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Gender Identity Representation in the Circumcision Songs of the Tiriki Community in Western Kenya

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Abstract

This article investigated the image of gender identity in the circumcision songs of the Tiriki community living in Western Kenya. The objective of this study was: to determine the cultural context of the Tiriki community in the selected songs. The study seeks to bridge the academic gap that shows that gender identity in circumcision songs within the Tiriki community has not been fully researched. Gender identity is a topic that is very broad for research, but for this study, the researcher focused on highlighting the issue of gender image that appears in selected circumcision songs of the Tiriki community. The researcher purposefully focused on eight circumcision songs among the Tiriki community of Vihiga County, Hamisi sub-county, to investigate and classify how these songs represent gender identity. The research was guided by the theory of gender and performance by Judith Butler (2004) and the theory of communication, tradition and language ideology of Roy Rappaport (1999). The research was field based, though it benefitted a lot from internet library to get relevant data concerning this research topic. The researcher selected ten circumcised boys, ten elderly men, ten elderly women, five circumcisers, and five community-based groups as respondents of the research. Data collection was of context analysis by analyzing the songs and various works on the issue of gender identity. Targeted group was circumcised boys, selected elders and Tiriki old women. Data collection was of context analysis by analyzing the songs and various works on the issue of gender identity. Data was collected using a questionnaire and recorded in both hard and soft copies. Data was analyzed descriptively and results presented in written documents. Eight selected circumcision songs were examined and analyzed on how they bring the image of gender identity in the Tiriki community. The research provided an important source of reference to scholars on this topic of gender identity, and will brought a different view of gender identity through the Tiriki circumcision songs. The research is a bridge to future researchers on this topic of gender identity.

Keywords: Circumcision Songs, Context, Gender Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Songs are a central genre of oral literature and have long played a vital role in both oral and written traditions. Mburu (2014) highlight their close relationship with poetry, noting that songs carry rhythm, melody, and structure that allow them to communicate powerful messages. In Tiriki circumcision ceremonies, songs accompany rituals and dances, guiding boys from childhood into adulthood. They are performed in distinctive styles and special language, serving purposes of education, discipline, and cultural preservation. Through these performances, songs influence emotions, instill courage, and provide moral direction, making them indispensable to initiation rites.

The Tiriki, a subtribe of the Luhya living in Vihiga County, Hamisi SubCounty, have historically used circumcision songs (*nyiso* and *maghani*) to transmit values, history, and identity. Their migration from Mount Elgon and cultural ties to the Bongomek group shaped their traditions, with strict circumcision practices becoming a defining feature of Tiriki identity. While many studies have examined circumcision songs among other Luhya groups, little research has focused on gender identity representation in Tiriki songs. This study therefore set out to investigate how gender identity is constructed in Tiriki circumcision songs. The songs are written in Tiriki language and translated to Kiswahili. For the sake of this article, explanations of the songs have been done using English.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON CONTEXTS OF SONG CULTURES IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES.

Songs are a genre of oral literature that perform more important functions in society than any other genre of oral literature (Wamitila 2002) and (Mbarwa 1978). Songs have a vital role in society, especially in expressing people's opinions, perspectives, and attitudes regarding various issues, including social matters. The definitions by Wamitila and Mbarwa are fundamental in this study because of the criterion of initiation songs in the Tiriki community. Therefore, the explanations of these scholars will greatly benefit the research."

"Astiba (2017) examined the role of indigenous social education in the Tiriki community during initiation ceremonies, highlighting values and social perspectives aimed at fostering peace, solidarity, and social responsibility. Although his study focused more broadly on social values, it was relevant to this research by providing an important context for understanding how initiation ceremonies serve as platforms for teaching and legitimizing gender perspectives through songs. The values he identified, such as respect, tolerance, and social responsibility, are directly connected to the construction of gender identity, as they establish the foundations of expectations and gender roles within the Tiriki community. Thus, Astiba's (2017) study strengthened this research by helping to interpret initiation songs as educational and social tools that contribute to the formation of gender identity.

