

PORTRAYAL OF MEN IN SWAHILI PROVERBS

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Abstract: While gender issues in Africa have been a rich area of study, the focus has been on issues related to women. This paper attempts to fill the gap that exists in the literature by taking a nuanced look at the depiction of men through the lens of gendered Swahili proverbs. Proverbs have long been the subject of many studies as they are useful in the identification of societal norms and taboos. The didactic nature of proverbs is particularly enlightening when investigating the expected set of behaviour for each member of society. The paper seeks to investigate masculinity among the Swahili with key focus on gender-specific characterizations and roles played by husbands and fathers. The study looks at the depiction of men as husbands and fathers to find out which stereotypes and gender roles are assigned to men and how the relevant Swahili proverbs are used to advance societal prescriptions and expectations. The paper utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis to scrutinize the proverbs to reveal the gender roles assigned to husbands and fathers and to analyse the male stereotypes embedded therein. Furthermore, Ambivalent Sexism Theory is used to underpin the analysis and the interpretation of the proverbs.

Key words: Proverbs, Swahili society, ambivalent sexism, CDA, patriarchy, masculinity.

1. Introduction

Proverbs are interwoven into every day speech acts ranging from normal conversation, through religious sermons to political rhetoric. One would be hard pressed to find a situation where proverbs cannot be used. Their ubiquitous nature coupled with the fact that they are not questioned but are generally accepted as truth passed down from previous generations make them perfect for examining a particular society's beliefs. Additionally,

proverbs are didactic in nature and are used to teach socially acceptable behaviour and to admonish unacceptable conduct. Consequently, a study on the proverbs of a particular society can reveal what that society thinks on a myriad of issues. In this study, we hope to look at gendered Swahili proverbs in a bid to find out how the depiction of men encourage or discourage conformity to gender roles and gender stereotypes.

Traditional gender ideologies have always prescribed specific gender roles for men and women presumably because of their differences. The study narrows its scope to the analysis of gendered proverbs on husbands and fathers to reveal the implicit and explicit signals given to the members of the Swahili community in the quest for gender hegemony. Furthermore, the study seeks to demonstrate the importance of language on the creation and perpetuating of gender ideology, which may or may not have adverse effects on the speakers of the language. We have already pointed out that while the depiction of women in African proverbs has received substantial attention, there exists a disparity in the depiction of men. A few studies have been undertaken to study the portrayal of man in proverbs. The studies include (Mariwah et al. 2022; Mathonsi & Mpungose 2015; Diabah & Appiah 2018). The present study seeks to add to the body of knowledge in this area by looking at how men are depicted specifically in their roles as husbands and fathers in Swahili gendered proverbs.

2. Theoretical framework

The nature of the topic under discussion has necessitated the use of an eclectic theoretical approach. We have used two theories, namely, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Ambivalent Sexism Theory. There are some aspects of the study that are best handled using the former and others that call for the use to the latter theory.

2.1. Critical discourse analysis

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach to the examination of power dynamics and prejudice in the society as

seen in the language and texts produced in that society. The main proponents of this approach are Ruth Wodak (1989), Norman Fairclough (1989), Teun Van Dijk (1990).

The main interest of CDA is power and domination. According to Van Dijk “CDA’s prime concern is the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse and dominance” (Van Dijk 2001: 96). It proposes that discourse analysis reveals both overt and covert power structures and ideologies held by members of the society.

CDA further proposes that discourse does ideological work. The approach seeks to study how ideologies are embedded in discourse and how interaction with such texts shape our identities, relationships and beliefs especially around power, prejudice and representation.

Fairclough approached CDA from a socio-cultural angle and provided a three-dimensional framework for the analysis of text and discourse. The three dimensions are text, discursive practice, and social practice. At the text level, the analysis is limited to the linguistic aspects of the text such as vocabulary and grammar. The discursive level scrutinizes the processes underpinning text creation, dissemination and consumption in the culture. The third dimension is that of social practice which examines the social structures valued in the society and how its discourse indoctrinates these ideologies.

Van Dijk (1990) concurred with Fairclough that language is a social practice but he argued that there lacks a direct link between discourse and society. He developed the socio-cognitive approach where he introduces a cognitive interface that would act as the link between discourse and society.

On his part, Wodak (1989) introduced a discourse-historical approach to CDA which focusses on the need of including the context of the discourse to understand how it impacts society. She argues that all ideologies held by members of society are shaped by their past and present experiences.

CDA transcends textual analysis and sets out to uncover the inherent power and prejudice dynamics held in society as seen in the text. Additionally, CDA seeks to investigate how these power dynamics are produced and reproduced in discourse.

2.2. Ambivalent sexism theory

The present work is underpinned by AMBIVALENT SEXISM whose proponents were Susan Fiske and Peter Glick (1996). They built on earlier approaches on gender studies which can be broadly grouped into two schools of thoughts, namely, prejudice or intimacy studies. Intimacy studies focused on the inter-dependence between men and women in heterosexual relationships while prejudice studies focused on the harm that heterosexual relationships have on the men and women.

