considered as a sign of beauty.

However, even after undergoing the dental surgery, Wanjiru still continued to emerge as the most beautiful. Because of this, the other two friends became very bitter and conspired to kill Wanjiru. This story is used to project the image of girls as jealous and malicious to the point of being murderous.

From the dentist's place, the girls had to go through a thick forest in order to get to their homes. The two girls who felt jealous of Wanjiru's beauty decided to kill her when they reached the middle of the forest. Their finding of a porcupine hole in the middle of the forest facilitated this plan. They seized Wanjiru and threw her in that hole alive.

Wanjiru's parents started panicking when evening set in, and Wanjiru was no where to be seen. Her mother knew that Wanjiru had gone in the company of those two girls. She went to seek information from those two girls as to the whereabouts of Wanjiru. The girls denied any knowledge of Wanjiru's whereabouts. This gives us the image of the girls as liars. Fortunately, a small girl had seen the two girls in Wanjiru's company and had even witnessed them throwing Wanjiru in the porcupine hole. She informed Wanjiru's mother that the two girls had buried Wanjiru alive. Through coercion, the two girls were forced by the villagers to show them where they buried Wanjiru. This helped the villagers to rescue Wanjiru, by exhuming her from the hole. Fortunately, she had not died, though she had lost a lot of weight. She was taken home and washed and clothed. The girls who had buried her are seized and killed by the angry villagers.

These kinds of stories are used by the community to teach the members that jealousy, malice, destructiveness and murder have no place in the society. In order to maintain law in the society, girls who had such characteristics have to be punished so as to discourage such behaviour among other societal members.

4.2.9 Ungrateful

In Gikuyu narratives, girls are portrayed as ungrateful beings. As hinted earlier, ogres are used as symbols of evil forces in the society and whenever they surface in stories, they signal danger.

This image is well captured in the story, *The ogre, Manga, and his sister*. It is a story of an ogre that had eaten men, women, and children in the village and the only survivors were Manga, his sister and a dog.

Manga, as expected of men, started planning how to eliminate the ogre which portended danger to them. He planned how to use the dog on his mission. In order to achieve his goal, Manga instructed his sister to treat the dog fairly. He advised her to feed the dog first, and to look after him well.

When Manga was away, the ogre came and attempted to eat the sister, but the dog bit him and fled. However, despite this protective role of the dog, the girl did not heed her brother's advice of feeding the dog before eating. After cooking, she ate first and gave the dog only leftovers, but the dog refused to eat. Afterwards, the ogre came and ate the girl since the dog refused to protect her.

According to the Gikuyu customs, girls and women are expected to feed other people before eating and since the girl contravened this convention, she had to be punished by being eaten by the ogre. This story was told as a lesson to girls so that they could avoid such unbecoming behaviours. They were expected to learn the rules of hospitality as per Gikuyu customs.

The images we have discussed so far in connection with the girls are, to a large extent, applicable to the women. However, there are some images which are solely associated with women. We will discuss these images in the next section of this chapter.

4.3 The Image of Women

4.3.1 Women as Mothers

The only positive image of a woman perhaps is that of a mother. As a mother, the woman is portrayed as loving, kind, industrious and very humane. In the Gikuyu community, when a woman reaches the age of motherhood and begets a child in marriage, she is highly respected not only by her children but also by all the members of the community. After giving birth, her personal identity changes and she could only be identified as mother so and so while before giving birth she was identified as daughter so and so.

This address is accompanied by several expectations. She is expected to nurse her children, feed them, look after their clothing and educate them so that they can grow to be responsible members of the community. This image of a woman is best captured in a tale where the mother is depicted as being mindful of her children's welfare. She struggles to provide for the

material needs of her children. If the basic needs of the children like food and clothing lack, mothers get worried and some even desert their husbands on that account. In another tale, we have a woman who deserted her husband because he could not support her and her children economically. Though she may appear ruthless, unsympathetic, or even opportunistic, it is her children's welfare which drove her to that decision. This is even confirmed by her effort to introduce the child to his father while she was on her deathbed so as to ensure that the child would not suffer when she died.

The maternal instincts in women lead them to be depicted as saviours of children or community. In the stories where girls are caught by ogres picking fruits after being deserted by their comrades, women rescue the girls from the ogre by substituting them with stones.

In another tale, we are told of a woman who was brought two small boys by her ogre husband to cook for him. However, the woman's maternal instincts could not allow her to kill the children. She therefore cooked wild animals for her ogre husband and son instead of the human kids. She took care of those human children without the knowledge of the ogre husband. She taught them many things, including how to use spears in order for them to kill the ogre husband and son. Though she emerges as a traitor to her ogre husband and son, she saved the human children who grow up and look upon her as their mother.

A barren woman is scorned and often looked upon by the society with a lot of suspicion. Barren women in the Gikuyu narratives are depicted as malicious and sadists who hate children and are capable of destroying them.

One factor which leads to a divorce in the Gikuyu community is that of women's infertility. Barren women are derogatorily referred to as *thata*. They are treated by the society very suspiciously and are often accused of being witches. In the following tale, we have a barren woman who deserts her dead co-wife's children. She convinces her husband to flee his home, and misguides the children as to their new destination. This woman is portrayed as very inhuman. However, since the society was out to teach children that such characters had no place in the society, the woman in this story is punished by being deserted by her husband who goes to live with the children after they get wealth provided for them by a bird.

4.3.2 Women as Wives

As wives, women are supposed to live according to certain expectations. They are supposed to obey their husbands, look after their land and animals and above all give their husbands as many children as possible, preferably boys.

They are also expected to feed their husbands properly and to be submissive. Any woman who does not live up to these expectations is depicted negatively in the oral narratives, proverbs or songs. This is shown

in the following example where we have a story of a woman who cooked some porridge which turned out to be very sweet. She decided to drink it alone under the pretext that it was not fit for consumption by men since it was burnt. She continued to do this for several days until the husband suspected something foul. After consulting with elders, he was advised to deny her milk until the calf grew the upper teeth, which biologically, was impossible. This continued until the woman also suspected something foul. She knew that her husband was avenging because she denied him porridge. She, therefore, decided to cook very good porridge and give the husband. After that, the husband also started to give her milk because she had learnt her lesson.

4.3.3 Women as Co-wives/ Stepmothers

The Gikuyu customary law of marriage provides that a man may have as many wives as possible if he is economically capable of supporting them. Hence, the theme of co-wives and/or stepmothers is very prevalent in Gikuyu folktales. As we pointed out in the proverbs, the Gikuyu consider two women in a home as two pots of poison. Co-wives are depicted as quarrelsome who spend most of their time undermining each other. Some even go to the extent of bewitching the co-wives and their children.

Women as stepmothers are depicted very negatively in Gikuyu narratives. They are depicted as cruel and sadistic, and as murderers and abusers of children just to name but a few of their characteristics. In most stories, a stepmother is portrayed as an abuser of her stepchildren. She overworks them, starves them and worst of all, even attempts to kill them.

The cruelty of the stepmother is best illustrated in the following tale which is about a man who married a wife that gave birth to a girl called Nemurora. After some time, his wife died and the man married a second wife who gave birth to a girl called Kanyagara. The girls grew up together and their father loved them equally. Whenever he came with things like honey, fruits, meat, etc. he always divided them equally between his two daughters. This habit did not please Kanyagara's mother. As it happened often, stepmothers were very jealous. Kanyagara's mother would have preferred her daughter got a bigger share of what her husband brought them. As a result of her jealousy, she started planning to eliminate Nemurora, her stepdaughter. She planned to boil a drum of water and then throw Nemurora into that drum alive so that she could die.

Nemurora and Kanyagara were such great friends that they used to share a bed. In order for Kanyagara's mother to execute her plan, she had to do it during the night when the girls were asleep and hence, she questioned the girls to know who sleeps on which side of the bed. After establishing that, she put water in a very big drum and put it on fire to boil. The girls became curious of the large amount of water being boiled. In order to heat that water, Kanyagara's mother used a lot of firewood and the girls' whose bed

was near the fire place started feeling uncomfortable and ended up swapping sides to escape the heat of the fire.

When Kanyagara's mother came to pick Nemurora from the bed so as to throw her into the boiling water, she did not realize that the girls had swapped sides and hence, the girl she picked was her own daughter, Kanyagara and not Nemurora, her step daughter, whom she wanted to kill.

When she woke up and looked into the drum, she realized that she had cooked her own daughter Kanyagara and not Nemurora. She screamed, fainted and died of shock.

Stories like this have a lot to tell us how the society views women in general and stepmothers in particular. Firstly, stepmothers are always depicted as trying to kill the children of their dead co-wives. This in itself gives them a very bad image of monsters who have no human feelings. The dead co-wives are no longer a threat to them and the question one is compelled to ask is why they would want to hurt helpless children who have no mother.

Secondly, in almost all the narratives with the stepmother character, the child left by their co-wife is always the same sex with that of their own. They are either two boys or two girls and never a boy and a girl. This leads us to conclude that the plot of the stepmother image in the narratives is contrived. The artist's motive in such characteristics is to ensure that the stepmother does not appreciate the stepchild because if she is a girl, she also has a girl and vice versa. Probably, if the stepchild was of the opposite sex with the child of the stepmother, she may be tempted not to harm the stepchild. As if that is not enough, the stepchildren have positive attributes, which seem to be lacking in the children of the stepmother. In the case of girls, they are always portrayed as being more beautiful than their stepsister, and in the case of boys, they are more industrious, obedient, etc.

Thirdly, most of the plans to kill the stepchildren are always executed while the husband is far away from the scene of the executions. This is deliberately done to create an opportune moment for the stepmother to execute her plan without the husband's interference. Probably, if the husband were around, the woman would not dare to attempt to kill the stepchild.

Fourthly, the most intriguing observation from the stepmother image is that they never succeed in carrying out their plans. For example, a tale is told of Muya, who was buried alive by the stepmother, but rescued by the stepbrother, Muya, his namesake and his father. It is interesting to observe that the father always surfaces in an opportune moment to save his child. In the story of Kanyagara and Nemurora, the stepmother, ended up killing her own child. How were these crimes committed against innocent children by the stepmothers?

The punishment meted against the stepmothers who perpetrated the crime varied from one artist to the other in different stories. In some stories, they were killed, in others they were beaten and returned to their parents or they died of shock after realizing that they had killed their own children.

4.3.4 Women as Unreliable Beings

In Gikuyu society, women are treated with a lot of suspicion. The society believes that women are unreliable and will never be trusted, or expected to keep a secret. This theory is advanced and reinforced in all genres of Gikuyu oral literature. For example, we have proverbs like *aka na iguru matimenyagirwo* which means *women and weather are unpredictable*. In the stories, this fallacy is best illustrated in the following story of *The egg that hatched a beautiful girl*. In this story, we have a man who found an ostrich egg while he was hunting in the forest. He took the egg home and after some time, the egg hatched into a beautiful girl. The man loved the girl very much and he asked the wife never to send the girl to the river or the forest to fetch firewood for fear that he might lose her. He also asked the wife never to tell her that she came from an ostrich egg. However, in confirmation of the Kikuyu fallacy that women can never keep a secret, the wife asked the girl to go to the river and fetch water. Since the girl knew that her father had instructed the wife never to send her anywhere, she refused to go. The woman reprimanded the girl, and even told her that she came from an ostrich egg that was collected from the fields. After learning that, the girl ran away towards the fields. The woman tried to persuade her to come back, but she did not listen.

When the father came back and found out that his daughter was missing, he ran towards the fields to look for her. In the end, the man found the girl and asked her to come back home, but she refused saying that the wife had abused her and called her an ostrich egg and therefore she was going back to the fields where she belonged. The man pleaded with her to come back and she refused and jumped into a river, and by the time she emerged from the river, she had already turned into an ostrich. The man went back home very bitter. The wife's unreliability had made him lose his beautiful daughter. She could not conceal the secret that the girl had come from an ostrich egg. Out of anger, the man beat his wife and sent her back to her own parents and he never married again because he lost faith in women.

4.3.5 Women as the Weak and Vulnerable Sex

When discussing the girl, we observed that she is depicted as a weakling who needs to be constantly watched by the brother, the father or the society at large. This image is also extended to the woman.

Women in Gikuyu society are looked upon as weaklings and therefore need protection from men. In the various tribal wars between the Gikuyu people and the Maasai, women and children are always regarded as weaklings and are therefore exempted from the battlefields.

This perception of women as weaklings is perpetuated through Gikuyu folktales. Women are depicted as being terrorized by ogres and it is only through the mercy of their husbands or sons that they are rescued.

For example, a story is told of Wagaciairi, a woman who was left pregnant by her blacksmith husband. The husband went far off to work. After some time, she gave birth and she was assisted by an ogre. The ogre terrorized the woman by abusing her and denying her food.

One day, a dove came and started eating some castor beans outside the woman's house. The woman asked the dove if it would take a message to her husband, as it was eating her castor beans. The dove agreed to go and inform the husband that the woman had given birth, but she was being mistreated by an ogre which was assisting her.

The dove went up to where the man was smelting and managed to convey the message through a song. The man went home and found his wife very thin because she was not being fed by the ogre. The man waited until the ogre came and killed it.

In this story, we have the image of a woman as a weakling who is incapable of defending or protecting herself and as such has to be protected by the husband, as in this story, or by the sons in other stories.

4.4 The Image of Grandmothers

The image of the grandmother is not well documented in the sample stories collected though most of them were narrated by grandmothers. From the limited stores we have, however, we can conclude that grandmothers are portrayed as follows:

4.4.1 Grandmothers as a Weakling/ Vulnerable Group

The image of the grandmother as captured in the sample narratives is one of a weakling. She is depicted as weak and sickly and often as one who relies on daughters and grandchildren for food and other material needs. The grandmother, like the girl and the woman, is also vulnerable and is not spared the terror from animals. In the story of the girl and the fox, we have a grandmother who was in bed weak and sick, and who eventually was eaten by a fox that tricked the girl who was bringing food to her. Unlike the girl who was rescued before she was tricked and eaten by the fox, the grandmother was eaten.

Their weakness makes them victims of natural calamities like drought. In times of famine, they are the first to die of starvation.

4.4.2 Grandmothers as Advisors

Grandmothers are also portrayed as advisors, especially of their grandchildren as shown in the following story. In this story, a grandson is warned by a grandmother against passing through a particular road which

was mostly used by ogres. The boy did not listen to the grandmother's advice seriously probably because as discussed earlier, men did not take women seriously - whether they were adults or children.

However, the boy fell into trouble when he passed through the road that the grandmother had warned him not to pass. Luckily, through a song, the boy managed to communicate that he was in trouble to the grandmother and she managed to come and rescue the grandchild.

The grandmother in this story is depicted as a saviour who is brave enough to confront the ogre in order to rescue her grandson. This is a contradiction to the general image of the grandmother who is always portrayed as weak and vulnerable.

In addition, her image as an advisor contradicts the general portrayal of women as fools who cannot offer constructive advice. However, the grandmother in this case is considered wise enough to advise grandchildren probably due to her age. It is also important to note that grandmothers are baby sitters in the Gikuyu community and hence charged with the responsibility of educating children through folktales, riddles, proverbs, songs and poetry. Thus, it is not far fetched to expect the Gikuyus to bend the image of grandmother as woman so that she could fulfil her duty of educating children. Her duty was noble and hence it is no wonder that she is given wisdom to use as a tool in discharging her responsibility of teaching the young.

5. IMAGES OF WOMEN IN GIKUYU FOLK SONGS

5.1 Introduction

Songs are one genre of oral literature. Songs in this study refer to pieces of poetry, especially composed for music expressed orally.

The word *folk* is taken in the sense of a group of people, in this case the Gikuyu people, because cultural, economic and educational differences are less pronounced. Their lifestyles, customs and literature, including songs, are known and shared throughout the community (Lusweti 1984, 57).

Songs and poetry are an essential part of life in many communities. Societies which adhere to traditional customs have songs which are used in various rituals. Songs are cultural symbols used to establish order and meaning. Songs can tell us about a community's cultural values. Songs have been used as vehicles of transmitting people's philosophy, beliefs, values and sometimes their historical development.

Songs are socially significant as they carry serious implication of society's beliefs. The song is probably the most prolific of all forms of African oral performances.

While other oral art forms are controlled by tradition in both content and form, songs seem to possess a unique kind of freedom. The song is the most flexible genre of oral literature. This characteristic hinges on the fact that the song is capable of taking new ideas or words and fit them into a song without changing its structure, rhythm or body movements involved (Kabira and Mutahi 1988, 18). This enables the song to be a genre which is responsive to changes in everyday life of the community. Traditional poetry has been a very forceful tool in communicating messages.

In the Gikuyu society, songs are classified into various categories. There are songs for various age groups (*marika*). There are songs for each sex at each age group, but some combine both sexes, for example, *mucung'wa* and *muthunguci*.

a. Songs for the Children

These include songs for both boys and girls who are not circumcised and are therefore considered as children since they have not been initiated into manhood or womanhood. The youth perform songs mainly during the dry season when there is no rain to disrupt the performances. Songs are also performed during circumcision. Young boys and girls gather together and perform songs as a gesture to send off their colleagues who are about to be circumcised.

b. Songs for the Young People

Songs for young people comprise songs for boys and girls who have been circumcised and also for those who are in their early years of marriage. However, it is important to note that women after getting married would not dance with the unmarried men. The songs for this age group consist of *muchung'wa*, *njukia*, *gicukia*, *mugoiyo*, *nduumo*, *kibaata*, and others. *Nduumo* is performed by young women only while *kibaata* is performed by young men only. The rest are performed by both sexes.

c. Songs for the Old

The songs in this category are for those men and women who have reached the age of having grandchildren. The songs in this category include *muthunguci*, *mugoiyo*, *kibaata*, *ndumo*, *gitiro*, *kiriro*, *gicandi*, etc.

These songs are performed during dry season and on special occasions like marriage ceremonies, reception of new babies, and at beer parties. Marriages are celebrated with nuptial songs. People also sing while performing their daily chores.

5.2 Functions of Songs

- a. Songs serve as vehicles of education. Through songs, the singers pass on information which is important for social stability of the community. Historical information as well as the accumulated wisdom of the people is transmitted through songs and dances. For example, the Gikuyu society has a large number of Mau Mau songs which urge people to resist the grabbing of their land by colonialists.
- b. Songs also serve as a means of social control. Songs abuse or ridicule cowards. The majority of these songs are circumcision or war songs. War songs are used to encourage people to fight bravely. Songs also praise or express satisfaction or approval of good behaviours. For example, war songs can be used to praise or honour men who display bravery, or inspire others to fight in defence of their community. These kinds of songs help to correct people who misbehave in society.
- c. Songs also serve as a reservoir for the culture of the community. People sing and dance songs which have been transmitted from one generation to the other. Through such songs, the societal and cultural values, customs, and traditions are perpetuated. Marriage songs record people's marriage practices. The same is true of burial, initiation, divinations, or naming songs. Every ceremony is accompanied by songs that transmit and perpetuate people's cultural practices.
- d. Songs are used to enhance a sound political climate and therefore enforce political stability. Political songs can be used to protest against some form of injustice in the community. Political songs can also be used to praise political systems or leaders. Songs can be very useful means of propaganda since their meaning cannot be easily detected by people outside the community. Songs can also be used for entertainment purposes. In most political meetings, songs are used to entertain the leaders and the participants.
- e. Dirges or lament songs are used as a means of consoling bereaved families. These songs are sung at funerals or memorial services. They are also sang around the corpse when it is being prepared for burial or when it is lying in the traditional morgue. Women mainly sing these songs. Finnegan (1970, 148) reckons that the fact that these songs often involve wailing, sobbing, and weeping makes them particularly suitable for women. In Africa, as elsewhere, these activities are considered typical for women.

Another function of a song is to induce or lull children to sleep. In this category of songs, we have children's songs and lullabies. Children also sing their own songs to entertain themselves. Children's songs, apart from

lulling children to sleep, can also be used to express feelings, and to comment on life in the family as well as the community at large. For example:

<i>Kira Wanja ii</i>	Keep quiet Wanja
<i>Mami athire ii</i>	Mother went
<i>Kwenja ngwaci ii</i>	To uproot sweet potatoes
<i>Na nieguka ii</i>	And she will come
<i>Iyo iyo iyo</i>	Iyo iyo iyo

From this song, we derive the message that the woman is responsible for feeding her family.

Once a song has been composed, it spreads fast and rapidly and becomes the property of the community and the name of the composer is usually forgotten. However, by the time a song has spread over a large area or through a generation or two, it almost becomes a new song because it is recreated over and over again. No wonder songs are said to be functional only in the communities in which they emanate.

Having looked at the definition, categories, and functions of songs, we can argue that songs are cultural symbols used to establish order and meaning. Songs therefore can tell us about the African cultural values. Songs are socially significant as they carry serious implications of society's beliefs. They reflect cultural beliefs and attitudes of a people at a particular time in history. They are said to move with time as they change both in form and in content as the society changes socially, politically or economically.

The Gikuyu society has been a man's world, dominated by male values, ideas and symbols. How, therefore, are women portrayed in the songs? That is what our next discussion is going to be on.

5.3 Images of Women in Gikuyu Folk Songs

In songs, as in other genres of oral literature, women are given various images.

5.3.1 The Image of Girls

Little girls are often charged with baby-sitting while their mothers are cultivating in the field, fetching water or firewood, or doing other domestic duties. Girls who do not live up to the expectations of the society concerning their domestic roles are depicted as irresponsible.

In some songs, women are portrayed as irresponsible. In such songs, young uncircumcised girls are portrayed as foolish, immature and irresponsible. A circumcised girl is supposed to take her responsibilities, roles, and duties

seriously, especially concerning minding children or in the garden. Hard working girls are the target of bachelors who want to acquire wives.

