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## INTERNATIONAL & COMPARATIVE EDUCATION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Female role models in Bukusu folktales: Education at the mother's hearth

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**Abstract:** Folktales serve a descriptive, as well as prescriptive role, by consistently depicting societal and cultural norms. Sexist portrayals sanction the marginality of Bukusu women, particularly when these reflect prevailing gender roles and expectations. However, contests over identity and representation are as ancient as (unwritten) history. The analysis of tales *From Our Mothers' Hearths: Bukusu Folktales and Proverbs*, offers a wide range of role models for women; some of which depict female agency in exacting circumstances (Florence, N., 2005. *From our Mothers' Hearths: Bukusu Folktales and Proverbs*. NJ: Africa World Pres/The Red Sea Press). Further, females as narrators, protagonists, and the primary audience act as both curator and creators of culture.

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### 1. Introduction

Social, cultural, economic, and political structures undergird rather than determine individual choices; an everyday activity, such as mothering or spousal choice, can mirror previous actions (kinships rules) but also set a precedent. For the greater part, choices reflect learned behavior as everyday structures

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The myths and folktales of societies have long been studied for the insights they provide about the cultures that create and perpetuate them. In this instance, the analysis of Bukusu folktales shows the importance of narrated stories in shaping what society expects of women; they illustrate what women do and what they are allowed to do, a case-study, as it were, of the relationship between a society and its beliefs. The language and pictures used to communicate ideas and rituals in books, media, music, and art, even imaginary tales, represent women as incapable of feats society typically honors in men. Retrieving folktales of women in leadership roles provides alternative roles models for youth. It is therefore crucial to question narrated stories because they define what and who society considers important, valuable and of worth. Unfortunately, few Bukusu stories highlight self-determined, smart, courageous, and prophetic women.

are embraced as tried and true. However, as some Bukusu folktales demonstrate, females have charted destinies over and above patriarchal demands and gender expectations. Similarly, females as narrators choose what to emphasize in tales and the audience selects what values to embrace from any one of the tales.

The authenticity of folktales arises from their foundation in everyday sense experiences. Further, the consistency of tale types sanctions their legitimacy despite the selectivity in appropriation of cultural mores. Penalties for social breaches “legitimate action patterns and inform the operation of institutions that embody particular value patterns” (Smith, 2001, p. 26). Omissions of more egalitarian role types marginalize these positions, and ignore inevitable multi-perspectives in life; society’s cultural sanction of male privilege in myth and reality subordinates women’s status and interests. The process denies females a tradition of agency and solidarity. To this end, an interrogation of cultural conduits and norms allows communities to critique received social knowledge that undermines human fulfillment (Ramphele, 1990, p. 16): “What is at stake in social change is the most basic power of all: the power to define what and who is real, what and who is valuable, what and who matters” (Minnich, 2005, p. 262, italics in original). As primary narrators, women are central to any community’s curation and creation of cultural identities. Highlighting female agency legitimizes the place, interests, and capacities of an otherwise subordinated group.

Parents transmit ethnic knowledge through child rearing practices and instruction as well as through modeling of gender roles. In Bukusu communities, role expectations reflect unequal power relations despite differences in receptivity and allegiance to received knowledge. A similar pattern appears in tales which reinforce sexism and discount the presence of strong female role models in a society. However, folktales also set up unrealistic portrayals that girls can reject, considering males are more exciting and female characters appear ridiculous. On the other hand, diligent, courageous, defiant, insightful, protective, and visionary females demonstrate capacities for identifying problems and potential solutions, anticipating barriers, and considering consequences of various solutions (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000).

While sanctioning particular social values, communities dictate social roles and gender demarcations through stories and proverbs. Indeed, my deceased grandfather, Wanami, (d. 1979) along with younger conservative Bukusu men and women, would dismiss women’s football as *busilu* (foolishness). And that men watch women play football would elicit a flippant grunt in a world of clearly demarcated gender roles, expectations, and aspirations. Sexist attitudes and practices within Bukusu communities are not atypical. In his off-the-cuff remarks after the opening of a Nairobi Conference for East African Women Parliamentarians on 6 March 2001, Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi attributed women’s insignificant progress to their “little minds” (*East African Standard; The Daily News*, March 7, 2001). In 1989, at the height of the late Professor Wangari Maathai’s opposition to former President Moi’s “ego-driven 60–storey Kanu complex,” he scolded her kind who had “*dudus* (insects) in their heads” (Warigi, 2011, p. 3). As both anecdotes illustrate, if male attributes (assertiveness, rationality, visionary, etc.) justify privilege, females exhibiting these qualities threaten existing gender divisions and, by extension, patriarchal structures. Females as well as males, who defy traditional gender roles, draw hostility or punitive ostracism; men who participate in domestic chores in the presence of women are chided, as are women who assume roles traditionally restricted to men. To maintain the façade of male supremacy, groups dismiss or downplay contradictory facts or imagery. In early October, 2000, about 100 Kenyan women demonstrated against the proposed Equality Bill, citing cultural imperialism during a landmark year of achievements. Purportedly, the Bill undermined spiritual, cultural, and customary gender roles.

