THE LANGUAGE OF KURIA PROVERBS: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR EXERCISING CONTROL OVER WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Language is the vehicle through which ideologies are transmitted in society. Proverbs which form an integral part of the society, reflect and shape social life in their concise form and authoritative style, they provide us with rich linguistic data for the study of cultural beliefs and social values of a particular society. Analysing the discourse topics and discursive strategies embedded in Igikuria proverbs provide a means by which gender-based power relations are renegotiated in everyday life. This paper identifies and describes the discourse topics in Igikuria proverbs while showing gendered power relations and social control embedded in them. The study was guided by Wodak’s discourse historical approach. The data consisted of Igikuria proverbs which were purposefully selected. Data was analysed descriptively after which inferences and conclusions were arrived at. The discussions in this paper will help in showing Igikuria culture and beliefs. It will also contribute to the fight against gender inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Social power is defined as the influence exerted through various means of control for instance, public, social and religious organizations.

To be maintained effectively, the society needs rules and regulations. These rules are instilled within society and implemented on a day to day basis. The society, especially the traditional one uses social control embedded in its customary culture relying on the socialization of its members to establish social order.

Gender is one of the most effective means of power and social control. From birth, we are encultured into a dual gender system reinforced by all the major institutions. Without some of these the society would be totally anarchic hence they are accepted without challenge. It is crucial for the society to set up some rules and boundaries that will enable people make sense of the world. Unfortunately with these provisions also comes a denial of self hood and individualism.

For both women and men, gender operates as a strict mode of social control right from birth. Individuals grow up in cultures which imbibe the notions of what may be considered appropriately male or female; qualities that include personality dispositions, mental and physical characteristics, and ability to perform certain tasks and to occupy certain positions in society.
These collective attributes form the social tasks appropriate for each gender as well as the division of labour, spheres and modes of interaction, the designated rights duties and social expectations. Tied with the concept of gender is the concept of social space which is a physical as well as social and psychological concept, delineating a person’s sphere of social interaction and inspirations.

According to mama (1996), the concept gender is stereotyped. It is contained and transmitted through multiple channels such as oral and written traditions, folklore, morals and myths.

Language is linked to power and ideological structures in a society and hence gender relations are perpetuated through language. Language can take various forms such as songs, riddles, tongue twisters, and narratives. This paper takes proverbs as its main focus.

According to Bukenya et al (2001) proverbs are the most widespread and the most respected genre of African oral literature. A proverb is a brief clearly expressed figurative comment on a situation. Proverbs draw their images from various sources like plants, people’s habits, customs, occupations, beliefs, social and political institutions. They are an embodiment of traditional gender ideology.

They provide us with rich linguistic data for the analysis of cultural beliefs and social values of a particular society. Because they are an oral form of popular culture at the level of local society, they provide a means by which gender based power relations are renegotiated in everyday life.

In Kuria language, almost every aspect of life is commented on and evaluated through proverbs. There are proverbs echoing the dominant social rules and norms concerning both women and men’s behaviour and family roles and necessity of social control. Kuria society is concerned with maintaining its belief system and as Munene (1995) observes society is often guided by truth often gotten from proverbs.

**THIS PAPER IS GUIDED BY THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES**

To identify and describe the discourse topics in Igikuria proverbs which show gendered power relations.

To describe the power and skewed relations embedded in the proverbs.

To analyse the discursive strategies embedded in the proverbs.

The discussions on this paper are of importance in expanding the meaning of various Igikuria proverbs and also to show the culture and beliefs of the Abakuria.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Arguments on this paper are guided by a branch of critical discourse analysis called Discourse Historical approach (Wodak 2001). This is an offshoot from CDA which enables the writer to critically analyse the proverbs and expose the dominating masculine ideologies.
Discourse Historical Approach maintains that language is not merely an instrument of communication but that ideologies and power are indexed in it. CDA draws attention to the three elements of criticality, ideology and power. Criticality basically entails distancing from the data. This means to uncover as critically as possible the unequal power connotations of a specific proverb.

Ideology, which is the way meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds, is seen as implicit in creating and maintaining unequal power relations. Mumby (1988) emphasizes the importance of ideology in shaping a people’s world view as follows;

..ideology plays a much fundamental role in the process by which social actors create reality of the world in which they live.

On power, in the context of a male dominated society, CDA critically analyses the language expressed in proverbs. Thus here Discourse Historical Approach is interested in showing the unequal gender relations and improving the condition of the disadvantaged gender.

DATA

Data for this paper constituted Igikuria proverbs. These were collected through library research.

