

**THE CONSTRUAL OF MASCULINITIES BY NYATITI MUSICIANS AMONG THE
LUO OF SIAYA COUNTY, KENYA**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, interest on the phenomenon of masculinity has captured the attention of scholars from great varieties of fields. Music has not been an exemption from this emerging curiosity. However, it is worth noting that in African traditional music, which is the attention of this article, the expression of masculinities has been portrayed as part of gender performativity that is expressed in defined social functions with particular reference to Luo culture. This paper attempts to analyze various instances in which selected traditional nyatiti musicians express emerging social competition for masculine spaces between males and females in the Luo society. This article argues for the likeliness of the concept of masculinity to be expressive of activities of both male and female spaces. Surprisingly, the emerging manifestation of the new conceptualization of masculinity has not escaped even the attention of traditional musicians among the rural population of Kenya. The paper therefore not only investigates the manifestation of this concept but also analyzes its implication among members of the community as well as the wider society.

Key words: Nyatiti Musicians, Masculinities, Luo, culture

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of masculinity has drawn continuing interest from scholars in various fields. The concept has generally been attributed to certain qualities, characteristics, values or roles that are naturally associated with male behaviour (Connell, 2016).

In contemporary Africa, masculinities are employed to portray emerging struggles for space of equality between men and women (Egodi, 2008). Masculinity has elicited scholarly interest in political, religious, social, cultural and economic spheres in contemporary Africa. Traditional music provides an interesting environment for assessing masculinities as expressed within a changing cultural setting.

Whitely (2012) in the study of popular music argues that the genre is a gendered environment and provides a persuasive argument about male centeredness in popular music. Whitely's argument partly parallels existing situation in Africa particularly with regard to traditional music instrument performance.

Historically in most African societies, performance of traditional music instruments is attributed to men while women are relegated to the side-lines to support men's musical careers by providing audience, singing, clapping or dancing.

In some instances, women become just the 'other' in a masculine venture. The discrepancy is notable in various aspect of performance of traditional music instruments and its related activities. Apart from performance aspect therefore, the article also evaluates related activities such as panegyrics, spiritual roles, social designations for performers and instruments.

In light of contemporary African perspectives, the article focuses on the current gender struggle that is notable in African music instrument performance and the newly emerging meaning of masculinity in relation to the current trends.

LITERATURE UNDERPINNING

Masculinity in Context of Luo Culture: Luo Oloo

Kenya with its over forty-two ethnic groups boasts of a remarkably rich cultural heritage. Despite the constant and inevitable cultural dynamics that are acting upon some aspects of the country's cultures, an enormous section of indigenous cultures lives on and is sustained by descendants of pre-colonial ancestors who escaped the Western education and who never

adhered to the Christian religion. Such survivors believe strongly in indigenous cultural systems which, to date exist alongside modern cultures.

The Luo of Kenya, who majorly occupy the shores of Lake Victoria greatly value their indigenous cultural systems. Traditional music is considered among the community as a repository of historical cultural values and beliefs (Ayany, 1952).

Nyatiti, a six-stringed lyre has been part of the Luo life since the time of their arrival in their present home from Southern Sudan around the 16th century (Acholla, 1976). The instrument therefore represents indigenous culture of the Luo: a culture that is symbolized by the expression Luo Oloo.

Luo Oloo is a cultural expression that paints the picture of a typical Luo man, tall, dark, serious in appearance with six lower teeth removed (*onagi*). Thus, the expression Luo Oloo symbolizes Luo indigenous masculinity (Cohen & Odhiambo, 1989). The Nyatiti musicians, their music instruments and the type of music they perform, are all source of expression of traditional forms of masculinity.

In the Nyatiti performance, the masculine attributes are noticeable in activities such as:

- ownership and performance of the instrument
- use of panegyrics
- use of lyrics that glorify masculinity

Masculinity in Ownership and Performance

Historically, the Luo like all other cultures set out specific roles for males and females. The gender stereotyping of roles has influenced aspects of Luo culture including ownership and performance of specific traditional music instrument such as nyatiti, drums, certain wind instruments and dances.

According to Crawford and Unger (2004), the gender stereotyping of a music instruments may depend on various factors including its shape, size, weight, pitch or the need of particular characteristics to play it. In the case of nyatiti instrument, the masculine attributes attached to its ownership and performance are partly based on the myths and superstitions and partly on characteristics such as shape, pitch, size, weight and playing position. The social beliefs and cultural status attributed to the nyatiti instrument, the musician and his music are all embodied in the nyatiti lyrics as well as in oral traditions of the Luo.

