

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
INNOVATIVE RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE**

ISSN-2213-1356

www.ijirk.com

**Narrating New Female and Feminine Identities through Music
and Dance: A Review of Abakhayo Nuptial Songs****Joseph Muleka**

University of Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract

Literature is a reflection of the wishes of the society that produces it. It forms an integral part of a people's lives, and through it one can see the history, philosophy and the kind of perceptions of the said people about situations and about people – how the said people define the world in relation to themselves, (Muleka, 2016). Song and dance as part of a people's literature would, thus, be said to possess the power to reveal the picture a people have of the world and how they perceive the people therein. Perhaps no literary genre is more popular, and more succinctly reconstructs, narrates and reflects the society better than music and dance. Indeed music and dance is an integral part of many social and cultural activities in the African society. Quite often, the genre serves to comment on an ongoing event as well as on the personalities involved, for whom the songs appear to spell out the roles and expectations. Based on the music and dances sourced from nuptial celebrations, this paper interrogates some of the Abakhayo music and dance songs as an avenue through which female and feminine identities are reconstructed, performed and prescribed. Taking a qualitative approach and anchoring our arguments on the feminist and sociological literary standpoints, the paper examines the kind of identities consequent through the said music and dance performances. Of particular interest is whether the constructed identities are in tandem with sustainable development in the emergent global concerns of gender equity and economic empowerment.

Key words: song and dance, women, emancipation and empowerment, identity, female, feminine.

Introduction

From time immemorial, narratives on female and femininity have mostly focused on subordinate, if not negative considerations. For instance, Adetayo Alabi (1998: 25), observes that the patriarchal society aims at creating a “virtuous woman” out of the girl child, describing this type of woman as: “not aggressive but coy; not boisterous but quiet; not assertive but compromising”. This means that the patriarchal society prefers a ‘silent’ woman. It has the effect that the patriarchal society tries to curtail the girl child’s self-expression, perhaps preferring that she remains silent or simply submit to male subjugation. Sylvia Tamale (1999), though commenting in relation to women’s writings, appears to corroborate Alabi’s 1998 assertion when she echoes the patriarchal legacy which relegates women to the lower rung of the social ladder and denies them space to talk or participate in public activities. Employing the metaphor of “the hen that is prohibited from crowing”, Tamale points out the inherent enforced silence that the female gender experiences.

Meanwhile, (Uwakweh, 1998:9), commenting on what she considers society’s view of who and what a woman is, states: “Gender identity and its exclusionary potentials for the female are deeply rooted in the fabric of both the traditional and modern African societies. From the very onset, ideological war is waged against the girl child in an African social setup. Through the popular oral performances such as song and dance, and through the day to day conversations by members of the community, she is exposed to certain specifically designed interactions. These interactions, it is apparent – target to influence the girl’s memory and perceptions as to who she is and where she belongs. To start with, the girl child is made to believe that her birth is a mistake since society prefers boy children, (Muleka, 2007). This fact is emphasized by rewarding women who bear boy children. Men on the other hand are expected and encouraged to marry other wives if their current ones do not bear sons.

While the foregoing arguments appear to paint a grim picture for women and girl children, and while one can understand where the arguments are coming from, I wish to argue that this state of affairs is no longer totally obtaining today. Instead, as Jane Nambiri Ouma (2016), observes in her article: “Fifty Years of Boy Child Education in Kenya: A Paradigm Shift”, girl children are quite emancipated, and that it is now the boy child that lags behind. This begins to raise the question of whether what the girl child advocates above seem to see as subordinating girl children has in fact worked to their advantage. Is it true that society has always relegated women to the lower rung of the social ladder and denied them space to talk or participate in public activities? A review of Abakhayo songs and dances that touch on women suggests that there are many songs that paint a positive image of women, and which can greatly contribute to their development. On the other hand, many of the songs that appear to subjugate women and girls could still be said to have something that has perhaps helped to encourage women in pursuit of their emancipation. Otherwise what has made them surpass the boys as Ouma (above) points out?

Taking a qualitative approach and anchoring our arguments on the feminist and sociological literary standpoints, this paper examines the kind of identities consequent through the said music and dance performances. Of particular interest is whether the constructed identities are in tandem with sustainable development in the emergent global concerns of gender equity and economic empowerment.