Ambivalent sexism theory takes a more nuanced approach and seeks to explore both the positive and negative attributes of heterosexual relationships. The positive aspects of heterosexual relationships are categorised as benevolent, while the negative aspects are classified as hostile. Fiske & Glick (1996) posit that every heterosexual relationship encompasses both benevolent and hostile components thus creating a state of ambivalence.

The theory has three main components at its core, that is, paternalism, gender differentiation and heterosexuality.

While the origins of patriarchy may differ, its prevalence all over the world cannot be disputed. Lerner suggests that while the specific time is irrelevant, patriarchy was birthed “when men discovered how to turn difference into dominance and laid the ideological foundation for all systems of hierarchy, inequality, and exploitation” (1997: 133). Everyone has to contend with patriarchy, there are men who are able to conform and meet the patriarchal expectations and, consequently, get rewarded for it. Equally, there exist men who struggle under the demands set by patriarchy and seek to change the status quo. Similarly, women can look at the prevailing hierarchical structures and rebel against them by advocating for change or conform to them and seek to find their place within the system.

Towards women, the hostile form of paternalism is dominative paternalism while the benevolent form is the protective paternalism. Dominative paternalism is overtly hostile and is founded on the belief

that men have more power in society because they are men. The protection of this masculine right to power is to be guarded fiercely to avoid women usurping it. Its benevolent counterpart, that is, protective paternalism, views women as creatures in need of care and protection through acts of provision and of chivalry.

According to Fiske & Glick (1996), in women's lives, patriarchy creates resentment of paternalism which is the hostile form and/or maternalism, the benevolent form. These two forms are expressed in their interaction with men. The hostility is borne out of the frustration of having to constantly prove their capabilities in societies that favour men and it manifests itself in feelings of resentment and antipathy towards men. Maternalism, on the other hand, is the benevolent form which focusses on the positive outcomes of patriarchy for women. Maternalism accepts the supposition of the superiority of men but holds that men would not be able to achieve greatness without the woman caring for him and the home.

The second component of ambivalent sexism is gender differentiation which according to Fiske & Glick (1996) can also be exhibited benevolently or with hostility leading to complementary or competitive relations respectively between the sexes.

In men, it is exhibited either as Competitive Gender Differentiation or Complementary Gender Differentiation. Competitive gender differentiation (CGD) is the hostile form of gender differentiation and is based on the belief that men are inherently better than women in competences such as ambition, competitiveness, boldness, and decision-making. Those who ascribe to this point of view seek to diminish competencies where women excel, such as nurturing, compassion, and cooperation.

In women, the hostile response to gender differentiation is Compensatory Gender Differentiation which is exhibited through the denigration and scorning of men. It is a reaction to the negative effects of paternalism on women and it seeks to elevate women by extolling areas where they excel while at the same time pointing out men's incompetence in such matters.

The benevolent counterpart is Complementary Gender Differentiation which seeks to highlight distinct male and female skills and advocates that these skills be used for the good of the wider society.

Heterosexuality is the third component of the theory that Fiske and Glick explored to reveal how ambivalence is produced in male and female romantic relationships. The innate drive for intimacy and reproduction leads to an inescapable interdependence between men and women.

Hostile sexuality is founded on the fear that women use male sexual desire for women to manipulate them by restricting access to sexual intimacy. This, coupled with the belief that men have to prove their suitability/ eligibility to gain sexual access, creates feelings of powerlessness and antipathy towards women. Intimate heterosexuality is the benevolent form which elevates the place of marriage in society by romanticizing sexuality.

3. Methodology

The article uses secondary data collected from published books and articles that contain Kiswahili proverbs. These publications are Swahili Proverbs from East Africa (Kalugila 1977), More Swahili Proverbs from East Africa (Kalugila 1980), Swahili proverbs: *Nia zikiwa moja, kilicho mbali huja* [When minds are one, what is far comes near] (Scheven 1981) and *Kamusi ya Methali: Maana na matumizi* [Dictionary of Proverbs: Meanings and Use] (Mkota 2009). Purposive sampling was used to select two broad categories of gendered proverbs that address the roles played by men in the family as fathers and husbands. They were then further categorised into eleven sub categories. Five of the proverb categories are on the role of husband and each proverb in the group refers to husbands using the Swahili terms for 'husband', that is, *mume*. The last six categories have proverbs commenting on men as fathers using the Swahili term for 'father', that is, *baba*.

4. Men as husbands

In this section we present and analyse proverbs that contain information on men in their role as husbands. The proverbs were grouped as follows: hardworking, authoritative, promiscuous, or weak towards women.

4.1. Husbands as Hardworking

The overwhelming characterization of men and husbands is that men are expected to work hard to provide for their family. The Proverbs (1) to (10) illustrate this view.

- (1) *Mtu mume ni kazi.*

‘To be a man is to work’. (Scheven 1981: 348)

- (2) *Mume ni kazi.*

‘To be a husband is to work’. (Scheven 1981: 348)

- (3) *Mtu mume ni kazi; ukikosa cha kuweka utapata cha leo.*

‘A man must work, if unable to save, then, he must find enough for the day’. (Scheven 1981: 348)

These proverbs equate masculinity with work and place the burden of providing squarely on the man’s shoulders. He is not only to provide for his family’s daily needs but he is also to save for the future as seen in Proverb (3).