Circumcision is supposed to initiate a girl into womanhood. Circumcision serves as a transition where a girl leaves her childish behaviours behind like climbing trees. Missionaries who infiltrated into the Gikuyu way of life and started preaching against female circumcision interfered with this rite. Through such songs, the society castigated the white man's culture, which barred girls' circumcision. Because of that infiltration, the uncircumcised girls are viewed as irresponsible and immature. These sentiments are expressed through songs and they aim at resisting all forms of foreign domination.

As we saw in the proverbs and narratives, girls are depicted as commodities for sale. This same image prevails in the songs. Girls are forced to marry the highest bidders whether old, ugly, lazy or deformed. However, contrary to the image of the woman as submissive, we get the image of girls as resisting forced marriages.

5.3.2 *Girls as Resisting Forced Marriages*

In another song, (*Wakiri, baba araraga akinuma* – Wakiri, my father spends the whole night abusing me), a marriageable young girl is complaining to her age group about her father. In some variants, her mother keeps rebuking her in an attempt to persuade her to marry Waigoko, an old, hairy-chested man. Girls are always warned that they should never consider physical attributes when choosing a man because beauty is not eaten – *uthaka nduriagwo*. The society contends that a man should be judged by his ability to feed or provide for his family rather than how he looks. Beautiful girls, on the contrary, are the target of every suitor. Beauty which is considered positive in women is considered negative in men. This manifests double standards as far as ideologies are concerned, a prevalent trend in many genres of oral literature. Father and/or mother will not let the girl choose a young feeble man in whose presence she would always behave femininely. Society is insensitive to the feelings of the women. Choices have to be made for them because it is assumed that men (husbands, fathers and brothers) are better endowed as far as decision-making is concerned.

In another song, we also have a newly wed woman who is lamenting against her husband's failure to live up to his expected image of a man. In the song, the woman laments that she is in danger (Cf. Image of women/girls as weaklings) for there are two men who are posing a danger to her life. Her husband has failed to live up to his role of protecting the family. Due to that failure, the young woman swears that she will not have her grey hair shaved in her husband's home; that is, she will not live there until old age, implying that she will desert her husband.

The man admits that he has nothing to add to the accusations labelled against him by the wife. However, he still shows concern for his wife;

hence, he reminds her to carry foodstuffs that she will need in her long journey.

Similar sentiments of a young married woman complaining against the man she married are expressed in other songs. In such songs, a woman laments that her fate was sealed with that of a lazy man. She reckons that she cannot live with such a man and is planning to leave him, therefore.

The man in that song is portrayed as exploitative, irresponsible, lazy and abusive to his wife. He does not contribute to the well-being of his family, but instead only waits for the time when food is ready so that he may be fed. In the event of not finding food, he uses abusive language, calling his wife lazy and a gossip (an image of a woman which is very prevalent in many genres of oral literature). The woman begs the husband not to abuse her for she is important to his well-being. If she was not feeding him, he could be dead. In that song, contrary to the image of the woman in other genres where she is depicted as a dependent the man is dependant on the woman for his upkeep.

However, she reckons that she has no choice but to leave her homestead for she is unable to live with a lazy man. Before leaving, she reminds the man that he will live to remember her. He will try to look for her in vain.

She even goes further to tell the man that he can collect his dowry from her parents. She does not care how much the dowry is. She does not even care whether they are producing twins. She tells him that even if he wanted additional, he would get it since her father is rich. This gives us the image of women who resist oppression and exploitation. She has already identified her cause of action and she will be thwarted by nothing, including the dowry, in her endeavour to fight oppression and exploitation.

5.3.3 Women as Commodities for Sale

The image of women as commodities for sale is well reinforced in most genres of oral literature. Songs are no exception. In marriage songs, men emphasize that the beer they are drinking is rightfully theirs because it is paid for by prospective in-laws. Girls in most Gikuyu songs were strongly advised to safeguard their chastity for that would determine their price when getting married. Good girls had to be “bought” using well-fattened goats (*mburi ya gicegu*). One has to use goats and cows to acquire a wife (*nayo njau ikagura muka* – and the calf will buy a wife). Barter ensures that girls are exchanged for cows and goats in marriage. Through songs, men are reminded that they cannot take stock of their wealth before getting married because they have to surrender some of that wealth to pay dowry. Girls are also warned that in the event of their refusal to marry, their fathers cannot acquire goats and cows – *kairitu wandega thogwo aroregwo ni mburi* – young girl if you refuse me, may your father be refused by goats.

Brothers also remind their sisters that they need to marry fast before the price of girls fluctuates.

*“Mwari wa maitu
hika narua bei
ya airitu itanagwa
nguigwa ta ikuma
king’otore na hela
mugwanja”*

(My sister, get married
Quickly before the
Price goes down. I
Hear it will reduce
From seventeen cents.)

This verse was sang after the Gikuyu society had entered a money economy. Apart from money, dowry is also paid in terms of beer. Girls are paid in beer form. Those who are unmarried are referred to as potential assets and as beer which is still in the crates, not ready for drinking.

Due to this commercialization of women, most parents do not care about the fate which awaits their daughters as long as the dowry is paid. In some songs, the women acknowledge the fact that after the dowry is paid, they become the property of their husbands. While dancing, women warn their partners that they should not touch their private parts because they belong to the one who paid goats (dowry) for them. In that sense they also acknowledge the fact that they are their husband’s property.

In other songs, women reject being treated as commercial assets. In one of the songs, *Ndumiriri ya mihuni*, the young and women reject the bride price. In the song, the youth are decrying that the bride price is exploitative and is used for personal aggrandizement. Through bride price, women are reduced to a chattel that a man can buy provided that he has money. The social aspect of the bride price has been obliterated to emphasize the commercial aspect of it. Young men on the other hand are objecting and rebelling against exploitation in the form of bride price. They reckon that they would rather remain unmarried or single.

The girls on their part are also against the practice that reduces them to chattels. When their parents demand more than her fiancés or suitors can afford, they reckon that if their fiancés will not marry them, they would rather become prostitutes.

5.3.4 Women as Source of Evil

Women in Gikuyu songs are portrayed as temptresses who pose a threat to a male.

In one of the songs, the artist asserts that while dancing *muthuu*, a male dance, he does not like girls. He laments that they were instrumental in leading him to jail where he served for six months. After serving the jail term, he went home in the seventh month. By then he had changed so much that people could not recognize him for he had grown a lot of hair on the chest. Female relatives are also blamed for brewing trouble. In the same song, the man laments that he lost his feather in Kamba land (in this case foreign land) where he had followed his sister.

In another song, the protagonist laments that he almost drowned in a river in his efforts to follow a girl. The ideology that women are dangerous is highly perpetuated in almost all genres of oral literature. Women are blamed for most evils that pervade society. Men are portrayed as innocent victims of women's machinations.

5.3.5 Image of Women as Mothers

The primary role of a woman in the Gikuyu society, as observed earlier, is to be a mother. This role is acculturated into girls' right from birth through adulthood. The role of motherhood is the only one that gives women any status in society. The songs like narratives and the proverbs have also been used to reinforce this role.

As a mother, a woman is adored. She is praised for her duty in childbearing and rearing. It is the woman's desire to have a child so as to acquire the noble status expected of her in society. After getting children, women are expected to be responsible. They are expected to feed their families. As such, it is emphasized through songs that they have to work hard in order to meet the family needs. Their companions become *pangas* and *kiondos* (baskets) which are symbolic tools they need to farm and harvest for the family material needs. In another song, the woman is being praised for having played her role well as a mother. She gave birth and reared her children well. She carried them on her back and chewed bananas for them and so the singer is seeking for blessings from God for the mother.

This song reinforces the fact that women are valued in society only due to their reproductive roles. When they give birth, they are given special treatment. They are exempted from difficult tasks like weeding or carrying heavy loads and are also treated to special diets of meat and gruel. Other songs also highlight the fact that women will even go to places where they do not normally go because of their children.

However, other songs warn women that in their bid to play the mother's role, they are likely to encounter problems. For example, when fetching firewood, they are warned not to cut certain trees which may hurt them.

In order to live up to the society's image of a good mother and/or wife, women are expected to be hard working. Lazy women are often criticized through songs. As pointed earlier, one of the positive attributes expected of women is hard work. When young men are looking for wives, they hide somewhere and observe girls as they bent when cultivating from morning to evening without even a lunch break if they had to pass or acquire the label of a hard working woman. If a girl stands up and then straightens her back, she is labelled as lazy and no one wants to marry a lazy woman for women are considered economic assets. They are expected to plough and cultivate large plots of land so as to feed their families. The money accrued through the sale of surplus foods is used to acquire goats and cows, which in turn is used to acquire new wives for the husband. A man with many wives and children is considered wealthy and has prestige and status in the community. In another song, we see a lazy woman being admonished. She is accused of standing and looking up as if she has her goats in heaven. The woman is being criticized for having a lot of fleas and spending her day killing them. This song implies that a lazy woman is also dirty and therefore unhygienic.

The mother of a lazy girl is also admonished. We observed earlier that mothers are blamed for the negative attributes of their children. The song insinuates that the lazy girl could have inherited the laziness from her mother. The mother is also being blamed for not knowing how to treat visitors. She asks them to go and fetch firewood and come and roast *maguanyiri* (something unsavoury) for themselves. The Gikuyu society believes in treating visitors hospitably. This concept is also reinforced in other genres like proverbs. An example of such a proverb is *Kwa Muhoro gwakuire ngaguro*, which means Muhoro's homestead was destroyed due to lack of hospitability. This proverb was coined after Muhoro's (a chief) area was destroyed. It is said that a man went to Muhoro to warn him that his area would be raided. However, when the man reached there, he was not given something to eat and as a result, he refused to warn Muhoro of the impending danger to his area. Later, the raiders came and destroyed Muhoro's area and from that time, a proverb was coined from the incident that *Kwa Muhoro gwakuire ngaguro*. From then, the proverb has been used to warn people that they should handle visitors hospitably.

Due to the important association to motherhood, any woman who does not fulfil the role of a mother is regarded with contempt. We noted in the proverbs and the narratives that barren women were mistreated, abused, and often ostracized. Contrary to that image in the songs, we find barren women being treated with sympathy. In another song, the singer is saying that the barren woman should not be abused for the co-wife has given birth on her

behalf. This song rejects the mistreatment of barren women. They are not barren by choice. It is God's wish and therefore nobody should blame them.

5.3.6 *Women as Wives*

As wives, women have their role expectations. They are supposed to give birth, look after their children and husbands, fetch water and firewood, sweep the compounds, cook food and cultivate the fields.

If women do not live up to these expectations as wives, they suffer both socially and psychologically and nobody appreciates their efforts. In another song, we have a young woman who is lamenting to her grandmother that her husband does not appreciate her cooking- the way she prepares her tea, porridge, green vegetables and arrowroots. She is psychologically tormented for she feels that she is despised for she has failed to live up to the society's expectations of a good wife. In the Gikuyu society, any woman who fails to live up to role expectations, especially where cooking is concerned, is returned to their mothers for further training in domestic issues. Such a girl is an embarrassment not only to her family but also to other girls and her clan as a whole.

In order to alleviate the problem, the grandmother teaches the girl how to prepare the various foodstuffs so that her husband can appreciate her. The grandmother, in that song as in the folktales, is portrayed as a wise advisor of the youth.

5.3.7 *Women as Adulterous and Unfaithful*

Portraying women as unfaithful is very prevalent in many Gikuyu songs. As noted in the narratives and proverbs, women and/or girls are depicted as weak, easily cheated and untrustworthy. These images are extended in the songs. It is emphasized that women are easily cheated and flattered by men due to their weak nature. It is also emphasized that women do not have a strong heart and that all men need to do to induce them into unfaithfulness is to flatter them and their thinking goes out of their heads. Many songs emphasize the fact that women are bound to be unfaithful no matter what you do to them.

In another song, we have a man who is lamenting that he has done everything possible to please his wife but despite his efforts, the wife wants to leave him. The message in this song is that women are hard to please and due to their weak biological make up, they are likely to become unfaithful no matter what you do for them. This ideology is emphasized in narratives and proverbs, too. Men are warned that women should be treated with caution for they are untrustworthy.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to understand the image of women in African societies through the exploration of one vehicle of culture, namely oral literature. Through three genres of oral literature (proverbs, narratives, and songs), we have shown that women are negatively portrayed. Some of the images associated with women in those genres are the following: women as economic assets or men's property, women as destructive and dangerous elements, and women as unreliable, unpredictable and therefore untrustworthy creatures. They are also portrayed as incapable of keeping secrets and are therefore denied access to important information most of the time, even when it concerns them directly. Besides, they are portrayed as inferior and a weaker sex while men are depicted as strong therefore a superior sex. Due to this attitude, they are socialized in such a way that they depend on men for both physical and mental protection. The biological differences between men and women are used to place women in a disadvantaged position. They are also denied opportunities to participate in important matters.

Through myths and legends, women are portrayed as irresponsible. A case in point is the myth of Wangu Makeri. This myth has been used to deny women chances of participating in political issues. Wangu Makeri, who was a chief, is purportedly alleged to have danced naked, an indication of irresponsibility and unacceptable social behaviour. As a representative of women, it has been alleged that she failed in political matters and therefore women cannot be leaders.

The songs challenge the above assumption. The picture of the woman cheerfully accepting her lot is replaced by that of a woman who is powerfully aware of the unfairness of the system and who tries to assert herself and seeks to be accepted as a full human being not as a man's appendage.

The songs register the women's disgust at male's chauvinism and their dissatisfaction with what the women consider unfair, unjust, cruel and an oppressive system.

Through songs, women show that the society is unjust towards the female lot. The society has designed ideological machinery through vehicles such as narratives and proverbs to intimidate women to accept those injustices. Women have been reduced to tools for procreation. Their worth is determined by their success in fitting into straight jackets designed and tailored for them by the society.

In the Gikuyu society, the father's responsibility to choose a husband for his daughter is taken for granted. However, in the songs, we find daughters questioning why fathers should choose husbands for them. It is assumed that a woman cannot possibly hate a man chosen for her by her people. Songs register protests against the stereotypic images normally associated

with women. Traditional arrangements such as marriages and motherhood lead to chauvinism and irresponsibility on the part of men. Men have been shown that they can be irresponsible and unreasonable in their decision-making, especially where gender issues are concerned. The female voices in the songs bemoan the fate of all women. They express their desire for their total liberation from customs and tradition which lead them to enslavement. Through tools such as oral literature, it is obvious that women have been subjected to years of acculturation which have brainwashed them to accept dehumanizing images and positions in society. It is obvious that from the images associated with women, they are harshly treated in societies. They have been brainwashed to accept conventional stereotypes which brutalize and degrade them. The women in the songs are trying to make their way in a male-dominated society. It is expected that these women will become forerunners in women's liberation in the Gikuyu society, Kenyan community, and Africa at large. The message emerging from the women in the songs is that they have been dominated, disadvantaged, exploited and excluded in mainstream decision-making. Through proverbs, we saw that women are expected to be passive consumers of male decisions – *ciaririo thingira, itiregagwo nyumba*, that is, what is decided in the hut (male's domain) cannot be rejected in the house (woman's place). Women, through the stereotypic images, emerge as subhuman. In the songs, we have female voices crying for their liberation and rejecting their positions as second class citizens. The songs appear to be the pioneer genre of oral literature to spearhead female emancipation. Submission in the face of suffering is discouraged and the victim is demanding for a reform in the social structures which perpetuate the degradation of more than half of its population.

Women in the songs have rejected to be treated as slaves and beasts of burden. They have even pointed out that their parents have no right to choose husbands for them. Dowry which reduces women to commodities for sale is also being questioned.

The images associated with women are a reflection of established societal patterns of behaviours expected of women. Women need to break away from the male stereotypic female roles. They need to fight traditional forces which have relegated them to an inferior and exploited position. Women need to question the structure and social relations that have facilitated their marginalization.

They need to find out how they acquired the negative stereotypic images which have been used to sideline them, leading them to occupy downtrodden status. Women constitute a force that can no longer be ignored, ridiculed or dismissed as negligible. In the light of the negative images, oral literature seems to be a coercive tool used by the community aimed at keeping women in subjugation.

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ORAL NARRATIVES AS AN IDEOLOGICAL WEAPON FOR SUBORDINATING WOMEN: THE CASE OF JIMMA OROMO

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Abstract: This study attempts to examine the ideological significance of oral narratives in justifying and maintaining gender inequality. Among the Jimma Oromo, women are considered as naturally inferior to men. Accordingly, they have little access to and control over principal economic resources and income. Women are also kept away from participating in political and religious leadership, rituals and prestige conferring roles. Moreover, they suffer from traditional practices, such as genital mutilation, and polygamy. It goes without saying that female subordination is a cultural attribute, which is deep-rooted in socially sanctioned beliefs and norms that devalue women and feminine attributes, and positively value men and masculine attributes. These institutions, in turn, find expression, validation, and maintenance in various forms of oral literature, especially in oral narratives. Viewed in this light, historical narratives and folktales play a vital role in shaping, justifying, and transmitting gender biased attitudes, behaviours, norms, ideologies, and stereotypes from generation to generation, and in forcing the individual to conform to them; by so doing they maintain the stability of female subordination. Hence, understanding how oral narratives of the Jimma Oromo function in this respect constitutes the major concern of the present study.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to the announcement of the National Policy of Women in 1993, and the issuance of the current Constitution, the Federal Government of Ethiopia declared its unequivocal commitment to the equitable development of women and to the institutionalization of the social, economic and political rights of women. Accordingly, much emphasis has been put to integrating women in development through increased participation so as to effect changes in women's education, economic situation, social status and political participation. In spite of all this, the status of Ethiopian women was reported to have been fundamentally unchanged. This was due to various factors, of which the influence of the age-old socio-cultural values and norms that perpetuate gender inequality and injustice are the most daunting ones. (Almaz 1991,12; Fellner 2000,202; Rao and Kelleher 2002).

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In the Jimma area, women are considered as naturally defective and inferior to men. This assumption is witnessed in various aspects of life and in verbal expressions. Among others, oral narratives¹ play a vital role in justifying, legitimizing and transmitting the 'inferior' nature and subordinate status of women from generation to generation. Oral narratives are used to socialize women to men's dominance, and to make them subservient to men. Similarly, the men are socialized to exercise power over women through oral narratives.

Researches aimed at alleviating the multidimensional problems of women, and by so doing, enhancing the overall development of the society, should focus on understanding the socio-cultural values, assumptions and norms that hinder women from achieving equal status with men. More importantly, they should be able to indicate appropriate means of eradicating the deeply entrenched attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies underlying gender inequality and injustice. This is the springboard of the present study.

This research report consists of four parts. The present part provides the reader with introductory information about the research project, its objectives, significance, and scope of the study. It also presents the theoretical framework of the study, review of related research works, and methods of data collection.

Part Two is an overview of the socio- cultural background to the study, with particular emphasis on the Jimma Oromo women's social status and roles in various spheres of life. It also highlights on the collectively shared assumptions of and attitudes towards the female race, as well as the gender norms and gender ideologies underlying the actual life condition of women in the present day Jimma Oromo society.

The Third Part deals with the thematic and functional analysis of gender-biased oral narratives. It provides a detailed discussion, by way of analyzing samples of historical narratives and illustrative and humorous tales collected from the field, of the ideological significance of oral narratives in justifying and perpetuating the subordination of women among this particular Oromo society. Part Four consists of concluding remarks and recommendations. Endnotes and list of references are provided at the end of the report.

1.1 Study Objectives

This study represents an attempt to investigate and analyze how oral narratives function as an ideological weapon for the maintenance of female subordination among the Jimma Oromo. Specifically, the objectives of the study were:

1. To identify how women are depicted in the Jimma Oromo oral narratives;

2. To examine the socially sanctioned roles of women;
3. To pinpoint the ways in which oral narratives of the Jimma Oromo legitimize and maintain patriarchal authority;
4. To identify men's attitudes towards women, and vice versa;
5. To pinpoint the gender ideologies, norms, and stereotypes underlying female subordination in the cultural settings.

1.2 Significance of the Study

A detailed study of a given society's culture may help to understand the thoughts, beliefs, fears, wishes, and hopes of its members. Understanding these aspects of life, in turn, assists development strategists, policy makers, educationists and the like in selecting and planning development projects for a given people. The findings of this research, thus, may be of some importance for government and non-government officials, as well as other concerned bodies by indicating priority areas, and how the culture bearers should be approached in the effort to bring meaningful changes into the their life.

Scholars in the field of humanities agree that analyzing verbal arts may result in discovering general patterns of a culture; knowledge of such patterns, in turn, can provide the means of raising levels of consciousness that may facilitate the process of social transformation. In this regard, modern feminists emphasize "consciousness-raising" as a major movement goal - the process of making people aware of the lower status of women and the possibility of raising this status, whereby traditional gender social definitions are rejected and replaced by a new gender consciousness (Chafetz 1990; Diefenbach 2002). This research, hence, may also be of some significance in this respect.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

Since the inception of folklore as an independent field of inquiry in the nineteenth century, several schools of thought have been developed. Each school attempts to investigate and analyze the various folkloric forms from its own point of view and by using its own approach. Of the various schools and approaches, the functionalist, feminist and contextual approaches were adopted here in analyzing the functional and thematic significance of oral narratives in justifying and maintaining the subordination of women among the Jimma Oromo.

The functionalist or anthropological folklorist is fundamentally concerned with the utilitarian aspect of folklore. For the proponents of this school, the important question is: "What does a particular folkloric form do for the people?" Among the various functions oral literature in general and oral narratives in particular fulfills in a given society, its function of validating and maintaining institutions of culture is of importance to functionalists.

This interest is based on the assumption that any form of oral literature is an embodiment and manifestation of the beliefs, worldview, wishes, and fears of the people in which it occurs.

In line with this, feminist folklorists strongly argue that analysis of oral literature should be carried out from a gender point of view, and with a focus on the representation of the power relationship between men and women. In addition, feminist folklorists emphasize the importance of examining how a genre of oral literature operates within a society to ensure conformity and continuity to the accepted cultural values and norms underlying a gender system. In so doing, they also suggest that folklorists should pay more attention to what the informants themselves say about the interrelationship of form and function of their verbal arts (Yong and Turner 1993,135).