“The ownership and performance of the nyatiti is strictly a man’s business” a prominent nyatiti musician, the Late Ogwang’ Okoth said wearing a manly expression on his face in front of his wife who looked at him with a humble admiration. He vehemently refuted the notions of superstitions and myth with reference to historical male dominance of nyatiti ownership and performance. He argued that these are cultural facts that are based on rational assignment of roles for males and females in our society. The Musician goes further to explain that traditionally, the cultural usages and technical aspects of the instrument naturally define its suitability to male and not females.

Nyatiti is a six-stringed lyre. The strings stretch from a sound box on the lower part of the instrument and run over a wooden bridge to coil on the wooden cross-bar at the upper part of the instrument. Two wooden handles run from the sound box and form a triangle with the cross-bar. The nyatiti has an average weight of approximately 2kg.

The performer places the instrument horizontally between his thighs with one leg in a convenient position to enable him to knock one of the handles with a metal ring (*Od Wong’o*) tied around the toe to provide a strong steady accompanying beat. The shape, size and playing position of the nyatiti has had an impact on the development of cultural gender stereotyping of the instrument and inevitably resulted into the preference of males playing the

instrument as opposed to females. In an interview with one of the earliest nyatiti player, Ogola Opot in February 1986, the musician provided a justification for the cultural gender stereotyping surrounding the playing of nyatiti instrument. According to him, first and foremost, nyatiti is a ritual and spiritual instrument. Traditionally, the instrument was performed in ceremonies where members of the Luo community intended to appease their ancestors or when they wanted to honour their dead heroes. Only men were required to provide spiritual leadership during such occasions. Women could only participate in such ceremonies as dancers (*Jomiel*) or singers (*Jower*). A woman was not supposed to own, perform or even touch the instrument. A woman who disobeyed this cultural rule would be socially branded as '*dhako ma kech*' literally meaning 'a bitter woman'. 'A bitter woman' signified one that could not be loved, enjoyed or appreciated by any man (Digolo, 2003). Traditionally, this was an unbearable verdict for a woman. The shape, size and playing position of the instrument requires that the performer sits with open thighs.

According to Luo culture, however, male and female differences are also determined by sitting styles whereby males are associated with 'open legs' whereas women are associated with 'closed legs', hence, making it impossible for women to play any instrument whose playing position demands the use of the culturally prohibited sitting style.

Nyatiti musicians employ interesting dramatic actions in the course of the performances. For instance, one may stop singing abruptly to give a long narrative based on his personal experiences, description of a friend or an event. At times, the performer narrates his sentiments as he walks around the arena keeping steady eye contact with his audience. As he does this, the nyatiti performer always carries his instrument along. The youthful nyatiti performer OchiengOmingli described the relationship that he had with his instruments as follows:

My nyatiti is me. My spirit flows into it and its spirit flows into me. I fear placing it down because someone may bewitch it or a woman may touch it. If this happens my manhood will be affected and I will never be able to perform again because I will no longer be a man (Personal communication, Ochieng, 2003).

The sentiments of the musician quoted above clearly portray the level of cultural gender stereotyping with regard to choice, ownership or performance of traditional instruments.

Expression of Masculinity in Traditional Panegyrics

Historically, Nyatiti performers have been acknowledged for their proficiency in paying tributes to ancestral heroes, community leaders, their friends, mentors and patrons. Panegyrics also serve as a space for expressing culturally valued masculine attributes. The attributes are presented in form of song lyrics or spoken forms or narratives.

The musician represents the social image and his utterances are a reflection of the mores and norms of the traditional community. In the traditional construction of masculinity, the musician may use heroic examples to enhance masculine image or even insults to attack negative male tendencies that go against masculine characteristics.

Polygamous marriage is among the most common practice among the Luo, particularly those who strongly adhere to indigenous cultural practices. Polygamous lifestyle is viewed within indigenous community as an instinct of a 'true man'. A man with only one wife is viewed as disadvantaged in many ways. Ogola Opot expresses such sentiments in his song '*JaDhakoAchiel*' – '*The Owner of One wife*'

Luo version

Ja dhakoAchiel

Odakgiluoro

Ong'eyonadigima biro

Inyalo lounge saasaya

Weyeuruobededhoot

Nikechdipokaopukokong'o

Oketorerango

wang' dhako x2

To dichuo to jadwar

Jodwarwadu biro weyi

chien

Literal translation

The owner of one wife

He lives in fear

How does he know what will happen

He can be called at anytime

Let Him sit near the door

Because he can spill the beer

You are fond of looking at your

wife's face x2

And yet a man is a hunter

Your fellow hunters will leave yo

behind

(Song collected from the Musician in 2002)

The term panegyrics, as applied in this article, refer to public utterances that nyatiti musicians present at various intervals during public performances. Such utterances may be in form of short sentences or a poetic description of an event or a person. The following nyatiti song performed by a nyatiti musician Oyoo Oguyo in praise of his friend Odongo Ratanga provides an interesting example of panegyric description.