Kipury (1993) examined Maasai initiation songs and categorized those performed during circumcision in different contexts. His study bears resemblance to the present research, although the Maasai are located in the Rift Valley and belong to the Nilotic group, in contrast to the Tiriki who are Bantu. Undeniably, there exist cultural distinctions between the Bantu and the Nilotes. Kipury's work was significant in providing the researcher with guidance on the general functions of songs and their broader importance. However, it differs from the current study in that it assessed the construction of gender identity in Tiriki songs, whereas Kipury's research focused on Maasai songs and their overall functionality.

Kobia (2008) investigated the representation of gender in male initiation songs among the Waigembe community in Kenya. He examined roles, ideologies, and gender relations within the Waigembe society through an analysis of one of their oral literature genres—initiation songs. The depictions of women and men in these songs were critically assessed to reveal the socially accepted worldviews regarding gender within the Waigembe community. His study was valuable, as initiation songs in the Tiriki community similarly transmit roles and ideologies to initiates, thereby facilitating their acceptance within society. Kobia's research was particularly relevant because it explored gender representation in Waigembe initiation songs, while the present study focuses on the construction of gender identity in Tiriki songs. Thus, Kobia's work provided both thematic and theoretical foundations for analyzing initiation songs as instruments in shaping gender representations.

Mbachi and Kariuki (2013) discuss perspectives on circumcision among the Bukusu community. They report that initiates are taught to become responsible members of society and, as a result, develop a sense of importance within the Bukusu community. Their study was significant because it provided the researcher with insights into key aspects such as gender and relational training, health and hygiene education, social and cultural instruction, as well as lessons in courage and endurance. It also highlighted how education is imparted to initiates during seclusion, which serves as their living environment until they recover.

Mutwiri (2005) researched the songs of the Tigania community, focusing on their performance and establishing that the meaning of these songs is constructed through enactments that incorporate symbols, behaviors, and the singing environment. This study benefited from Mutwiri's work by considering performance as a crucial element in the analysis of selected initiation songs of the Tiriki community living in Western Kenya. From this perspective, the present study was able to demonstrate how the construction of gender identity is shaped not only through words but also through actions and symbols that emerge during the performance of these songs.

Njiru (1981) states that circumcision of young men was the only avenue through which indigenous education was transmitted. He further explains that in the Meru community, there was no room for those who avoided this ceremony for any reason, a point also emphasized by other scholars such as Nyaga (1986), Mimanyara (1992), and Kanake (2001). Njiru's study was valuable to the present research as it shed light on the role of circumcision as a social institution of education that shapes values, attitudes, and gender expectations. This argument helped the researcher to understand that initiation songs are not merely for entertainment, but serve as crucial tools for teaching and legitimizing gender identity among boys undergoing circumcision. Thus, Njiru's (1981) study provided a foundation for comparison and interpretation of how the Tiriki community employs selected initiation songs to construct and perpetuate gender identity.

Sunkuli and Miruka (1990) explain that initiation songs aim to highlight the new responsibilities of adulthood, ridicule cowards, and prepare boys to endure physical pain as part of the process of becoming men. This argument closely aligns with the present study, which found that selected initiation songs of the Tiriki community function to construct and reinforce gender identity, particularly masculine identity, by emphasizing qualities such as courage, resilience, and endurance. The ridicule of cowards evident in these songs serves a social function of encouraging boys to conform to the gender expectations of adulthood, while the preparation for enduring pain operates as a criterion for validating gender worthiness. Thus, as Sunkuli and Miruka (1990) observed, initiation songs serve social and

educational purposes; however, this study extends that observation by demonstrating that these functions are gendered, as they construct and legitimize gender identity within the Tiriki community.