Mysyk (2007) discusses the role of mentors in the process of lifelong learning. Mentors are a source of guidance and support in the recipient’s significant transition, particularly, in adolescence (pp. 207–217). Asserting that identity is socially and historically constructed, Mysyk identifies stories, relationships, day-to-choices and events as influences on identity (pp. 211–214). Conformity means sharing the group’s preferences and values. Most Kenyans derive their primary identity from

membership in a family, kinship group, or ethnic group, a social bond between family members that spans generations. In folktales, youth are beholden to elders in *Kalisanga and Kalisanga*, as well as in *The Story of Nasio*. Wives fare no better under husbands in *Kasaawa and his Garden of Pumpkins*. Typically, parties sacrifice primary interests for purposes of cultural bonding.

Violence against ogres, wives, and children is commonplace in folktales. The death penalty appears a primary corrective to social breaches. However, violence relativizes the value of human life, particularly women's lives. Mwangi (1983) justifies the lack of affectivity in such punitive extremes to a hostile environment that fosters uncompromising choices (pp. 43–46). Such rationale ignores the impact of modeled behavior upon impressionable youth. The omission of resistance to violence, excepting male confrontation of ogres, reflects distinct socialization patterns (Seppala, 1993, pp. 71–173). Abuses of power illustrate the asymmetry and dominance in relationships. Downplaying the threat, Ramphele (1990) sees the use of force over minorities as the lack of rather than an indicator of power (p. 11).

Bisin, Patacchini, Verdier, and Zenou (2011, pp. 1046–1050) note the price cultural outsiders pay for opposition to sanction mores. In folktales, penalties follow deviations from an existing social order. The barren woman deserves no children. Sitati murders his brother-in-law for his greed and insensitivity. The murderous Njabila and Ngoya die for taking the lives of spouses. Vindictive stepmothers lose their lives, or, at the least, their husbands' affection and loyalty. However, when bad things happen to good people, society has established retributive means of correction. Individual acts benefit or jeopardize the whole community and adults are cultural guardians.

While Finnegan (1970) cautions against a functionalist reading of folktales by scholars, these are a primary cultural conduit in communities with limited access to a literary or mass media networks (pp. 330–334). Tales are recited during impressionable adolescent years, when most young people are constructing identities and worldviews. The analysis of females in Bukusu folktales exposes unexamined places of authority and privilege. Both myth and reality depict “the world as a precarious place for women, a world where women are vulnerable, fearful, and often mistreated or despised” (Jordan & Kalcik, 1985, p. 27). They are married off, or some predicament befalls them. Females who reject selected suitors or ignore male/social edicts are eventually subdued.

Bourdieu offers a middle ground to positivists and theories of self-determination in recognizing the impact of socialization on human actions as much as individual choice based on available resources and previous experiences (Swartz, 1997, p. 106). Beneficiaries of prevailing structures tend to favor orthodoxy what they equate to a stability and security devoid of self-interest. Yet, actors bring the assumptions, expectations, and aspirations of their location in the hierarchical social order to each and every situation and interaction. Women understand their roles and limitations based on prevailing norms and also their unique experiences both of which provide a structure that undergirds choices within the collective. There are no clear-cut boundaries in the social world or absolutes in physical boundaries; both of which are perpetually negotiated by parties. While language, knowledge, and cultural life shape interactions, individuals have the capacity to reason. As such, ongoing embellishments of original folktales, as well as depictions of tensions in relationships, manifest a group's efforts at (re)constructing reality, what Okpewho (1999, p. 184) attributes to the “natural urge for self-determination.” The presence of uncompromising females and recurring contests for recognition illustrate a drive to achieve established goals that benefit both self as much as the community.

## 2. Significance of tales

Folktales reflect a group's cultural identity and serve as tools of education as much as entertainment in relatively isolated communities. Dundes (1965, p. 277) notes how folklore aids, “in the education of the young, promoting a group's feeling of solidarity, providing socially sanctioned ways for individuals to act superior to or to censure other individuals, serving as a vehicle for social protest, offering an enjoyable escape from reality, and converting full work into play.” Appiah (1992, p. 67)

stresses the “self-validation” to a people accustomed to cultural definitions or omissions in (foreign) literary texts to counter complexes from years of denigration and self-abasement. In Bukusu folktales, man is the ideal being. Events center on human life and occur within families. The human community epitomizes peace and order; resolutions to threats from ogres, individual breaches or natural disasters restore the social order. Heroes demonstrate their courage and significance of victory through hardships rather than a predestined calling in Bukusu folktales. Yet, folktales also reflect unexpressed contests of representation in depicting self-determined females and youth. Although African communities dismiss children’s views, the destruction of a menacing ogre is averted by a child’s initiative in, *An Arranged Marriage*.