Twenty proverbs were purposefully collected, translated and analysed qualitatively with an aim of revealing the power, social control and gender relations depicted in these proverbs. As Mugenda (2003) puts it, in purposeful sampling, cases of subjects are handpicked because they are deemed informative or they possess the required characteristics. The results were descriptively presented.

Basing on the principled criteria of Wodak’s (2001) Discourse Historical Approach, the discourse topics of the Igikuria proverbs were identified to reveal power, social control and gender relations. The discursive strategies embedded in the proverbs were analysed. During analysis the researcher focused on answering the following questions;

- How are men and women named in the and referred to in the Igikuria proverbs
- What character traits qualities and features are attributed to the men and women
- By means of what arguments and argumentations are unequal power relations justified in the proverbs
- From what perspective are these naming, attribution and arguments expressed
- Are the respective discriminatory utterances articulated overtly, intensified or mitigated(as stated in Wodak&Reisigil, 2001)

Igikuria proverbs are means by which the Kuria society propagates its ideals regarding birth, marriage, parenting, work, property ownership, leadership and death.
HISTORY OF THE ABAKURIA

Igikuria myths explain the origin of the Abakuria tribe from the Monto who is believed to be the parent of all Bantu tribes. Monto gave birth to Range who bore Magaiwa. It was Magaiwa who bore six sons, Munyabasi, Mutimbaru, MwiregeMunyamongo, Mukiira and Mugumbe. It is by the names of these sons that the Abakuria clans are named.

Mackinon (1987) posits that a Kurian man is held in high esteem, he has power and authority over the woman. He adds that a man is allowed to marry many wives since he has the capability to exert control over them. Even so, he does not state what perpetrates the power that the man holds. This paper will unveil this.

According to Akivaga and Odaga (1982) a people’s way of life is transferred from generation to another through oral traditions. Their beliefs and cultural aspects guide their day to day life. It is in these that power and gender relations are embedded. Proverbs provide a vehicle through which social expectations are passed on and preserved.

Male character traits include strength, power and ability to defend the community and tribe all these are found in proverbs.

Onyango, (2007) says that most African societies have always been partriachal and its power ideology structures is always propagated through genres such as songs and proverbs which are used to show gender constructions. Traditionally the Abakuria were farmers and herders: while men would go out hunting the women took care of the children and tilled land.

DISCUSSIONS

BIRTH

If a child was born, women made ululations to symbolize a successful birth. If it was a boy the father would slaughter a goat, dip his right hand finger in blood and touch his forehead. This was a symbol of blessings.

First born children were named after the parents of the father. The rest were named after relatives of the mother’s side.

And if the first born was a male child he was equalized to his father as shown in the proverb below.

Omotaanginkoreng’anabirenaisowabo

The first born is equal to his father

Children were socialized from the word go where male children were taught to be strong, powerful and dominant they were to be protectors while women were taught to be humble, submissive, and subordinate. The above is illustrated by the following proverb.
Umumuraningubayomobo

A son is the shield of the house

If you had a son it meant that you had protection and no enemy would invade your household or take your property by force.

The men were told that they were the decision makers and protectors while the girls were to agree to the decisions made by the boys even if they had a contrary opinion.

Temokarianaeng’anyihai

A woman cannot decide a family’s migration.

A woman cannot decide if the family needs to migrate-important decisions are the prerogative of men.

A woman’s place was in the kitchen, but she was also expected to work in the garden, take care of the children, provide sexual satisfaction to her husband and give birth to male children to continue the family line as evidenced in the proverb below.

Omokarianaabamura

A woman has a male children

A woman who was not able to give birth was considered a social misfit. A woman who was married but could not give birth was not called a wife but a piece of firewood but one who had given birth especially to sons earned respect and was considered a proper wife (umusubaati). This is evidenced in the proverb below.

Omokarinoonoaiboye

A woman is the one who has delivered

A husband whose wife was not able to deliver was advised to send her away and look for another woman but if it was him who had the problem he would secretly allow his brother to get him children with his wife. this is shown in the proverb below.

Enoyaatebankogogweere

A cow which is barren is slaughtered

A house without a son was considered as poor and in a state which could not be helped as stated by the proverb below.

Inyuumbaenoetanamumuranentakaterrabokereehanini

A house without a son is poor it will not rise to defend when an enemy attacks
Women were also seen as lesser beings and given the status of children, while men were considered as the most important people in the society. Men were associated with patience while women were always seen to be impatient. A man was not expected to give up because of one problem. He was to persevere.

This is evidenced by the following proverb

Temosachaagukweragesarrakemwihai

No man dies in only one bush

Bad traits in children were attributed to their mothers. This meant that the negative attributes were inherited from mother and not the father.