Wanyenya (2020) examined the thematic content of initiation songs among the Masaba community in Uganda. He analyzed the content in relation to the sequence of initiation events, addressing various stages such as the preliminary preparations for circumcision, the announcement of candidates, the journey to the circumcision site, the act of circumcision itself, and the post-initiation training, since these songs accompany specific events. His study was useful to the present research because initiation songs among the Tiriki community also accompany various events during these ceremonies, such as *khurangiriza*, an event in which initiates are paraded along the road to prepare them for circumcision. These events in the Tiriki community parallel those observed in the Masaba circumcision practices in Uganda.

Wamitila (2003) provided a definition of songs and their functions, elaborating on different types of songs and emphasizing their role in initiation ceremonies for boys and in transmitting social messages. His work was significant to this study as it explained how initiation songs of the Tiriki community in Western Kenya can convey representations of gender identity. Through an analysis of styles, functions, and contexts of these songs, the study was able to demonstrate how they contribute to the construction of both masculine and feminine identities, while simultaneously promoting gender-related values and expectations among boys.

Balisidya (1982) examined the portrayal of women as mothers, objects of pleasure, and possessions as reflected in Tanzanian oral literature, particularly among the Kaguru, Gogo, Pare, Nyakyusa, and Sizaki communities. The findings of this study reveal that the representations of women in Tanzanian oral literature serve as evidence that such literature is rooted in the traditions and customs of Tanzanians and reflects their culture. Furthermore, the study shows that these portrayals exist in people's minds, manifest in their creative works, influence audiences, and reinforce their beliefs. This implies that the content of texts derives from authors drawing upon the culture of their communities, and thus the perspectives of the authors are revealed in the works they produce. This research also contributed to stimulating interest in exploring gender identity in the initiation songs of the Tiriki community in Western Kenya, particularly in relation to cultural aspects and gender perspectives. This dimension is especially valuable in examining Tiriki initiation within the context of tradition and customs.

Mwita (2005) argues that due to the patriarchal system deeply rooted in the Kuria community, the reality of women is characterized by oppression, abuse, and exploitation. Women are depicted as dependent beings without the ability to make decisions, since doing so is considered taboo in that society—a situation that is also widespread in many other African communities. Although we partly agree with him, circumstances have changed significantly due to public awareness campaigns on women's issues. Mwita's study was useful to the present research in highlighting how Tiriki initiation songs reflect patriarchy and demean women. However, his study differs from this one in that it examined patriarchy within the Kuria community, whereas the current study investigates gender identity in Tiriki initiation songs.

Omari (2008) describes the portrayal of women in children's songs among the Swahili community in Tanzania. He shows that men are depicted as providers, while women are portrayed as homemakers who care for the family and welcome men upon their return home.

Omari further explains that many children's songs present men as figures to be feared—strict individuals who can intimidate the entire family. This notion is used to threaten children when they misbehave in the absence of their fathers, instilling great fear in them. His study also reveals that fathers are portrayed as owners of everything in the household, while women are depicted as unable to live independently. Similar to Omari's research, the present study examines issues of gender identity in initiation songs. The difference lies in the focus: Omari studied children's songs among the Swahili in Tanzania, while this study investigates initiation songs among the Tiriki, where the theme of patriarchy also emerges.

RESEARCH METHODS EMPLOYED IN THE STUDY

This study adopted descriptive design to investigate initiation songs among the Tiriki community within Hamisi sub-county in Western Kenya. The study purposivefully sampled eight circumcision songs chosen to represent cultural contexts, stylistic features, and gender identity construction. Data collection involved questionnaires, interviews, and library research, engaging elders, mothers, circumcisers, assistants, and initiates. Analysis followed a descriptive approach guided by Gender and Performance Theory and the Communicative Theory of Tradition and Ideology, focusing on how songs construct gender identity through words, actions, and symbols. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, respect for cultural traditions, avoidance of harm, and obtaining approvals from community leaders, the university, and NACOSTI. Overall, the methodology ensured rigor, cultural sensitivity, and ethical accountability in examining initiation songs as tools for transmitting social values and shaping gender identity.