Luo Version

Apako Odongowuod Ugenya

Wuoyisiro

Wuoyisiromosirodipo

Ka ok inyuolowuoyi

To odiomuk

Kata inyuolomanamaorundore

Iluongimananiwuodng'ane

Nyinginyakadong'ekorpiny

Nyako to ng'atokiathurgi

Nyiri kata inyuolomang'eny

To dhokemagiweyigo

Odongo to wuoyisiro

Ma osirodala

English Translation

*I'm praising Odongo the son of
Ugenya people*

*A boy is a wooden block that forms
foundation*

*A boy is a wooden block that protects the
homestead*

If you don't give birth to a boy

Then your house is broken

*Even if you give birth to a mentally
handicapped one*

Would still be referred to as son of so and so

*And your name will be remembered in this
world*

*As for a girl, nobody knows where her home
will be*

Even if you give birth to many girls

They will only leave you with cows

*I therefore consider Odongo as a Foundation
wooden block*

That provides foundation for the homestead

(Song collected from Oyoo Aguyo– January 2002)

In the above song, the musician compares his subject to a strong block of wood that is traditionally used in the Luo homesteads to provide a framework for a house and hold it firmly (siro). Any house that is not well secured by such blocks is considered as having no firm foundation. The implication of the panegyric is that a boy child is traditionally more recognized than a girl child by members of indigenous Luo community. In fact, the musician maintains that 'it would even be better for one to have a mentally challenged son than none at all. At least he will make the family name to live on despite his disability'.

Girls on the other hand are considered as strangers. Nobody knows where their homes would be. Girls are simply regarded as ‘objects’ to be exchanged with cows. He further maintains that even if someone give birth to many girls, at one point he/she would never have them in the homestead as they would be replaced by cows. The musicians make this comment in reference to the cultural practice among the Luo and other African communities where cows and goats are used to pay dowry to the girl’s parents prior to marriage. Such panegyrics portray the masculine tendency of downplaying the important roles played by women in African societies both in traditional and modern contexts.

Emerging Struggles for Masculinities as Portrayed in Nyatiti Songs

The struggle for social equality between men and women remains an area of continuing relevance to any quest for a holistic understanding of economy, society, culture and politics in contemporary Africa (Nyamnjoh, Adebawale & Fall-Cissé, 2005). Studies on gender and gender related concerns have become areas of interest to scholars who attempt to investigate and interpret the effect of the gender battle for space in modern socio-cultural settings. In the context of African cultural systems (Barthel, 1992), and specifically traditional music genre as discussed in this article, the struggles for social equalities are better investigated in terms of contemporary patterns of the projections of masculinity. Investigation may also be conducted in terms of the factors and behaviours, the modes by which these masculinities express themselves and the implications of contemporary masculinities to continent-wide struggle for gender equality.

The nyatiti is an instrument that is historically recognized for the provision of gendered traditional music. This makes it most suitable for use in investigating dynamics of masculinities in Africa in context of traditional music. In African context, masculinities are

constructed based on gender-stereotyped assumptions about traditional roles and responsibilities of male members of household or community. In certain circumstances, however, the validity of such assumptions has been negated by prevailing changes in context and circumstances. For instance, certain dramatic circumstances in contemporary African society has resulted into the reversal, sharing or even complete shift of what has been traditionally regarded as male roles or responsibilities (Buzzard, 1983).

The changes have been noted in all aspects of African cultural systems including traditional music such as nyatiti. It is interesting to note that the genre has traditionally been male dominated. However, in recent years, female performers have ventured into nyatiti music as composers, performers and even as owners of the instrument.

The construction of masculinities contradictions and struggles that are noticeable in various aspects of the contemporary African cultures are considered to be as a result of new experiences, influences, contacts, interactions, freedoms of making choices and individual decisions that are not dictated by the society.