The advocates of the contextual approach, on the other hand, are more concerned with understanding the social and cultural contexts of folklore than just the texts. Here, much attention is paid to the socio-cultural features of a given folkloric form. In any attempt to analyze thematic and functional significance of oral narratives, contextualists stress the need for recording and examining the cultural and social aspects of performances along with texts.

In relation with analysing a maintenance mechanism of gender inequality, the framework provided by sociologists² is also found to be helpful. Accordingly, gender inequality or female subordination, women being under the authority of men, their having no control over available resources and having no personal autonomy, is maintained on a coercive and Voluntaristic bases. The coercive bases of gender inequality concern the various mechanisms men use to maintain their patriarchal power over women. On the other hand, the voluntaristic bases refer to aspects of gender subordination in which women contribute to their own disadvantage and devaluation. In her analysis of legitimising and maintenance mechanism of gender inequality, Chafetz (1990, 34) proposes an integrated theoretical approach which comprises three major variables: systems of gender stratification, gender division of labor and gender social definitions. Among these, the last one has much more relevance for the present study.

Social definitions are beliefs, values, stereotypes and norms that are widely shared by societal members. There are three kinds of social definitions of importance to understanding gender system maintenance: gender ideology, gender norms, and gender stereotypes. Gender ideologies are “belief systems that explain how and why males and females differ; specify, on these bases, different (inevitably unequal) rights, responsibilities, restrictions, and rewards to each gender; and justify negative reactions to nonconformist.” Gender ideologies constitute the bases for the other two

types of social definitions (Jameson 1981 as cited by Salivar 1991,13; Chafetz 1990,35; Bakhtin 1994; Diefenbach 2002).

Ideology is a complex structure of beliefs, values, attributes, and ways of perceiving and analyzing social reality based on religious doctrines, pseudoscientific theories, and political aims. It serves two distinct purposes: a) to justify the existing social order; and b) to co-opt and obtain the consent and participation of all members of society, including the oppressed, in their predetermined purposes. Gender ideology is based on the pseudoscientific theory of biological determinism.

Gender ideology plays an effective role in legitimizing inequality and perpetuating the unjust power structure of patriarchy that has constructed culture-specific justifications for the subordination of women. By co-opting women and making them instruments of their own subordination, patriarchy has penetrated virtually every society, and survived largely unchallenged for thousands of years. Gender ideology is widely disseminated and enforced through a complex web of social institutions such as the family, the educational system, religion, culture and the media, and economic and political structures like the market, the state and its bureaucracy, law enforcement mechanisms, and the military (Diefenbach 2002).

Social norms are widely shared expectations of proper behaviour for people who occupy given roles or statuses. Gender stereotypes, on the other hand, refer to collectively shared beliefs or perceptions that, concerning the difference between men and women, including value systems, instil an image of women as weak, dependent, subordinate, indecisive, emotional and submissive. Men, on the other hand, are defined as strong, independent, powerful, dominant, decisive and logical. Gender stereotypes consist of unexamined images, ideas or beliefs associated with a particular group that have become fixed in a person's mind and are not open to change. For example, women's roles, functions and abilities are seen to be primarily tied to the home.³

In oral societies like the Oromo, the various types of social definitions, ideologies and norms underlying gender inequality are expressed, justified, and maintained mainly through myths, historical narratives, and stories. Hence, such kind of oral narratives that are used as ideological weapons for female subordination in the Jimma Oromo have been focused upon in this study.

1.4 Literature Review

So far, very few research works have been done on Oromo oral narratives vis-à-vis gender ideology, and on women in Oromo in general, and the Jimma Oromo in particular. Among the studies on Oromo oral narratives, the works of Sumner (1996), Sahilu (1996), and Abraham (2000) have indirect relation to the present study. These writers have shown some interest in studying oral narratives in relation with gender. Sumner's work is

mainly a compilation of collections and typological study of Oromo tales. The other two writers, Sahilu and Abraham, are also mainly concerned with social and contextual aspects of oral narratives of two Oromo groups, the *Borana* and the *Jimma* Oromo, respectively. In their discussions of the social aspects, however, these writers have touched upon the roles of women in narrative performances. They pointed out that women are kept away from playing the role of a narrator in the performance of historical narratives, which is considered as a prestige-conferring role. By so doing, they highlight the relative status of women in both Oromo groups. However, they hardly made any attempt to understand the “justification” and the reason for prohibiting women from the aforementioned role. Moreover, these writers have shown little interest in and endeavour to investigate the functional and thematic aspects of oral narratives in relation to gender inequality.

There are two research works recently done on Oromo women: Minale (2000) and Wondwosen (2000). Minale’s study is an anthropological analysis which deals with the impact of polygamy on the economic, social, and political life of women in the western Oromo region. Wondwosen’s study is concerned with the traditional custom of *Laguu*, which prohibits women from addressing their husbands and in-laws by their names. In doing so, the writer points out that the custom has linguistic, psychological, and social impact on women. The linguistic effects are mainly manifested in creating some differences in women’s speech, which are manifestations of “the abominable male chauvinism that characterizes the Oromo societal life” (2000,7).

Apart from the above briefly reviewed works, there are some other studies conducted on women of various Ethiopian ethnic groups. Among others, Almaz (1989;1997); Helen (1997); Tsehay (1989), and Pankhurst (1992) studied the social, cultural, economic, and political roles and status of women from different perspectives. These writers have made significant contributions in increasing our knowledge of the Ethiopian women living in diverse socio- cultural and economic settings.

As it can be surmised from the above discussion, the oral narratives of the Oromo in general and the Jimma’s in particular have not been studied in relation to their role in justifying and maintaining gender inequality. The present study, thus, seeks to fill this lacuna.

1.5 Methodology

This study is primarily based on qualitative data collected from the field. In fieldwork-based studies like the present one, selecting representative research sites is among the important tasks. This emanates from the difficulty of covering all parts of a large culture area. Accordingly, seven of the thirteen *woredas* of the Jimma zone were selected to secure a sample that would represent the characteristic of the Jimma Oromo as closely as

possible. These are: *Saqqa Chaqorsa*, *Manna*, *Omo Nadda*, *Qersa*, *Dedo*, *Limmu Kosa*, and *Gomma*.

The Jimma Oromo are a homogeneous society. The people exhibit more or less a common socio-cultural identity, speak the same dialect of *Afaan Oromo*, practice the same religion, Islam, and obtain their livelihood in a similar mode of agricultural production. Therefore, the above randomly picked research sites are hoped to be representative of the Jimma Oromo.

The major techniques and instruments employed for data collection were of three kinds: interview, observation, and focus group discussion.

1.5.1 Interview

Both formal and informal interview sessions were conducted to elicit information on the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of women. The interview sessions involved forty informants, (thirty men and ten women)⁴, who were selected on the bases of their knowledge and willingness. It should be pointed out here that it was not possible to involve as much female informants as it had been intended, for the Islamic tradition and social norms of the Jimmas do not allow women to intermingle with men outside their respective families.

Informal interview sessions were held in the form of direct request for stories. This straightforward strategy, sometimes looking for locally admired performers and directly requesting for narratives, and in other times, asking indirect questions which could lead to narration enabled the researcher to collect a large corpus of verbal texts.

1.5.2 Participant Observation

This technique helped the researcher to get an optimal learning situation about the society and to record narratives within their own socio-cultural contexts. Thus, oral texts and relevant ethnographic data were collected by attending social gatherings and ceremonies such as neighbours' coffee drinking party (*buna dhuguu*), 'chat' chewing ceremony (*qimaa*), and mourning rite (*taziya*).

1.5.3 Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were also carried out with key informants. They included men and women, community leaders, elders and other informants locally known for their knowledge of the culture area. Each discussion consisted of five to seven persons. This technique helped to obtain information on widely shared norms, beliefs, practices and assumptions towards women. Discussions were also conducted to learn about local reflections on and interpretations of gender-centred verbal expressions. On top of this, this technique helped the researcher to strengthen and verify the data collected from interview sessions and participant observations. Secondary data were also obtained from published and unpublished

documents on historical and socio-economic aspects of the Jimma Oromo. In all cases of collecting data from the field, a tape-recorder, a photo camera, and note taking were employed.

1.6 Data Analysis

In analyzing data, the ethnographic method (usually referred to as “interpretative approach”) was employed. The interpretative approach in folklore studies presupposes the need for analyzing verbal arts within the prevailing socio-cultural context in which they operate. (Ben-Amos 1982; Finnegan 1992; Georges and Jones 1995). It also encourages researchers to consider local interpretations and values attached to oral forms. Accordingly, oral narrative texts were presented and interpreted mainly based on their thematic and ideological significances vis-à-vis gender inequality in the Jimma Oromo. In doing so, the holistic approach, rather than the atomistic approach, was used to enable the reader to have a comprehensive picture of the problem in its own social reality.

2. PROFILE OF THE JIMMA OROMO WOMEN

This section presents an over view of the actual life conditions of women in Jimma Oromo society, including the socially sanctioned roles and status of the female race in various phases of life. It also attempts to give a general account of the collectively shared assumptions of and attitudes towards women, as well as the currently prevailing gender norms and ideologies that produce and perpetuate female subordination in that particular society. More importantly, much attention has been paid to describe the stereotyped image of women in childhood, girlhood, and womanhood, along with the corresponding cultural prescriptions for proper girlhood/womanhood, which are generally considered the most crucial phases of women's social life. As such, it provides the reader with the necessary background information to understand the role oral narratives play in transmitting, justifying, and maintaining the deeply entrenched socio-cultural values, gender ideologies and norms underlying the existing gender inequality in the Jimma Oromo.

The Jimma Oromo is a branch of one of the tribal clusters of the Ethiopian Oromos. According to the Ethnographic Survey of North-Eastern Africa, the Oromos of Ethiopia are divided into some 200 or more tribes that fall in to six major regional groups: Southern (*Borana* and *Guji*), Northern (Wallo, *Raayyaa*), Central (Showa, *Tulamaa*), Eastern (Harar, *Ittu*), Western (Wallagga, *Leqaa*), and South-western (*Macca*). The Jimma Oromos, thus, belong to the Macca group which comprises several Oromo tribes inhabiting the south-western part of Ethiopia, the territory east of the Didessa River and south of the Abbay (Nile) River. More specifically, the Jimma Oromo belong to the cluster which includes the tribes of the former Oromo kingdoms beyond the Gibe River. These were often referred to as the Gibe States, namely: Jimma, Limmu-Enarya, Guma, Gomma, and Gera.

Today, these formerly independent kingdoms constitute one administrative zone-Jimma.

Based on the 1994 national census report, the total population of the zone is estimated to be about 2.15 million. Among these, the Oromo constitute 81.6%, the Yam 5.3%, the Amhara 2.9%, the Dawaro 1.8%, the Kaffa 1.8%, and others 3.5% of the total. Ninety percent of the people reside in rural areas, and subsist on mixed agriculture, whereas the rest are urban dwellers engaged in various forms of trade and other activities.

The Jimma Oromo group is the most patriarchal society, a man's world with men at its centre, as seems to be the case with most traditional societies universally. It goes without saying that women in such societies are subjected to gender inequalities and injustice. They suffer from the strong patriarchal structures, widely held ideologies and norms that dictate power inequalities between the genders in every aspect of life: social, economic, political and religious. Within the family, husband and wife have unequal status; the man incontestably dominates, and the woman defers to him. The wife is always regarded as a chattel, as the man is head of the family and owner of every bit of the household's economic resources. He owns and controls the land and every property it yields. Throughout their life, thus, women are obliged to be substantially dependent on and subordinate to men. Until marriage, they belong to and depend on their fathers' support and care, and after marriage, to and on their husbands. Influenced by the deep-rooted patriarchal systems, ideologies, norms and demands of life, women tend to develop serious psychological dependence on men and, consequently, appear to be content with their lot of being good wives to their husbands, and loving mothers to their children.

Among the Jimma Oromo, women are regarded as naturally inferior to men in mind, function and status. This traditional assumption is evident in everyday life situations, customary practices, socially sanctioned institutions and verbal expressions. In the Jimma area, for instance, the birth of a female child is generally accepted with indifference, if not with contempt, while that of a boy is welcomed with great pride and delight. As their saying goes, "Begetting a female child is better than sitting idle" (*Taa'uu mannaa durba dhalchuu wayya*). This proverb shows the devaluing attitude the society has towards women; it is that begetting or giving birth to a baby girl is not something to be cherished. Needless to say, begetting a daughter is represented as a metaphor for an undertaking or activity more valuable only than that of sitting idle.

In relation to this, it is interesting to note that the custom of abandoning children, mainly of the eldest child if it is a daughter, was pervasive among the South-western Oromo, though currently extinct. As Huntingford, (citing Cherulli), pointed out half a century ago, "...it was the custom, now almost extinct, to abandon daughters whom the father considered superfluous. The baby was called *gataa*, 'thrown away.' The father was allowed to abandon

it at any time during the first forty days after its birth, or on its second birthday" (Huntingford 1969, 28).

The demeaning attitude the people hold towards the female sex can also be witnessed in their birth custom. In the Jimma area it is customary that, upon a successful delivery of a child, women make a jubilant shouting locally known as "*iliilcha*". As soon as the child is born, neighbouring women, who in such circumstances often gather at the bedside of the would-be mother to offer their assistance, ululate, which they produce rapidly at a high pitch. They ululate five times if the child happens to be male and only three times if it comes out to be female. The *iliilcha* is culturally understood as an expression of joy, victory, and thankfulness to Allah; and hence the more the frequency of the *iliilcha*, the greater the happiness it conveys.

The above-mentioned customary practices may appear as trivial or commonplace to the casual observer. Seen critically, however, the number of repetition of the *iliilcha*, five and three times for a male child and a female child respectively, symbolizes the degree of the value the society attaches to the two sexes. In other words, it is an indication of the outcome of the brainwashing of the multifarious cultural mechanisms that communicate the 'proper' place and 'inferior' nature of women in the society. It is that the gender ideologies and gender stereotyped beliefs underlying the patriarchal system are so deeply internalized and accepted by women that they not only act in conformity with the dictates of the gender system status quo, but also contribute to their own disadvantage and devaluation. As Rowland-Sevdar and Schwartz have clearly noted, the more deeply these messages are internalized by female children and women, the more difficult it is for them to envision empowerment (Rowland - Sevdar and Schwartz-Shea 1997, 215; Leinbach and Rodgers 2000). Of course, this is a widespread social phenomenon existing in and peculiar to all forms of inequitable human relationships.

The ideal girl or woman in the Jimma Oromo is characterized by certain traits, of which forbearance (*obsa*) and obedience (*kabaja*) to men happen to be the most important. Women are expected to submit to male authority and supremacy at all levels of their lives. Deviation from this widely accepted norm could result in various forms of punishment, including social ostracism.

The socialization of girls includes explicit prescriptions and practical exercises for proper girlhood/ womanhood. From infancy throughout their youth, girls are brought up to behave like little women and to be able to carry out women's duties. They grow up with constant reminders of the fact that the ultimate goal of decent girls is marriage, for which they are required to be docile, modest, and shy in front of men in general. It is not proper for a girl or a woman to speak loudly, assertively, and to argue with men in

whatever circumstances. It is the responsibility of grown up women, particularly mothers and close female relatives, to impart to girls all the necessary knowledge and skills they need to become pleasant wives and, consequently, mothers, which constitute the socially sanctioned roles of women.

While in their parents' home (i.e. prior to getting married), girls are expected to be (and generally are) respectful to male members of their respective families, including male guests. Accordingly, they are to take orders from their fathers and brothers, even from the younger ones, and serve them in every way their age and physical make up permit them. In fact, little girls under age of seven are naturally exempt from any social obligation and, as a result, free to enjoy the taste of childhood. They pass most of their time playing within their homesteads. From the age of eight onwards, however, girls are considered to be old /or strong enough to learn and practice doing women's work. According to informants, a girl should assume her place within the home and take instructions from her mother by way of, as an apprentice, carrying out some household chores, as of the time her milk teeth are removed.

At this age, female children undergo the traditional practice of circumcision (*nandha qabaa*), which involves a set of ritualistic performances, of which the removal of the clitoris (*clitoridectomy*) constitutes the major part. They also have to get their ear lobes slit. This marks the transition from childhood to girlhood. Thereafter, a girl is expected to be aware of her sex and, consequently, learn how to adjust her clothes; she is expected to know how to behave in front of men, especially outside her family members. At this age, together with the emphasis on sex and age differences, also comes an awareness of the importance of seniority of birth.

According to female informants, girls naturally suffer immediate and lasting physical effects while they survive the genital mutilating operation. As also shown by studies, haemorrhaging, infection and infertility are among the serious complications of genital mutilation. The inability to pass urine normally, pain during sexual intercourse and highly difficult deliveries are among the common impacts of female circumcision (Sillah 1996, 137; Blauer 1998,79).

Under normal circumstances, girls do not choose their partners, nor do they conclude their marriage contract without the prior involvement and consent of their parents or guardians. In particular, they should obey their fathers or other male relatives designated as fathers. For a girl's marriage to be legalized and socially accepted, her father's or her guardian's consent is indispensable. Digression from this widely accepted norm, or refusing to marry the groom chosen by the father/male of guardian may adversely affect the social image and reputation of a woman.

According to the social norm, religious (Islamic law) as well as moral principles of the Jimma Oromo, premarital sex is prohibited; rather it is condemned. Premarital sex and pregnancy are highly stigmatized. Marriageable girls are expected to be chaste and inexperienced in sexual matters until marriage. The loss of virginity may diminish a girl's honor and reduce her marriage chances. Correspondingly, parents attach more importance to their daughter's virginity than to any other single quality they might offer to her future husband. Brought up under such social pressure, girls themselves cannot help valuing their virginity as highly as do their parents, and will not be tempted to lose it before marriage. Failure to meet this social expectation would result in severe punishment. If a girl is not found to be a virgin at her wedding, her and her parent's reputation would be ruined.

A girl's blood of virginity is said to be proof of her sterling character and purity throughout her girlhood, a gift she should offer only to her future husband and seal on the relationship to be established between the two families. A girl who fails to prove her virginity at her wedding will bring disgrace on her family and herself; her reputation will be ruined and her entire future reduced to shambles. Informants asserted that the groom has every right to flog the girl and send her back to her parents in shame, consequently demanding compensation for expenses he spent on the marriage. However, this tradition is said to be in decline these days.

It might not be difficult to surmise from the foregoing discussion that Jimma women are at a disadvantaged position in areas of family law and civil procedure, by extension, in the socio-cultural institutions of the society. As indicated above, among other social institutions, marriage, along with the corresponding traditional conventions, norms and assumptions, may be identified as an important mechanism for the production and maintenance of women's dependant and subordinate status. In broad terms, marriage is essentially a rearrangement of social structure; an arrangement of individuals' institutionalised relationships. As clearly noted by several anthropologists (DiCanio 1989,345), in most societies marriage, like birth and initiations at puberty, involves a socially sanctioned process whereby certain existing relationships, particularly those of the bride to her family, are changed. It is common place that when a woman marries she leaves her parents and lives with and under the control of her husband and his family; she ceases to live under the protection and authority of her father and is passed to the hands of her husband. Consequently, the bride implicitly becomes the property of her husband.

The Jimma Oromo have an old tradition of much relevance to the issue under discussion. Among this particular Oromo group, married women are given social identity and recognition only through their husbands. According to the traditional marital law, the culminating phase of marriage contracts is marked by a ceremonial bestowal of name, locally known as

maqaa moggaasaa. In this special rite of passage, the newly wed couples are bestowed with an honorific title (*maqaa hayaa*), as a mark of their transition from adolescence to adulthood. The bestower of the *maqaa hayaa* is invariably the father of the groom, or his male guardian in case the biological father is deceased. Upon going through this initiation rite, which usually takes place on the morrow of the wedding ceremony, the couples become full members of their community. Consequently, they will be identified by and distinguished from unmarried adolescents by their honorific names; their names of boyhood and maidenhood are to be relinquished for good.

The *maqaaa hayaa* of a man invariably consists of a compound of the honorific title *Abbaa*, which literally means 'Father', and a male name suffix; women take their husbands' names with the title *Haadha*, 'Mother.' For instance, if the name *Jobir* is chosen for a newly wed couple, thenceforward the man and his wife shall be identified as *Abbaa Jobir* and *Haadha Jobir*, respectively. The very interesting aspect of this tradition is that, which in the Ethiopian context seems to be uniquely belonging to the Jimma Oromo, upon marriage a woman does not only lose her maiden name but also gives up her father's name and take that of her husbands. Accordingly, to use the above-mentioned example again, the full name of a woman may be *Haadha Jobiir Abbaa Jobiir*⁵. From the feminist writers' point of view, a married woman losing her birth name symbolizes the loss of an independent identity she has had for decades, and the assumption of a kind of subordinate position. When the woman lost her name, and the wife merged into and became part of her husband, she lost her individual identity and status as an independent person. Incorporated and consolidated into her husband, she also lost, by implication, her independent existence, her natural right to control her own sexuality, and her right to own and inherit property (El-Saadawi 1997; DiCanio 1989).

Among the Jimma Oromo, women are traditionally deprived of their right to inherit properties of their fathers and their husbands. Nor do they have the right to own and administer land, the vital economic resource. Of course, this is not a peculiarity of the Jimmas alone; as is the case with most patriarchal societies in Africa, succession and inheritance go hand in hand, and the fundamental principle underlying the selection of the main heir is that property and power are inherited from and owned by men. Accordingly, a married woman hardly holds major economic resources and incomes in her own right. As long as he is alive, the husband has total authority and control over the family and every aspect of the economy that goes to the first-born sons on his demise. As corollary of this principle of ownership and inheritance, women could not help being substantially dependant on and submissive to their husbands as well as their sons upon the death of their husbands. In relation to this the Jimmas have a popular maxim which runs as: "Women are ruled by three persons; first by their father, secondly by their husband, and thirdly, by their sons" (*Dubartii*

abbaa sadiitu abbooma; kuniis, tokkoffaa haadha fi abbaa, lammaffaa, abbaa warraa, sadaffaa, ilma ishii).