Theoretical Foundations

This study is guided by two complementary frameworks: Judith Butler's *Gender Performativity Theory* (2004) and Roy Rappaport's *Theory of Ritual Communication and Linguistic Ideology* (1999). Butler's theory emphasizes that gender is not a fixed identity but is continually constructed through repeated social performances involving language, actions, and behaviors. It highlights how societal norms reward conformity to gender expectations, thereby legitimizing masculine and feminine identities. Rappaport's theory, on the other hand, underscores the role of rituals, ceremonies, and songs in transmitting and sustaining cultural beliefs, values, and norms. It situates initiation songs within their cultural contexts, showing how they function as channels of social communication that reinforce gender roles. Together, these theories enabled the researcher to analyze Tiriki initiation songs by considering both the performative construction of gender and the cultural environment in which these songs are embedded, thus providing a holistic understanding of how gender identity is represented and legitimized.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings below are based on the various selected contexts during circumcision.

Cultural Contexts of the Tiriki Community in Selected Initiation Songs

Initiation songs in the Tiriki community cannot be adequately evaluated without considering the cultural context that produces and disseminates them. These songs emerge within ritual settings filled with symbols, procedures, and social taboos, which give them a distinctive

weight in terms of gender and identity. This situation requires a broad descriptive approach that takes into account the role of language in rituals, as well as the community's beliefs about the legitimacy of that language. For this reason, the analysis of contexts in this study relied on Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual communication.

Rappaport (1999) views ritual as a formal system of communication that conveys carefully structured messages through language, actions, and symbols, accepted collectively as truth. In the Tiriki community, initiation songs function as authoritative utterances within circumcision ceremonies, transmitting beliefs, values, and gender expectations. These ceremonies unfold as ritual dramas, with songs shifting from praise to ridicule, encouragement, and caution depending on the stage, such as *kurangiriza* or midnight performances. This article analyzed contexts including ritual sites, roadsides, secluded spaces, circumcision grounds, seclusion (*jandoni*), and homes, showing how songs derive meaning within social and ideological boundaries. Guided by Rappaport's ritual communication theory and Butler's gender performativity theory, the findings reveal that initiation songs are powerful social instruments shaping gender identity in ways inseparable from their ritual and cultural contexts.

The Ritual Context

This ritual takes place under a special tree known *as khavunyonje* and involves only men of the community. The tree holds great cultural significance as it is recognized as a sacred site for performing rituals and legitimizing social and cultural practices associated with men. The power linked to this tree is both cultural and social, derived from the community's beliefs and traditions, where the exclusive presence of men grants the ritual authority and legitimacy. This tree is not ordinary; it serves as a space for affirming and perpetuating societal norms regarding male identity. Women are never allowed to approach or come near this ritual site, as they are perceived as weaker beings within the community. Although circumcision (idumi) is deeply rooted in Tiriki life, it is during these ceremonies that traditions and customs are given prominence. Respondents revealed that the Tiriki attach cultural meaning to circumcision at every stage—preparation, the act itself, seclusion, and reintegration into society.

The Tiriki circumcision ritual (*idumi*) unfolds in four main stages: preparation, circumcision, seclusion, and reintegration. Preparation involves sacrificial rituals under sacred sites, symbolizing purification and transition into adulthood. The circumcision stage is marked by symbolic acts such as carrying branches for protection and crossing water to signify cleansing from youth. Seclusion places initiates in isolated huts (*irhumbi*), where they are considered ritually impure until purification rites are completed, preparing them for responsible manhood. Reintegration follows, with symbolic burning of seclusion items and rituals like sprinkling milk, marking the initiates' new social and gender identity. Songs, especially the famous *kulahila vana* ("we shall take the boys for circumcision"), accompany these stages, reinforcing courage, masculinity, and the community's expectations of men. Overall, the ritual dramatizes cultural values, legitimizes male identity, and uses songs as powerful tools for transmitting gender roles and social continuity.

