



A Cultural Reading of Henry Rufus Ole Kulet's Literary Presentation of Maasai Masculinity

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Abstract

This is a study of Henry ole Kulet's fiction in the context of Maasai culture. The research focuses on three of his novels: *Is it Possible? To Become a Man* and *Moran no More*; in so far as he fictionalises the nature and cultural construction of Maasai masculinity. The methodology of the study is largely socio-cultural but embraces a close reading and analysis of the three texts. Of necessity, related texts are brought into play in order to give the study a comparative outlook. The general ideological assumptions of hegemonic masculinity aid in highlighting the central place of the male in understanding and critiquing masculinity. The paper acknowledges and borrows from Connel's (1967) assertion that power relations among the men and between men and women are found to dominate social, cultural, economic and political activities, as portrayed in the three novels and in Maasai society. Special privileges also rank high as attributes of masculinity and determine nearly all interactions between the man and woman. The nature of Maasai masculinity is described from the viewpoint of cultural expectations and consequently construction of masculinity through character analysis based on the selected novels. The overall conclusion is that Maasai culture is not static as often claimed in the world of stereotyping. Man and masculinity in general, social demands, responsibilities, and history do not allow a man to discharge forever. If anything, the novels and cultural writings highlight the continuing reconstructions and redefinitions of Maasai manhood in light of changing values.

Key words: Culture, Hegemony, Masculinity

Introduction

There are varied definitions and perspectives of manhood or womanhood in different societies. This is because gender is a social construct, determined by every community in its own way. While Cornwall (2005) argues that third world women have been portrayed as voiceless victims of ever multiplying oppressions - situating them as powerless and inviting interventions on their behalf, the images of African men have equally been polarized. Perceptions of what constitutes manliness vary according to cultures. This paper analyses how the Maasai community defines a Maasai man in view of ole Kulet's literary presentation. The study focuses on three of ole Kulet's novels: *Is it Possible? To Become a Man*, and *Moran no More*.

There is a significant relationship between Literature and culture since no literary artist lives nor writes in a vacuum. Of necessity, a creative writer draws from daily experiences the society goes through, as he artistically fictionalizes them. It can thus be argued that culture informs Literature. It is also worth noting that the relationship between Literature and culture is symbiotic, since culture also draws from Literature. As a mirror of the society, Literature illuminates any retrogressive culture exposing its evils, with the hope that positive cultural change may be executed.

Kroeber (1963:125) points out:

A spirited depiction of the total pattern of any culture possesses much the same appeal and interest as a portrait by a good painter. Some cultures, like some faces are more interesting than others, but all can be given interest and meaning by the hand of the skilled master

Through Literature, one can thus creatively describe culture in a manner that is more appealing to readers. In this way, many people are exposed to different cultures.

Henry ole Kulet draws mainly from the Maasai culture, providing context to his creative work. A close reading of such writing becomes an eye opener to certain aspects of Maasai culture. Of particular interest, his presentation of an ideal Maasai man is determined by the cultural values of the Maasai community, despite other foreign influences that come with time. The Maasai have gained popularity from the fact that they have endeavored to preserve their material culture. This paper examines how this culture determines who qualifies to be a man. In other words, a description of the qualities a man should possess, as required by the Maasai culture, defines an ideal Maasai man. Ole Kulet's view in this case is determined by how he presents his male characters in his literary works.

DISCUSSION

Masculinity asserts itself in several ways including: physical, functional, sexual, emotional, intellectual, interpersonal and other personal characteristics. Masculine traits portrayed by Maasai men can thus be analyzed in reference to these areas. Generally, the Maasai have been described as noble, dignified, beautiful and honest (Dorsey, 1997). The role that men play in a traditional Maasai set-up requires that he possesses and displays certain characteristics, since a man is also defined by the role he plays.

Considering each of these areas, the physical aspect of masculinity defines a man as strong, brave, athletic, and virile. An ideal Maasai man should display a great deal of courage, for which he is rewarded and praised, since this trait enhances his major role of protection of the members of the society and their property. Personal bravery is the most developed and celebrated characteristic of the Maasai culture. Boys are socialized from an early age to be brave and able to protect themselves. In *Is it Possible?* (5315), Lerionka wants to prove his bravery so as not to disgrace his father's name 'Osokoni'. He stages a fight with other boys, which he wins; and they sing praises to him (p.6). Later on, he courageously travels all alone at night through a dangerous forest in search of his new home.