Bisin et al. (2011) underscore the realism and primacy of social identity and community as portrayed in Bukusu folktales. Given the precarious existence, social cohesion may have been of greater significance than individual autonomy (p. 1048). Within social groups, folktales convey unconscious human desires and fears, striking a balance between the *public faces* of rationality and sentimentality (Jones, 1965, pp. 88–102). The overt prohibition of socially disruptive behavior in public may account for the depiction of ogres and animals as embodying anti-social fantasies (Miruka, 1994, pp. 170–174). Thompson (1996, pp. 392–398) links the presence of ogres in folktales to imagined fears of death and a natural desire to overcome it or its personification but cautions against looking for psychoanalytic interpretations of myths and folktales. Miruka views folktales as occasionally portraying ogres positively in order to emphasize the vice of man. The ogre in *Mulongo and Wacheche the Ogre*, manifests socially desirable traits in its interaction with humans. In this light, women become the shadow on which society projects the other when the masculine is the norm.

As an educative tool, folktales provide a network of meanings for cultural norms and practices, what Bascom (1996) terms image and its images of other groups; although he acknowledges differences between folklore and culture (p. 268). In his analysis of the role of psychological and institutional defense mechanism in times of change, Akong’a (1997, pp. 3–19) illustrates how social norms provide stability and consistency by prescribing social roles and behaviors. As cultural and moral ideals, folktale characters legitimize modes of social existence. *Namunguba and His Brother-in-Law Sitati* portrays an occupation, kinship alliances, relational tensions, greed, revenge, etc. On the other hand, the image of folktales as frivolous entertainment, undeserving of scholarly attention, undermines their legitimacy (Finnegan, 1970, pp. 25–47), compared to “masculine” oriented historical traditions and memories purportedly based on fact and targeting a relatively adult audience (Pender-Cudlip, 1972, pp. 3–24). Yet, folktales highlight women’s activities and their role in cultural transmission, particularly the immediacy of everyday tensions, resolutions, and world views; what Jordan and Kalcik (1985, p. xiv) term the “complexities of human culture as seen from multiple perspectives.” However, the subordination of the genre, devalues women as its primary representatives.

Ramphele (1990) views power as the ability to use resources to secure outcomes as well as both defining and constructing symbols (pp. 11–12). If language captures and reinforces social meaning, women as nurturers and storytellers help to define reality as well as transform structural inequalities. Women’s complicity in sanctioning male privilege raises questions of responsibility. In *Enchanted Maidens: Gender Relations in Spanish Folktales of Courtship and Marriage*, Nahuat and Mayan women, comparable to women elsewhere, promote their own subordination by socializing children according to the values of the male-dominant public culture (Taggart, 1990, pp. 219–224). Among the Marakwet of Kenya, similar to neighboring communities, the privilege of constructing social meaning is primarily based on gender and age although Moore acknowledges that “power does not operate in a uniform and monolithic way” (1986, p. 194). The position transcends an acceptance of historical gender ordering at the center of academic and ideological discourse. While appealing to human emotions, folktales also foster assessments of prevailing philosophies (De Vos & Altmann, 1999, p. 23). In this light, assertive females epitomize alternative albeit sidelined identities.

The significance of fairy tales narrated to children, mostly before age nine and in the process of forming an identity, cannot be understated. Since evil consistently befalls violators of social norms, one has to assume that folktales discourage such traits in humans, albeit implicitly. Stone (1985, p. 125) wonders whether tales are “damaging because of their violence or irrationality, or whether they instead furnished powerful fantasies good for developing psyches.” The consistency in depicting women as subordinate in character, sanctions prevailing sexist beliefs and practices. Stone admits that most tales depict “young girls who are passive and helpless ... (powerful women) are older (and) often wicked stepmothers” (p. 127). Smith (2001, p. 59) acknowledges the impact of myth, but recognizes differences in how people “create and use meaning.” The depiction of Bukusu women captures incidents of agency as much as structural influences on choice. Although beholden to men in large part, female protagonists in, *Namulunda the Neglected Wife, an Old Lady, a Young Woman and the Ogres*, as well as *The Ogres and the Infant*, orchestrate resolutions to predicaments absent male audience or assistance.

Communities use folktales for entertainment and education, but primarily as a bonding ritual. Setting folktales in a fantastic, non-human world lifted the minds of narrator and listener to a world without limitations and blissful wish fulfillment (Rohrich, 1991, pp. 92–111). Listeners and readers tolerate atypical behavior, such as talking animals, marriage between ogres and humans, sadistic acts, and unnatural escapes without rationalistic deliberations. In *Khangaliba, the Boy and the Ogre*, the bride-to-be is stuffed in a tree hole. Also, in *The Girl with the Unique Scarifications* and *The Ogres and the Infant*, humans conjure hailstorms and lightning, respectively. The *Barren Woman* acquires children from bark skins. In myth, nothing is impossible. Such aberrations in folktales make the omission of women in leadership roles conspicuous and prescriptive. The portrayal of courage, adventure, control over families and resources, could just as frequently be depicted by either gender. There could also be depictions of women beating up husbands or ogres taking over human communities.