The Abakhayo songs analysed were the result of fieldwork carried out to interrogate nuptial music and dance among the Abakhayo (one of the seventeen Luhya sub-tribes of Western Kenya). The focus on nuptial music and dance was informed by the fact that the wedding day among the Luhya is seen as the bride’s day, thus, majority of the songs for the marriage occasion will centre the girl or centre on the girl. Once the songs were collected, they were subjected to analysis guided by an analytical framework that included intrusive questions such as: Who performs the songs? Who is targeted? Why are the songs performed? What impression are the songs meant to

create particularly about and to the girls? Is there a hidden intention in the messages of the songs? These were of course among other questions. Beyond the researcher's own textual interpretations, interviews with members of the Abakhayo community added insight into the society's expectations, which helped build a projection of the impact the songs would have on the consumers of the music. Besides, focused group discussions with youthful married women assisted in highlighting what women felt concerning what they thought society was doing or not doing for women.

In Praise of the female and the feminine

To start, one Abakhayo song states:

Mudambo kwomukhasi kurerenga mukwobo Failure to have a wife demeans a man
Naye nodong'a awo nechimbosi chibayo This is an abominable state
Esibwana muliro nisio sidinyu khumundu. The fire maker (wife)'s the most important person.

From the wording of the above song, one begins to see the position that a woman occupies. Considered the most important person, the song obviously begins to disabuse the popular view that women are subordinates. Thus socially fore grounded, women are likely to want to assert themselves in society, if perhaps to live up to the position so granted by the words of the above song. And as if to really affirm the actual position of a woman in a home, another song states "Mukhasi alandanga mudala nga inderema" (A woman spreads in the home like *inderema*). *Inderema* is a creeper weed that spreads where it grows totally taking over the space.

Apparently, the choice of *inderema* as the analogy to how a woman occupies space in a home, serves a number of purposes. While it asserts the dominant position of the woman in a family, home and community, it also depicts the usefulness of the woman, because *inderema* is edible as a vegetable and a home that has it cannot go hungry for complete lack of what to eat. Indeed the wording of the songs quoted seems to go hand in hand with another one sung amongst the girls as they do the prospective bride's makeup that states:

Khuli bayobe, khuli bayobe We are the chosen, we are the chosen
Abakhana Nandunga Nandunga girls
Khuli bayobe We are the chosen
Nyumba yefwe sikwa muyale. Our house cannot lag behind.

One observes that this is a song deliberately worded to psyche up the prospective bride – and of course the other girls in the group – to consider themselves as special and capable of forging forward with their businesses. Aware of the role praise may play in boosting one's self-esteem; the impact of the latter song cannot be gainsaid. What needs particular mention is the communal sense that the song seems to create, emphasizing an 'insiderness' that appears only unique to those involved (we are the chosen whose house cannot, or perhaps should not lag behind). The psychological significance of this inclusionary 'insiderness' is actually likely to cause a commitment to the ideals of this particular community, i.e. aspiring to live up to the call of the chosen by/and ensuring that the house of one's responsibility or jurisdiction does not lag behind. And perhaps if 'house' here represents "our space as women", one begins to understand why the members of this particular community are likely to go out of their way to achieve, if only to maintain their legitimacy in this special community.

Alabi (1998) has argued that the patriarchal society in its attempt to create a “virtuous woman” endeavours to emphasize the frailty of the girl child and her dire need to depend on the male. Apparently, frailty and dependence are considered as feminine virtues which perhaps a “normal” woman should possess. The said frailty is often qualified by certain labels given to the girl, which appear attractive (feminine), apparently only to lure her into the acceptance of really being frail. Some of the labels addressed to the girl include kind, gentle, caring, beautiful, graceful and many others. To appear feminine one has to be “not aggressive but coy; not boisterous but quiet; not assertive but compromising” (Alabi, *ibid*). This argument would, therefore, celebrate the following song, sung by Abakhayo girls as they escort their colleague to her bridal home:

<i>Khusene bunyiri po</i>	Let’s walk with gracefulness
<i>Khusene bunyiri</i>	Walk with gracefulness
<i>Abakhana khusene bunyiri po</i>	Girls walk with gracefulness
<i>Bakhana khudondole namulwa</i>	Girls let’s pluck fruits
<i>Khudondole namulwa.</i>	Let’s pluck fruits.