- (4) *Mume ni kazi; mke ni nguo.*

‘A man works, a wife dresses’. (Scheven 1981: 348)

In Proverb (4), the role of the man is directly compared to the woman’s. The man is presented as active participant in the development of the society while the woman is portrayed as a consumer, as being frivolous and either unconcerned or not interested in the efforts needed to sustain the family. The juxtaposition is used to show the power imbalance in the Swahili society, where men are seen to be providers while women are consumers. It is likely that such views inform the belief that men (who, at least traditionally, were the only earners) should make decisions unlike women who are portrayed as interested in trivialities.

As money and access to resources are factors that determine the power dynamics in society, such views would underpin patriarchal beliefs that require women to be subservient to and dependent on men.

Competitive gender differentiation is exhibited in the Proverb (4). While differentiating the roles played by men and women, the proverb seems to commend the fact that men provide for their families while trivialising women's work by reducing it to activities geared towards making women to look attractive.

(5) *Mume ni jaha, si raha.*

'Being a husband is an honour not happiness'. (Scheven 1981: 349)

Proverb (5) reveals that the responsibilities placed on the husband in marriage are considered simultaneously burdensome and honourable. The proverb shows that men take pride in being able to provide for their family, irrespective of the sacrifices that they have to make to do so. It also implies that marriage is not pursued for happiness but for reasons which could include posterity, societal respect and to fulfil societal expectations. This proverb associates being a husband with inhabiting a position of honour. It further suggests that, in this society, honour is valued more highly than individual happiness. The proverb reveals a resignation to the role a husband plays albeit without being praised for it. This study did not find proverbs that praised men for their ability to provide; instead, the proverbs about provision were simply stated, as a fact of life.

(6) *Taabu ya mume umaskini ya mke utasa.*

'The husband's problem is poverty; the woman's is barrenness.' (Kalugila 1977: 23)

Proverb (6) compares the inability of a husband to provide with the inability of a woman to give birth; again, showing how provision in this society is inextricably linked to masculinity.

Poverty, which renders the man unable to provide, is characterised as being as debilitating to a man same as infertility is to a woman.

Additionally, the proverb reveals what is expected of men and women; he is to contribute economically while she is to bear children.

This is an illustration of complementary gender differentiation as it reveals the demarcation of the roles of women and men.

The Proverbs (1) to (6) metaphorically equate manhood to provision. Equating masculinity to provision is a disservice to men as provision is not solely based on one's willingness but also on other factors such as environment, class, race, education, capitalism, access to technology and even physiological factors. If the ability to provide has a direct correlation to masculinity, then the more one acquires the more masculine he is. This inspires a culture of competition and grandiosity with men trying to out-do each other with accumulation of resources, women and children.

Men who fail in this endeavour are untethered from their masculinity and are left grappling with feelings of inadequacy. This state is dangerous both for the man and the women around him. Such a man may seek to reclaim his masculinity in a number of ways. First, they can resort to propagating violent rhetoric and perpetrating violent acts. In the modern setting where women do not necessarily need men (as much as they did) to access resources, then some men are left confused about their place in society. Once stripped of their identity as providers, they have "nothing else to offer" giving rise to anti-women empowerment sentiments so as to regain their footing and sense of the self. Others may be so overcome with despair that they opt out of society, so to speak, or even choose to end their lives.

While the proverbs depicting men as providers do present them as having the potential to wield power over women, they inadvertently reveal that men lack power over themselves in the quest to be the best provider. This is an instance where men suffer the negative impact of patriarchy.

The study notes that this trait is the most prominent characterisation of men outside of sexuality thus underscoring the magnitude with which provision was esteemed in this society. The proverbs that set this expectation on men use complementary gender differentiation to affirm that husbands are expected to be hardworking and to assign them the role of providing. They reveal that the man is expected to not only

ensure that his family has what they need on a day-to-day basis but also to plan for their future as evidenced by Proverb (3).

Though this responsibility is assigned to men (by men), it is beneficial to women. Men, who work outside the home, gain access to resources and women get access to the same by being in relationship with the men. This can be an illustration of maternalism when viewed from a female perspective. Maternalism is the acceptance of the prevailing patriarchal structure in society but focussing on the positive aspects, specifically provision in this case. Viewed from a male perspective, the proverbs display protective paternalism. Protective paternalism is the benevolent form of paternalism, which is grounded on the belief that men are strong while women are fragile beings who need care, provision and protection from the men in their lives.

As stated earlier, patriarchy is deeply entrenched in Swahili proverbs and in them provision is depicted as a distinctly male responsibility which, over time, seems to have become a heavy burden that breeds both feelings of power and resentment. These proverbs that typify the Swahili man as being hardworking, instil this character trait on the men in the society. Men who grow up hearing this will aspire to replicate this in their life and, in this way, the proverbs cement and perpetuate gender roles.