## 2.1. General themes

Although plots vary in location or historic period, names of folktales consistently reflect cultural roles and expectations. Recurring motifs in Bukusu folktales include jealous stepmothers, human and non-human interactions, neglected wives, the plight of orphaned stepchildren, contests of wit and physical stamina, ecological disasters, a threatening environment, human resilience, domesticated animals, domestic chores, community life, scarification of young girls, etc. The heroes are ordinary farmers, shepherds, stepmothers, husbands, and orphans, all of who represent familiar social roles. In Bukusu folktales, the reader meets Nyaranga, the ironsmith; Namunguba and Sitati, the hunters; Namulunda, the neglected wife; Lukela and Lutomia, the malicious stepmothers; the barren women, Mukoya and Namuyemba; Manyonge, the hunter; Khayonga, with the unique scarifications; Kulundu, the shepherd; etc. Animals and ogres also have names: Khole, the unique bull; Menumenu, Muangaki ekulu, and Wacheche, the ogres. Regardless of plot, males come off in better light than females whom tales frequently portray as negative, gullible, and reckless beings. Within marital arrangements, defiant females are subdued, infertility is attributed to a woman’s moral culpability, bride-wealth settles parental concerns for daughters, and in polygamous unions stepmothers exploit vulnerable stepchildren.

### 2.1.1. Males

In *Once upon a Kingdom*, Okpewho illustrates how social hierarchies involve networks of meaning and expression that privilege particular interests and concerns to create cultural hegemony. Folktales portray males as visionary, responsible, courageous, and with inordinate power. Women come off as an alter ego. Even male children exhibit a perception that is lacking in adult females.

Most folktales portray males in authority and as individuals who have power over death. In myth and reality, male privilege is founded on control “over the means of production, land, and cattle” (Nasimiyu, 1997, p. 284). Male interests prevail including, the choice of spouses, bride wealth, and living arrangements. In *An Arranged Marriage* and *Khachelechenje*, Khayanga, and Makokha’s family, respectively, promise daughters to marriage partners they neither know nor particularly appear to



desire. That husbands pay bride-wealth may further reinforces the marginality of women. To the present, most Bukusu men define masculinity as outgrowing female-related traits and characteristics including childishness and lack of autonomy.

As household heads, fathers protect families by their presence and ensure security in their absence. None of the Bukusu tales depict ogres attacking homes unprovoked; incidents which are frequently instigated by a female's breach. In both *Nyaranga the Ironsmith and the Ogre* as well as *Nalubanga and her Brother Tukhila*, the brothers warn female siblings against ogres and Tukhila even resuscitates his sister by rejoining her skeleton bones after the ogres make a meal of her. Male kin are portrayed as protective, ingenious, and diligent. The rescue effort is replete with male imagery.

Folktales frequently portray women at work, rather than at leisure oriented beer feasts and dance gatherings. In communities, women's domestic chores relieve governments of funding for social programs, such as child/elderly care, crucial to community welfare. However, men occupy the apex of authority structures. Communities relegate girls to domestic and child rearing roles, under the supervision of males and adult females. Females are confined to the domestic sphere and engaged in subsistence occupations: farming, collecting firewood, foraging for vegetables, fetching water, and raising children. In *Kasaawa and the Garden of Pumpkins*, males congregate at beer-fests, while wives are depicted in domestic spheres, engaged in farming, threshing of millet and childcare. Only in *The Daughters of Chiefs Sudi and Namutala*, do two girls attend a courtship ceremony. Although women hold extensive responsibilities in the domestic sphere, men retain ultimate decision-making power on what transpires in and outside homes.

The association of a public sphere with reason, objectivity, and vision ennobles males whose control over women predates but was also reinforced by Colonialism and Christianity (Nasong'o & Ayot, 2007). The traditional gender hierarchy creates, "authoritarian and over-centralized state structure engendered" to men (p. 164): "parents, schools, peers and the media orient girls towards 'feminine' mothering and wifely roles while encouraging boys into 'masculine' roles that include being aggressive and ambitious and venturing into the world beyond the domestic arena" (p. 166). House work and childcare appear secondary and requiring neither skill nor training. Nasimiyu (1997) justifies Bukusu patriarchy maintaining women had virtual control and monopoly of crop production (pp. 283–289). Yet male household heads possessed exclusive rights to the means of production, land and cattle, as well as the labor of women and children. Wandibba (1997) posits a more bucolic pre-colonial era of gender complementarity. Overall, traditional divisions of labor have undergone transformation over the years though gender roles persist (pp. 332–340). Women's honor remains limited: "A Bukusu woman is appreciated in a limited sphere of agricultural and domestic work. Industriousness and submissiveness are qualities that men look for when they want to marry. These are the qualities that mothers advise their daughters to follow and mother-in-laws repeat to them" (Seppala, 1993, p. 79).