Indeed a cursory look at this latter song will easily reach the conclusion that the girls are having gracefulness imposed on them presumably as a reward to lure them away from being aggressive (a quality that would perhaps make them want to compete with the men). However, a keen look reveals that the girls are being advised to walk “gracefully” in order to be able to “pluck fruits”. So one realises that the girls are not necessarily being extolled to “walk gracefully” so as to appear gentle and fragile, or, weak and vulnerable. The call is for them to be careful and focused so as to achieve – to “pluck fruits”.

It is perhaps imperative for the most important person as revealed in the first song to be careful. From a number of Abakhayo nuptial songs, the quality of carefulness for a woman and a mother by extension is greatly emphasized. One of the songs: *Ng’ina mwana rera siwabikhira omwana* (Mother of the girl, display what you have been keeping for your child), seems to place enormous responsibility on the woman because the girl is viewed as a reflection of her mother. While one may want to consider this as a kind of oppression on the mother, we could look at it positively as an expectation that puts the woman in a crucial and central position, thus, making her the most important person as already observed. It could further be argued that perhaps it is this emersion of the woman into the centre of the society and her own acceptance of it that has seen her prosper and survive what would otherwise be impossible situations. As the saying goes “necessity is the mother of invention.” We may want to observe that the woman is ever aware that all society’s eyes are on her, not necessarily as a servant but as the leader on whom the society depends. It is no wonder then that it is the mother who is asked to display what the family or community for that matter, has spared for the girl who is going to get married. Arguably, if the mother were not careful enough to “pluck” the fruits as well as to keep them safe until the day they are needed, then society would perhaps have nothing to give to the future generations.

A Glimpse of Hope for the Woman

Makori (2014) decries the way the boys appear to lag behind nowadays, “While the girls are focused and busy working hard and creating more space for themselves, the boys appear to be wandering about or in a daze at the periphery”, (quoted in Ouma, 2016:54). This observation appears to justify our earlier posturing that perhaps the girls may be taking seriously some of the literature and day to day conversations that they access and reaping benefits from the same, particularly the songs that appear to target the very girls. It may be logical to argue that the girls could even be taking advantage of some of the very songs that appear to disadvantage them.

One Abakhayo nuptial song sung as the bride leaves her ancestral home escorted by her friends seems to evict her from where she was born and reared.

<i>Khuli barende, khuli barende</i>	We are foreigners, we are foreigners
<i>Khuli barende khwechira</i>	Foreigners we now depart
<i>Khulekhere bene sialo</i>	We create room for the land owners
<i>Khuli barende khwechire</i>	Foreigners we now depart
<i>Khulekhere bene dala</i>	We create room for the land owners
<i>Khuli barende khwechira.</i>	Foreigners we now depart.

What comes through this latter song is that girl children are foreigners/outsideers in their ancestral homes, which perhaps confirms Uwakweh's (ibid) lament about "society's exclusionary potentials for the girl child". Indeed interviews with Abakhayo elders confirmed that in fact girls are considered as temporary members of their ancestral homes. The assumption is that they will, on maturity, get married and leave for good to live in their marital homes. This can perhaps explain why girls are not allocated land in their place of birth nor do they inherit any other property from their parents. Of course the girls on their part appear fully aware of this arrangement, something that could be confirmed from the way they sang on their departure.

One really wants to sympathise with girl children at this seemingly unfair arrangement. However, one also wonders why the girls who are destined to inherit no property from their parents are now the ones being said to be doing better as both Makori (2014) and Ouma (2016) appear to aver. During the focused group discussions that I held with some youthful women in the Abakhayo community, it came out that, the girls knowing that what they would come to own depended on their own efforts, they seemed to work harder for their own self emancipation. The women actually observed that most of what the male children inherited from their parents was mostly squandered, perhaps because they (men) could not feel or even understand the pain of toiling for the same. Many of those who were left pieces of land, for example, soon sold them for money and then ended up remaining landless themselves. Perhaps in an effort to convince me on how the girls were doing better than the boys, despite the former being curtailed from property inheritance, the women challenged me to visit any urban centre and find out for myself who was running the salons, the m-pesa shops, typing and photocopying bureaus, boutiques, beauty shops, phone stalls, second hand clothes, waiters in eateries, market stalls, offices and many other economic engagements that involved manpower.