Dorsey (1997) points out that for the Maasai, the importance of bravery is symbolized by the absolute necessity of the sacrament of circumcision. Circumcision is the most critical moment in a boy's life, the trial for which he prepares himself from the onset of consciousness. Dorsey acknowledges that the preparatory indoctrination, the exercises in stoic endurance, and the elaborate details of the publicly witnessed operation have been described in many autobiographical, anthropological, fictional and other accounts.

Bravery is a trait that is valued so much to the extent that one must be tested on it before being declared a man. The act of circumcision ushers boys into manhood and later becomes a mandatory requirement for one to be given any position as an elder. Its main test is physical endurance, and one who endures the operation is crowned a man. If he cringes or winces with pain, he is ridiculed and regarded as a coward like a woman or a child. Leshao in *To Become a Man* (1972) undergoes a painful process of circumcision. It is described:

At last the surgeon hurried a little. He squatted between Leshao's outstretched legs. Leshao felt the long nails of the surgeon get hold of the skin between them. And the cutting came. Surely it was painful and the knife seemed blunt. It produced the sort of pain he once experienced when holes were made through his earlobes. He counted the cuts. They are usually five, but the time they took seemed endless. It seemed more especially when ole Sulunye told a member of the crowd to hold for him a piece of skin which he could not cut without aid. Then the final cut came. It was the most painful one as it entailed the cutting of a fibre structure and pulling of the bleeding wound. Then it was over. Someone poured milk on both his thighs. He was still staring into space.

'Stand. Now you are a man.'

'Stand up, the pillar of Merresho'. (p.108-109)

It is worth noting that Leshao is crowned a man only after he has successfully undergone the painful process described. From the description, it is also evident that this is not the first time a man is subjected to pain. He undergoes a painful experience when holes are made through his earlobes. Perhaps this is one of the trials through which he is prepared for the great test. Spencer (1998) also comments that among the Maasai, manliness is bestowed ritually after initiation when the individual acquires adult roles.

It is the nature of a man to defend and protect. This is why among the Maasai,

a man who can do this is praised. To be considered a man, one has to display his ability to defend and protect his family and property. Boys are therefore socialized to develop physical endurance and willingness to be at the forefront of securing the society. In *Is it Possible?* (1971), Lerionka tells Lekakeny:

“No brother - - - We are born to face these things. If you don’t go through them, you are not a man.” (p.75)

After circumcision, the young men join moranship – a stage that is the climax of masculinity. Morans occupy a cherished position, associated with the reputation of the Maasai as a warrior people. Morans at this stage are trained to display a great deal of courage that will enable them to perform their role – mainly that of protection. During the training, the morans simply need to adhere to the rules and regulations of moranship. Giving a description of some of the rules, ole Kulet adds:

Courage, of course, was essential for the defence of one’s name and village. If one was found to be a coward, he was continually provoked by everyone. (1972:110).

To test this, the morans hunt and kill lions as a show of personal strength and courage. In spite of the danger involved, every moran looks forward to this great event, and the successful ones are greatly praised. Men in their physical identity must embrace heroic self-sacrifice because it is masculinity’s duty to protect. All the same, morans occupy a cherished position. Spencer (1998:68) notes:

Everyone in different ways is enchanted by the ideal of moranhood as the climax of male virility. Boys look forward to this period eagerly; girls look to the morans for lovers; mothers of the morans dote their sons’ position and the morans themselves bask in this limelight. They are to excel all others physically; and the symbol of their coveted position is a set of privileges denied to boys.

Emotionally, a man is expected to be stoic and not display his emotions openly. He is supposed to suppress his emotion as much as possible. One of the qualifications of manhood is the ritual of circumcision, which has its main test on endurance. During the operation, a man must not even wink, but be stoic, courageously facing the pain.

A Maasai man, as ole Kulet describes, generally values independence. He suppresses emotions, particularly portraying weaknesses of their masculinity. Men suppress emotions of anger especially when they err. Kulet (1972) describes Leshao’s father as a man who does not want to admit his weakness and seek help. Sharing his weakness with others, he thinks, will be ridicule. He is withdrawn and does not want to seek help from his brother and other elders until he finds himself in a bad situation. He is often quiet and when he speaks, anger is registered in his voice.

Other factors to be considered in the definition of manhood are the interpersonal aspects that define masculinity. Men are seen to be leaders, dominating and disciplinarian, independent, free, individualistic and demanding. In most cases, they use violence and aggression to assert their masculinity. Male characters are often rewarded for their self-control and the control of others, aggression and violence, financial independence and physical desirability. Men are socialized to be aggressive, a trait that is vital in the Maasai culture of cattle raiding. Physical aggression is clearly

shown by ole Kulet, as he portrays his male characters as individuals who are easily provoked to fight. One could possibly link this to the tradition of carrying a club and a spear wherever a Maasai man goes – in readiness to fight/ protect if need arises.