The depiction of males as the foundation of communities contrasts sharply with a simultaneous portrayal of their capricious nature; imaginably, a subtle admission of fallibility in an ideal. In *Kasaawa and his Garden of Pumpkins*, the husband forbids his wife Mukoya to harvest from one of the plots before undertaking an extended trip. The children die from eating the forbidden produce after exhausting the allotted portion. Upon his return, the husband resurrects his children by stroking them with a medicinal herb, *lufufu*: capricious men, perhaps, but powerful enough to resuscitate dead children. Children die and are resurrected; voiceless in life and nameless in death. The Bukusu proverb *Nandakambilwa kakona khumwanda kwe njoli* (fools rush in where angels fear to tread!) cautions youngsters against disregarding the advice of elders. In spite of conventional platitudes regarding the value of children, folktales portray children as unreliable at best. Perhaps reflecting the conventional cliché of children being seen rather than heard, few folktales center on children alone. Injunctions of children "being seen, nor heard," capture the cultural subordination of children's visibility and interests.

Children are a primary source of labor. Brides earn dowry for exploitive parents. A number of families indenture their children to wealthier relatives and patrons in urban centers. The Kenyan media ran a series on Nairobi “Bureaus that turn girls (*ayahs*) into chattels,” with some girls as young as ten (Omukhango, 1998). To date, as indentured workers, most live under a shroud of fear, enduring physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of employers, particularly, fellow women. Stories of jealously malicious stepmothers epitomize abusive relations within polygamous families. The recurrence of scheming stepmothers in Bukusu folktales probably demonstrates women’s resistance to polygamous unions. Aware of the partiality in such unions, co-wives resist traditional mores experienced as oppressive, albeit underhandedly.

There is an obvious contrast between the folktales of orphaned male and female children, despite similarities in plight. In *The Girl with Unique Scarifications*, as well as *Nalubanga and her Brother Tukhila*, female victims are rescued from their predicament by third parties. However, in *Simbi and Syuma*, the male orphan subverts the plot of a scheming stepmother and emerges with notable success. In myth and life, children can play a crucial role. Female siblings in *Kangaliba, the Boy and the Ogre*, initiate a bride into her marital community and expose an ogre that dupes both bride and groom.

#### 2.1.2. Females

Folktales consistently portray women in domestic roles, gullible to the lures of ogres and strangers, and dependent upon men folk. Making reckless choices, girls endanger their lives and the community’s welfare. Girls are married off to spouses they neither know nor care for. Women exploit stepchildren in the absence of adult males. Also, despite elements of distributive justice in folktales, women, more frequently than men, lose their lives.

Transgression, or rather, independence, in women, regarding spouses, is at the expense of community protection and goodwill. That assertive women suffer for overstepping their boundaries, reflects reality; “many females find fairy tales an echo of their own struggle to become human beings” (Stone, 1985, p. 144). The females in *The Girl who Rejected Suitors* and *A Girl Called Sisiwe* are both eventually tricked into marriage, deflating any notion of female autonomy outside a prescribed marital ideal. The caveat against undue pride and self-assertiveness in females reflects the futility of such ambitions but also the primacy of community over individual interests; except in males. Yet, the girls’ dissenting voices and the fact that stories are named after them reflect an agency.

Besides compromising women’s ability to accumulate wealth, cultural definitions and practices limit individual women’s overall autonomy. *The Girl who Rejected Suitors*, loses protection and goodwill for denying the community bride-wealth. The abducted daughter’s father concedes to the marriage and accepts the dowry. Opponents of the system point to excesses, the commodification of women and the financial strain on newlyweds in addition to a “legitimized male appropriation of female and child labor” (Nasimiyu, 1997, p. 289). Some view it as a symbol of the wife’s material and emotional backing. *Namulunda the Neglected Wife* benefits from her natal family’s protection against a callous husband. Wagner (1949) acknowledges the price girls pay in marriage: it “means for a girl that she has to leave her parental home and join a group of persons who will make numerous demands upon her and who often will show a very critical attitude towards her accomplishments and her conduct as a wife” (p. 380).

Women are reputed to be indecisive and divisive, in contrast to men, who are focused, responsible, and visionary, in Minnich’s (2005) terms, the man’s alter ego (p. 195). Societies like the Marakwet of Kenya use adjectives like “individualism,” “thoughtlessness,” and “uncontrollability” for females while “maleness may become associated with a series of things like, ‘big’, ‘sky’, (and) ‘right’” (Moore, 1986, p. 168). The subordination of women reflects dominant representations of gender in language as well as day-to-day village beliefs and practices that reproduce power relations (pp. 155–188). Felski’s (2011, p. 38) draws on a tradition of feminist analysis linking language to cultural identities:

Our sense of what it means to be a woman, of how women look, talk, think, and feel, comes from books we read, the films we watch, and the invisible ether of everyday assumptions and cultural beliefs in which we are suspended. Thus language and culture play a crucial part in reproducing the unequal relations between men and women. Patriarchal power pervades verbal and visual systems of meaning. Within such systems, woman is always connected to and inseparable from man. Men's ability to symbolize the universal, the absolute, and the transcendent depends on the continuing association of femaleness with difference, otherness, and inferiority.