As indicated earlier, the Oromo in general and the Jimma Oromo in particular attach much importance to children. Even though begetting or giving birth to a baby girl may not be cherished so highly as begetting a male child, children generally are regarded as the most valuable assets and are always wished for in large numbers. (Dahl 1990, 129). This naturally establishes motherhood as the central pillar of womanhood and, correspondingly, makes fertility crucial to wifehood.

The most important part of the 'value' of a woman is her childbearing capacity. Once married, therefore, a woman's major role is giving birth to and raising children. Apart from attending to sexual as well as other physical needs of her husband, and fulfilling household obligations – providing a loving and supportive atmosphere within the home – a wife is expected to bear as many children as possible. More importantly, a woman's value to her spouse, and her economic as well as emotional position and status in both the homestead and the community is significantly dependant upon her ability to give birth to and raise able-bodied sons to perpetuate the man's lineage. As long as a woman fulfills those expectations, she might win the respect of her husband and the community; relatively speaking, she could enjoy economic and emotional security in her marriage. Anything contrary to this inevitably leads the woman to nothing but a lifelong heartache and suffering. When a woman has no child, her status in the household and the community is anomalous and insecure. In order to understand this part of the societal expectation of the married woman, one needs to have an idea about the conception the Oromo in general and the Jimma Oromo in particular have of infertility.

In the Jimma area, a childless marriage is taken as a metaphor for an unprofitable and unproductive undertaking, which is stigmatized and ridiculed. For the same reason, a barren woman is generally looked down upon, held with contempt, and referred to as "gogduu." The word "gogduu" is an adjective derived from the Oromo verb "goge" or "gogde" (for feminine gender), which literally means to be or become dry. In its connotative and, obviously, derogatory meaning, it is used to qualify something as "lifeless, stale, charmless, dead." Here it should be noted that the Oromo perceive water as source of life (Bartels 1983). Accordingly, anything wet or that exhibits wetness, freshness and warmth is believed to be alive, and vice versa. Thus, death is understood as a natural phenomenon whereupon the victim runs out of water (life), and becomes dry. Simply put, the dead is supposed to have lost its freshness, and thus described as "gogeera" or "gogdeeti," which means, "it has turned dry." Viewed this way, an interesting point worth mentioning is that barrenness is culturally associated with and defined in terms of "dryness" of a woman and, specifically, "dryness" of the womb (*gadameessa*), as is evident in the

usage of the word “*gogduu*”. This is also witnessed in the traditional practice of “*eebba*” (blessing) of promoting fertility. When a woman fails to produce children, she is advised to get the blessing of elders (*manguddoo*), who are believed to have the power to restore her natural fertility by giving their blessing and “*tuftaa*,” spitting saliva into her dry, lifeless womb, which symbolizes water of life.

As indicated above, infertility, inability to procreate is entirely associated with and assumed as a failure on the part of the female sex. This finds expression in, besides the testimony of informants, the terminology “*masheena*” (equivalent to the English “barren”), which exclusively refers to the feminine gender and relating to humans and animals or nature in general. In accordance with this collectively held assumption, it is only women who bear the blame for and suffer the consequence of childless marriage. To make things worse for women, barrenness in a wife is virtually a breach of an essential condition of a marriage contract. If a woman is found to be unable to give birth, her husband is entitled to send her back to her parents, or to put her aside and take another wife to perpetuate his name and patriline. In fact, divorce in general and on the basis of infertility in particular, is not pervasive among the Jimma Muslims, as it is condemned on both religious and moral grounds.

It has already been indicated that the primary sphere of Jimma women is the home and their stereotyped roles are those of a wife and a mother, as is almost universally the case among traditional societies. As wives, women belong in the home and shoulder the responsibility of nurturing children, food preparation and taking care of the domicile. The household chores include fetching water from rivers and ponds, preparing and distributing food, cleaning the home, laundering, milking, taking care for and socializing children, and taking care for the young, weak and pregnant animals.

Outside the homestead, they may participate and give a hand in light agricultural works like weeding and gathering coffee beans, whenever the need arises. In addition, they undertake the responsibility of taking small-scale household products such as vegetables, dairy products, *caat*, and food crops to small local markets. This should not be taken to mean that women have an upper hand in the domestic sphere. Though women carry the burden of performing the overwhelming majority of activities within the homestead, the men wield total authority in the family and domestic economy. Many informants testified that men make major decisions in the social and economic life of the household.

It goes with out saying that most of the activities within a women’s domain are less valid; garner few rewards and little social recognition than that of men’s extra domestic activities. Much of the work of child rearing and taking care of family members and household is not only physically demanding, but also highly repetitive, dull, dirty, and generally undesirable.

Meals must be produced several times daily. Clothes, dishes, and other items must be cleaned, some daily, others regularly, if less frequently. Sick people, babies, and toddlers must have virtually all their physical needs attended to many times daily (Chafetz 1990, 50).

Confined to domestic spheres, women are practically alienated and barred from the public domain by custom, and religious conventions as well, which discourages female participation in most of the society's communal and power conferring activities. Among the Jimma Oromo, as is assumed to be universally the case with most followers of Islam, women do not intermingle with men outside their immediate families, and must not be exposed or show themselves to the external world. The separation of the two sexes from each other in their respective community and, specifically, the exclusion of the female race from playing significant roles in social, religious, and political life of their society is manifested in the various social activities of the people.

According to informants, this is to prevent provocative situations and the stimulation of sexual desire women can create in men, which may result in adultery.

In social and religious gatherings, women should be kept separately and out of sights, so that men will not be distracted from their duty and led astray by the enticing seductive nature of women.” From sociologists' point of view, however, it is a clear reflection and manifestation of the segregation, seclusion, degradation, and subordination of women in patriarchal societies. To put it in Baskin's (1985) words, “women ... are defined almost exclusively in terms of their sexual functions, and these are often frightening or threatening to men; therefore, women will be seen as anomalous and defined as dangerous, dirty, polluting, as something to be set apart.” In this regard, religion too is “most anxious to circumscribe, defuse and control the sexual attributes of the female as both polluter and temptress” (Baskin 1985,111).

As to power, traditionally, Jimma women neither assume positions of leadership, nor have decision-making and consultative role in social, religious, and political institutions operating at all levels. In fact, the exclusion of women from leadership roles is one of the distinctive features of the traditional socio-political institution of the Oromo, the Gada (Asmerom 1973). In this respect, it is worth noting that terms like *queen*, *princess*, and *governess* are not even found in the Oromo vocabulary.

According to a widespread version of an historical narrative (*Seenaa*), the disenfranchisement of the female race from power goes back to the earliest history of the Jimma Oromo. The narrative says that it was at the time of Jimma Oromo ancestors' first penetration into the Gibe region that women's leadership role ended. The wise ancestors assessed the physical and mental nature of women and concluded, “Women are incomplete and

defective creatures.” Similarly, the Jimmas have a massive body of folk tales (*Oduu Durii fi Qoosaa*) that draws on the old stereotypes of women obsessed only about their sexual gratification, lacking sense of duty, rational thinking, devotion, endurance, honesty, and such like character traits required to shoulder social and political responsibilities. Complete texts in English transcription and translation, and analysis of specimen of these narratives are presented in the later part of this paper.

3. ORAL NARRATIVES JUSTIFYING THE SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN

The present part of the paper sets out to illustrate the ideological significance of oral narratives in justifying and perpetuating women subordination among the Jimma Oromo. Before going into the analysis, however, it is necessary to point out the critical presuppositions within which the present analysis is framed.

As repeatedly indicated above, this study is based on two widely acknowledged and interrelated assumptions (Chafetz 1990; Diefenbach 2002).

- 1) The woman's position, which seems to be universally the case with most traditional societies, is subordinate to the man's in every aspect of life: economic, social, political, and religious;
- 2) Gender inequality (the subordination of women) is a socio-cultural attribute, deep-rooted in widely shared belief systems, ideologies and norms.

In relation to this, it is also necessary to pin point how oral narratives contribute in maintaining the gender system status quo.

Many writers in the field of humanities believe that folklore in general and oral narratives in particular play an important role in the production and transmission of ideology - the collectively shared body of ideas, values, and beliefs underlying a certain social order.⁶ Ideology, briefly, can be understood as “the system of interlinked ideas, symbols, and beliefs by which a culture ... seeks to justify and perpetuate itself...” It is through these internalized rather than imposed networks of ideas and assumptions that the society coerces, persuades, and coaxes its members into acting in a unified and regularized way (Bercovitch 1986 as cited by Saldivar 1991,13). In this respect, narratives play a crucial role in articulating and instantiating ideology as the substance of collective thinking and collective fantasies about reality (Jameson 1981 as cited by Saldivar 1991,13; Bakhtin 1994). In Hinchman and Hinchman’s words (1997,35), stories play a crucial role:

in socializing people into accepted ways of acting, thinking, and perceiving, in fostering group cohesion, and in perpetuating communal traditions. A

community's stories offer members a set of canonical symbols, plots, and characters through which they can interpret reality and negotiate- or even create- their world. ...Indeed, without the consensus that narratives help to establish, the memories they preserve, and the values and behaviour-pattern they transmit, culture would be impossible (Hinchman and Hinchman 1997).

Put simply, the form and content of a community's preferred narratives play a significant role not only in influencing and shaping their modes of thinking, feeling, valuing, perceiving, believing, etc., but also in the (re) production, legitimizing, and maintenance of the set of beliefs, the multifarious institutions, and power structures governing their behaviour and interaction. If what appears 'natural', common, and normal in the ways individuals live their lives in a society is the result of identifiable cultural matrices, thus, there is no question that stories play crucial roles in articulation and perpetuation of the net work of ideas, and assumptions underlying the gender system status quo, among others, as universally accepted norms and standards of behaviour to be internalized and embraced by each member of the society.⁷

Accordingly, some Jimma Oromo oral narratives that were recorded in the field and selected for the purpose of the present article are examined hereunder in two interrelated local categories: *Seenaa* and *Oduu Durii*.⁸

3.1 *Seenaa*

The *Seenaa*,⁹ which, for common understanding, may be referred to as historical narrative, is the most valued narrative genre of the Jimma Oromo. It is a factual representation of local historical events and great deeds of popular personalities in the good old days. *Seenaa*, which is conventionally understood as and believed to be *true history*,¹⁰ consists of factual oral accounts whereby the cumulative and shared socio-political experiences, traditions, ideologies, norms, and values are expressed, validated, and perpetuated.

Conceived as a factual account of the 'good old days' when Jimma was an independent, powerful and prosperous kingdom, *Seenaa* is more favoured and enjoyed by the Jimmas, to be more specific, by the Jimma men, than any other narrative form.¹¹ Correspondingly, it is taken seriously and performed with much importance and emphasis put on the maintenance of its validity. To this effect, it is usually performed in formal social contexts involving only adult men. The performance of *Seenaa* is a role exclusively undertaken by senior men (*maanguddoo*). This does not mean that women, and children as well, are prohibited from attending and/or participating in narrative performances. There is no explicit imposition on them as such. As emphasized by informants of both sexes and confirmed by author's observation in the field, women have little to do with narrative performances, especially with that of *Seenaa*. *Seenaa* is the prerogative of elderly men. Women are said to lack the detailed knowledge of the 'facts'

and the skills needed to play the role of a *Seenaa* narrator. An interesting aspect of the issue is that female informants also held similar view. Almost all of the few female informants (five in number) with whom the author had the opportunity to discuss the role and place of women in that particular society testified that the narration of *Seenaa* was out of their reach. The common response to the writer's request for the narration of *Seenaa* was, "What have women got to do with *Seenaa*? It is only the elders who know it and take pleasure in reminiscing about the yesteryear."¹²

Analytically, the problem of women's exemption from narrating the *Seenaa* could be approached from different angles. First, it might be related to women's confinement to the domestic sphere on the one hand, and the intellectually demanding and time-consuming nature of the performance of *Seenaa* on the other. The narration of *Seenaa* requires one to have not only a wide repertoire or memory of the narrated events - the imagined or reconstructed historical and socio-political facts and situations that dominate its content - but also an ample opportunity, extended leisure time and ability to present it with as much verisimilitude as possible. Viewed against this, the traditional role and status of women in the society seems to allow them neither to have the time for, nor the interest in making the effort to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for playing the role of *Seenaa* narrator.¹³

Secondly, in line with feminist theory of folklore, women's exemption from *Seenaa* narration could be understood as a way whereby women use their marginal status to creatively undermine or protest against the patriarchal society and its 'reality system,' and their marginalized roles and subordinate status in the society (Young and Turner 1993). The exemption is, thus, a behaviour disruptive to the established patriarchal values and ancestral authority, which appropriate and deprive women of their equal rights with men. By denying themselves of the 'knowledge' and 'competence' in *Seenaa*, in which their male partners take much pleasure and pride, women negate the 'great deeds' and 'wisdom' of the bygone days, the established assumptions, values, ideologies and norms underlying the patriarchal social order and their marginal status. In this respect, "marginality lends women the capacity to remain detached from the status quo." (Ibid). The point is women seem to gain little from *Seenaa* performance, which is hardly to their advantage.

The other possible explanation lies in the ideological dimension of *Seenaa*, whereby the commonly shared definitions of and attitudes towards both women and men find expression and validation. Embodied in and transmitted through the ground rules governing its performance and communicative processes, the exclusion of women from *Seenaa* could be understood as an instance of imposed marginality of women, and the deliberate folkloric mechanism which the overwhelmingly male elite employ to justify the patriarchal ideology - 'Women lack intellectual

capabilities required to bear social and cultural responsibilities'- underlying the gender division of labour. This helps the elite not only to restrict women to the less valued domestic arena, but also to keep them away from questioning the legitimacy of the laws, customs, institutions and the underlying ideologies that promote and perpetuate male domination and supremacy over women. The more isolated women are from cultural performances, the more likely that their male interaction partners' definitions will be the only ones available to them, and therefore, the more likely those definitions will be accepted as valid and true. At a larger level, the more alienated women are from the patriarchal system, the less they feel a part of it and, consequently, the less conscious they will be to fight for gender equality and justice (Ibid; Chafetz 1990).

According to certain *Seenaa* currently told in the area, women initially ruled the Jimma Oromo. In the widespread version of *Seenaa* mentioned above, for instance, the first ruler of the Jimmas was said to have been a woman called Makka Ware. Makka ruled the five Oromo groupings during and subsequent to the time of their migration to and settlement in the area, which thenceforward was to be known as Jimma.¹⁴ As time went by, however, says the *Seenaa*, ill feelings grew in the people and they became disappointed at being ruled by a woman so much so that the tribal representatives plotted to overthrow her. Consequently, they succeeded in making a law that defined women as incomplete creatures. They not only removed Makka Ware from power but also disenfranchised the entire female race from leadership. The complete narrative text in English translation runs as follows.

At the time our ancestors first came to settle in this area, a woman called Makka Ware ruled them. The territory of the present day Jimma was uninhabited then. And the Oromo had been living in Bisil, a place east of The Gibe River. Makka Ware was the first ruler* of the Jimma Oromo; Her office was said to have been under the sycamore tree at the place where the flag is being flown now. That was the place where Makka and her law making officials had a council. The name of that sycamore tree was... what was it? 'Hulle, Oda Hulle.' [Audience response].

Yes, that is it. And the law making council was similar to the present-day committee meeting. While Makka was ruling the people, Diggo came to power.

'What happened to her?' [Audience request].

Just a minute, she was to be overthrown. They were to have a council under the sycamore tree. Don't you know the sycamore tree, which stands in pair in the place where the flag is being flown now?

* The Oromo language does not have an equivalent term for 'queen.'

‘Yes, we know.’ [Audience response].

That was her office, you see. That was the place where she had a council; it was from there that all the binding rules and regulations radiated. She held office there, and ruled the people for a long period. As time went by, however, ill feelings grew in the people. They became disappointed at being ruled by a female. Then, the men assembled and counselled secretly. They said, ‘It is ridiculous, our being ruled by a woman; it is shame, to be governed by a woman as if there were no men among us.’ Having expressed their disapprobation of their female ruler, they plotted to overthrow her. Accordingly, they conspired and agreed to trick her out of chairing a meeting of the legislative council she herself had called and, in her absence, to make a law that would enable them to remove her and the entire female race from power. There and then, a man called Hera volunteered to play the leading role in the plot. Hera was a very tall, handsome man, a kind of man who holds an irresistible attraction for women.

‘In the morning of the day our meeting is to be held,’ said Hera to his fellowmen, ‘I will go to the palace and engage Makka in a long conversation and delay her from the meeting. In the mean time, you are to make a law which prohibits women from assuming authoritative position.’ It was agreed, thus, to carry out everything according to the plan.

On the said day, Hera arrived at the palace while Makka was getting ready to ride her horse to the meeting. ‘Oh! Hera, what brought you to my place at this early time of the day?’ asked Makka. ‘Your Excellency,’ replied Hera, ‘while I was on my way to our law-making meeting, I felt like coming here to pay my respects and escort you there. To be frank with you, I have not had my breakfast. Would you provide me with something to eat and drink, please?’ Makka dismounted from her horse, and invited Hera to a lavish breakfast with the best food and mead. Hera took his time, eating and engaging her in a protracted, amusing conversation. By so doing, he was able to hold her back for hours from going to and residing over the meeting. In the meantime, hence, his fellowmen were to make the law. Overcome by Hera’s enticing countenance and delaying tactics, Makka arrived at the meeting place long after the council had completed making the law.

Upon her arrival, Makka found the people communing with each other in a relaxed mood. To her bewilderment, they failed to pay her due respect and received her coldly. They remained in their seats regardless of their custom of rising and remaining standing until she was seated in her presidential chair. Shocked by her subjects’ unusual behaviour, Makka was unable to know what to do or to say. She quietly sat down and observed them for a while. Then she asked, ‘What has come of our law making counsel to be held today?’

‘We have already made our law,’ replied the men.

‘Who led you in doing so?’

‘No one, we made it ourselves.’

‘What laws did you make?’

‘The first is a law that prohibits women from assuming administrative positions. We are convinced that all women, including you, are naturally incomplete and defective creatures, who, therefore, should be given no more chance to come to power.’

‘So, you declared that we are unfit to be a ruler. That means you have removed me from power.’

‘Yes, you are not fit to rule us, because you are mentally and physically inferior to men. Women are not adept at using the spear; nor are they strong enough to fight the enemy. What is worse, women’s pregnancy hinders men from being victorious over their enemies, as they neglect their duty of fighting for looking after their expecting wives who may go into labour in a battlefield. As to women’s inferiority in mind, Hera’s success in holding you back from this very meeting, which was prearranged but by yourself, is a tangible evidence.’

‘Okay! You declared that women would not be rulers. What is the other law you have made?’

‘We have also declared that honey makers, blacksmiths, tanners, and itinerant traders should be treated as outcasts.’

There and then, Makka Ware was removed from power and replaced by a man called Abba Qiriphe. Thenceforth, women were not allowed to be rulers. While eight kings reigned over Jimma, there was no single woman in it. This is why women cannot hold positions of leadership or administration at all levels.¹⁵

The *Seena* of Makka Ware seems to be men’s formulation, though it contains commonly shared traditional conceptions of both women and men. Actually, it is told to justify and legitimize women’s inferior ‘nature’ and subordinate status. To this effect, it depicts women from men’s point of view, and presents the exclusion of women from power as a justifiable “making of the wise ancestors.” This patriarchal theme is especially evident in terms of both the female and male behaviours that stand in direct opposition.

The woman in the story, Makka Ware, is a stereotypical representative of Jimma Oromo women. True to the patriarchal ideal of the female sex, thus, she is portrayed as a passive, submissive, helpless, politically naive and vulnerable woman who lacks the strength, commitment, self-control, seriousness of purpose and rational judgment required of a political leader. Unable to resist Hera’s intruding and enticing physique, Makka falls into his trap and completely neglects her public responsibility and misses the law making counsel, feeling moral obligation to pander to his whims. She

neither protests against nor makes any effort to arrest the plot and the law of disenfranchisement of women from being passed. In so doing, she behaves in conformity with the deep-rooted gender norms and prescriptions. The dominant male figure, Hera, on the other hand, behaves cunningly and confidently. He not only takes the initiative in planning and executing the plot against Makka Ware, but also plays a leading role and succeeds in establishing the patriarchal order by way of bringing Abba Qiriphe to power. In conformity with and justification of the prototypical image and societal expectation of a man, Hera ventures upon and succeeds in extracting compliance from Makka, hence exhibiting courage, commitment and seriousness of purpose, in sum, superiority and dominance over the female figure.

Here, it should be noted that the story also contains a message that stands in contrast with the most important part of the social value of a woman, at least the male ideal of a woman, i.e. her fertility (childbearing capacity). The Oromo in general and the Jimmas in particular attach much importance to children. Even though begetting a baby girl is less cherished than begetting a son, children generally are regarded as the most valuable assets and are always wished for in large numbers (Dahl 1990). This naturally establishes motherhood as the central pillar of womanhood and, correspondingly, makes fertility crucial to wifeness, which seems the case with most African societies. In broader terms, the primary end of marriage in traditional societies is procreation, rather than romance. As Radcliffe-Brown (1952,51) clearly put it, "An African marries because he wants children."