Song 1: Kulahila Vana

"Khari vachaye kulahila, vana wa Sakwa
Vasomi vosi kulahila, vana wa Sakwa
Khari vavore, khulahila vana wa Sakwa"

Kiswahili translation.
Tutapeleka wavulana kupashwa tohara
"Hata wadharau, tutaendelea na tambiko
Wanaopashwa tohara, tutaendelea na hili tambiko
Hata waseme tutaendelea na hili tambiko

English Translation

We will take the boys to be circumcised Even if they despise it,
we will continue with the ritual Those who are circumcised,
we will continue with this ritual Even if they speak against it,
we will continue with this ritual

The circumcision song performed during the preparation stage reinforces the Tiriki community's commitment to circumcision as the defining marker of male identity. By invoking *Sakwa* as the ideal man who transforms boys into men, the song emphasizes courage, endurance of pain, and obedience to tradition as essential qualities of masculinity. Repeated phrases counter external opposition, affirming the ritual's cultural legitimacy and portraying refusal as weakness or social deviance.

The song also highlights gender dynamics by excluding women, presenting circumcision as a malecentered institution. Mothers are urged to release their sons to the elders, who are depicted as protectors of the community. From Butler's perspective on gender performativity, the song functions as a cultural tool that teaches boys to enact masculinity through repeated social practice, ensuring continuity of gender identity within the Tiriki community.

The Roadside Context at the Secluded Place

The roadside context further illustrates the symbolic dimension of *idumi*. Fathers set circumcision dates, and initiates move from village to village inviting relatives through the *kurangiriza* ceremony. Dancers begin from the East and move West, imitating the sunrise as a sign of prosperity. This directional symbolism is crucial: the right side and EasttoWest path are associated with good fortune, while the left side is linked to women and considered a bad omen. Songs such as *Hoyee hoyeyaa* accompany these roadside rituals, echoing war songs that signal the end of childhood and the approach of manhood. Though melodies may remain constant, lyrics shift to convey different messages, embedding gender expectations and legitimizing the transition to adulthood.

Together, the ritual stages, initiation songs, and roadside performances demonstrate how *idumi* operates as a cultural drama that legitimizes male identity, reinforces social hierarchies, and perpetuates gender roles. Guided by Rappaport's theory of ritual communication and Butler's theory of gender performativity, the analysis reveals that initiation songs are powerful social instruments shaping masculinity in ways inseparable from their ritual and cultural contexts.

Song 2:

Tiriki Language

Ho-ye hoyeyaa
"Hoyee yaa hoyee!
Hoyeyaa!

Hoyee yoyeyaa hoyeeee!
Hoyeyaaa!
Hoyeeya hoyee!"

Kiswahili Translation

Hoyee yaa hoyee!
Hoyeyaa!
Hoyee yoyeyaa hoyeeee!
Hoyeyaaa! Hoyeeya hoyee!

English Translation

Hoyee yaa hoyee!
Hoyeyaa!
Hoyee yoyeyaa hoyeeee!
Hoyeyaaa! Hoyeeya hoyee!

This song signifies entry into adulthood. The initiates, like warriors going to battle, must prepare to face the challenge with courage and without retreat. *Hoyee* symbolizes fighting the "enemy" without fear, and in this context the enemy is youth itself, which must be overcome. The song conveys that boys undergoing circumcision are not cowards but are ready to endure the cut regardless of the challenges ahead. Thus, the *Hoyee* song captures the atmosphere that enables the preparation for circumcision.

Song 3:

Tiriki Language

Yona mtende Yona
"Yona mtende, Yona mtende
Yahira vana khulubao!"

Kiswahili Translation

Yona Jirani yona
"Yoha Jirani, Yona jirani
Alimpeleka mvulana apashwe tohara hospitalini"

English Translation

Yona the neighbor,
Yona Yoha the neighbor,
Yona the neighbor He took the boy to be circumcised at the hospital

In the Tiriki community, a song was composed to ridicule and mock a man named Yona, who took his son to be circumcised in hospital rather than through traditional ritual. This act angered cultural custodians, as hospital circumcision was seen as cowardly and contrary to tradition. Respondents explained that some parents resorted to hospitals because their sons feared circumcision or due to beliefs in witchcraft. However, those circumcised in hospital were derided as weak, likened to women, and considered incomplete men who had failed to

follow cultural norms. The leader of the ritual mocked them by associating their circumcision with female nurses, symbolically transferring feminine traits and behaviors onto them. This ridicule reflected the patriarchal bias entrenched since the 1960s, when women were regarded as inferior and incapable of understanding circumcision.