Apart from *Weswa* in *The Ogre that Lost its Tail and the Two Dogs Kutubi and Namulikho* and the man duped by *The Squirrel and Hyena*, gullible females, rather than males, fall prey to ogres. In *An Arranged Marriage* a group of damsels in distress are eventually rescued by one of the fathers, Tunde, the son of Walianda. He is out and about in places females and children frequent to collect firewood. Alternatively, communities live in such harmony that socially destructive behavior, when it occurs, is unexpected. However, in *Simbi and Syuma* the orphaned child overhears the plot against his life and tricks the stepmother into killing Syuma her own son. Folktales portray boys as more perceptive or intuitive of strained relations. Evidently, cultural distinctions arise much earlier or else, are innate in boys.

Oral narratives depict women as voiceless individuals, less intelligent than men, as domestic aides, totally dependent on men and overcome by jealousy and malice (Chesaina, 1994, pp. 85–92). Moore (1986, p. 164) links gender representation and perception to everyday relationships between men and women. The division of labor, organization of marriage, household structures and gender specific judicial status within communities, reflect and reinforce gender conceptualizations and hierarchical arrangements. In communities, politicians and their precursor village chiefs, command inordinate power and wealth from gratuitous pledges. Across the country, men dominate the public sphere in representation and decision-making power. The Center for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW, 2011, p. 24), chronicles the gender imbalances in politics.

Although women make up 52% of the Kenyan population, they remain largely underrepresented in political and decision-making processes ... in Parliament out of 222 members only 18 women, 10 elected and 8 nominated. The level of under representation manifests itself further when we look at the ministerial and other dockets. Only 2 out of 34 Ministers are women, just 6 out of 46 assistant ministers are women, 7 out of 34 permanent secretaries, only 2 out of 71 DCs are women, just 15 out of 45 ambassadors are women and a mere 12 out of 44 are high court judges.

In the search for identity and place, females face tremendous hurdles including conformity to traditional gender roles coupled by limited education access (Barasa, 2007). Clinton (2010) highlights the ongoing plight of women:

Women are still the majority of the world's poor, uneducated, unhealthy, unfed. They are the majority of the world's farmers, but are often forbidden from owning land they cultivate or accessing credit. Women care for the world's sick, but women and girls are less likely to get treatment. They rarely cause armed conflicts but always suffer consequences and are often excluded from peace talks. And violence against women remains a global pandemic.

Although Ramphela (1990) roots unequal relations in gender, class, race, geographic region, age, etc., not all women are similarly disadvantaged (pp. 7–17) as postmodern feminism illustrates: “while some women share some common interests and face some common enemies, such commonalities are by no means universal; they are interlaced with differences, with conflicts.” (Fraser & Nicholson, 2011, p. 235) Bukusu folktales capture this disparity in depictions of women's agency, however ambivalently.

The depiction of independent women who use power destructively undermines their moral authority. Although marginalized by patriarchal structures, older or economically privileged women



readily exploit female dependents, particularly in domestic spheres. The *Barren Woman* is happy to acquire children who help out with chores but exploits them; especially, the hunchback who runs errands in the home and is also in charge of drying Mukoya's medicinal concoctions. Women find their identity in childbearing and the association to the male as brother, father, and husband. And matchmakers have their fee, especially from well-endowed grooms and families.

Okpewho (1999, p. 127) attributes the marginalization of some women to old age or the possession of "questionable traits of character or unspeakable acts that automatically disqualify them from ordinary interactions." Most Bukusu marriages are formalized at the birth of the first child. Since social maturity is tied closely to lineage, reproduction makes a man and barren women lack purpose and worth (Moore, 1986, p. 58). Barren women are pariahs in folktales and real life, and childlessness is viewed as a penalty for personal or moral inadequacy. Seemingly, cultural beliefs tramp science; African communities attribute infertility to women for whom it signifies, "a punishment from God or wrath of the ancestral spirits for sins committed, usually by the woman" (CREAW, 2011, p. 10). Indeed, *The Barren Woman* exonerates the husband by absentia. She suffers the loss of helpers for being insensitive to a handicapped child and for her exploitation of his siblings. By implication, the protagonist is guilty of moral failure, absolving a system that privileges a few. In contrast, "... Impotence of the husband, on the other hand, may disrupt a marriage for reasons of sex but hardly for reasons of procreation, as with the husband's tacit agreement one of his brothers step into his place" (Wagner, 1949, p. 43). Yet again, sexist imagery and language limits the aspirations of females and ennobles masculinity.