Once married, therefore, a woman's important duty would be giving birth to and raising children. Correspondingly, a woman's moral value, her economic as well as emotional position and social status both in the homestead and the community is significantly dependent upon her ability to give birth to and raise able-bodied children, especially male children, to perpetuate the man's lineage. As long as a woman fulfilled this expectation, among others, she might win respect of her husband and the community; relatively speaking, she could also enjoy a higher social prestige and emotional security in her marriage. It is unfortunate of a woman who fails to live up to this social expectation, as the consequence will be nothing but a lifelong heartache and suffering.¹⁶

Contrary to this, the *Seena* of Makka Ware reveals that it was because of their child-bearing capacity (fertility) that women were excluded from leadership and destined to live under the authority of men: "Women's pregnancy hinders men from being victorious over their enemies...." In a slightly different version of the same story, Makka Ware was said to have been a virgin sorcerer and tyrant ruler. She had a magical power over her subjects. She exercises her magical power to make men obedient and subservient to her. Let alone mortal men, even the earth trembles in fear

when Makka puts her magical sceptre (*Bokku*) on the ground. Eventually, the men plot to overthrow her and make a law, which thenceforth prohibits the entire female race from holding positions of leadership. By tricking Makka into losing her virginity and, consequently, her magical power, the men bring an end not only to her rule but to all women's role and participation in politics.

If the Oromo attach much value to women's fertility, as actually is the case, how can we explain the devaluing statement against the same in the *Seenaa*? The theoretical explanation for this lies in the ideological function of the *Seenaa* that reverses the state of affairs that exists in the realm of actual life.¹⁷ This is a typical instance of the way men use oral narratives to reconstruct and reinforce the patriarchal ideal of women to propagate that they are submissive and helpless, that their sexuality, including pregnancy and menstruation, makes them venerable to physical assault, and that they constantly require the overprotection of men.

The ideological significance of the narrative is particularly explicit in terms of the conclusion: "That is why women cannot be rulers." This simple and seemingly naïve statement is loaded with the disguised patriarchal ideology the whole story aims to propagate: "*Women are inferior to men.*" It is used to establish the exclusion of women from power as something natural and timeless, as if it has been the way of the world since time immemorial, and it were an incontestable, and unassailable, self-evident truth, not a socio-culturally constructed phenomenon shaped by historical circumstances. It is also interesting to note that the downfall of Makka Ware, which resulted in the disenfranchisement of women in general, is deliberately expressed in the exclusively masculine ancestral voice and grounded within a mythical setting—"Makka Ware was the first ruler of Jimma." For the same reason, the story propagates that women initially had the chance to rule over the society, but failed to make use of it. By so doing, the *Seenaa* lends a primordial origin and ancestral blessing to the system of gender stratification, specifically, to the exclusion of women from power, so that it becomes a basic component of the people's historical and cultural heritage, social norm, belief, and personality.

Concisely, the story reveals the male ideal of women and the patriarchal ideologies and stereotypes that have been accepted as representing the whole society. To this end, it defines women as having 'natural' attributes that make them less worthy than and inferior to men. What is more, it reinforces the traditional assumption that women lack the character traits required to fill positions of leadership. It provides 'correct' models of maleness and femaleness, socializing both men and women into behaving in gender-normative ways as the only 'proper' modes of behaviour, and thereby, contributes to maintenance of the patriarchal system. By producing and reproducing various versions of this and other *Seenaa* narratives, the men narrators make sure to justify and legitimize the subordination of

women. In this respect, it is worthwhile to quote a few words from Novitz's (1997) article on the political function of art in general and narratives in particular: "Stories and counter stories are told; history is written, subverted, and rewritten. And in this game of strategy, *those who have the last word also have considerable power over those who do not*" (Novitz 1997, 146) (emphasis added).

In another *Seenaa*, women's exclusion from power is said to have been caused by their own unsympathetic and tyrannical behaviour. Accordingly, women cannot be rulers for they lack rational thinking and sense of justice; they are ruthless, and thus, dangerous threats to the continuation of the society, especially to the very existence of men. The following story is a typical instance of its kind.

In the good old times, the Oromo had a law, which barred women from assuming positions of leadership. The law had always been in force until one day a woman came forward to the council of men and asked them to make her their ruler just for a while, so that she would bring unbelievable transformation to their life. "Let me have power for a period of time as short as something thrown upward falls down to the ground," she requested. The men agreed to her request and brought her to power, simply out of curiosity. There and then, the woman began passing unjust sentences upon the people. 'So and so, you are sentenced to death; so and so, you are sentenced to imprisonment in life; ...' she sentenced the men to severe punishments. The people could do nothing but execute the sentences, as their social norm dictates them to keep their words and agreements. Thereafter, however, they denounced not only that particular woman but also the entire female race as ruthless and unjust, and made a law that disenfranchised them from power. 'Women are blindly cruel and vengeful creatures. Therefore, let them not be allowed to assume positions of leadership in whatsoever circumstance.'

The story of the cruel woman is one of the many oral narratives and sayings that emphasize the irrationality and futility of women as the bases for their subordination to men who, on the other hand, are described as rational, duty-minded, composed and resourceful. Of course, Oromo orature abounds with proverbs and metaphorical expressions depicting women as irrational, thoughtless, and absurd. The following examples suffice to illustrate this point:

- *Motummaan dubartii karra cufaatti oshiti.*
The government of women leaves the cattle shut in their corral.
- *Motummaan dubartii bishaan ol yaafti.*
The government of women demands for water to flow upward.
- *Dubartiin hamma harmi rarraate takka, qalbiin rarraate.*
The mentality of women is like their breasts, it is hanging in mid air.

- *Dubartiin dheertuu malee beektuu hinqabdu.*
A woman may be tall, but never bright in her thinking.
- *Dubartiin furdoo malee guddoo hinqabdu.*
There is no a great woman, but a fat one.

Similarly, in the following *Seena* the prohibition against women's political role is explained in terms of their 'unreasonable' and 'tyrannical' behaviour.

Long ago, there was a woman who tyrannically ruled over the Oromo. She had always been a tyrant and unjust to her subjects. The people could do nothing except being loyal, subservient and obedient to her for she went on tightening her grip on them as time went by. One day during her rule, she ordered her subordinates to call for an assembly of all able-bodied men. There and then, she ordered them to build a palace hanging in the air. 'I want you to build a palace for me that neither touches the ground nor reaches the sky,' she said. This was a very threatening challenge to the people. They knew that failure to fulfil her wish would certainly result in severe punishment, no less than a death sentence. They also knew that they could not build a palace hanging in the air. After exchanging some ideas about the way out of the problem, they decided to look for and consult a dwarf, who was known for his wisdom and resourcefulness. They found the wise dwarf and asked him to save them from their tyrant ruler. The dwarf pondered over the problem for a while and came up with the best solution. He advised the people to ask the queen to lay the cornerstone of the building first, according to the dictates of their tradition. The people went to the ruler and requested her to lay the corner stone so that they could build the palace of her preference. Thereby, thanks to the wise man, the people were able to defeat the tyrant woman. Ever since that time, it has been known that women lack sense of justice for which they are denounced as unfit to hold administrative offices.

These and many other *Seena* narratives play a significant role in transmitting and perpetuating the stereotypic inferiority of women from generation to generation. By producing and reproducing these stories, the Jimma Oromo men socialize women to men's dominance, and ensure that they remain content with their lot. To conclude, these narratives, among others, are used as ideological weapons not only to justify and legitimize the subordination of women but also to repress changes or oppositional behaviours towards the age-long gender system status quo.

3.1 *Oduu Durii*

The *Oduu Durii* designates a class of illustrative and humorous tales which are also used to communicate the commonly shared stereotypic images of women and men and cultural prescriptions for proper/improper womanhood and manhood. Broadly speaking, narratives in this category are locally understood as imaginary stories told for their pedagogic and entertaining

value, i.e. to illustrate and ponder upon the nature of the various aspects of human life and to exemplify proper private, as well as public conduct in an entertaining manner. Accordingly, they are told in turns during a course of social interaction, in both formal and informal contexts, and at any time of the day and in any place. This paper, however, deals only with those recurrent stories that draw upon the commonly shared values, norms, views, assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices underlying women's subordination in the Jimma Oromo.

Women and their faults or shortcomings are among the most pervasive themes in Oromo oral narratives of the Jimma Oromo. A number of stories and sayings depict the female race as creatures with negative traits that make them 'naturally' distinct from and inferior to men. These narratives transmit the stereotyped conceptions and male ideals of women from generation to generation. In so doing, they provide evidence that the commonly held views and attitudes towards women are true. Furthermore, they reinforce gender normative behaviour by way of socializing both women and men to the traditional gender roles and works they are expected to perform. Specifically speaking, these stories influence women to act and behave in conformity with the socially sanctioned gender norms. It is a socialization process which works via stories to make women what they are expected to be and what they actually are as well. As Kapteijns and Ali (1994) noted in their study of Somali oral narratives, narratives in this category suggest what women should be by lamenting what they are not, and vice versa (Kapteijns and Ali 1994,37).

The cruelty of women happens to be one of the most common negative stereotypes in stories told by Jimma men. In fact, it is among the most pervasive and popular themes in Oromo orature in general. Thus, it is said that, "Dog is the best friend of man, woman his cruellest enemy" (*Sareen fira namaati, nadheen dina isaa*). The same view is expressed in the proverb, "Be cruel as your mother, and brave as your father" (*Garaa jabina akka haadhakee, jagnummaa akka abbaakee*).

Several *oduu duriis* give evidence to women's cruelty. One good example is the *oduu durii* of the king who makes a bet with his chiefs about whether women are crueller than men. To determine the issue, the king tests a man and his wife.

'Go home, cut off your wife's head and bring it to me, so that I shall raise you to the rank of a chief,' said the king to the man. 'If you fail to do so, however, I will sentence you to death.' The man went home pondering over his assignment. He took a knife and placed it under his bed. In the middle of the night, he got up and took out the knife to kill his wife, who was sound asleep. He raised the knife, but could not find the heart to slaughter his wife. 'How can I cut off my wife's head?' he said, and threw away the knife. 'I would rather be sentenced to death.' In the morning, he went to the palace and told the king that he could not kill his wife. 'I am ready to accept your death

sentence, your majesty,' he said. Then the king ordered his chiefs to summon the man's wife. When she came to him, he told her that he would make her a queen, if she cut her husband's neck and brought it to him. She went home to do as she was told. When her husband had fallen asleep, she got up and cut off his head. In the morning, she put it in a basket and took it to the king. 'I have brought you my husband's head, your majesty,' she said. Then she drew out and showed it to him. The king and his chiefs were shocked by the cruelty of the woman. They concluded that women are indeed crueler than men. Then the king sentenced the woman to death in fire. They dug a hole and buried her up to her neck. Then they covered her head with wax and set fire to her.

In another *oduu durii*, a girl tricks her mother into falling from a roof down on a spear so that she could go to bed with her mother's lover. Still in another one, a woman betrays her husband and delivers him to his enemy, which is similar to that of the biblical Samson and Delilah. The complete story runs as follows:

Once upon a time there was a man called Abba Giddi. Abba Giddi was a very rich and great warrior. He had a wife whom he loved very much. When he was at home and at rest, he liked to play with his wife. He used to enjoy sleeping on his wife's lap and listening to her stories out in the beautiful garden in front of their house. Abba Giddi had a few enemies who wanted to kill him but could not find the way, as he was a very strong and a great warrior. When the enemy realized that there was no way of defeating Abba Giddi in a hand-to-hand combat, they approached his wife and asked for her assistance. 'When is your husband off his guard?' they asked her. 'He passes most of his leisure time on my lap. You can easily kill him then,' she said and told them the right time to come for her husband. On the appointed day, while Abba Giddi was sleeping on her lap, she playfully twisted his long hair with a tuft of grass. When the enemy came at the appointed time, she withdrew her legs. Then Abba Giddi heard the footsteps of his enemies and tried to rise to his feet, in vain. He struggled to free himself, but failed as his hair was tangled up with the firm grass. There and then, the enemy killed Abba Giddi, cutting his neck right in front of his wife.

In concluding the above *oduu durii*, the narrator said, "You see, this is why our forefathers declared, 'Be cruel as your mother, and brave as your father'" (*Garaa jabina akka haadhakee, jagnummaa akka abbaakee*).

There is no end to *oduu durii*s about cruelty of women. The tale about the cruel stepmother in which the stepmother abandons her innocent stepchildren to starve to death, the *oduu durii* of the woman who cuts off her husband's penis to show her love and loyalty to her lover, the *oduu durii* of the blind man who outsmarts and tricks his adulterous wife into falling into the very trap she devised to get rid of him, and so on goes the list. The common denominator of these *oduu durii* is the disguised ideological message that women should be nothing but nurturing, loyal, selfless,

subservient, and pleasant to men, which all together constitute the Jimma male ideal of women.

Women's lustfulness and infidelity is the other powerful negative stereotype that occurs most commonly in the *oduu durii* of the Jimma Oromo. In several of these narratives, women are portrayed as deceitful and unfaithful to their husbands, and irresponsible and lustful creatures obsessed only about their sexual gratification. In one *oduu durii*, a man and a woman make a bet on whether women are more lustful than men are. The man says, "Women are more lustful than men." The woman argues to the contrary. "Women do not care that much about sex. But you men cannot even abstain from having sex for a few days." They took their bet to the elders. The elders devised a way to decide the issue. They put the man and the woman on opposite sides of a river and instructed them to remain there naked. They passed many days and nights feasting their eyes on each other's naked body. Both of them were fed on fat. The man dreamed of a woman, and the woman of a man. However, both remained fixed in their place, determined to win the bet. Finally, the woman gave in. Unable to control her urge any longer, she made a pass at the man. "Come over to me, I am defeated," she said. The man was too proud to accept her invitation. His refusal intensified her sexual urge. She felt so horny and could not tolerate the itch in her vagina. She jumped into the river to reach for the man. However, she could not get across and began drifting away for the river was in flood. The man dived into the river and rescued her. Thereupon, it was proved that women are more lustful than men are.

In another account, an itinerant merchant comes back home to find his wife with illegitimate children whom he does not know. On his arrival at his homestead, he comes across two boys playing in the compound. Surprised by the scene, he asks his wife whose children they are.

'Who is that boy?' he inquired, pointing to the bigger boy.

'His name is *Hinturina*' [Don't stay out long], she replied.

'What about the younger one?'

'He is *Turtan Nankomatina*' [Don't blame me if you stay out long].

The man was too annoyed to say anything. '*Ajab!*' [surprising], he exclaimed.

Then, 'Oh! *Ajab* is also over there,' said the woman, pointing to a little child sitting at the fireside.

Here, it is interesting to point out the comment made by the narrator at the end of his narration: "While men toil for a better life, travelling on foot for days and months, their unfaithful wives indulge in love affairs and bear illegitimate children. It is not good to stay long away from one's home for women are not dependable" (*Abbaan manaa jireenya maatii isaa fooyyessuuf halkani fi guyyaa jaawara, geennoon manaa diqaalaa horti.*

Geennoon waan hin amanamneef mana ofii irraa fagaatani yeroo dheeraa turuun baroo miti).

In a slightly different version of *oduu durii*, a man comes back home after spending several years trading in far off places. Upon his arrival, he finds his unfaithful wife expecting a child impregnated by a servant. In another one, an unfaithful and irresponsible wife allows a passer-by to sleep with her and gives him her husband's favourite dagger as a keepsake, while her husband passes the whole night out in the cold watching over the farm. Another story recounts about a cheating wife who, surprised by her one-eyed husband's unexpected homecoming, hides her lover under the bed and subsequently succeeds in smuggling him out by covering the single healthy eye of her husband with a kiss. In another *oduu durii*, the suspicious husband unexpectedly comes home from the field and tricks three of his wife's lovers who were hidden in different places in his house into exposing each other. In short, marital infidelity and irresponsibility of women is among the most pervasive and recurrent themes in Jimma Oromo narratives that persist in the repertoire of the people.

It is a widely acknowledged fact that stories serve to inculcate gender appropriate behaviours both into women and men. Appropriate behaviour for men is defined in narratives and other verbal arts in such a way that enables them to sustain their commitment to gender specific work tasks and to reinforce their domination and exercise of power over women. Correspondingly, appropriate behaviour for women is prescribed as that which helps to sustain commitment and confinement to the domestic affairs, as well as to reinforce deferential behaviour towards men.¹⁸ Any behaviour contrary to these prescriptions is condemned, ridiculed, and punished. Accordingly, stories suggest how men and women should behave, and how women should be treated by men, and vice versa, in their interaction in their respective families and the community at large. By so doing they play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing gender normative behaviour and the socially sanctioned gender norms and, consequently, in maintaining the gender system status quo.

The characteristics of the ideal married women outlined in narratives of the Jimma Oromo are many. The most emphasized ones are, however, those of obedience, forbearance, and respect to men. A woman is expected to show respect to her husband in every circumstance. Failure to do so entails severe punishment, including divorce and social ostracism. For instance, the story of the Jimma Oromo sage, Jolombis, who advises a man not to divorce all but his disrespectful wife, illustrates this point.

Once upon a time Jolombis came across a man who was taking four of his wives back to their parents. Upon their meeting, Jolombis asked the man why he decided to divorce his wives.

‘For different reasons,’ said the man. ‘I decided to divorce this one for her stingy behaviour (*dooqna*). She does not like to host my guests. This one is very talkative (*odeessituu*). She passes most of the day talking and gossiping. The third is sexually insatiable (*haasaa jaallatti*); she does not allow me to have a wink of sleep for the whole night. The fourth is obstinate (*morkattuu*); she has no respect for my words,’ said the man pointing at the four women one after the other. Jolombis quietly listened to the man and began to give his advice. ‘You do not have to divorce all of your wives for these reasons. All but one of their shortcomings is remediable. You can reform your stingy wife by giving her the responsibility of herding the livestock (*loon egsisuu*), so that she stays away from home and your guests. To reform your talkative woman, assign her to keeping watch over the crop in the field (*midhaan eegsisuu*). There she cannot find anyone to talk with. You can also cure the sexually demanding one by giving her much work every day, so that in the night she will be too tired even to think of sex. For the one who is not obedient and respectful to you,’ said Jolombis, ‘there is neither cure nor place in the whole world.’

The consequence of women’s disobedience to men in general and to their respective husbands in particular is the subject matter of many narratives that appear with the common format of a mother’s advice to her daughter on her wedding. “Don’t ever forget to be obedient and respectful to your husband, my daughter,” says in one *oduu durii*, “for men are usually kind and loving to women who are respectful to them, and attentive to their physical and sexual needs. However, they neither tolerate nor kindly treat obstinate and proud women. Besides, my daughter,” concludes the story, “disobedience to one’s husband and inattentiveness to his desires are unforgivable sins against Allah!”

In another story, a girl is advised by her mother to always have three things ready at her husband’s disposal on his homecoming. First, she should have water and food ready to quench his thirst and satisfy his hunger. Second, she should have a whip ready so that he can beat her if he is angry. More importantly, she should be neat and ready to undo her belt so that he can sleep with her if he has the desire.¹⁹

As indicated above, how men should treat women, what they should or should not do to win their wives’ loyalty and respect is another subject matter of Jimma Oromo orature. One way to ensure the obedience of women, according to one *oduu durii*, is to treat them harshly and to keep tight control over them. As one popular saying has it, “Women swear simply out of habit (not to tell the truth); that is why a wise man, who knows how to handle women, slaps them” (*Kakuun dubartii amala, beekaan kana beekaaf kabala*). Similarly, several stories express women’s natural duty of obedience to men and, to this effect, the need to ‘tame’ and whip women into shape starting from their early age. The following story illustrates this point.

Once upon a time, there was a man who married a girl whose mother was known for her disobedience to her husband. He was well aware of the influence a mother could have on her daughter; however, he married the girl in confidence of taming her to behave properly. As soon as she became his wife, he began to frighten her by being ruthless and harsh in his every action within the home. He kept his sword close at hand and threatened to use it every time he felt anger. When his cat came near to him, he shouted at his wife, 'Keep this ugly creature out of my sight!' and then snatched his sword and severed the cat's neck by a single blow. Similarly, he killed a hen and his dog. Having witnessed his hard heartedness, his wife became afraid of him and began to avoid everything that might cause his anger. Eventually, she became a very obedient and pleasing wife to her husband. One day, her father came to visit them, and was surprised by the radical change in his daughter's behaviour. Congratulating his son-in-law on his success in breaking his wife into behaving respectfully, he asked him to teach the same lesson to her mother. 'Would you help me in making my wife respectful to me, please, in the same way as you trained yours?' he requested his son-in-law. The man agreed to help his father-in-law on one condition. 'I am ready to help you, but you should bring her to stay here with us for a couple of days,' he said. The old man agreed and did as he was advised. Upon the arrival of his father- and mother-in-laws at his home, the young man welcomed them warmly and slaughtered a heifer for their reception. Then he left the heifer hide to dry in the sun. Five days later, he summoned his father- in-law and requested him to wrap up the dry hide. The old man made every effort to do so, but couldn't move an inch of it. After several unsuccessful efforts, he told his son-in-law that he could not wrap up the hide, as it was too stiff. Then the wise man said, 'You see, it is impossible to teach an old dog a new trick.'

In conclusion, the narrator commented that it is not possible to 'break a mature woman into obedience, unless it is done at her early age' (*Ijoollummaatti yoo abboman malee geennoo fi sareen abba manaa hin kabajju*). Furthermore, he added in a very matter-of-fact way, "To be bested by one's wife is a punishment to a man" (*Dubartiin abbaa warraa isee hin qabajine, abaarsa isaati*), to which the audience responded in confirmation.

According to the Jimmas, a man who fails to put his woman in shape by giving her the whip is a laughing stock of his fellow men. Such kind of man is nicknamed *gadhee nitiin mootu*, which amounts to mean, "a weakling man ruled by his wife." Such men are often ridiculed and made a butt of jokes in their respective communities. The following *oduu durii* is typical of henpecked husbands:

One day while a man and his wife were sitting together, an unexpected guest came to visit them. Their house was only a single room serving both as a kitchen and a living room. On that day, while the woman was cooking a pot of porridge for their dinner, her husband said something that annoyed her badly. As a result, the woman struck her husband on the mouth with the hot stick she

was using to stir the porridge. So humiliated and ashamed, the husband was at a loss and unable to know what to do in the presence of the guest. Then he said to his wife, 'The sweetness of your porridge has nearly made me swallow the stirring stick.'