4.2. Husbands as authoritative and violent

As earlier noted, Swahili culture propagates the belief that the husband as the man of the house has to have the final say, his word is the law, and obedience is to be expected from the wife/wives and the children. The following proverbs give credence to this perspective:

(7) *Mtu nyumbani mwake hatiwi na mkewe, haonwi kuwa mume asipompiga, twa.*

‘A man who is not obeyed by his wife at home is not regarded as a man unless he beats her’. (Scheven 1981: 348)

The proverb is directed to men and reaffirms the family hierarchal structure where the man is the head, above the wife and thus should

be respected. It further states that this obedience should be obtained at all costs even if it leads to domestic abuse. The absence of wifely submission is interpreted as an attack on masculinity, revealing the reassertion that masculinity is closely tied to subjugation of women and that violence is a tool used to reinstate male dominance in the family.

(8) *Fimbo impigayo mke mwenza ukiiona itupe mbali*

‘If you come across the stick used to beat your co-wife, throw it away’. (Mkota 2009: 123)

While Proverb (8) is directed to women in polygamous unions, its nonchalant mention of violence perpetrated by the man, communicates the attitude that men have towards their wives and the normalisation of abuse in marriage. It also reveals that women have little to no recourse to avert or prevent said abuse.

A critical analysis of agent-patient relations in the proverb is useful in highlighting the underlying power imbalances. In the proverb above, the perpetrator remains unnamed; the use of passivity for the battered woman reveals the weakened state of the woman in society. She has no recourse against the perpetrator, her only option is to throw the stick so that it will not, presumably, be used on her on a later date. This was not the only way that men used to subdue and dominate their women.

Proverb (9) reveals that reproductive coercion is yet another tool in the male’s arsenal in subduing women:

(9) *Mke mbaya, mpe mwana na mbeleko*¹.

‘Give a bad wife a child and a baby carrier’. (Scheven 1981: 346)

This proverb is peculiar in that it seems to imply that pregnancy can be used to modify female behaviour or justify her continued presence in the home. As for behaviour modification, pregnancy can be used to domesticate the woman, maybe by restricting her movements

¹ *Mbeleko* is a piece of cloth that Swahili women would use to carry babies on their backs or hips

or reducing her desirability. The promise of a child would cement a woman's place in the home as, regardless of her "badness", a child is good thereby validating her position.

The proverb asks the questions, "What constitutes a bad wife and how would one impregnate her?" The answer to the first question implies a code of behaviour for women that would be assessed by their men. The answer to the second question brings forth the idea of consent and lack of female agency over their reproduction.

The topicalization of the "bad wife" seeks to bring attention to her as the problem and paints the man's actions as reactions to her "badness" Men have all the power in this instance, not only do they have free rein over women's bodies but they are also protected from blame when they act violently towards their wives – women made them do it! Women are branded as both the cause and the victims of the abuse. In this case, there is a definite push to get the woman pregnant to control her either by limiting her options or validating her continued presence.

Patriarchy dictates that the man takes a prominent role in the running of the home and, to achieve this, dominative paternalism is used to protect the position of man in society and in the home. It should be noted that dominative paternalism advocates for the use of violence or the threat of violence to ensure this happens as shown in the Proverbs (7) to (10). The proverbs overtly advocate for the use of violence against a woman who would defy her husband. The belief that wives are supposed to obey their husbands is founded on the belief that men are the heads of the homes.

Dominative paternalism generalises that men are superior to women and views that this is the natural order of things. Accordingly, men who hold such views rationalise that they are only restoring the natural order of things when they assault the women in their lives who would seek to change things. Men not only have to dominate their wives; they have to be seen to do so. A man who is perceived to be weak is despised by other men and so, to preserve their social standing, men may feel that they have no recourse but to perpetuate these violence acts.

An analysis of the proverbs in this section reveals that men have the option of physically abusing their wives as a way of reinstating dominance over them. The proverbs institutionalise and validate violence against women especially in intimate relationships. This way of thinking can be attributed to the fact that a woman is viewed as property, first belonging to her father and then to her husband. When viewed as her husband's property, then he has every right to do with his property what he wills.

This being said, there do exist proverbs that urge husbands to be temperate when dealing with their wives.

(10) *Mke ni dada mdogo*

'A wife is like a younger sister'. (Mkota 2009: 316)

While proverb (10) does not expressly mention husbands, it is directed to them and seeks to modify their behaviour towards their wives. It encourages men to care for their wives like they would their younger sisters and urges them treat their wives with gentleness. These proverbs act as a kind of check and balance to the use of violence in the home.

4.3. Husbands as promiscuous/ polygamous

The study found out that the second most prevalent description of men was tied to their sexuality as illustrated below:

(11) *Mume ni moto wa koko usipowaka utafuka.*

'A man is like a wild fire, if it does not burn it will smoulder' (Scheven 1981: 349).

The proverb has been interpreted in two ways. In the first interpretation, the man is depicted as being sexually insatiable and, in his bid to seek satisfaction with multiple partners, he is being warned that he will be found out. This interpretation is directed at men and advises them to stem their desires in a bid to protect their name/honour.