The song also employed the term *khulubao* ("on the board"), referring to the wooden boards on which boys were laid during hospital circumcision. This imagery was used to mock hospital initiates, as lying down symbolized fear, in contrast to the traditional expectation that boys stand upright during circumcision. Thus, hospital circumcision was stigmatized as cowardly and unmanly, reinforcing the community's belief that true masculinity required enduring pain and adhering to tradition. The ridicule embedded in the song highlights how initiation songs functioned as cultural tools to police masculinity, delegitimize deviation from ritual norms, and reinforce male dominance within the Tiriki society.

The Context of the Place Where Circumcision Is Expected to Take Place

Respondents explained that the process begins when elders remove boys from their homes and take them to a secret place to prepare them psychologically for circumcision. This separation from mothers is symbolic, intended to detach boys from maternal influence and instill masculine traits. At the elder's homestead, initiates undergo rituals such as shaving their heads and the *imoni* (eye ritual), which involves questioning and guidance. These acts mark the transition from childhood to manhood, with headshaving symbolizing rebirth and entry into a new stage of life. Elders emphasized that *idumi* functions as a second birth, reinforcing social structures of agesets, hierarchy, and male responsibility.

During this stage, initiates sing the song W4: "Male lidahalo male"**,** which calls on fathers to bring their sons for circumcision and highlights the father's authority in major community decisions. By naming boys like Elijah and Joel, the song underscores the father's role in legitimizing the ritual and preparing sons to become future leaders. The song also conveys gender identity by excluding women, portraying them as weak and irrelevant to the process. Thus, the ritual and its songs reinforce male authority, social continuity, and the cultural expectation that boys embrace manhood through obedience to tradition.

Song 4:

Tiriki Language

Male lidahalo male
"Male lidahalo male!
Savira vana yavo Elijah
Savira vana yavo joel"

Kiswahili Translation

Kijiji hicho Kijiji hicho
"Kijiji hicho Kijiji hicho! (male)
Ombea hawa watoto Elijah
Ombea hawa watoto Joel"

English Translation

That village, that village! (male voice)

Pray for these children,
Elijah Pray for these children, Joel

The Context of Circumcision at the Secluded Place.

This stage begins with songs that highlight the danger and pain of circumcision, preparing initiates psychologically for the ordeal. The songs emphasize that whether willing or not, boys must undergo circumcision, reinforcing courage and obedience to tradition. Initiates wear *shuka* (traditional cloth) and carry *ludanga* (long sticks), symbolizing childhood's lowly status and the rebirth into valued manhood. Dancing in this attire is a cultural requirement, reminding boys that avoiding circumcision is unacceptable. Women also participate symbolically by carrying *lusuyi* (stripped sticks), representing transformation, as the removal of bark signifies the transition to adulthood.

Songs sung during this context include song 5: "Mama reta vusera" (Mama bring porridge**)**. This song reflects the mother's role in preparing and carefully delivering millet porridge to the forest edge where circumcision occurs. The porridge symbolizes maternal care, love, and continuity of life, linking childbirth pain with the initiates' endurance of circumcision pain. Traditionally, porridge is the first food given to a woman after childbirth, so serving it to initiates signifies fertility and the hope for future reproduction. Fathers emphasized that mothers carrying the porridge pot symbolize marital fidelity and loyalty, while breaking the pot would imply immorality or impurity. Thus, the ritual intertwines maternal nurturing with masculine rebirth, reinforcing gender roles and the cultural expectation that boys embrace manhood through circumcision.