Masculinity is linked to power in a way that has made people afraid of it – it is seen as a return to the authoritarian society that suppresses women. Men are decision makers and women cannot dare to oppose them. Maasai men are portrayed as domineering figures over women and children. Kerea ole Merresho dismisses his wife's suggestions and silences her saying:

Woman! This is my home. It is not ours. It is mine. I do not know why you keep on forgetting this even after staying with me all these years. But for the sake of saving you the trouble of trying to remember what I have repeatedly said, get this straight. This house belongs to Kerea ole Merresho alone--- (Kulet, 1972:4).

From ole Merresho's words, it is evident that there is a deep sense of hegemony among the Maasai. The exercise of power gives men the masculine identity they value. It is also important to note that women are paramount in the definition of manhood and the general expression of hegemony. In other words, for one to dominate and rule, there must be a willing subject to be dominated and ruled. However much the position of women and children is underrated, it gives meaning to the men's position. The acceptance of the lowly positions by women is an indication that masculinity cannot be constructed without them.

The Maasai generally have maintained their dignity despite foreign influence. The social cohesion they display earned them respect even by the colonialists who found it difficult even to rule them. Kroeber (1948) says that the first problem of any culture is that of its survival or persistence. The Maasai on the other hand have struggled to keep their culture despite foreign influence. He comments that there was a widespread belief in colonial East Africa that men posted to Maasailand succumbed to a disease called 'maasai-it is' which destroyed their desire to rule. It can thus be argued that the Maasai's reluctance to adopt the white man's ways also changed the white men's attitude towards them and gave them an excuse concerning their presence in the land: as evangelists, missionaries and educationists. It also explains why the Maasai were never ruled: their cohesion made it impossible for foreigners to influence them fast enough.

Maasai men display this sense of dignity and pride. They hardly admit weakness. There is a kind of pride that Maasai men associate with masculinity. As a result, they do not display any emotion that would be contrary to what they consider to be masculine. Leshao's father in *To Become a Man* (1972) is a good example. Ole Kulet describes his brother Meteurr's attitude:

...He knew what was troubling the old man. Poverty and pride. He knew the old man could not admit that he was poor. They had lived and shared jokes and miseries together in their youth, and Kerea had always been proud of himself. He could hardly agree to be given anything. (p.51)

It is indicated that Maasai elders do not accept praises easily. Roiman's uncle in *Moran no More* (534) does not openly accept praises and gratitude from Roiman. He

knows his duty and is proud of it. What ole Mugie wants is for people to know that he performs his duty well. This is the pride of any man: to prove his ability to provide. Instead of open praises, he prefers that his action be known by many.

Other factors that define Maasai masculinity include the functional aspects of masculinity. Generally, a man should provide for his family since he is the presumed breadwinner. Failure to do so is an indication of failed manhood. Among the Maasai, men go on raids to acquire wealth for self-esteem, but the primary reason is to be able to provide the basic needs for his family. This is why masculinity may be an indicator of social status as much as race, wealth and social class.

The status of a man is determined by the kind of family he has raised. This is the greatest challenge a man faces. His success or failure in this constitutes his success or failure in life, thus determining how the man is rated. This is what disturbs Leshao's father in *To Become a Man* (1972). He is disappointed and disturbed by the fact that he cannot provide the basic needs for himself and his son. He does not want to admit that they live on solicited food. His position in the society is affected by this state. Even women mock him on the grounds that he cannot fend for himself. Leshao, on the other hand, is not spared. He loathes having to go round the village with a bowl begging for flour. He asks his father if he can go to Narok to look for a job that will earn him some money for family upkeep. Roiman in *Moran no More* (1990) also wants to provide for his widowed mother. This is a noble task and when he does not find a job immediately after school, he considers himself a failure. He compares himself with his friends who are doing well: successful in their prominent professions and businesses.

Masculinity is also linked to the intellectual domain in general culture. Men are expected to be logical, intellectual, rational, objective, and practical. Ole Kulet portrays Maasai men as the decision makers in the family. Their suggestions are deemed most reasonable. Since they are perceived as less emotional, their decisions are regarded as the most objective. Ole Kulet's male characters make their own decisions which they believe are the best ever. They do not want to be questioned, nor do they take suggestions from anybody. Lerionka's father makes a decision to send his son to Arusha without consulting his presumably emotional wife, who is left crying as she is going to miss her only son. Ole Merresho also dismisses his sister's advice concerning the impending circumcision of Leshao, however reasonable it is. His decision is final: he is going to 'seat' his son however difficult it will be for him.