In the second interpretation, the man is portrayed as having the potential of being insatiable and even though he may not be actively

satiating his desires with a myriad of lovers, he can. It is his prerogative. The latter interpretation is often directed at women to justify polygamy or to encourage her to take care of his sexual needs.

(12) *Mwanamume ni mbono hualika kule.*

‘A man is like a castor plant which scatters its seed widely’.
(Scheven 1981: 349)

Proverb (12) speaks of the sexual habits of men; the comparison of the men to the dispersal mechanism of the castor plant seeds speaks to the ability of the man to widely spread his seed. The proverb can be directed to both men and women. When directed at men, it urges them to liberally explore their sexuality and spread “his seed widely”. Conversely, when directed at women, it seeks to almost mitigate the pain caused by infidelity by expressing the inevitability of unfaithfulness on the man’s part. The proverb spells out the sexual habits expected of the Swahili men; they are promiscuous while women are to bear with it.

(13) *Eda kwa mke, hakuna eda ya mume.*

‘Iddah/iddat is for women there is no iddah for men’. (Mkota 2009: 114)

Iddah refers to the mourning period where a woman was secluded from society following the death of her husband. It also referred to the time that a woman was to be abstinent after a divorce before she could remarry. The reasons given for iddah was to allow the bereaved women to mourn her husband, to ascertain her pregnancy status and to protect her from criticism of remarrying too fast after the last marriage. The fact that iddah was not prescribed for men shows that in matters of sexuality men operate under a different set of rules where abstinence and chastity were not a requirement.

Hostile sexuality and hostile paternalism are evident in the characterisation of men as inherently and incurably promiscuous. The belief that it is normal for men to have unfettered sexual access to women and women bodies is couched in dominative paternalism which espouses that men should rule over women, they are to make the decisions and

have final say in decisions affecting the home including the sexual domain.

Proverbs (11) and (12) are used to teach women how to live with their unfaithful husbands by instilling in the collective psyche of women that a man is hardwired to cheat and that women should accept this inevitability. The proverbs also speak to men and propagate the idea that men naturally lack sexual control by seeing such infidelities as normal for them.

The tendency to seek out more female partners is institutionalised and legitimised in polygamy, which is a legalised form of promiscuity that is validated by both religion and culture. Polygamy is attractive to men for various reasons, chief among them being the availability of multiple sexual partners, which translates to more heirs. Wives and children are key in wealth production especially as they provide unpaid labour.

Proverb (14) and (15) seek to regulate husband's behaviour within the polygamous union:

(14) *Ukimwoa mke mpya hutasahau yule wa zamani.*

'If you marry a new wife, you will not forget the old one' (Scheven 1981: 368)

(15) *Mke wa kwanza ni kama mama.*

'The first wife is like a mother'. (Scheven 1981: 348)

Proverb (14) is used to encourage men to marry multiple women by suggesting that additional wives will not lessen the attachment that the husband has to his first wife. Such beliefs have their origins both in dominative paternalism and hostile sexuality where only the satisfaction of the male partner is considered.

As contradictions are fairly common in proverbs, while the former proverb implies that the husband is incapable of disregarding the older wives, Proverb (15) anticipates and cautions against a situation where the man loses touch with the first wife in his excitement of building a home with the new wife. The proverb puts in place a decree that the first wife should be esteemed above the others.

By equating the first wife with a mother, Proverb (15) implicitly demands that she be treated with great respect and be valued in the man's eyes. This proverb is usually directed at polygamous men and it is meant to safeguard the position of the first wife when a man marries the other wives. By placing the first wife over the other wives, the proverb sets up a hierarchy in the home which presumably would be necessary to keep order in the home.

4.4. Husbands as weak towards women

Although men are physically stronger than women, the following proverbs show that this strength has its limitations:

(16) *Mume si babe kwa mkewe.*

'A husband is not a hero to his wife'. (Mkota 2009: 364)

The proverb speaks to the fact that though a man may be seen as being exceptional in the outside world, to his wife he is just a regular man. Her proximity to him allows her to see beyond his exploits and instead see him in unbiased fashion as a mere mortal.

(17) *Hakuna anayemshinda mwanamume kama mwanamke.*

'No one overpowers/disarms a man like a woman'. (Scheven 1981: 346)

Although in most contexts men are perceived to be stronger than women, Proverb (17) depicts them as being powerless to the charms of women. This weakness may refer to the belief that men are incapable of controlling their urges when it comes to women and may be used as a justification for irresponsible sexual behaviour or sexual crimes against women.

These proverbs employ hostile sexuality by portraying women as men's Achilles' heel. In most societies, men are associated with strength and they revel in this attribution. It may be suggested that this strength is one of the pillars that support patriarchy, so by showing that women have the ability to tear down the strength, such a proverb can result in men treating women with hostility in a bid to prevent such an occurrence.