Despite overwhelming portrayals of female incapacities, the mother in, *The Ogres and the Infant*, singlehandedly saves her family from starvation. She scouts an ogres' homestead and farm, orchestrates an illicit harvest in the night losing her infant in the process. She successfully strategizes the rescue of her child and destroys all the ogres. In the end, she assumes ownership of a farm of bounteous pumpkins to the family's benefit. In communities, women's political visibility and gains in access to resources also compel negotiations of mainstream knowledge and the prevailing patriarchal order. Further, the breakdown in kinship ties and tradition coupled with encroaching urbanization and greater access to education across gender trigger cultural redefinitions. Challenges to dominant discourses come at a great expense as both reality and myth demonstrate.

## 2.2. Contested tradition

Most scholars underscore the dynamic nature of cultural realities and identities. Moore views society as a site of contested representation and resistance to power. Giray (1996, p. 11) also disputes the conventional portrayal of tradition as a collection of immutable experiences, arguing that tradition, "may be something that does change to accommodate, comment upon, and sometimes resist social change and transformation." While Bukusu, similar to most African communities, have thrived on shared norms and established social hierarchies, misdeeds in folktales reveal internal conflicts in the system. Stories of abusive stepmothers and fathers, exploitative relationships, gullible spinsters, and disobedient children reveal the "emotional conflicts and affective contradictions generated by the prevailing and generally accepted hierarchical order and matrimonial rules" (Gorog-Karady, 1995, p. 84). However, since folktales highlight tensions within a social structure rather than the structure itself, there is danger of legitimating social roles and, thereby, reducing critiques and resistance to an individual assault on organized society. Folktales depict the acts of scheming mothers and an insensitive barren woman or capricious males in *Njabila and his Wife Namae* as aberrations of a marital ideal without challenging the institution.

Charges of illogical and infantile uneducated women illustrate the complexity and difficulty of cultural transformation. Kenyan culture stereotypes girls as "irrational, gullible, confused, and unable to make judgments about what is good for them" (Akong'a, 1997, p. 17). Meanwhile, educated women are often labeled independent and uncompromising, indifferent to family ties and old traditions (Nasong'o & Ayot, 2007, p. 179). That men, as well as women, chide assertive females reflects the community's uneasiness toward a blurring of traditional roles which are assumed to be

“natural.” Among Bukusu, Elijah Masinde (1911–1987), of the *Dini ya Musambwa*, would unleash his followers on scantily-dressed girls in the market centers in Bungoma and Kitale, claiming the girls were prostituting—an act that was an abomination to God and to the people (males) (Wipper, 1978, pp. 132–198). Filled with ambivalence for abandoning traditional customs and patriarchal privileges, men compensate by ensuring that women uphold the mores.

Male privilege is inevitable in societies where males possess inordinate social power. Yet, elders have authority over marital arrangements, but sometimes err in choice of spouses for daughters, as *The Story of Nasio* demonstrates. In reality, social hierarchies have been severely challenged by emerging social and economic systems. The participation of youth and women in a monetary economy and their increasing political transparency, challenges male authority as breadwinners and exclusive guardians. That Bukusu folktales portrayal female agency in the absence of adult males avoids confronting male supremacy and, by extension, a gender hierarchy, in domestic and public spheres.

### 3. Empowering models

Folktales sanction existing social values, but also subvert existing social arrangements by providing “socially approved outlets for the repressions which these same institutions impose” (Bascom, 1996, p. 298). They portray contrasting forces of good against evil, cleverness against the stupidity, heroes against villains, favored spouses against neglected ones, all of which reflect the ambivalence in the lives of most listeners. In terms of gender, folktales depict women as narrators, nurturers, laborers, and some with inordinate power over nature.

Although Bukusu folktales reflect a gender hierarchy, female agency disputes this essentialist view of women’s ineptitude, as the stories of *Namulunda the Neglected Wife*, *an Old Lady*, *a Young Woman and the Ogres*, as well as *The Ogres and the Infant* illustrate; female heroines orchestrate the resolution of predicaments. In *The Ogres and the Infant*, a mother—in classic Western-style adventure—rescues her daughter and destroys a whole herd of ogres, in the process gaining access to a bounteous plantation of pumpkins during a famine. At the end of the tale, her husband and family assume ownership, although conspicuously absent during the woman’s plight and eventual feat. Similarly, in *An Old Woman, a Young Girl and the Ogres*, an old lady organizes a narrow escape, camouflaged in manure to repulse the ogres en route, while the young girl parts waters for them to cross over to safety and human territory, reminiscent of the renowned Exodus experience in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The subversive quality of these tales and those portraying males as capricious or non-humans with desirable characteristics cannot be overlooked.