The characters involved in the above *oduu durii* behave in a parallel contrast to the accepted social norm of the society. The husband, as any married man in that particular culture area, is expected to have the upper hand and win his wife's total respect. By the same token, the marital custom of the society to which they belong dictates that a woman should always treat her husband with due respect and be submissive to his words or wishes. It is impolite for a woman to use strong words against her husband, let alone to be disrespectful in the presence of a guest. Contrary to this set marital custom and social norm, the woman hits her husband, an act that was interpreted by the narrator and his audience as a shocking and gross vulgarity. The man instead of responding angrily and taking the expected severe measure against his wife, humbly, even good-humouredly, accepts her defiant action. What makes his 'unmanly' and 'submissive' behaviour worse, his turning of the episode into a quick mirth or wit, is the part that produces or enhances the amusing effect of the joke. From an outsider's point of view, his quick-wittedness and tolerance may be appreciated. However, when seen from the perspective of the culture bearers, his action turns out to be far from appreciable. Rather he is humiliated for his 'unmanly' behaviour and ridiculed for his pretension in his effort to save his face.

As such, the male figure's failure is two-dimensional. The first is his being a 'henpecked' husband, and falling short of meeting the conventional expectations. His second failure lies in his unsuccessful attempt at 'face saving.' In both cases, he turns out to be the victim and the butt of the joke. The aforementioned kind of *oduu durii*, thus, serves to poke fun and laugh at 'deviant' members of the society, at 'vulgar' women and 'unmanly' husbands that do not know how to rule their wives.²⁰

Another way of keeping women obedient, as suggested in the narratives examined in this study, is by being wise and tactful in handling them. One can cite several examples to illustrate this point, however, suffice it to mention the *oduu durii* about the man who 'tactfully' taught his wife to be obedient and respectful to him.

Once upon a time, there lived a man and his wife. The woman was disrespectful to her husband. She often insulted and humiliated him in presence of strangers. The man pondered over the problem and came up with an idea of tricking her into changing her bad behaviour. Then, he told her that he was very unhappy about her behaviour and would like to get a divorce unless she became obedient and respectful to him. 'It is very irritating and at the same time unbelievable that of all the people, you, my own wife do not show respect for me. You have not the slightest idea how much fear the whole

market have of me.’ ‘I do not believe you,’ she replied to him. ‘Then, let me prove it to you,’ he said, and took her to the market. As they came to the outskirts of the market, they heard the deafening noise of the crowd. Then the man told his wife that people would tremble in fear and keep silent when they saw him. ‘You will be surprised to see how this noisy crowd becomes calm and quiet upon my arrival there.’ The woman could not help being very curious to see whether her husband’s claim was true or not. There and then, they arrived at and entered the market. To the woman’s surprise, the market appeared to have suddenly turned silent as her husband had told her it would be. Having proved how he was feared and revered by the market, the woman apologized for her misbehaviour and began to show respect for and to defer to her husband.

This *oduu durii* gives evidence of the stereotypical image and male ideal of women, as well as of the prescription for proper womanhood and manhood. It portrays the woman as a numskull, who can easily be manoeuvred and, on the other hand, the man as a smart and knowledgeable person who knows about the process of habituation, and how to rule his wife. In so doing, the story not only reveals men’s desire to control and dominate women, but also suggests the ‘appropriate’ behaviour for women - to show respect and deference to men. The moral of the story comes clearly in its conclusion, which runs as, “A man needs to be wise and tactful in coercing his woman to behave properly” (*Geenno malaan bulfatu*).

4. CONCLUSION

The oral narratives and sayings examined in this study report are still existent and recurrent among the Jimma Oromo. Though nearly all of them were told and commented on by men, they were assumed and accepted as representing worldviews, beliefs and concerns of the society as a whole, rather than reflecting only male ideologies justifying male supremacy and dominance over women.

Many of the narratives examined in this study define women as ‘naturally’ incomplete, defective, irrational, cruel and inferior creatures, which should be kept under control of and subordinate to men. These narratives attest to the age-long traditional belief that women lack the physical and mental strength required to hold positions of authority and leadership in every aspect of life. This ideological definition of women enables the dominant male elite to justify and maintain the subordinate status of women.

Similarly, there are several stories and humorous tales that draw on the old stereotypes of women obsessed only about their sexual gratification, lacking a sense of duty and rational thinking to shoulder social and political responsibilities. These narratives depict women as deceitful, unfaithful, lustful, cruel, and dangerous to men. By so doing, they provide evidence

that the collectively held beliefs and stereotyped images of women are true, and thus contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality.

There are also stories that prescribe proper and improper behaviour for both the female and male sex. Accordingly, sexual fidelity, forbearance, obedience, subservience, deference and respect to men are presented as crucial to proper womanhood. Conversely, a man should be powerful, unflinching, fierce, authoritative, protective, and able to provide for women. By externalizing these gender normative behaviours and prescriptions for 'proper and improper' womanhood and manhood, the stories reinforce the gender system status quo.

Any research geared towards achieving a gender system change and greater equality should initially aim at, as emphasized by modern feminist movements, raising level of consciousness among the majority of people by way of questioning and rejecting traditional gender ideologies and stereotypes and indicating counter definitions. The present study was conceived with the intention of making a humble contribution towards this goal, which, the writer believes, yet requires much more effort on the part of researchers in the humanities. It is unfortunate that examining women's orature, in which they express their feelings, opinions, concerns, aspirations, and attitude towards their position in their society could not be the object of this study, though of great assistance to the national and global efforts geared towards gender equality and justice, and deserving of further research. A cross-cultural study along these lines would be very interesting.

Notes

1. For detailed information on Jimma Oromo oral narratives, see Abraham Alemu's unpublished MA thesis (2000).
2. For detailed understanding of concepts of gender stratification and differentiation, see Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead 1981; J.S Chafetz 1990; Laura Kramer 1991; Heike Diefenbach 2002.
3. See Kim, Hyun-Jeong *et al.* 2000. "Gender Stereotypes and the Dynamics of Social Interaction." In: Eckes, Thomas and Trautner, H.M. (eds.). *The developmental social psychology of gender*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 207-43.
4. Among the female informants, five were office holders in the zonal Women's Affairs Office, and the rest five in *woreda* administrative offices in Saqqa Caqoorssa, Deedoo, and Maanna *woredas*.
5. For details, see Abraham Alemu 2000.
6. See Walter R. Fisher 1997; Ruth Finnegan 1992; Ramón Saldivar 1991; Stanley Brandes 1981.

7. See Ramón Saldivar 1991:12; Robert A. Georges and Michael Owens Jones 1995; David Carr 1997.
8. The Jimma Oromo categorize their oral narratives into three major classes, which are designated as: *Seenaal/Taarika* (historical narratives), *Oduu Durii* (folktales), and *Qoosaa* (jokes). These are identified and distinguished from each other mainly on the bases of, fact and fiction, and purpose of narration. However, the narrative texts examined in this paper are randomly categorized into two subgroups, simply for methodological convenience rather than as a valid classification, as little distinction can be made between the historical and the other narrative forms on the basis of their presumed 'veracity,' and 'imaginativeness,' or on the social and ideological purposes they are put to serve. As David Carr (1997,8, citing Louis O. Mink 1978) has clearly noted, though an historical narrative generally claims to represent part of the real complexity of the past as a symbolic narrative form, which equally holds true to *Seenaal*, "it is a product of imaginative construction which cannot defend its claim to truth by any accepted procedure of argument or authentication."
9. The term '*Seenaal*' in Oromo language means 'history. But its etymology has not been traced. Commonly regarded as "true history", *Seenaal* narratives are often told to impart information about popular personalities and important socio-political events in the long history of the people, and in explanation and perpetuation of traditions, customs, norms, and practices. It consists of various narratives about, for instance, the origin and first settlement of the Oromo in the Jimma area, the 'biographies', and succession of the Jimma monarchies, the islamization of Jimma Oromo, the advent of the military force of Menillik II, and the eventual takeover of the Jimma area by Emperor Haile Sellassie I. In this paper, however, only a few selections of gender-related *Seenaal* narratives in which the 'inferior' nature and 'subordinate' status of woman finds artistic expression and justification are dealt with.
10. The issue of veracity or credence locally attached to historical narratives is one of the most debatable and difficult problems to deal with. Nevertheless, the present writer shares the post-modernist view that it does not matter whether a story, any discourse, or genre is 'valid', 'true', and 'credible' or not from a researcher's view point. This depends, rather, upon a measure of "community acceptance," where the story is communicated in accordance with the set of conventions and norms governing its actualization, the general expectations, as well as specific purposes of each communicative process and event. In other words, any statement or claim is valid, at best, within a particular frame of social interaction or discourse. See Mats Alvesson 2002; Gertrude Himmelfarb 1997; Robert A. Georges and Michael Owens Jones 1995; Ruth Finnegan 1992; Elliott Oring 1986.
11. The tendency to prefer historical narratives to any other form of narrative, which appears to be emanating from the natural nostalgic feeling for and sense of pride in one's past, as well as the strong desire to perpetuate 'the good old

days,' traditions, assumptions, and power structures, seems to be common to many oral societies. For instance, in their study of Dahomean narratives, Melivel J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits noted that in Abomey stories of the days when Dahomey was powerful and feared were heard more than any others (1958,9). Dan Ben-Amos (1982) has also made a similar observation in his study of Benin oral narratives.

12. This statement was made by a woman of 46 years of age, an office holder in Dedo Woreda Administrative Office, in an interview session held in Shekhi Kebele, on 26th of March 2002.
13. Ruth Finnegan (1966,69) has also made a similar observation in her study of Limba stories and story telling tradition.
14. The *Seenaa* about expansion and settlement of the Oromo in the area was told in most of the six wāredas where the fieldwork was conducted. In all versions of the narrative, which are four in number, five Oromo groupings by the name of Bilo, Lalo, Badi, Harsu, and Qore were said to have been the first to penetrate into the Jimma area.
15. A respectable man of 92, Shekhi kábāle told the above *Seenaa* in a focus group discussion held on 5 January 2002 in Dedoo Wārāda. There were a total of seven senior men in the group, all of whom approximately in or above their fifties. The topic of the discussion was the role and status of women in general and the place of women in the socio-political life of the Jimma Oromo in particular. During our discussion, I reminded the participants that, in accordance with the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, women have equal rights with men (in all aspects of life: social, political, and economic). None of the men in the group explicitly expressed their objection to the equal rights policy. All of them agreed upon the indispensability of women's role within the household: "Women are the source and pillars of life; life without women is unthinkable." However, the participants shared deep reservation about women's ability and right to equally participate in the public arena. In regard to this, the commonly held view was: "It is known that women lack physical and intellectual strength to shoulder public responsibilities." In justifying this age-long traditional assumption, a number of proverbs and narratives were recounted. It was in this context that the respected elder went to great pains to recount the foregoing *Seenaa*. Almost all of the narratives included in this paper were narrated and recorded in similar social contexts.
16. According to my informants, the status of a childless woman is generally anomalous and insecure. Similarly, a childless marriage is often used as a metaphor for an unproductive undertaking and purposeless existence. The high value of fertility is also evident in, among others, the most important blessings of elders to newly-wed couples: "May the bride become a fertile woman who gives birth to many children, and who remains in the household of her husband' /*Misirroon kan deessu fi kan teessu haa taatu!*

17. For details on function of male ideology, see Stanley Brandes 1981,218.
18. For detailed discussion of the engenderment process, see J. S. Chafetz 1990; M.D.Leinbach and C.S. Rodgers 2000. For understanding of the vital role stories play in shaping and reinforcing behaviour, see also M. Jane Young and Kay Turner 1993; Robert A. Georges and Michael Owens Jones 1995; Hinchman and Hinchman (eds.) 1997.
19. In their study of Somali orature, Lidwien Kapteijns and Maryan Omar Ali (194,39) also recount a slightly different version of this story, which was referred to as a “folk *hadith*, oral and popularized version of Islamic *Hadith*.”
20. This critical commentary on the *qoosaa* was given by the narrator, a learnt religious man (Sheikh) of 60, to which all of the audience (comprising five senior men) reacted positively. The *qoosaa* was narrated in a focus group discussion held in the town of Yabbu, Maanna Wārāda, in the afternoon of 20 March 2002. The narration was brought up as an illustration of how women could behave ‘disrespectfully’ towards their ‘unmanly’ husbands.

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GENDER-FRIENDLY HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT: A STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONS IN UGANDA

*Matagi Leon**

Abstract: The major purpose of the study was to establish how commonly gender oriented human resource management policies are practiced, and find out their relationships with organisational commitment of women and men working in Ugandan organisations. A quantitative survey design was used and data was collected from 203 respondents (95 females and 108 males) using a self-administered questionnaire. Percentages, correlational techniques and Analysis Of Variance (ANOVA) were used to present data and test hypotheses.

Results indicated that: Gender oriented human resource management policies are not commonly practiced in Ugandan organisations; gender does not significantly influence employee organisational commitment; organisational gender-friendliness is positively and significantly related to employee organisational commitment. A major recommendation was that there should be organisational restructuring to ensure that gender oriented human resource policies are practiced in all Ugandan organisations.

1. BACKGROUND

During the past few years, organizations throughout the private and public sectors in Uganda have undergone dramatic changes due to extensive downsizing, restructuring and mergers. As a result, most organizational policies in Uganda are revised, but the revisions were made without much consideration of gender related issues. Such policies discriminate women, even in access to employment opportunities. Since 1986, the government of Uganda has been considering the issue of women participation in all developmental activities, including politics. This move has increased the number of women working in managerial positions in Ugandan organizations. These changes need to be accompanied by corresponding changes in gender-sensitive and gender-friendly human resource management policies and practices.

A lot of research has been conducted to investigate issues or problems women encounter in organizations. Based on these studies, researchers have made a spectrum of recommendations to make organizations friendlier to female employees (Davidson and Burke 1994; Tanton 1994). However,

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most of the studies have limitations of different kinds. First, their focus is often single-mindedly on women's work, family, and personal lives. Few try to examine if men would also benefit from such changes in human resource management (HRM) policies.

Secondly, the recommendations are derived from women's life experiences. There is little empirical support for their actual effect on employees' careers after implementation. This type of empirical study would complement the theoretical suggestions. Thirdly, it has not been convincingly shown specifically how organizations can hope to benefit from practicing gender-friendly human resource management. Such information would indicate whether organizations that are more women-friendly have more or less committed employees.

In addition, it is important to note that some women-friendly dimensions are widely considered by theorists as more beneficial to organizations (e.g. flexibility, development and family-friendliness) than others (e.g. equal opportunity and affirmative action). How commonly the various women friendly organizational policies are practised in Uganda, however, is not clearly known.

There is a need to go beyond the women's perspective, and to look more broadly at the potential impacts of gender-friendly organizational policies and practices on both women and men in Ugandan organizations. In particular, more research effort should focus on their potential benefits on employees' organizational commitment and work attitudes.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Gender-friendly human resource management policies, in most cases, are not widely adopted in the organizations (Chiu and Ng 1999). The least practised but crucial policies include reduced work hours for women, promoting women over men, and providing childcare facilities. It appears that gender-friendly human resource management in its current shape and form is not able to revolutionize the nature of work in such a way that it greatly enhances women's quality of work life (Ng and Chiu 1997). Such a trend may lead to a decline in organizational performance and productivity.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of this study is to establish how commonly gender-friendly human resource management policies are practised, and to investigate how closely they are related to employees' organizational commitment in Ugandan organizations.

1.3 Study Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are:

- i) To establish how commonly gender friendly human resource management policies are practised in organizations in Uganda;

- ii) To assess if gender influences employees' organizational commitment significantly;
- iii) To find out the effect of gender- friendly human resource management policies on female and male employees' organizational commitment, and
- iv) To access if personal variables of male and female employees influence their organizational commitment significantly.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study has revealed the extent to which gender- friendly human resource management policies are practised. The findings will help planners, especially in the Ministry of Gender and Community Development, to identify appropriate measures that will help to improve the quality of the careers of both female and male employees in Ugandan organizations. Identifying factors that affect employees' organizational commitment is very important to devise ways of improving organizational performance and productivity.

1.5 Scope of the study

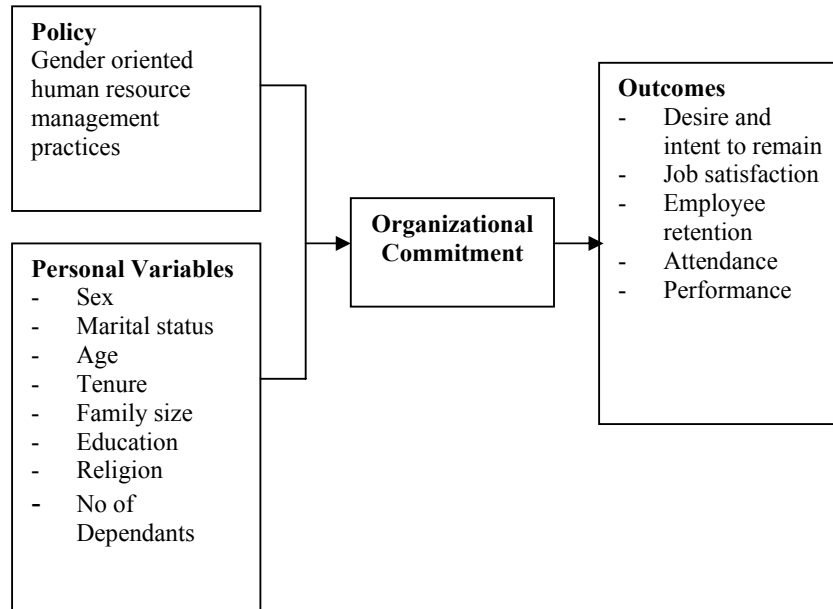
The study was carried out in Kampala district. This is because most organizations (public or private) and government ministries have their headquarters in or around Kampala district.

The study considered the following variables: gender- friendly human resource management policies and practices, personal variables of employees, and female and male employees' organizational commitment. Personal variables include marital status, age, tenure, family size, education, religion, and number of dependants.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The concept of employee commitment to organizations in relation to gender has received increased attention in research literature as both managers and organizational analysts seek ways of increasing employee retention and performance. Figure 1 below, shows the relationship between antecedents and outcomes of organizational commitment.

Figure 1. The Framework Showing the Relationship between Variables



Studies have shown the link between organizational commitment and gender-friendly human resource management. In a recent study, Scandura, and Lankau (1997) found out that those employees who perceive their organizations as family-friendly have a higher level of organizational commitment than those who do not. In this sense, employees, especially female employees who benefit from women-friendly programmes would appreciate what has been done for them and hence hold a favourable attitude towards the organization (Chiu and Ng 1999).

Earlier researchers have indicated that employee commitment is important for several reasons. Their findings show that commitment is often a better predictor of turnover than job satisfaction (Steers 1977). Highly committed employees may perform better than less committed ones (Mowday, Porter and Dubin 1974), and commitment may represent one useful indicator of the effectiveness of an organization (Steers 1977).

In relation to personal characteristics, research has shown that commitment relates to sex (Stevens, Beyer and Trice 1978), age (Hrebiniak and Aluto 1972), marital status (Hrebiniak and Aluto 1972), family size (Marsh and Mannari 1977), and tenure (Sheldon 1971).

The framework also hypothesizes that commitment leads to several specific behavioural outcomes. First, highly committed employees should have a strong desire and intent to remain in the organization. Such an outcome is implicit in the definition of commitment. Moreover, such behavioural intentions should be manifested in subsequent employee retention or turnover (Porter *et al.* 1976).

In addition, commitment would be expected to be related to attendance. Employees who are highly committed to the goals of an organization and have positive attitudes towards their organization are more likely to have a strong desire to come to work and contribute toward goal attainment (Steers 1977).

Finally, commitment was hypothesized to be related to performance under the assumption that committed employees would expend greater effort on their job. This second part of the model was set forth more on an exploratory level because of the paucity of empirical data available for guidance. Even so, it was felt that knowledge of such possible outcomes was as important as information concerning antecedents.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Design

The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. This design allowed the researcher to collect information from many respondents to establish how much information is on the ground.

2.2 Sample

A total of 203 respondents (95 females and 108 males) were selected using systematic random sampling. The majority of respondents were between the age of 25 and 34 (43.9%), Protestants (53%), single (56.2%), and from both public (64%) and private (36%) organizations.

2.3 Instrument

A self-administered questionnaire with four parts was used to collect data. It has four parts and the content of each part is as follows:

Part one: This part measured background information such as sex, age, educational level, religion, marital status, number of children, family satisfaction, number of dependants, name of the organization one is working in, tenure, job title, and when one was last promoted.

Part two: This measured organizational commitment using 14 items developed by Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993).

Part three: This measured gender-friendly human resource management policies and practices in organizations-using items developed by Chiu and Ng (1999).

Part four: This measured other gender-friendly human resource management policies and practices.

2.4 Quality Control

Validity: A draft copy of the questionnaire was given to ten fellow staff members. They were asked to fill in the questionnaire, and comment on the wording of the questioning, the relevance of the items, and sentence constructions. The researcher used the comments from the ten members to revise the questionnaire. This improved the validity of the instrument.

Reliability: After effecting suggested changes from fellow staff members, the questionnaire was administered to 20 evening students who were working in some organizations. Reliability analysis was done to remove the bad items. The remaining items that formed the final instrument had a reliability coefficient of 0.537, which indicates that the instrument was measuring what it is supposed to measure.

2.5 Research Question

- How commonly are gender friendly human resource management policies practised in Ugandan organizations?

2.6 Study Hypotheses

- i) Gender does not influence employees' organizational commitment significantly.
- ii) There is no significant relationship between the degree of organizational gender- friendliness and the level of employees' organizational commitment.
- iii) Personal variables do not influence organizational commitment of Ugandan public servants significantly.