4.5. Husbands as tolerant

In relation to their strength, the present study found proverbs which advise men to be temperate especially when relating to their wives. The following are such proverbs:

(18) *Mume gogo, mke dupo.*

‘A man is a log; a wife is the sound produced’. (Mkota 2009: 363)

(19) *Kosa moja haliachi mke.*

‘One mistake does not lead to divorcing a wife’. (Scheven 1981: 272)

Proverb (18) encourages men to be calm when dealing with difficult situations in their marriage. This proverb depicts men as having the ability to be calm in the midst of a storm in order to avoid further deteriorating an already bad situation.

Proverb (19) is used to urge husbands to be more forgiving, tolerant, and long suffering towards others. The wording is important to this study as it assumes that the female spouse is more prone to making mistakes. Taking this limited view of the proverb, men and husbands in particular, are described as having the ability to be self-sacrificing and tolerant with the shortcomings of their wives.

Protective paternalism perceives a woman as a fragile/ delicate creature and these proverbs express that view. The proverbs seek to motivate men to be more compassionate and tolerant with their wives. The phrasing reveals that men were usually the one who initiated divorce over perceived shortcomings on the part of the wife. Those who wield the great power are being encouraged to use the power with kindness.

5. Men as fathers

Proverbs on men in their role as fathers were grouped as follows: fathers as being worthy of respect, as loving, as disciplinarians, as providing familial ties, and as the stepfather. The proverbs used explicitly referred to fathers using the terms ‘baba’.

5.1. Fathers and familial ties

The father provides a link to his brothers, that is, their children's paternal uncles. In Swahili culture, as in most African societies, paternal uncles are considered fathers. An older paternal uncle is referred to as *baba mkubwa* 'older father' while a younger uncle is referred to as *baba mdogo* 'younger father'. This means that the connection that the father gives to a child is fundamental as it gives the children identity and roots. This is illustrated in the following proverbs:

(20) *Kwa ami hupaonyeshwa na babako.*

'Your father will show you to your uncle's home'. (Kalugila 1977: 16)

(21) *Kuwa watoto wa baba mmoja ni kusaidiana*

'To be of the same father is to help one another'. (Kalugila 1977: 26)

This idea of familial ties is further ingrained in Proverb (21) which brings up the idea of sibling ties. Children born to the same father have a genetic connection that can translate into societal benefits. Bearing in mind that polygamy was rife, unsurprisingly, children would find themselves with many siblings, which translates to a community. Members of the community are encouraged to support each other by the virtue of having the same father.

These proverbs show that the Swahili ascribe identity through patrilineal ties and this ascription has far reaching consequences such as providing the legitimacy of children, identity and kinship ties.

5.2. Fathers as worthy of respect

Swahili proverbs depict fathers as being worthy of respect and urge children to accord them the respect:

(22) *Baba ni baba lau ni kahaba.*

'A father is a father even though he is a prostitute'. (Scheven 1981: 269)

Proverb (22) speaks of the immutability of the father's status; nothing he can do that can lead to the stripping of the status. CDA

studies the choice of words and their effect on the comprehension of the text, the choice of the word *kahaba* is particularly interesting for several reasons. First, prostitution is historically a female trade where women sell sexual favours to earn resources. Secondly, male prostitution would be associated with homosexuality which was frowned upon by both religion and culture. The act of a man paying for sex was highly irregular because men were allowed to be polygamous, which would negate the need to pay for sexual favours. Secondly, as sexual impurity for the unmarried and infidelity for the married women were discouraged, the act of procuring sexual intercourse would be highly unlikely. Even on the chance that these men prostituted themselves to women is still shocking because sexuality was a male domain. This would mean that these women had access to resources that the man did not have and that such was the power imbalance that the man had been “reduced to a woman” who would then use sexuality to gain access to resources. But even such a “despicable” act would be forgiven or overlooked and the man given the honour deserving of an honourable man.

This is yet another instance where dominative paternalism is evident as the proverb seeks to safeguard the position of the father as the head of his family by expressing the view that this position is held by men by right. A father’s rights are shown to be inalienable and, consequently, nothing the father does negates the rights. Swahili fathers are honoured on the basis of their fatherhood; they do not have to earn the honour and, even when they fall short, the shortcomings are overlooked or downplayed.

5.3. Fathers and work

The pivotal role that a father plays in determining the job choices for his children is illustrated in the proverb below:

(23) *Ukalamazi wa mtoto sawa na ule wa baba yake.*

‘The intelligence / skillset of the child is similar to that of their father’. (Scheven 1981: 280)

The use of the occupational term shows that the father was instrumental in determining the occupation that a child, especially a son, would take up in adult life. To illustrate, a farmer would teach his children all that he knew about farming thereby equipping them to be farmers. The same would happen with the fisherman, the potter, or the musician.

The proverb suggests that the father has a great influence in the skill acquisition and occupational pathway of the child. Whether the proverb is interpreted as the father's skills or the intelligence is passed onto the child, the message remains that even outside of the home, the father is thought to have a greater impact on the child than the mother. Naturally, as the father is the one who worked outside the home, he would have greater access to information and a wider skillset that he could pass on to the child. The proverb operates on both dominative paternalism and complementary gender differentiation forms of sexism.