Indeed, I came to confirm that surely far more girls than boys were engaged in economic ventures. I also established that there were far more boys/men than girls/women involved in destructive ventures such as drug taking (particularly beer drinking), betting in which they lost money and idling in soccer showing kiosks, or on the roads, or in urban centres. Of course I had also for some time noted that even more women than men were paying to study in colleges in the self sponsored programmes. All this could partly explain why women are perhaps beginning to do better than the men. I would wish to attribute this success by the girls to their realization that they are really on their own. This makes them start to train early, thereby standing a better chance of achieving success. It is actually of interest what the following song appears to be telling Lanya, a girl that is preparing to venture into the world:

<i>Lanya wekholerere, Lanya</i>	Lanya start early, Lanya
<i>Eee Lanya wekholerere Lanya</i>	Eh Lanya start early,
<i>Lanya olwo nolukhobo</i>	Lanya, that could be a plot
<i>Owomwefwe nokona awo, Lanya</i>	If you delay here my sister, Lanya
<i>Owomwefwe nokona awo</i>	My sister if you delay here
<i>Onalie khunyama embolu.</i>	You will eat stale meat.

The call to Lanya to start early is crucial. Indeed as the saying goes, the earliest bird catches the worm. Realising that one has to start early is obviously likely to come in handy for one who has the duty upon herself to work for self emancipation. The Lanya song seems to echo the Kiswahili saying that goes: “Ngoja ngoja utapata mwana si wako” (One who keeps procrastinating is always likely to miss the prize). We could argue that perhaps one reason why the boys are lagging behind has to do with procrastination. And the reason for the boys procrastinating may have something to do with their looking forward to take over their family fortunes, particularly land, which as I have already pointed out, they will receive, sell, squander the proceeds and remain to live in destitution. In contrast, the girls who are aware that they may not be beneficiaries to their family fortunes, will set up early as the Lanya song advises and start working for the future to which, they know, they are their own architects. Therefore, while the boys remain the proverbial beneficiary that was given the fish, the girls become the proverbial beneficiary that instead learnt the skill of fishing.

The Role of Music and Dance

As already hinted to, music and dance is a powerful tool of communicating society’s values and expectations. Its power further resides in the fact that it is the most readily available, as well as the most popular genre of a people’s literature. Meanwhile, majority of the singing and dancing groups tend to comprise women and girls. For example, nearly all the nuptial performances that I came across during my field research were made up of female performers, of course with a few that incorporated countable males. I nearly concluded that music and dance in the Abakhayo community was a “female” activity. Well, the point is, music and dance as a communication tool – I concluded – was likely to carry greater significance for the community’s women and girls (who are the active participants), than the men and boys (who more or less appeared to be passive participants). If this be the case, I would argue that the songs and dances that the women and girls so enthusiastically take part in have been a contributor to their enthusiasm to work for their own emancipation. This is a conclusion one reaches after listening to the messages communicated in the songs.

Indeed, much as the space of this paper does not allow me to revisit many of the songs which I collected, that touch on women and girls, the few that appear here confirm that the songs communicate messages that are likely to greatly shape the way the targeted personalities may come to think about themselves. Starting, for instance, from the song that presents the woman as the most important person in the community and also capable of spreading like *inderema*, to the one that reminds the girls that they are the chosen ones who cannot allow their house to lag behind, or the one that advises the girls to walk gracefully (perhaps carefully) while plucking fruits, one realises that the songs can in fact be a game changer.

Incidentally, the women and girls could also pick lessons from those songs that appear to isolate or discourage them by labelling them as foreigners. From such songs, they come to accept and appreciate the need to be self reliant. Meanwhile, songs such as the one addressed to Lanya, are quite blunt about the message to be communicated (start early, for delay could make you “eat stale meat”). Stale meat here – I guess – could be anything from missing one’s targets, getting bad deals, to failing in life.