2.7 Data Analysis

Data obtained from fieldwork were entered into the computer and analyzed using SPSS program. One way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and product moment correlation coefficient (Pearson r) were used to test the hypotheses.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

Much research has been conducted to investigate issues or problems women encounter in organizations. Based on these studies, recommendations have been made to make organizations friendlier to female employees (Adler and Izraeli 1988; Collinson, Knights and Collinson 1990; Davidson and Burke 1994; Fagenson 1993; Kanter 1977; Larwood and Wood 1977; Marshall 1984; Powell 1988; Stead 1978; Tanton 1994; Vinnicombe and Colwill

1995; Drizin 2001; Cobs and Natti 2002). However, most of the studies have limitations which this study has tried to address.

3.2 Women-Friendly Organizational Policies and Practices

Research into 'women in organizations' has seldom been purely academic or solely theoretical. It is common for studies to conclude with recommendations that would supposedly enhance women's opportunities for promotion, training, career development, eradication of sex discrimination, and so forth. These recommendations form the basis for women-friendly human resource management (Chiu and Ng 1999). To illustrate the point, three classic studies have been looked at as indicated here after.

Role conflict: Cooper and Davidson (1982) reported that women in managerial positions face stress that their male counterparts do not face from work, home, and social environments. The sources for this additional stress include the necessity to acquire male managerial skills (e.g. being assertive and confident), multiple demands inherent in running a career and a family, being tokens, expectations of others to play either the mother earth or the seductress role, difficult work relationships with bosses, colleagues and subordinates, sexual harassment, and limited opportunities for promotion and career development. In order to help women employees, Cooper and Davidson (1982) proposed flexible working arrangements, day nursery facilities, career counselling and planning for women, senior management sponsorship of women, provision of help to men to come to terms with women at work, and creation of support networks for women.

Imbalanced work life: Marshall (1984) conducted another classic study. She set out to explore how women's careers differed from that of their male counterparts, and found that her participants (female managers) felt that they were travellers in a male world. They did not feel accepted, valued or respected, and faced 'various pressures which made it difficult for them to develop and consistently maintain a sense of their own worth and capabilities. They wanted to lead a "balanced life", to have it all, yet felt unable to because "[t]hey were very often very tired."

To enhance the careers of women employees, Marshall (1984) gave six categories of suggestions. The first was to integrate women into current organization systems as equals (e.g. by providing women employees with *training* and development opportunities). The second category involved modifying current practices to help women (e.g. flexible working hours and childcare facilities). Thirdly, organizations should constantly bear women in mind when solving problems. Improving organization members' acceptance of women formed the basis of the fourth category of suggestions. The fifth category emphasized training women, and developing their interpersonal skills to enable them to participate in employment in similar ways as men. The last set of recommendations suggested that organizations should render

advice to women on how to participate and make choices in a man's world.

Sex discrimination: More recently, Collinson *et al.* (1990) examined why sex segregation prevailed in the insurance industry despite the fact that it was predominantly mental rather than manual work. They studied 20 insurance companies' recruitment and selection practices, and found that informality facilitated sex discrimination. It allowed male selectors to adopt word-of-mouth recruitment which was likely to exclude women applicants, and to make subjective decisions based on the recruiters' bread-winner ideology' and on the notion that sales women were 'bad risks'. The research also revealed that women in insurance were confined to the low-grade clerical work through 'tiered recruitment' by sex, age, and qualifications, which in turn was based on gendered assumptions about women's non-career commitments.

Furthermore, although many of the essential and important tasks that women did-physical and emotional, skilled and semi-skilled- were sometimes acknowledged informally, they were not recognized in formal job descriptions (Collinson *et al.* 1990). Women were also discriminated against in the insurance companies' promotion policies. Besides, they were not selected to participate on *training* courses, geographical mobility was applied in an inconsistent and contradictory way to them, and their domestic responsibilities and the family ideology worked against them. To eliminate sex discrimination and gender inequality, Collinson *et al.* (Ibid.) prescribed 'a gender agenda' in which they advocated more systematic and formalized practices in the channels, criteria and procedures of recruitment, training both men and women on the informal vicious circles of job segregation, career-break schemes, flexible working pattern and crèche facilities.

The above review suggests that organizations need to re-examine policies related to building commitment. It also shows that some women-friendly dimensions are widely considered by theorists more beneficial to organizations (e.g. flexibility, development and family-friendliness) than others (e.g. equal opportunity and affirmative action). However, how commonly the various women-friendly organizational policies are practised is not clearly known.

3.3 Gender and Organizational Commitment

The study of the broad pattern of differences between men and women's experience of work and the labour market shows that women, on the average, are in lower quality employment though, in what seems a surprising finding, women report similar levels of organizational commitment to men (Kanter 1977; Dodd-McCue and Wright 1996). In fact, in some countries, there is some evidence that women report significantly higher level of organizational commitment (Clark 1996; Habomugisha 1998; Kwon and Banks 2004). It is noted that women, despite having strong

psychological attachment to work, have lower expectations, and therefore, employ different social comparison processes from men when evaluating their jobs.

There is some evidence that job characteristics have a different impact on men and women. For example, autonomy seems to be more important for men's organizational commitment than that of women's (Pugliesi 1995) whereas supportive supervision has more impact on women's organizational commitment than that of men's (Mottaz 1986).

Other results relating to the variable of gender indicated weak correlations between sex and organizational commitment (Stevens, Beyer and Trice 1978). However, in their study on personal and role related factors in the development of organizational commitment, Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972) found that females were less likely to change their organization compared to their male counterparts. Grusky (1966) also came up with similar findings.

Unequal representation of women in some institutions may also affect their organizational commitment. Hart, Patricia and Barriars (1988) argue that in comparison with men, women tend to be disadvantaged, wrongly or rightly, due to several factors that lead to their under representation which in turn seems to influence their stereo-typical reactions from both genders. This leads to a diminishing probability of women's chances to attain top administrative positions, and this may lead to less commitment to their work.

3.4 Gender-Friendly HRM and Organisational Commitment

Chiu and Ng (1999) got particularly interested in examining the relationship between women-friendly human resource management (HRM) and organizational commitment.

Recent research findings indicated that organizations with human resource management policies that were responsive to employees' needs were instrumental in organizational attachment. These human resource management policies included, for example, a 'managerial development and *tiering* programme' (Robertson, Iles, Gratton and Sharpley 1991; King 2000), 'employee stock ownership plans' (Klein 1987; Klein and Hall 1988; Tucker, Nock and Toscano 1989; Wetzel and Gallagher 1990; Bob 2000) and 'family -friendly policies' (Goldberg *et al.* 1989; Grover and Crooker 1995; Youngblood and Chambers-Cook 1984). However, little research, if any, has been done to investigate the impact of women-friendly human resource management on employees' organizational commitment.

Chiu and Ng (1999) believe that even if all the effects of work and family-related factors were controlled, organizational women-friendliness would still have an impact on employees' commitment. Previous findings suggest that individual employees become attached to organizations in return for

gains provided by their employers such as a higher income and a more stable job (Angle 1983; Angle and Perry 1981; Hrebiniak and Alutto 1972; March and Simon 1958; Peters, Bhagat and O'Connor 1981; Steers 1977; Bob 1999; Chow *et al.* 2001; Greenglass, Burke and Fiksenbaum 2002).

In a recent study, Scandura and Lankau (1997) found that those who perceived their organizations as family-friendly reported a higher level of commitment than those who did not. In this sense, employees-especially female employees-who benefit from women-friendly programmes would appreciate what has been done for them and hence hold a favourable attitude towards the organizations (affective commitment). In addition, commitment to the organization may arise because of 'side bets' or investment that the employees may lose if they leave the organizations.

It was observed that since women-friendly organizations are still a minority in the business community (Ng and Chiu 1997), employees may encounter difficulties when trying to look for another organization that offers women-friendly programmes. In this sense, employees may choose to continue their membership (continuance commitment) simply because of the benefits provided to them by the organizations.

3.5 Personal Variables and Organizational Commitment

Marital status

A more specific yet indirect variable assessing familial commitment is marital status. To some researchers, married individuals are more likely to have greater financial burdens than those who are not. It implies that these individuals would rely more on the provisions of means via the present organization, hence resulting in a higher level of continuance commitment. In fact, the results of a meta-analysis study (Mathieu and Zajac 1990) revealed that married individuals were found to be slightly higher in their continuance commitment than the unmarried ones.

Other findings indicate that single employees are more likely to be positively disposed towards attractive employment alternatives than married or separated employees are (Hrebiniak and Alutto 1972). Their analyses of both sex and marital status further suggested that married or separated individuals, especially women see greater costs attached to inter-organizational mobility. Hence, they are less likely to consider employment alternatives than single or male subjects are, even when given inducements to do so.

Number of dependants

It is argued that marital status is not a critical variable in predicting organizational commitment. Other family induced factors such as having young children or elderly dependants would have more predictive power in determining an individual's continuance commitment (Chiu and Ng 1999). A dual-income family with no dependents may enjoy more flexibility in

formulating its career strategy. For example, a wife may opt for a secure job that lacks future prospects over an unstable but promising job to facilitate her husband's business. The choice is entirely reasonable when the wife and the husband are seen as one economic unit. Therefore, married individuals contrary to conventional wisdom could be more mobile than those who are single in their career pursuits: that is, they could have a lower level of continuance commitment (Pulglesi 1995).

It is argued that having dependants at home is a more crucial factor than marital status because individuals might feel the need or pressure to remain in an organization in order to provide for the family. The need is more profound for those who have greater family obligations. Research findings indicate that dependency on work had an impact on employees' pay satisfaction and the intention to leave the organization (Doran, Stone, Brief and George 1991). Based on these findings, it is proposed that individuals who have children and/ or elderly dependants would have a higher level of continuance commitment. The way the heads of families strain to maintain their dependents is very important. Marsh and Mannari (1977) found out that turnover correlates with number of dependents negatively. They had assumed that turnover is the inverse of lifetime commitment norms and values. The above finding indicates that family size is more likely to correlate positively with organizational commitment.

In addition, research in 'work and family conflict' indicated that the influence between work and family is bi-directional in nature (e.g. Frone, Russell and Copper 1992). Williams and Alliger (1994) reported that moods spill over from work to family and vice-versa. On this account, it is possible that favourable attitudes in the home domain (i.e. family life satisfaction) would translate to a positive attitude toward the work organization (i.e. affective commitment) and vice-versa. Hence, it is suggested here that individuals with satisfied family lives are more likely to report a higher level of organizational commitment.

Age

Consistent results have been found for the variable of age. As age increases organizational commitment increases. Young employees were found to be less committed to their work than older ones (Hrebiniak and Alutto 1972; Stevens, Beyer and Trice 1978). This is because older age implies increased investment in the organizations. Moris and Schereman (1981), and Habomugisha (1998) who showed that older employees and those with a greater sense of competence had higher levels of organizational commitment reported similar findings.

Educational level

Higher educational level correlates with organizational commitment negatively, while those who do not plan to seek further education show more commitment. This is because highly educated employees become

committed to their professions instead which increases their mobility (Dubin, Champux and Porter 1975). Steers (1977) got a similar finding. He established that when employees have higher level of education, it becomes more difficult for the organization to provide sufficient rewards (as perceived by the individual) to equalize the exchange. Hence, highly educated people who also tend to be more cosmopolitan would be less committed to their organizations and perhaps more committed to a profession or trade. White (1987), Habomugisha (1998) and Klein (2001) also reported similar findings.

Religion

Not much research has explored the effects of religion as a variable on organizational commitment. However, there is some evidence that formal religious affiliation is related to the development and maintenance of occupational and organizational orientations (Thielens 1965). Hrebiniak and Alluto (1972) also found out that religious affiliations of employees were significantly related to organizational commitment, Protestants exhibiting higher levels of commitment than Catholics or employees with other formal affiliations. These findings indicate the possibility that organizational commitment can be affected by background or pre-organizational conditions.

Tenure

Besides family, work is another factor that affects organizational commitment. For example, tenure and job level have often been used as surrogate measures of side bets (e.g. Meyer and Allen 1984). The general assumption is that as individuals accumulate more years of service with a company or occupy a higher position in the company, they are likely to acquire greater investments (e.g. pension plan contributions), and are, therefore, less inclined to leave. Hence, it is suggested here that individuals' tenure and job level are positively related to their continuance commitment.

Other researchers had earlier indicated similar findings. Sheldon (1971), for example, found out that organizational commitment increases with the number of years spent in an organization. This is because length of service suggests the accumulation of organizational career. Similarly, it binds one to the organization, for example, in pension or profit sharing plans. Grusky (1966) had also obtained similar findings. It is suggested that time invested in an organization becomes a valued resource in itself while the privileges associated with length of service make it easier to derive additional organizational rewards. Hall, Schnader and Nygren (1970) and more recently, Brunetto and Wharton (2003) are of the same view.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents results of the study in line with the set objectives and developed hypotheses. The results are presented in the following order: background information, gender-friendly human resource management policies, levels of organizational commitment, the influence of gender on organizational commitment and organizational friendliness, the relationship between organizational commitment, gender friendliness and family satisfaction - by gender, the influence of personal variables of males on organizational commitment, the influence of personal variables of females on organizational commitment, benefits for employees as a result of gender related considerations, problems due to the absence of gender-friendly human resource management policies and suggestions on how to improve the welfare of employees.

4.2 Background Information

Results are presented beginning with background information as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Background information

Variables	Levels	N	Valid %
Sex	Male	108	53.2
	Female	95	46.8
Age	20 - 24	69	36.1
	25 - 29	41	21.5
	30 - 34	36	18.8
	35 - 39	23	12.0
	40 and above	22	11.5
Educational Level	A-Level	25	13.0
	Undergraduates	121	62.7
	Degree	21	10.9
	Postgraduates	16	08.3
Religion	Masters and above	10	05.2
	Protestants	96	53.3
	Catholics	73	40.6
Marital Status	Moslems	11	6.1
	Single	111	55.8
	Married	72	36.1
Number of dependants	Co-habiting	16	08.0
	1	17	13.7
	2	29	23.4
	3	28	22.6
	4	17	13.7
	Above 4	33	26.6

Table 1. Cont.

Family Satisfaction	Satisfied	112	61.4
	50 - 50 (fair)	38	20.9
	Dissatisfied	32	17.6
Tenure	0.5 - 2 years	84	42.0
	3 - 4 years	53	26.5
	Above 4 years	63	31.5

From the table above, we learn that the majority of the respondents were males (53.2%), employed undergraduates (62.7%), Protestants (53.3%), and single (55.8%). In addition, the majority were satisfied with their family life (61.4%).

4.3 Practice of Gender-Friendly HRM Policies

Respondents were required to indicate how commonly gender-friendly human resource management policies are practised in their organizations. Results are shown in the table below.

Table 2. The practice of gender friendly HRM policies

S. N.	Items	Yes N (%)	No N (%)	Not Sure N (%)
1.	Formal job sharing (i.e. two or more employees sharing one job) is permitted.	117(57.9)	57(28.2)	28(13.9)
2.	Leave without pay but position assured is an available option for women employees who would like to resume work after an extended leave of absence taken due to family obligations.	65(32.2)	82(40.6)	55(27.2)
3.	Voluntary reduced time is permitted for women employees who desire such an arrangement (e.g. working only three days a week).	26(12.9)	139(68.8)	37(18.3)
4.	"Women-only" training programmes are provided to enhance female employees' job skills, interpersonal skills, etc.	45(23.0)	123(62.8)	28(14.3)
5.	The organization counsels women employees on career development.	63(31.0)	102(50.2)	38(18.7)
6.	Women are promoted over men in cases where both sexes possess same qualifications.	66(33.5)	97(49.2)	34(17.3)
7.	The organization has special committees for handling sex discrimination and sexual harassment grievances.	55(27.1)	109(53.7)	39(19.2)

Table 2. *Cont.*

8.	The organization gives training programmes to employees on issues of sex discrimination and sexual harassment.	58(28.4)	114(55.9)	32(15.7)
9.	The organization has policies on rectifying inequity of pay between the two sexes.	63(32.0)	97(49.2)	37(18.8)
10.	The organization renders advice to women employees on how to combine family issues and work.	67(33.2)	95(47.0)	39(19.3)
11.	Childcare is provided on-site for working mothers.	31(15.7)	146(74.1)	20(10.2)
12.	The organization gives child-care subsidies.	33(17.4)	131(68.9)	26(13.7)
13.	The organization has paternity benefits (e.g. male employees are permitted to take leave to spend time with family).	54(27.4)	118(59.9)	25(12.7)
14.	Maternity leave duration for women is adequate.	122(61.0)	49(24.5)	29(14.5)
15.	Family life attachment is considered when transfers are being arranged.	74(37.2)	79(39.7)	46(23.1)
16.	Gender issues are respected throughout the organization.	115(57.8)	45(22.6)	39(19.6)
17.	The organization offers development contracts (e.g. study leave to women employees).	85(45.7)	67(36.0)	34(18.3)

As we can understand from the table above, the most commonly practised gender-friendly human resources policies include the following: formal job sharing i.e. two or more employees sharing one job (57.9%), adequate maternity leave duration for women (61.0%), and respecting gender issues throughout the organization (57.8%).

However, the following gender-friendly human resource management policies are not commonly practised: permission of voluntary reduced time for women employees who desire such an arrangement, e.g. working only three days a week (68.8%), the provision of "women only" training programmes to enhance female employees' job and interpersonal skills (62.8%), counselling female employees on career development (50.2%), the presence of special committees for handling sex discrimination and sexual harassment grievances (53.7%), the provision of on-site child services for working mothers (74.1%), the provision of childcare subsidies (68.9%), and the provision of paternity benefits (59.9%).

4.4 Level of Organisational Commitment

Respondents were required to indicate their level of organizational commitment using a self-administered section in the questionnaire. Results are indicated in the table below.

Table 3. Levels of organizational commitment among respondents

S. N.	Items	Yes	No	Not Sure
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
1.	I do not feel a strong sense of belongingness to my organization.	83(41.3)	13(6.5)	105(52.2)
2.	My organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.	177(86.8)	9(4.4)	18(8.8)
3.	I am willing to put in a great effort beyond that normally expected in order to help my organization to be successful.	172(86.9)	15(7.6)	11(5.6)
4.	I am proud to tell others that I am part of my organization.	162(80.2)	5(2.5)	35(17.3)
5.	I feel like "part of the family" in my organization.	143(70.8)	11(5.4)	48(23.8)
6.	I do not care about what happens to my organization as long as I get my pay.	38(18.8)	6(3.0)	148(73.3)
7.	To know that my own work has made a contribution to the good of my organization would please me.	177(86.6)	9(4.4)	18(8.8)
8.	It would be very hard for me to leave my organization right now.	121(60.8)	32(16.1)	46(23.1)
9.	I feel that I have too few options to consider leaving this organization.	105(52.5)	25(12.5)	70(35.0)
10.	Too much of my life would be disrupted if I decide I wanted to leave my organization now.	102(50.2)	25(12.3)	76(37.4)
11.	Even if my organization is not paying well, I will still be reluctant to change to another organization.	110(54.5)	18(8.9)	74(36.6)
12.	If I were offered a job in another organization with a slight increase in pay, I would take it up.	114(56.7)	33(16.4)	54(26.9)
13.	I wouldn't respect someone who would advise me to leave my organization now.	88(43.3)	26(12.8)	89(43.8)
14.	To leave my organization would mean end of my happiness in the world of employment	47(23.2)	20(9.9)	136(67.0)

From the table above, it is clear that all the items (1 to 11) indicate a positive trend of organizational commitment; that is, over 50% of the respondents for those items indicated that they identify themselves with their organizations psychologically.

4.5 Gender and Organisational Commitment

The effect of gender on two major variables, that is, organizational commitment and organizational gender friendliness, was established using One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Results are presented in the table below:

Table 4. Gender and organizational commitment and gender-friendliness

Variables	Levels	N	Mean	F	p
Sex and organizational commitment	Male	108	47.2057	0.018	0.893
	Female	94	47.0106		
Sex and organizational gender-friendliness	Male	108	30.1481	0.086	0.769
	Female	95	30.3895		

According to the table above, gender influences neither organizational commitment ($F = 0.018$, $p = 0.893$) nor organizational gender friendliness ($F = 0.086$, $p = 0.769$) significantly. Whereas males indicated slightly higher levels of organizational commitment (Mean = 47.2037) as compared to those of females (Mean = 47.0106), females experienced more organizational friendliness (Mean = 30.3895) than their male counterparts (Mean = 30.1481).

4.6 Gender-Friendliness and Organisational Commitment

The relationship between organizational commitment, organizational gender friendliness and family satisfaction (while controlling for gender) were established using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient technique. Results are shown in the table below.

Table 5. Correlation of gender-friendliness and organizational commitment

Variable	Gender Levels	N	r	p
Organizational commitment versus organizational gender friendliness	Male	108	0.090	0.352
	Female	94	0.222	0.031
Organizational commitment versus family satisfaction	Male	96	0.055	0.593
	Female	90	0.242	0.022
Organizational gender friendliness versus family satisfaction	Male	94	0.259	0.011
	Female	91	0.051	0.634

From the table above, we see that organizational commitment is significantly related to organizational gender friendliness for female employees ($r = 0.222$, $p = 0.031$) but not for male employees ($r = 0.090$, $p = 0.352$). Similarly, organizational commitment is significantly related to family satisfaction for female employees ($r = 0.242$, $p = 0.022$) but not for male employees ($r = 0.055$, $p = 0.593$). However, organizational gender friendliness is significantly related to family satisfaction for male employees ($r = 0.259$, $p = 0.011$) but not for female employees ($r = 0.051$, $p = 0.634$).

4.7 Organisational Commitment and Personal Variables

4.7.1 *The Male Employees*

The influence of personal variables on organizational commitment of male employees was established using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) technique. Results are presented in the table below.