Dominative paternalism is used to enforce patriarchal hierarchal structures and by the father being the one assigned the role of directing the child's "work life" it reinforces the patriarchal belief that men were to have the final say in "important" matters. Additionally, the proverb can be deemed to be based on complementary gender differentiation in its assignment of the role of career guide to the father.

5.4. Fathers and blessing

African cultures believed that parents were endowed with the ability to bless or curse their children and that this would directly impact the course of the child's life. The following Swahili proverbs reveal that this was also true of the Swahili:

(24) *Radhi ya baba na mama ni ufalme wa dunia.*

'The blessing of the father and mother is an earthly kingdom'.
(Scheven 1981: 278)

(25) *Katika radhi ya baba huimarika ukoo.*

'In the father's blessing the clan is strengthened'. (Scheven 1981: 271)

Proverb (24) designates the priestly role of blessing to both parents and such is the weight of this parental blessing that it is equated to a kingdom. It does this by employing Complementary gender differentiation. In Proverb (25), the paternal blessing is said to provide fortification for the clan and has undertones of competitive gender differentiation in its elevation of the father's blessing.

It is important to note that while the proverbs were directed to the young to urge them to obey and not dishonour their parents by their conduct, they also reveal that in this society parental involvement was perceived to go beyond the tangible and spill over into the spiritual realms where parents could speak into the future of their children's lives.

5.5. Fathers as disciplinarians

(26) *Baba na akanye mwanawe.*

'The father should reprimand his child'. (Scheven 1981: 269)

The proverb calls upon men to participate in the raising of their children by disciplining them when they erred. This is one of the proverbs that allocates a role for the father in his children's lives within the home. It is quite telling that this role would entail some form of "violence". Outside of provision, a father is depicted as being violent towards his wife/wives and children. Working outside the home would create disconnection between the father and his children. Allocating to the father the role of punishing the children is detrimental to the fostering of a relationship between the two sides. The child may be unaware of the role the father plays in providing for their needs such that when taking up the disciplinarian role, the father is seen merely a stranger who holds the promise of violence. This could be one of the reasons why the mother gets more love and adoration from the children than the father.

Complimentary gender differentiation is evident when the man is assigned the role of disciplining the child. While women for the most part deal with the child rearing, this proverb brings out one instance

where the father is encouraged to actively participate in the parenting processes. The reason behind this may be based on the perception that women are inclined to leniency and would not be firm with the children.

5.6. Fathers as loving

The father is depicted as possessing such great love for a child that he is unable to forsake his child. A father's love is portrayed as being enduring and able to withstand even the child's rejection.

(27) *Mtoto humuasi baba lakini baba hamuasi.*

'A child can renounce a father but a father will never renounce his child'. (Scheven 1981: 275)

(28) *Mwenye baba hajifungii kuni.*

'He who has a father never ties firewood himself'. (Kalugila 1977: 20)

Proverb (28) paints a father as an asset. His presence is shown to be advantageous to his offspring by espousing that having a father in one's life eases some of life's cares. It implies that the presence of the father lessens the load on the children presumably as the father provides, protects, and acts as a role model.

The strength of a father's love to withstand even the weight of a child's rejection might be a case of dominative paternalism where men are depicted as being pillars of strength who need to be in the home to provide direction and stability.

5.7. The step father

Proverbs concerning the step father assert that, he is inferior to the biological father as illustrated below. The implication is that the step father cannot provide the same level of parenting that the father could.

(29) *Baba wa kambo si baba.*

'A step father is not a father'. (Mkota 2009: 67)

By denying the title of father to him, the step father is denied the respect deserving of the father while actively carrying out the role of a father. The proverb implies that it is impossible for a man to love and care for a child to whom he is not biologically related.

Proverbs (30) and (31) communicate a contrary message and legitimise and elevate the step father to the status of a father meaning he is entitled to all the rights and privileges of a father. The proverbs urge the children to give honour and respect to the man married to their mother regardless of the presence of blood ties. The proverbs give credit to the man who takes the fatherly roles and demands that such a man be esteemed in the eyes of the children.

(30) *Anayependwa na mama ndiye baba.*

‘The one who is loved by mother is the father’. (Scheven 1981: 269)

(31) *Mume wa mama ni baba,*

‘The husband of the mother is the father’. (Scheven 1981: 276)

The reason for this acceptance may be the aversion to female headed homes and the legitimisation of the step father would allow him to assume the headship in the home. If women were allowed to head homes, they would have to be allowed to participate in male dominated spheres outside the home to provide for their family. Additionally, if they succeeded, they might encourage other women to attempt to do the same.

The proverbs on fathers were noted to elevate the status of the father by commending the part a father plays in the development of his children. The proverbs mainly exhibit hostile dominative paternalism where the place of man is safeguarded by the use of threats and complementary gender differentiation by highlighting the things that only a father can do.

The scarcity of proverbs on fathers may point to the fact that raising children was traditionally considered woman’s work thus accounting for the limited number of proverbs on childrearing dealing with fathers.

6. Summary of findings

The study has shown that men are to be respected and obeyed at all times as the de facto heads of families in their roles as husbands and fathers. The study has found out that threat of violence was used to maintain this hierarchical order. Husbands are shown to use violence against their errant wife/wives while fathers were reminded to discipline their children.