Besides, some of the songs attempt to redefine women's roles as well as what was considered feminine. A group of women in one wedding occasion, for example, were heard singing "*Abasacha bali bakana sibakheya lwanyi, lero beyanga lwanyi*" (Men had vowed never to sweep the courtyard, today they sweep the courtyard). This is a song that suggests a change in which men too sweep compounds. Such chores were always regarded as domestic, where domesticity was considered to be a woman's preserve. I would rightly guess that such perceptions were always likely to change, particularly with many women emancipated and in fact now engaged in outdoor duties that were – as we established – initially the preserve of the men. Indeed one woman bragged saying, 'today our men do everything including cooking for us and serving us.' She then jokingly added, "we are actually working on how they could also carry pregnancies instead of being us all the time".

Meanwhile as Alabi above has described, the patriarchal society wanted to mould a virtuous woman. A truly virtuous woman as Alabi puts it again is "not aggressive but coy; not boisterous but quiet; not assertive but compromising. This perhaps meant a woman who displayed what was considered "feminine" qualities of which being silent was one. Yet the following song appears to liberate the woman from that kind of prescription:

<i>Ndi mukhasi wayera khuloma</i>	I am a woman who deserves to talk
<i>Ndi mukhasi wayera khuloma</i>	I am a woman who deserves to talk
<i>Oweing'ombe yarera</i>	One for whom a cow was paid
<i>Ndi mukhasi wayera khuloma.</i>	I am a woman who deserves to talk.

This latter song apparently endeavours to give the woman a voice. By declaring that the woman deserves to talk, the gesture appears to subvert the state where the woman was expected "not to be boisterous but quiet". The state of the woman today is testimony that she has truly responded to the call in this latter song. Women are now preachers, parliamentarians, administrators, news anchors, judges and many other positions that require that those in those positions speak. It indeed gives them the chance to speak as all and sundry listen. In a nutshell, the barriers that were erected to mark what was considered male or female; masculine or feminine have apparently crumbled. Now women can project their voices through writing, speech, advocacy, performance, among other avenues of expression. This, as one would conclude, accounts for what is humane, democratic, inclusive and progressive, thus, a sure route to empowerment and sustainable development.

Conclusion

This paper has argued in recognition of the role music and dance could play on the journey to the emancipation of women. Singling out some of the messages in the songs that appear to appeal to the change in the perception of self, the paper attempts to attribute some of the achievements observable in the lives of women to their interaction with the said songs. In particular, the paper revisits and attempts to counter some of the views expressed by the advocates of the welfare of the girl child and woman by extension; views that decry the disadvantaged position of the woman in society. Instead, the paper takes count of the progress that women have made and the ever emerging realization that in fact it is the male who now lags behind. Part of the progress that appears to favour women is the apparent deconstruction of the traditional allocation of roles as feminine and masculine, and the construction of a new female and a new feminine.. This, the paper observes, has created more space for women, who succinctly express through song and dance, what they have achieved and what more they can achieve. The songs, thus, serve as the avenue for communicating the women's present and projections into the future, a future which if things remain constant is far brighter than that of the men.

Works Cited

1. Adetayo A. "Gender Issues in Zaynab Alkali's Novels" in *Childhood in African Literature*. Oxford, 1998.
2. Akivaga, S. K. and A.B. Odaga: *Oral Literature: A school Certificate Course*. Nairobi, 1982.
3. Alkali, Z. *The Virtuous Woman*. 1987.
4. Masinjila, M. "Patriarchy" in *Delusions*. FEMNET, 1994.
5. Muleka, J. *Images of Women in African Oral Literature*. Germany: VDM, Verlag, 2009.
6. Ouma, J. N. "Fifty Years of Boy Child Education in Kenya: A Paradigm Shift" in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*. IJHSSI, 2016.
7. Tamale, S. *When the Hen Begins to Crow*. FEMRITE, 1999.
8. Uwakweh, P. A. "Carving a Niche: Visions of Gendered childhood" in *Childhood in African Literature*. Oxford, 1998.