The deep sense of hegemony expressed in the Maasai culture breeds a kind of dictatorship. It is one of the values of the Maasai not to question what a man says. Ole Kulet describes this value in *Is it Possible?* (1971:41):

...but as is the custom, there was no reason to question what a senior said. The rule was, and still, that a person does what he is told and if there is a question, to ask it later.

However, the kind of problematic treatment that calls for constant invention and re-invention of gender roles is an expression of our creation-based sense that men and women need each other (gender-role complementarities). As much as Maasai men value hegemony, which is also accepted and supported by women, looking down up-

on women may not be justified. Ole Kulet's male characters treat women this way, yet they are among the main contributors to the family's well-being. Leshao in *To Become a Man* (5316) for instance remembers the time his mother was alive. They never went hungry since she was hardworking and would travel long distances to trade her milk for flour. In this community also, it is the woman's job to plaster the roofs of houses and they come to the aid of Leshao and his father when it rains.

The last area considered is the sexual aspect of masculinity. Men are generally described as sexually aggressive and experienced. This is a masculine trait expected to be admired by women. The aggressiveness of men is celebrated by women. Women fall for men who show courage and feel proud of this. After successful raid, women sing praises to men who have shown courage. It is a sign that they can provide food as well as security for the family.

Men on their part value sexual conquest. The ability to attract women to themselves and please them enhances masculinity. A man feels humiliated if he approaches a lady but is not successful. Kulet (1990) portrays Roiman as frustrated when his attempt to win Sereya's love seems futile. He considers his failure to be a result of his joblessness hence poverty, in contrast to his friends' affluence. The issue of economic empowerment goes hand in hand with masculinity. For Sereya, real masculinity is embodied in 'real men' who demonstrate that they are wealthy. This is why she befriends Mzee Za Kale, a very rich man, regardless of his age. In spite of the genuine love Roiman has for her, he cannot demonstrate it due to his financial status, really frustrating him.

From the above descriptions of manliness, it is evident that an individual's character is a yardstick for judging his masculinity. Unfortunately, the society sometimes imposes standards that are difficult to meet. Many men who desire success therefore overstretch in an attempt to meet the set standards. Their situations notwithstanding, they seek to prove their manliness at all costs. What needs to be examined therefore is whether such standards are worthwhile or at all necessary. It should however be noted that the demands on men can be very unreasonable: it is animalistic, for example, to argue that roughness equals manliness. Nor should it escape criticism that intelligence should be regarded as a masculine domain. To the contrary, it is common to both male and female. Even the variations of intelligence have nothing to do with gender and ole Kulet's literary portraits testify to this.

It is worthwhile to note, however, that due to the social change that has taken place over the years, there are paradigm shifts in the definition of manhood and the requirements therein. The cultural definition of a man is therefore not a reliable way of judging one's performance because culture is dynamic. There are factors which determine the perception of who a man is – education, religion, and colonialism. Salzman (1980) argues that modern culture has valued urban rather than rural life, education rather than experience, refinement rather than natural qualities, consumption rather than production, national rather than local identity, and leisure rather than labour. The disruptive culture brought about by formal education, Christianity, and colonialism problematizes the definition of Maasai masculinity.

Formal education, for instance, affects masculinity since it is judged by a culture that does not value it. It is opposed to, or rather does not value some cultural

practices which are very important to the society. The boys who go to school do not rightfully fulfill the requirements of manliness since most of their time is spent in school. No emphasis is given to such rites such as circumcision, so the boys who go to school undergo the rite much later in life. The importance of the rite of circumcision to the Maasai is of paramount importance to the effect that the grown boys who have not undergone the rite are mistreated by their age mates who have. Until they undergo the rite, they are still children, who cannot be given any responsibility.

It can thus be argued that manhood is not simply a matter of age – it is worked for and achieved. One has to go through the tests that qualify him as a man. Failure to do so in time does not render him unable to do what is considered manly; yet the society does not allow him to. He must undergo the ritual. Kulet (1972) for instance shows such predicament that Leshao is in. He feels he can perform the duties of a man (he is a grown up) yet he is not allowed to since he is not circumcised.