As fathers, men are also important in providing kinship ties between their children and other males in the community thus providing legitimacy to their children. Additionally, through the father, the children have communal ties with their siblings, who can be quite numerous in polygamous unions.

Fathers were considered as worthy of respect by virtue of their being fathers. This reverence for fathers extended beyond biological fathers to step fathers and even fathers who are disgraced members of society.

The importance of parental blessings is also brought to light and a father's blessings are esteemed as being critical in ensuring the stability of the clan. They are also portrayed to be integral in the child's future professional development.

All the roles that the Swahili father plays stem from his love for his children. The proverbs reveal that a father's love can withstand even a child's scorn and rejection and still remain true.

In their role as husbands, men are mainly characterised in two ways: in terms of their ability to provide and their sexuality. The proverbs reveal that Swahili men are expected to provide for their family. They are expected to work and ensure that their wives and children are cared for both now and in the future. This responsibility placed on the man is both taxing and thankless thus revealing the strain that patriarchy places on man. The male experience is defined as an honour that in and of itself does not bring happiness. The ascription of the role of provision to men is a form of protective paternalism where men feel the need to care for the women in their lives and

providing for the material needs of their wives and children is the epitome of care.

Husbands are characterised as being potentially promiscuous and/or polygamous. Proverbs discussing husbands and their sexuality are directed to both men and women alike. When directed to men, they seem to warn them that uncontrolled sexual appetite can be detrimental to their status in society. Conversely, when directed to women, they seem to inculcate the belief that male sexuality cannot be tempered and that women have to cater to men sexually or give way to other women to do so via polygamy.

In terms of temperament, husbands are shown to be authoritative and prone to violence. Consequently, they are urged to be tolerant to their wives and to treat them with kindness.

The depictions of men and the subsequent expectations placed on them have some detrimental effects. Men's roles have been defined by two dominant stereotypes: uncontrolled sexuality, and mandatory provision, which we suggest may negatively impact the man and his family.

In the case of provision, the man is tasked to provide for his family at whatever cost. A man who cannot do this is stripped of his masculinity without taking into consideration mitigating factors. This push to provide for one's family may cause alienation within the family. The man in his quest to provide may have to spend prolonged time away from his wife and children. This situation is made worse by polygamy which leads to the increase of spouses and dependants.

The second dominant stereotype of men is their sexuality. The importance placed on male sexuality is highlighted by the plethora of proverbs dealing with male sexuality. Men are portrayed as sexually voracious, insatiable and entitled towards women. Husbands are depicted as incurably promiscuous and naturally polygamous. This depiction can lead to the normalisation of dangerous sexual behaviour in men that leads to irreparable harm to them and their families.

These portrayals were found to be based on hostile forms of sexism specifically dominative paternalism and hostile heterosexuality. This

was especially apparent in the men's potential to act violently towards their wives and the prioritisation of male sexual expression. These portrayals perpetuate the stereotypes of macho sexuality, unconstrained nature of male sexuality. The portrayals are also used to train women to accept and be willing participants in sating their husband's sexual appetite. The predominant use of hostile forms of sexism when dealing with wives seem to suggest that masculinity is fragile and any threats to it are to be met with ruthlessness.

By limiting the expression on husbands and fathers to provision, discipline, and sex, society denies them their right to fully flesh out their individuality and access the diverse human traits available to them.

The modern man is grappling with the traditional expression of masculinity and modern life which restricts the full expression of this form of masculinity. They have to find a hybrid form of masculinity that embodies all the good aspects of tradition but can accommodate the realities of modern life.

In conclusion, the study found out that these gendered proverbs can be used to propagate and perpetuate gender stereotypes. They are also useful in assigning and entrenching gender roles.

7. Conclusion

Proverbs have been passed down from the past into modern times unchanged, but the society that birthed them has gone through radical changes, yet the proverbs remain the same. This creates a dissonance between the present society and the society envisioned in the proverbs. Consequently, there is need to interrogate to what extent these depictions and gender roles are observed in the modern society and their appropriateness or otherwise.

The modern man may not ascribe to the gender roles prescribed in the proverbs leading to feelings of displacement and having to learn to navigate the modern world and redefine his role in the family and find a new and meaningful sense of masculinity. In the face of changing

times, masculinity needs to be revised in such a way that it better serves both men and the community at large.

We suggest that the gender demarcation of provision being a male endeavour and homemaking/caregiving being a female activity do not offer a complete and valid picture of male and female endeavours within and without the home. Men and women, as humans, should be allowed to express their whole humanity (femininity and masculinity) without constraints. Modern technological economy has reduced the biological advantages that men had in the workplace, thus allowing an influx of women into formerly male dominated spaces. This, coupled with the rising cost of living, has made it necessary for most families to strive for a dual income in the household where the husband and wife are co-providers.

The findings of the study do not represent the full picture of the Swahili male experience. While the depictions found in the proverbs still are prevalent, there is need to redefine what masculinity looks like in the 21st century that encompasses a wider range of male expression.

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