Table 6. Personal variables of male employees and organizational commitment

Variable	Levels	N	Mean	F	P
Age	20 - 24	32	46.5625	1.686	0.132
	25 - 29	32	45.5000		
	30 - 34	21	46.1905		
	35 - 39	14	49.7857		
	40 and above	9	50.6000		
Educational Level	A' Level	13	40.2250	2.243	0.050
	Undergraduates	64	47.9688		
	Degree	12	49.9167		
	Post-graduates	10	48.7000		
Religion	Masters and above	6	51.6667	0.906	0.408
	Protestant	52	47.7500		
	Catholic	42	47.9524		
Marital Status	Moslem	6	42.5000	0.859	0.491
	Single	59	46.2881		
	Married	37	48.8108		
Number of Dependants	Co-habiting	10	43.8333	2.184	0.027
	1	6	44.0000		
	2	17	42.4706		
	3	17	47.0000		
	4	9	51.8889		
	5	7	45.7143		
Family Satisfaction	Above 5	15	52.6000	1.315	0.259
	Satisfied	50	45.0930		
	50 - 50 (fair)	21	48.5714		
Tenure	Dissatisfied	21	47.0588	1.493	0.229
	0.5 - 2 years	50	48.3400		
	3 - 4 years	21	47.4762		
	Above 4 years	35	44.8286		

According to the table above, only personal variables of educational level ($F = 2.243$, $P = 0.050$) and number of dependants ($F = 2.184$, $p = 0.027$) influence organizational commitment of male employees significantly. The rest do not. However, highly educated employees showed higher levels of organizational commitment (Mean = 51.6667) than the ones with lower qualifications. Similarly, those with many dependants (five and above) showed higher levels of organizational commitment (Mean = 52.6000) than the ones with fewer dependants.

4.7.2 *The Female Employees*

The influence of personal variables on organizational commitment of female employees was established using the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) technique. Results are presented in the table below.

Table 7. Personal variables of female employees and organizational commitment

Variables	Levels	N	Mean	F	p
Age	20 - 24	37	44.2703	1.444	0.217
	25 - 29	19	46.8421		
	30 - 34	15	51.4000		
	35 - 39	9	49.6667		
	40 and above	13	44.4000		
Educational Level	Undergraduates	12	43.9000	0.898	0.512
	Degree	58	46.2069		
	Postgraduates	9	47.6667		
	Masters and above	6	53.000		
Religion	Protestant	4	44.5000	0.025	0.976
	Catholic	44	46.5484		
	Moslem	31	46.000		
Marital Status	Single	52	46.5385	1.257	0.293
	Married	35	47.7143		
	Co-habiting	6	45.7500		
Number of Dependants	1	11	46.6364	0.653	0.729
	2	12	50.4167		
	3	11	46.8182		
	4	8	48.3750		
Family satisfaction	Above 4	11	46.9300	2.881	0.019
	Satisfied	62	44.6621		
	50 - 50 (fair)	17	48.0000		
Tenure	Dissatisfied	11	61.35	2.303	0.106
	0.5 - 2 years	34	46.8824		
	3 - 4 years	32	49.8750		
	Above 4	28	43.8929		

As we can see in the table above, only family satisfaction influences organizational commitment of female employees ($F = 2.881$, $p = 0.019$) significantly. The rest do not. Surprisingly, those employees who are dissatisfied with their family life indicated higher level of organizational commitment (Mean = 61.35) than the more satisfied employees.

4.8 Benefits of Gender-Related Considerations

Respondents were asked to indicate the benefits they get as a result of the implementation of gender-friendly human resource management policies in their organizations. Results are shown in the table below.

Table 8. Benefits for employees as a result of gender related considerations

No.	Responses	N	%
1.	No benefits	10	6.6
2.	Everyone is treated equally	32	21.2
3.	Study and sick leave given to both sexes	36	23.8
4.	Maternity leave	58	38.4
5.	Allowances (e.g. Housing, transport)	36	23.8
6.	Medical benefits for staff	10	6.6
7.	Health competition among sexes	8	5.3
8.	Easy promotion	19	12.6
9.	Advocacy for women	6	4.0
10.	Free interaction for both sexes	8	5.3
11.	No night duties for females	5	3.3
12.	Development of strategic plans	5	3.3
13.	Not working on public holidays	3	2.0
14.	Training in areas of personnel	3	2.0
15.	Preferential deployment	2	1.3
16.	Women are not overworked	4	2.6
17.	Participation in decision making	1	0.7
18.	Gender security during fieldwork	1	0.7
19.	Give offs	2	1.3
20.	Education of one biological kid	3	2.0

According to the table above, the most commonly practised gender-friendly human resource management policies include maternity leave (38.4%), study/sick leave and allowances (both at 23.8%), and equal treatment of everyone (21.2%).

4.9 Problems Due to Absence of Gender-Related Considerations

Respondents were also asked to indicate the problems they face as a result of absence of gender-friendly human resource management policies and practices. Results are shown in the table below.

Table 9. Problems due to absence of gender-friendly HRM policies

No.	Responses	N	%
1.	Poor communication	3	2.3
2.	Low positions given to women	12	9.0
3.	Low pay for women	18	13.5
4.	Organizations are personalized	6	4.5
5.	Autocratic leadership	6	4.5
6.	Overworking	13	9.8
7.	Female voices not heard because supervisors are males	11	8.3
8.	Ratio of female to male is small	5	3.8
9.	Fear of women to approach managers	10	7.5
10.	Women are under looked	9	6.8
11.	Short maternity leaves	13	9.8
12.	No job security	2	1.5
13.	Lack of promotions	3	2.3
14.	Sexual harassment	13	9.8
15.	No privacy	3	2.3
16.	Family breakdown due to role conflict (work)	6	4.5
17.	Poor child upbringing	3	2.3
18.	Lack of in-service training	10	7.5
19.	Use of gender biased language	4	3.0
20.	Unfair deployment/change of workplaces	3	2.3
21.	Imbalance in recruitment	7	5.3
22.	Toilets shared by both sexes	1	0.8

As we can observe in the table above, the outstanding problems faced by employees due to absence of gender-friendly human resource management policies and practices include the following: low pay for women (13.5%), overworking (9.8%), short maternity leaves (9.8%), sexual harassment (9.8%), female voices not heard because supervisors are males (8.3%), low positions given to women (9.0%), and lack of in-service training (7.5%).

4.10 Suggestions for Improvements

Lastly, respondents were asked to suggest how their welfare can be improved in as far as gender-friendly human resource management policies and practices are concerned. Results are indicated in the table below.

Table 10. Suggestions on how to improve the welfare of employees

No.	Responses	N	%
1.	Pay for extra load	2	1.2
2.	Give women more time for maternity leave	19	11.7
3.	Pay people their study leave allowance	20	12.3
4.	Treat both sexes equally	40	24.5
5.	Ensure capacity building	4	2.5
6.	Put gender friendly policies in place	30	18.4
7.	Introduce a gender welfare department	6	3.7
8.	Have more female managers	3	1.8
9.	Standing orders be known to all employees	1	0.6
10.	Regular workers workshops about their rights	29	17.8
11.	Allow mothers to come with children to work	2	1.2
12.	Encourage promotions	3	1.8
13.	Increase on pay/salary	9	5.5
14.	Recruit and promote on merit, not on technical know- how	12	7.4
15.	Encourage people to go for further studies (training)	9	5.5
16.	Provide paternity leave	6	3.7
17.	Consider family attachment when transferring	5	3.1
18.	Change leadership in favour of women	3	1.8
19.	Equitable employment for both sexes	9	5.5
20.	Improve communication between workers and administration	3	1.8
21.	Reduce workload for women	1	0.6
22.	Provide flexible working time	4	2.5
23.	Separate toilets of males and females	1	0.6
24.	Give loans for staff	2	1.2

From the table above, major suggestions made include treating both sexes equally (24.5%), putting more gender friendly policies in place (18.4%), organizing regular workers workshops about their rights (17.8%), paying people their study leave allowances (12.3%), giving women more time for maternity leave (11.7%), and recruiting and promote on merit (7.4%).

5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter gives the discussion of the findings, outlines the conclusions and presents the recommendations as per the findings. The discussion begins with the practice of gender-friendly human resource management policies, and moves on to the discussion of gender, organizational commitment and organizational gender friendliness. It is then followed by organizational commitment and personal variables of male employees and

organizational commitment and personal variables of female employees. This arrangement follows the order of the set hypotheses.

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 *Practice of Gender-Friendly Human Resource Management Policies*

The first research question was, "How commonly are gender-friendly human resource management policies practised in Ugandan organizations?"

Results indicate that only three gender-friendly human resource management policies are practised commonly. These include adequate maternity leave duration for women, formal job sharing and respect for gender issues throughout the organization. From these findings, it is clear that the gender-friendly human resource management policies that are currently practised are those that are inevitable (e.g. maternity leave), those that reduce workload from supervisors (e.g. job sharing), and those that have national political legitimacy/support (respect for gender issues).

On the other hand, the gender-friendly policies that are about sex discrimination, promotions and training opportunities are not widely practised in Uganda. These findings are in line with those of Collinson's *et al.* (1990) who wondered why sex segregation prevailed in the insurance industry despite the fact that it was predominantly mental rather than manual work. The insurance companies' promotion policies discriminated against women, did not select women to participate in training courses, and applied geographical mobility in an inconsistent and contradictory way to them. Besides, women's domestic responsibilities and the family ideology worked against them.

In an effort to remove sex discrimination and gender inequality, Collinson *et al.* (1990) prescribed a "gender agenda," in which they advocated more systematic and formalized practices in the channels, criteria and procedures of recruitment, training both men and women of the informal vicious circles of job segregation, career-break schemes, flexible working pattern and crèche facilities.

The above discussion indicates that women-friendly organizations in Uganda are still a minority in the business community. This observation is similar to that of Ng, and Chiu's (1997), who also added that employees might encounter difficulties when trying to look for another organization that offers women-friendly programmes.

After realizing that there was a limited practice of gender-friendly human resource management policies, Marshall (1984) gave six recommendations that would help to integrate women into current organization systems as equals (e.g. by providing women employees with *training* and development opportunities), to modify current practices in such a way that they help women (e.g. flexible working hours and child care facilities), to put in place

mechanisms that would remind organizations to constantly bear women in mind when solving problems to improve organization members' acceptance of women, to emphasize *training* in women's jobs and interpersonal skills to enable them to participate in employment as competently as men, and to suggest that organizations should render advice to women on how to participate and make choices in a man's world.

Therefore, the stated research question was adequately answered. It is clearly seen that gender friendly human resource management policies are not commonly practised in Ugandan organizations.

5.2.2 Gender and Organizational Commitment

The first hypothesis states, "Gender does not significantly influence employees' organizational commitment."

Results indicate that gender significantly influences neither employees' organizational commitment nor their organizational gender friendliness. Whereas males indicated a slightly higher level of organizational commitment as compared to females, females experienced more organizational friendliness than their male counterparts did. These findings are in line with the job model.

The job model suggests that when women perform in the same organizational settings as their male counterparts, their attitudes are shaped by the same factors, and that there should be no significant differences across the two groups (Kanter 1977; Dodd-McCue and Wright 1996). Proponents of this view contend that women and men form job attitudes in similar ways and the only basis for gender differences in job attitudes lies in the organizational experiences and positions of women and men (Kanter 1977). That is, from a job model perspective, differences in job attitudes are viewed as being attributable to differences in the jobs themselves and are thus influenced by such factors as job status and job tenure (Loscocco 1990); thus, situational factors may influence job attitudes. This implies that if situational factors are similar, gender differences, if any, should disappear. Awamleh (1996) also obtained similar findings.

On the other hand, the findings are not in line with the findings of other researchers. Gender was found to be positively related at a significant level with organizational commitment: that is, women displayed higher level of organizational commitment than men did (Singh, Finn and Goulet 2004; Kwon and Banks 2004). Habomugisha (1998) also found out that sex significantly influenced organizational commitment of lecturers in Uganda, and that females had a higher level of commitment as compared to males. In some other countries, there is some evidence to show that women have a significantly higher level of organizational commitment than men (Clark 1996). Despite having strong psychological attachment to work, women may have lower expectations, and therefore, employ different social comparison processes from men when evaluating their jobs.

Other findings relating to the variable of gender indicate weak correlations between sex and organizational commitment (Stevens, Buyer and Trice 1978). Nevertheless, in their study on personal and role related factors in the development of organizational commitment, Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972) have found out that females are less likely to change their organization compared to their male counterparts.

Studies of the broad pattern of differences between men and women's experience of work and the labour market show that woman, on the average, are in lower quality employment though it may seem surprising that women reported a similar level of organizational commitment to men (Clark 1996). This means that unequal representation of women in some institutions may also affect their organizational commitment. Hart, Patricia and Barriars (1988) argued that in comparison with men, women tend to be disadvantaged, wrongly or rightly, by several factors that lead to their under presentation, which in turn seems to influence their stereo-typical reactions from both genders. This leads to a diminishing probability of women's chances to attain top administrative positions, and this may lead to less commitment to their work.

From the above discussion, the first hypothesis is retained: that is, gender does not influence employee organizational commitment significantly.

5.2.3 Organizational Gender-Friendliness and Organizational Commitment

The second hypothesis states, "There is no significant relationship between organizational gender friendliness and organizational commitment."

Results indicate that organizational gender friendliness is significantly related to organizational commitment for female employees but not for male employees. All correlation coefficients are positive, meaning that the higher the organizational gender friendliness the higher the level of organizational commitment.

The findings are all in line with other people's findings. Recent research findings have indicated that organizations with human resource management policies that are responsive to employees' needs are instrumental in organizational attachment (Chiu and Ng 1999). Examples of these human resource management policies include a managerial development and *tiering* programme (Robertson *et al.* 1991), employee stock ownership plans (Wetzel and Gallagher 1990), and family-friendly policies (Grover and Crooker 1995). Chiu and Ng (1999) believe that even controlling all the effects of worker and family - related factors, organizational gender friendliness would still have an impact on employees' organizational commitment.

In another study, Scandura and Lankau (1997) found out that those who perceived their organizations as family-friendly reported a higher level of

commitment than those who did not. In this sense, employees, especially female employees who benefit from women-friendly programmes would appreciate what had been done for them, and hence hold a favourable attitude towards the organization.

Other related findings demonstrate the strategic impact of human resource practices on commitment (Bartlett 2001). A growing body of evidence suggests that certain bundles of human resource practices can affect firm performance through increased employee commitment (Mowday 1998 as quoted by Klein 2001). The assumption is that systems of human resource practices can play a critical role in developing committed employees who are willing to contribute to an organization (as well as in the development of the human capital and the culture within that organization). The development of these factors can create a sustainable competitive advantage and enhance firm performance (Barney and Wright 1998 as quoted by Klein 2001). The Bartlett study is valuable in that it adds to the growing evidence for the linkage between human resource management practices and organizational commitment (Chiu and Ng 1999).

From the discussion so far, the second hypothesis is rejected, and it is concluded that organizational gender friendliness is positively and significantly related to organizational commitment.

5.2.4 Personal Variables and Organizational Commitment

The third hypothesis states, "Personal variables do not influence organizational commitment of male and female public servants significantly." For the purpose of order of discussion, each personal variable is dealt with separately.

Age: Results indicate that age does not influence the organizational commitment of male and female employees significantly. However, older male employees (40 years and above) and middle-aged female employees (30 - 34 years) have higher level of organizational commitment than employees in the other age brackets.

Older or middle aged employees indicate a higher level of organizational commitment because they are more likely to be in senior positions and feel more responsible and are more committed than younger employees are. This is because older age implies increased investments in terms of on-the-job training and experience.

Results on age and organizational commitment are not in line with findings of earlier studies. Habomugisha (1998) found out that age and organizational commitment were related significantly. Decotiis and Summers (1987), and Moris and Schereman (1981) who showed that older employees and those with a greater sense of competence had a higher level of organizational commitment have obtained similar findings.

Recent research findings are in line with the findings of this study. Kwon and Banks (2004), using a multiple regression model (with standardized regression coefficients along with t-values), found no significant relationship between age and organizational commitment. Awamleh (1996) also obtained a similar finding.

Educational Level: Results indicate that educational level significantly influences organizational commitment of male employees but not of female employees. For both sexes, highly qualified employees (Masters and above) have a higher level of organizational commitment as compared to other less qualified ones.

Other people's findings are to a very small extent in line with the above findings. Habomugisha (1998), for example, found out that educational level of male employees significantly correlated with their organizational commitment. However, several researchers disagree with the above findings (Awamleh 1996). They indicate a negative relationship between educational level and organizational commitment while those who do not plan to seek further education become more committed (Dubin *et al.* 1975). This is because highly educated employees become committed to their professions instead, and that increases their mobility.

Steers (1977) is also in disagreement with the findings of this study about educational level. He established that when employees have a higher level of education, it becomes more difficult for the organization to provide sufficient rewards (as perceived by the individual) to equalize the exchange. Hence, more highly educated people who also tend to be more cosmopolitan would be less committed to their organizations and perhaps more so to a profession or trade. White (1987), Habomugisha (1998), and Kwon and Banks (2004) obtained similar findings.

Religion: Results indicate that religion does not influence organizational commitment of both male and female employees significantly. However, for both sexes, Catholics followed by Protestants were found to be more committed than the Moslems who ranked last.

In relation to this, there are contradictory findings; that is, some agree with the above findings but others do not. Habomugisha (1998) found out that religion does not significantly influence the organizational commitment of both female and male University Lecturers in Uganda. This may be because highly educated people have less attachment to religion. On the other hand, Hrebiniak and Alluto (1972) have indicated that religious affiliations of employees are significantly related to organizational commitment, with Protestants exhibiting a higher level of commitment than Catholics.

Marital Status: Results indicate that marital status does not influence organizational commitment of both male and female employees significantly. As expected, both married male and female employees showed a higher level of organizational commitment than single or co-

habiting employees did. This is because married couples have more responsibility in terms of children and other related obligations; hence, they value the outcomes and outputs of work in the form of rewards or/and pay.

In agreement to the above findings, a meta-analysis study by Mathieu and Zajac (1990) revealed that married individuals were found to be slightly higher in their continuance commitment than the single ones. Other findings indicate that single employees are more likely to be positively disposed towards attractive employment alternatives than married or separated employees (Hrebiniak and Alutto 1972). Their analyses of both sex and marital status further suggested that married or separated individuals, especially women see greater costs attached to inter-organizational mobility. Hence, they are less likely to consider alternative employments than single or male subjects, even given inducements to do so. Pulglesi (1995), however, does not support this argument.

Number of dependants: Results indicate that the number of dependants significantly influences organizational commitment of male employees and not that of female employees. For the male employees, those with a high number of dependants (above five) have higher levels of organizational commitment as compared to those with fewer dependants.

Habomugisha (1998) indicated similar findings for both sexes. This was, and is still expected because many economic dependants imply increased economic strain and obligations, and employees would remain identified and committed to the organization for survival.

Along the same line, research findings indicate that dependency on work had an impact on employee's pay satisfaction and the intention to leave the organization (Doran *et al.* 1991). Based on these findings, it is proposed that individuals who have children and/or elderly dependants would have a higher level of continuance commitment.

Tenure: Results indicate that tenure (number of years spent in the organization) does not significantly influence organizational commitment of both male and female employees. Those who had been in the organizations for over 4 years had lower levels of organizational commitment as compared to others who had spent fewer years. This is an unexpected finding and the majority of other people's research findings are in disagreement with it.

Contrary to the above finding, Sheldon (1971) found out that organizational commitment increases with the number of years spent in an organization. This is because length of service suggests the accumulation of organizational career. Similarly, it binds one to the organization, for example, in pension or profit sharing plans. Grusky (1966) had also obtained similar findings. It is suggested that time invested in an organization becomes a valued resource in itself while the privileges associated with length of service make it easier to derive additional

organizational rewards (Habomugisha 1998; Hall *et al.* 1970). Recent research findings also support the findings of this study (Brunetto and Wharton 2003).

However, the findings of McDonald and Makin (2000) support the study finding about tenure. They argue that newly recruited employees have few incidences of the violation of their psychological contract; hence, have higher levels of organizational commitment. Awamleh (1996) obtained similar findings.

From the above discussion, the third hypothesis is, to a very large extent, retained; that is, personnel variables do not significantly influence organizational commitment of male and female Ugandan public servants.

5.3 Conclusions

The following conclusions are made in view of the results and the discussions.

- Gender-friendly human resource management policies are not commonly practised in Ugandan organizations. This means that women-friendly organizations in Uganda are still a minority in the business community.
- Gender influences neither employee organizational commitment nor organizational gender friendliness significantly. Whereas males indicated slightly higher levels of organizational commitment than their female counterparts did, females experienced more organizational friendliness than males.
- Organizational gender friendliness is positively and significantly related to organizational commitment. Organizations with human resource management policies that are responsive to employees' needs are instrumental in organizational attachment.
- Most personal variables do not significantly influence organizational commitment of male and female Ugandan public servants. This is contrary to what most researchers have found out. This calls for further research in the area.

5.4 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study.

- There should be organizational restructuring to ensure that gender-friendly human resource management policies are practised in all Ugandan organizations. The Ministry of Public Service (for public sector organizations), and the private sector foundation (for the private sector organizations) should address this. They should put in place arrangements like flexible working hours, day nursery

facilities around the workplace, career counselling and planning for women, senior management sponsorship for women, a system for helping men to come to terms with women at work, and the creation of support networks for women.

- Through its line ministries and the private sector foundation, the Ugandan Government should do the following: integrate women in current organizational systems as equals, modify current practices to help women, constantly bear women in mind when solving problems, improve organization members' acceptance for women, improve women's job efficiency and inter-personal skills to enable them to participate in employment as competently as men, and render advice to women on how to participate and make choices in a man's world through organizations.
- More research should focus on the relationship between organizational gender friendliness, organizational commitment, and situational factors like pay. This will generate data that can be used by policy makers and managers to improve on employees' career and motivation.

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