The availability of the liberal space for self-expression that accommodates both males and females is currently opening up new perspectives and meanings of masculinities where both genders have equal space for competition. The competition for masculinities in contemporary Africa has been attributed to various factors. Such factors are considered to exert equal influence on all aspects of social, religious, political and cultural spheres.

Traditional African society places considerable emphases on the socialization of male and female members of households or community in order to prepare them for the roles and responsibilities that are relevant to their masculine or feminine values. As pointed out by

(Nyamnjoh *et al.*, 2005), such socialization processes are complete with formal and informal rituals and rites that mark a coming of age.

The notion of what it means to be a man or a woman and the gender stereotyping of labour division based on the masculine and feminine values has been critiqued and contested in the contemporary socio-cultural settings in Africa.

The general argument advanced against the validity of the historical or traditional male or female labour division in Africa is that it cannot realistically work within the prevailing contexts and circumstances. The foregoing argument is applicable to the currently prevailing shifts that are noticeable in ownership, performance and other activities related to nyatiti music that has traditionally been male-dominated.

In considering factors that have contributed to the eminent struggles for masculinities in nyatiti music, one overriding factor that must be noted is that the foundations on which masculinity has been built with regard to the nyatiti traditions have constantly and inevitably eroded or shifted over time.

The factors that have been attributed to this include gradual structural shifts in economy whereby the rural woman is slowly gaining economic freedom while there is remarkable loss of economic power by males particularly among the working poor. The males, some of whom are reputable nyatiti performers, have lost their financial capabilities due to factors such as involvement in consuming a harmful local brew (*chang'aa*) which destroys their capacity to perform effectively. Such men are unable to undertake any other form of employment that could enable them to support their families financially. The nyatiti performers who succeed in making a living through the art become the village heroes and celebrities. However, most of them end up marrying more wives than they could support, hence losing their economic powers.

The nyatiti performers themselves have come to the realization that the local brew (*chang'aa*) and sustaining many women are drastically reducing their economic power. Joseph Samo gives his colleagues the following warning in his music:

Luo version

Jowadwa tang' urunikong'o

Kong'ober to rach

Tang urunichang'aa

Chang'aakech to mit

Chang'aaneomiyoalakokaakia

Ne omiyoaweyokoda e od chi liel

Literal translation

My Colleagues be careful about the beer

The beer is good and bad at the same time

Be careful about the Chang'aa (Traditional liquor)

Chan'gaa is bitter and sweet at the same time

Chang'aa caused me to inherit a widow without my knowledge

It caused me to forget my coat inside a widow's house

In the above song, the musician warns about careless involvement in drinking *chang'aa* which he describes as 'bitter' and sweet at the same time. He narrates the experience in which he got drunk with *chang'aa* and got involved in a sexual relationship with a widow unknowingly.

According to the Luo culture, a man who sleeps in a widow's house is considered as having inherited the widow even if no sexual act took place between them. Involvement in behavior such as over drinking and spending their meager earnings on numerous women has resulted in to most of the nyatiti being financially incapacitated.

Unlike the male performance where the instrumentalist provides the solo part, the females have a different soloist from the instrumentalist. The female nyatiti groups organize their performances for purely income generating purposes. Such female groups are gradually

becoming popular within the Luo community despite the traditional gender stereotyping attached to nyatiti performances. The emergence of female-headed households has resulted into the re-ordering of social identity among women, most of whom have resorted to undertaking roles and responsibilities that were culturally attributed to the males.

The introduction of African music formal education, under all levels of learning, has provided access for both boys and girls to all areas of African music performance. Nyatiti is one of the major African instruments that are taught especially in institutions of Higher Learning where music is offered such as Kenyatta University in Kenya. Both male and female students, who take nyatiti instructions at the University level, continue performing the instrument as specialists regardless of their gender.

The new generation of liberal youths are bringing into the nyatiti performance a new perspective of masculinities as applied to the genre. In recent years, the commercialization of traditional art forms has become a common practice in most African countries. In Kenya, like other countries, the 21st century has ushered in the formation of commercialized cultural troupes. Such groups comprise performing organization from different ethnicities, gender and age. Members of such cultural troupes are permitted to play any roles ranging from singing, dancing or playing any traditional instrument regardless of their gender. The foregoing factors highlight the struggles, contradictions and the reconstruction of the concept of masculinity in contemporary Africa.