Another important factor affecting masculinity is the introduction of Christian religion. The Christian belief system and practices are totally different from the Maasai way of life. Dorsey (1997) points out that the fundamental crisis in Maasai life is the conflict of cultures. Christianity, for instance, provides possible alternatives to solving problems. Rather than face danger as a man should, Lerionka relies on Christian religion to bolster his courage (Kulet: 1971). Although he finds the resurrection of Jesus incredible, he feels quite secure when he prays alone to the Christian Lord at night in the forest. This religion therefore creates a kind of conflict of cultures. Whereas the Maasai culture would expect Lerionka to bravely face any kind of danger and fight 'like a man', it provides an alternative solution which may seem to breed cowardice. Edgerton (1971) describes the personality of pastoralists as more open, expensive, prone to direct action in attacking enemies and quick to forget grudges. The argument he gives for this is that since they keep shifting and changing camp groups, they can separate from enemies and avoid social tension. In contradiction to Edgerton, ole Kulet portrays the Maasai, who are pastoralist, as people who can harbor feelings of hatred for a long duration and without any intention to move as a result of conflict. They are however capable of negotiating and solving problems on their own.

Can there be the most objective and reasonable yardstick that can be used to determine who a man is? Since the qualifications of a man in the Maasai culture are portrayed by ole Kulet as certain characteristics determined by culture, one must possess them in order to fit the social definition of a man. However, it has also been noted that there are certain challenges that affect these requirements. It is therefore possible to fail to achieve the set masculine standards due to one reason or the other. What then are the implications of this failure?

In *To Become a Man* (1972), ole Kulet portrays ole Merresho as a humiliated man since he has failed to do what a man should: provide for his family. He does not want to be associated with poverty although it is a fact, for it is a sign of failure in his part. The truth of the matter is that he cannot even feed his family. When his son Leshao is accused of stealing ole Sembe's ram, he wants to fight ole Sembe because he insults him, taking advantage to settle an old grudge. Ole Kulet describes his feelings:

He felt a mixture of anger and sorrow when he said the two boys from Leshota thought to blame the theft on Leshao because they were poor and did not have anything to eat in their hut. He felt more bitter when he thought that it was an established fact that they were poor. He recalled his own voice the previous night when he had told his son to go and beg for a little posho. Anger choked him. (p.31)

It is quite unfortunate for him since all the effort he puts to emancipate himself from this is futile. He initially hopes that by sending his son to school, he is preparing for later prosperity through him when he gets employed and earns a lot of money. He confesses that besides the calamity that befell him, he sold a number of his animals to enable him pay Leshao's school fees and pay the white man's taxes demanded.

Leshao's failure to bring wealth is due to his late circumcision which denies him the chance to go on raids with his age mates. According to his friend, Mbulung, cattle raid is the only way through which one can gain recognition. This is a very important element of masculinity. Men like to be recognized and praised and have their ego massaged. Leshao's failure to prove his masculinity this way leaves him a depressed man. The prevailing circumstances make him feel insufficient. Although the society expects him to work hard and bring wealth to his family, it does not allow him to participate in cattle raids his friends organize because he is not circumcised.

This indicates that Maasai masculinity is tied to wealth. Poor people feel angry about the fact that they cannot provide as a man should. Roiman in *Moran no More* (1990) also faces the same challenge. When he fails to do well in school and secure a job as expected, he feels humiliated that he cannot provide for his widowed mother. His predicament is intensified when his childhood friends seem to succeed in their dreams so easily. They are so aggressive, just as men should be. Roiman's 'failure' is aggravated when he fails to win Sereya's love since he cannot afford to entertain her with his meager earnings. She mocks him, comparing him with his successful friends. This makes Roiman a bitter man.

CONCLUSION

It is remarkable that Ole Kulet is an author who moves with time. Judging from his writing, he appreciates the socio-cultural transformations that are taking place in his community. His approach appreciates the Maasai culture, and at the same time does not dismiss the western culture that impinges on the society's life. In fact, a challenge he seems to pose is the possibility of having a hybrid culture and at the same time maintaining the cultural identity of the Maasai. He presents this so well in his first novel *Is it Possible?* (1971). He creates an impression that with time, the Maasai accept change.

Ole Kulet clearly paints a picture of what makes a Maasai man, from the way he portrays his male characters. Against the standards of manliness, he describes some aspects of Maasai culture, some situations that may challenge individuals' ability to perform. For instance, the idea that one must be circumcised before he can perform certain roles is not realistic. Moranship is also another questionable institution. Since the ideology of manhood is cultural, its perception is bound to change with time. It becomes debatable whether moranship is really a necessary stage one must

fulfill before he becomes a man.

From the foregoing, it can be argued that there is a danger that conservative cultures place on men, thus there is need for gender-role complementarities. The overstretching in order to meet the required standards of manliness has far-reaching effects. Is it necessary to go to the extreme limits in order to be accepted as a man? Ole Kulet seems to indicate that the definition of manhood and its standards need to be re-examined.

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