Song 5:

Tiriki Language

Mama reta vusera
"Mama reta, mama reta vusera!"

Kiswahili Translation

Mama leta uji
"Mama leta mama leta uji!"

English Translation

Mother, bring porridge Mother,
bring, mother bring porridge!

The Context of the Seclusion Huts Where Initiates Live

The huts in *Kiswahili* called *jandoni* (*itumbi*) are secluded spaces where circumcised boys are kept for healing and transformation. Community members are forbidden from entering until purification rituals release them. Boys remain here for about two months until wounds heal, and they undergo the ritual of *khuravitsa* (washing) before reintegration as full men. Elders explained that seclusion protects initiates from external contamination and symbolizes their passage from childhood to adulthood. Before entering, initiates circle the hut three times from the East, symbolizing separation, boundarysetting, and eventual reintegration.

Inside the hut, a chosen elder (*mudiri*) acts as teacher and moral guide, instilling discipline and masculine values. Boys are given nicknames like "lion" or "leopard" to symbolize courage and strength, distancing them from their childhood identity. During seclusion, initiates sing songs boasting of their bravery, addressing mothers to show they are now protectors ready to face enemies. Respondents emphasized that *jandoni* is not only a place of physical healing but also of psychological and social reconstruction, where boys are reshaped into men through ritual, discipline, and song. Two key songs performed here are song 6 and song **7**, both reinforcing courage and masculine identity.

Song 6:

Tiriki Language

Mwoyo ngwenyanga mama
"Mwoyo gwenyanga, mwoyo gwenyanga mama!
Nindole lina, nindole lina mama!
Lelo nyonjile, lelo nonjile murumbi"

Kiswahili Translation

Moyo wangu unatamani kumwona mama
"Moyo wangu unatamani, kumwona mama!
Nitamwona lini nitamwona lini mama
Leo nitamwona mama leo nitatoka jandoni"

English Translation

My heart longs to see mother
My heart longs to see mother!
When will I see her, when will I see mother?
Today I will see mother,
today I will leave seclusion (jandoni)

Song 7:

Tiriki Language

Moyo khumama hoye
"Moyo khumama!
Hoye hoyee hoyee!
Jelizila mama mirembe hoyee!"

Kiswahili Translation

Moyo wangu unamtaka mama hoye!
Moyo wangu uko kwa mama!
Hoye hoyee hoyee!
Salimia mama hoyee!"

English Translation

My heart longs for mother, hoye!

My heart is with mother!
Hoye hoyee hoyee!
Greet mother, hoye!"

Song 6 expresses the initiate's longing for his mother during seclusion, highlighting her role as the closest caregiver who nurtured, protected, and provided security since childhood. Song 7 continues this theme, showing the deep bond between mother and son. Mentioning the mother during the healing period demonstrates that even as the initiate transitions into adulthood, he still acknowledges her contribution.

However, these songs go beyond simply remembering the mother. The longing becomes a symbolic bridge, marking the transformation from a dependent child to a man expected to be brave and capable of facing community challenges. The mother is portrayed as the pillar of care and protection, while the initiate is redirected toward his new identity as a courageous man. Thus, the *jandoni* context is crucial in constructing male identity, showing the shift from maternal dependence to masculine strength and responsibility.

The Home Context

The home context marks the reintegration of initiates after seclusion, involving the entire community in celebration. Songs at this stage praise the boys for their courage, affirm their new status, and mock those who showed fear during circumcision. Drumming, dancing, food, and creative musical performances accompany the festivities. Instruments such as dry logs, wooden planks, and plastic gourds are used, with their sounds symbolically representing gender: higher tones are associated with women, while deeper tones signify men. Together, these instruments symbolize the union of male and female forces, ensuring continuity of life and renewal of the community.