Hanoogeteterenkugiborore

If you get a problematic wife you will get a problematic child

When a child did something that people would be proud of, it is the father who took credit rather than the mother. As shown in the proverb below.

O we sera ne hotoyaisa

A child of good character is pride to his father

**MARRIAGE**

Marriage defined the life of a woman. This was exacerbated by the institution of dowry where parents viewed their daughters as investment that would bring wealth to the family in the form of livestock once the daughters are married. Bride price was to be paid for every girl. As shown by the proverb below.

Iching’ombenindwamataawa

Bridewealth is given for a lazy woman as well as a hardworking one.

Marriages were generally arranged and at times when the girls were opposed to their-to-be husbands the parents’ word was final. The wedding day was set but kept as a secret to the girl. She was not allowed to know the amount of cows paid as her dowry until she got married.

On the wedding day, the girl was abducted, grabbed and carried shoulder high to her husband’s home. Sometimes the girl protested, struggled and refused to go with them, crying loudly, the grabbers made sure they were strong men who would not be overcome.

Girls did not have a say in whom to marry or when to get married. They did not choose how to get married but were kidnapped. This is reflected in the proverb below.
A woman has no nationality

It did not matter whether a girl was beautiful or not, what mattered was character. In fact men were warned against marrying very beautiful women because it was believed that marrying a very beautiful girl would lead to a multitude of problems, as evidenced in the proverb below.

Abaiyambakemooromooro

Beautiful girls have bad luck.

If a girl got pregnant before getting married, she could not be married to a youth but an old man as a second wife while the man who made her pregnant went scot free. Such a girl would always be treated with contempt as shown in the proverb below.

Wahenyeragenkenerraka

You are rude like a woman who delivers at home

This was an abusive remark referring to girls who bore children without being married

Negative attributes were associated with women and it was believed that women could not tell anything constructive, even their advise was not heeded. This is shown by the following proverb.

Iyo omokarihanoetagundireigoroigundanse

A woman’s advice, when it does not rot from up it rots from down.

Polygamy was allowed and a man was allowed to marry as many wives as he wanted. But each of these women were not allowed to have relationships outside marriage. However, men were also warned that marrying many wives had its own problems; the proverb below summarises this-Polygamy damages like poison and two women in a homestead are two pots full of poison they spoil things for each other.

Ichiharekanensarrania

Polygamy is a damage

This means that the more women a man has in his house, the more problems he has because women have no upright words but crooked ones only.

Men were allowed to have extramarital relationships but women were prohibited. If a woman was found cheating on her husband, he was allowed to divorce her and marry another wife, but if it was a man he was only punished by paying fine in form of a goat or sheep.
DEATH

A dying man called is sons to assemble at his death bed. The wife had no say even if she was present. He shared his property amongst the sons- girls did not inherit anything. If he died the eldest son took over the headship of the house, his mother would always consult with him before making any decision.

If one beats their father till he dies it was believed that they also will be beaten to death, but not when they beat their mothers.

Ono atemaisanawengotemwarre

The one who beats his father is beaten

When a man died and he had given birth to a son with another wife outside marriage the son received part of his property as his inheritance. But if she was a girl she was not recognized.

When the man died the widow had to do a customary dance on his grave. If she was unfaithful while he was alive and had relationships outside marriage, she did not survive this dance. This belief made women extra careful in having extramarital relationships. This reveals that, in Kuria customs only women were expected to practice chastity but not men.

CONCLUSION

The Abakuria society is organized into a patriarchal and patrilineal kinship system whereby the family name and property is passed along the male line and marriage was often patriarchal. The Igikuria proverbs echo dominant social rules and norms concerning women and men’s behavior and emphasizes the necessity of male control over women. Women as a group become the marked, endangered category and are always subject to the society’s strict scrutiny. With this male dominated system, the Kuria Woman inevitably occupies a marginal status. In their homes, women are often regarded as temporary members and pilgrims. They are seen to be a future loss to the family while the male child is viewed as an investment. Upon marriage, they are viewed as intruders or strangers by their husbands’ kins. The low social status of women and attitudes towards them are embedded clearly in the proverbs discussed above. Mama (1996) asserts that the advent of serious gender studies in Africa, in the last three and a half decades, have triggered off discussions over unequal power relations between men and women, the domination of men over women and ideologies that reflect male points of view. In this case, Igikuria proverbs recapture cultural paradigms of gender relations and appear to reaffirm a gender-related social and cultural hierarchy in the patriarchal and patrilineal society.

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