Expression of Women Empowerment in Nyatiti Song Texts

The nyatiti musicians and their music serve as media through which members of the Luo community receive information about the happenings in their environment. Such happenings are embodied in the song texts and are disseminated to members of the community through

participation in the music. As Kavyu (1986) points out, the Nyatiti musician serves as the “rural newspaper”.

Most of nyatiti performers are located in very remote parts of the rural areas, where majority of the residents have no access to the print and electronic media. Consequently, indigenous media of communication such as nyatiti and other traditional music genres serve as a viable means of communication (Digolo, 2003).

The indigenous arts employ idiom that are easily understood by the rural based audience. The analysis of these forms, particularly the nyatiti music reveal that the feminine gender empowerment and the ensuing struggle for masculinities is a phenomenon that is rapidly spreading in contemporary Africa and is attested to, not only by the elites, but also by the ordinary rural masses.

The following excerpts derived from selected nyatiti music portray how the nyatiti musicians make use of panegyrics to inform their audiences about the emerging struggles for masculinities and women empowerment in the contemporary Africa.

The two examples provided are extracted from the compositions by the late Ogwang’ Okoth.

In the first excerpt, the musician provides the following description of his female friend:

Luo Version

Thuolmadhako

Makaodonjo e ot

To jiringoaringa

Kata chuoringo

Ongeng’amapenjochalne

English Translation

The female snake

Whenever it enters into a house

People just start running away

Even men run away

Nobody asks about its gender

(song collected from Ogwang’ Okoth in February 2001)

First, it is worth noting that the musician uses plain and non-intimate language that does not portray male-female ‘love’ relationship. He uses culturally familiar panegyrics. This type of idiom is well understood and easily interpreted by the audience. He describes his woman friend as a female snake. Snakes are very common reptiles in the region due to the hot climate. When a snake enters into a house, which of course happens at times, both men and women scamper for safety. Nobody questions whether it may be a male or female snake.

The panegyric implies that the woman under reference has made some remarkable achievements within the community that has earned her respect among males and females equally. Such woman therefore transcends the feminine boundary and exerts control within the male territories as well (Digolo, 2003). In the next music excerpt, which is also presented in form of a narrative, the same musician, Ogwang’ Okoth, describes his female subject as follows:

Luo Version

Literal Translation

Oyieyo ma wang’etek

The daring rat

Madonjo e jikondjokapaka

That enters into the kitchen of the cat family

Kama oyieyo ok donjgaengang’

Into which rats never enter at all

Kata kaoted ye manaring’o ma obul

Even if there is roasted meat kept there

(Song collected from Ogwang’ Okoth in February 2001)

Again the plain language employed by the musician portrays what would be described as “man to man” friendship between him and his female subject. His intention is simply to demonstrate the remarkable achievements by the woman who he describes as the daring rat.

Rats are common features in African homesteads. The traditional houses serve, not only as living places, but also as storages for food stuffs’ for the family. Rats from surrounding

forests frequently visit the homesteads to steal some of the food. In order to chase away the rats, most families keep cats.

The musician makes reference to unfriendly and uneasy relationship between rats and cats. The description is meant to portray the feminine and masculine struggles in contemporary Africa. The 'rats' (females) are portrayed as daring enough to intrude into the 'cat's' (male) territory within the homesteads.

The musician describes his subject as 'the daring rat' and continues to explain that the 'rat' has entered into the kitchen of the 'cat' family where rats do not enter even if the kitchen has roasted meat kept in it. He insinuates that there are certain roles, responsibilities and achievements that are traditionally attributed to male members of the homestead or community, that is, the gender-stereotyping of the social roles, responsibilities and achievements. However, his female subject has defied and ventured into the male dominated space.

The descriptions presented above indicate just a few examples that demonstrate the on-going construction of masculinities and struggles that are resulting into the emergence of the new masculine perspective and identities in contemporary Africa.

CONCLUSION

The discussion presented in this article focuses on emerging struggles for masculinities in contemporary Africa and the modes through which the masculinities express themselves. Interesting examples are provided on how indigenous cultural systems currently serve as mediators or conduits for the construction and expression of masculinities.

The nyatiti music of the Luo has traditionally been viewed by the Luo community as a gendered music genre and specifically as a male dominated genre. In contemporary Luo

community, however, the nyatiti performance, ownership as well as some of its messages embodied in its texts reveals that the gender-stereotyping of the music instrument that has been attached to its ownership and performance is gradually fading.

The new constructions of masculinities and the ensuing struggles for their expressions among females and males portray the possible continent-wide emergence of gender struggles for masculinities, hence creating a new definition of the concept.

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