Women respondents emphasized that *idumi* is not merely a ritual but a family and communal responsibility, extending even to ancestors who are believed to bless and witness the boys' transition into adulthood. Before eating or participating in home activities, initiates undergo purification rituals, such as washing hands in bowls containing herbs and honey, symbolizing cleansing from ritual impurity. The *shalukhu* (homecoming ceremony) involves elders escorting initiates with stripped long sticks, signifying maturity and new responsibilities. Passing through a doorway made of branches symbolizes good fortune and hope for the family. Gender distinctions are reinforced through symbolic materials: boys pass through strong wooden gateways, while girls' celebratory structures are made of weaker banana trunks, reflecting temporary transitions. Songs like song 8 performed here highlight gender identity, portraying male authority, courage, and responsibility within the Tiriki community.

Song 8:

Tiriki Language

Hegoywe hee hogoywa.
"Hegoywe hee, hogoywa!
Undevanga hee, alandola
Ingoyi yarule, hogoywoo!"

Kiswahili Translation

Unaniulizia utaniona

"Hegoywe hee, hogoywoo
Nani ananiulizia hee, utaniona
chui amejifungua hegoywoo!"

English Translation

You ask me, will you see me?
"Hegoywe hee, hogoywoo
Who is asking me, will you see me?
The leopard has given birth, hegoywoo!"

The symbol of the leopard emphasizes qualities of courage, strength, and resilience associated with manhood at the stage of entering adulthood. The phrase about the leopard "giving birth" is used symbolically to show that the initiate has undergone a process of rebirth into a new stage of life. In this sense, "giving birth" does not mean ordinary reproduction, but rather represents the transformation of the initiate from childhood to adulthood.

By using the imagery of a powerful animal, the song conveys the construction of male identity, portraying the initiate as brave and capable of facing the challenges of adult life. Respondents stressed that the song communicates a message to the wider community from which the initiates had been secluded. This separation symbolizes their new identity and status as men. Through the song, the initiates announce to the public that they are no longer boys in seclusion but have emerged as full men who have undergone circumcision and now possess new masculine qualities.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study examined the representation of gender identity in the initiation songs of the Tiriki community in Western Kenya. It pursued the objective of identifying the cultural contexts in which selected circumcision songs are performed. The article findings revealed that the songs fulfill their role by showing how gender identity emerges differently depending on the context. These contexts include ritual sites, roadside ceremonies, secluded places for circumcision, the act of circumcision itself, the seclusion huts (*jandoni*), and the homecoming setting. The article established that circumcision ceremonies among the Tiriki are highly valued because of their social and cultural significance as accorded in different structured stages of life.

This study was fieldbased. Data were collected using content analysis methods and examined through descriptive analysis. The research was guided by Judith Butler's (2004) Gender and Performativity theory and Roy Rappaport's (1999) Ritual Communication and Linguistic Ideology theory. The study is important in explaining the contribution of gender identity representation in Tiriki circumcision songs. It also introduced a new perspective on how initiation songs function within the Tiriki community.

CONCLUSION

Identifying the Cultural Contexts of the Tiriki Community in Selected Circumcision Songs

The objective of the study was to identify the cultural contexts in which Tiriki circumcision songs are performed. The study revealed that these songs are embedded in specific ritual settings such as sacred sites, roadside ceremonies, secluded preparation areas, the act of circumcision itself, seclusion huts (*jandoni*), and the homecoming stage. Each context carries its own symbolic meaning: rituals emphasize beliefs and taboos, roadside songs encourage bravery, secluded preparation removes boys from maternal influence, circumcision itself tests endurance and obedience, seclusion huts highlight maternal bonds while preparing boys for adulthood, and homecoming ceremonies reintegrate them into family and community life.

Overall, the study shows that circumcision songs cannot be separated from the cultural environments that produce them. They serve as the backbone of Tiriki initiation, functioning to warn, instruct, transmit traditions, and guide boys through the transition from childhood to manhood. By analyzing songs alongside their cultural contexts, the research demonstrates how gender identity is constructed and reinforced, with songs acting as powerful tools of socialization and continuity within the community.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the next researcher on this topic should try to show why the culture of male circumcision remains unchanged regardless of the deep-rooted Western education in the Tiriki community.

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