Okpewho (1999, p. 190) links “tales of self-assertion” to “recognition of identity, and equality in the political playing field.” Mainstream ideologies tend to promote selective social knowledge. The absence of women’s voices, resilience, and self-assertion illustrates the partiality in those cultural histories and within social mores. In 1913, the Giriama Mekatili Wa Menza led a rebellion against the Colonial administration’s policies and in 1922, Mary Nyanjiru faced the colonists gun when men refused to fight (Ikonya, 2008). The 2004 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dr. Wangari Maathai (2006) consistently fenced off political silencing in her memoir, *Unbowed*. The notoriety of Mekatili, Mary, Wangari and folktale depictions of autonomous women illustrate either their rarity or a lack of visibility in Kenyan communities. What are the “silences,” in Bukusu folktales? Scheming stepmothers reflect conventional views regarding the partiality of stepmothers in polygynous unions, despite the existence of impartial stepmothers. A similar correction applies to models of diligent youth, protective fathers, or for that matter, harmonious communities. Breaches of social roles pose a threat to gendered ideologies in African communities. By contrast, independent women develop the space and authority to reassess allegiances and reverence to prevailing structures. They depict females in control of destinies and as catalysts of social change. In *The Story of Nasio*, a father mistakenly marries off the daughter to an ogre. Nasio plans her escape back to her natal homestead after the birth of the first child which gives her time to consider options and risks. Even then, an ogre clings to her and has to be beaten off with the help of Nasio’s brother Muabini. There is a wide range of role

models, some more obvious than others. On the other hand, that women recount disempowering folktales raises questions of agency as much as perception and responsibility.

Women's economic and political Women account for 53% of Kenya's electoral vote but yet society marginalizes their tasks, traits, and characteristics in myth and reality. Okpewho (1999, p. x) acknowledges that "myth reflects the structure of relations between people but ultimately the implications for contemporary society of prejudices inscribed in those relations." He attributes the misogyny in folktales to women's acceptance of the "religious or cultural tradition which puts women on a lower rung of the social ladder, and sees little need to alter the facts of the tale and upset the order of things" (1983, p. 91). Although women and men have different perceptions of reality, both are enmeshed in existing structures of meaning and practice, in this case, a gender hierarchy: "Women are not 'free' from the images society provides them; they are socialized, just as forcibly as men, into accepting social norms and values. When women construct representations of themselves, they do so using the material, which the socially dominant representations of women provide" (Moore, 1986, p. 184). As tokens in male-dominated fields like sports, "women respond to performance pressures, heightened visibility, and gender adversity by embracing stereotypical roles and behaving accordingly (i.e. consistent with the female identity)" (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007, p. 251). Seemingly, sameness is inextricably linked to differences. One understands man by what he is not and vice versa.

#### 4. Conclusion

Folktales offer an alternative view to historical narratives dominated by male narrators and ideals. Narrators, most of whom are women and youth, uphold traditional beliefs and shape the construction of identities. Of great concern is the sexism in folktales, which is prevalent, even though narrators are primarily women. Further, while most Bukusu folktales portray women as less assertive, less ethical and often indecisive if not dependent on male folk; women nurture future generations and, through folktales, foster norms and values that maintain communities. Further, self-determined protagonists offer models of strategic, resourceful, daring, and visionary females.

While folktales reflect and sanction the subordination of women in society, most Bukusu men maintain a protective stance toward mothers, while deriding femininity. The worst insult within Bukusu communities ("Kumao," literally, "Your mother!") as with other Kenyan ethnic groups, in which the denigration of an opponent's mother is equally used. It is a sure way of picking a fight. Nonetheless, a primary threat to masculinity is highlighting a man's "femininity," involving associations to the domestic and a sense of vulnerability. Are men protective of women for their vulnerability or because of their valued status? Paradoxically, men and women, readily recount women's ineptitude, while chiding those that transgress gender-based roles and expectations.

Sexist imagery trivializes women's lives and contributions; however, the economic and political dominance of men, as well as overrepresentation in education and media fails to explain the subordinate status of women worldwide given stories of female agency. On the other hand, in Bukusu folktales, women who accomplish feats or use power destructively, do so in the absence of adult males. By acknowledging female agency in predominantly female settings, folktales avoid confronting male supremacy and, by extension, a gender hierarchy, in domestic and public spheres. It appears as though men thwart women's ambition or that females fall short of a male norm of excellence. Ramphele finds the portrayal of women as victims both patronizing and paralyzing. Story telling provides a context for negotiating meaning including gender depictions.

Daily interactions, as much as cultural claims of tradition, selectively represent the past and present, both of which shape a projected future. The existence of self-empowered females in Bukusu folktales testifies to their real presence in history. Within my primary *Bayaya* clan, *Namuyemba*, the barren woman is remembered for her independent and resourceful spirit as much as the miraculous cure of barrenness. Similar contests over social constructions influences child rearing practices and, ultimately, cultural expressions. The concern over "rebellious," disgruntled youth and

“uncooperative” women may well signify broader, real-life social redefinitions. An analysis of existing structures engages members in a critical evaluation of what is, and the necessity of promoting egalitarian models. In contrast, the essentialist focus on sexist imagery and women’s subordination within Bukusu folktales and related scholarship deny the complexity of an age old issue. Ramphele (1990, p. 16) also blames scholars for the maintenance of inequalities. Scholars who encode, transmit, and ennoble existing symbols and languages benefit from their role and reinforce power relations. She views feminism as an industry jealously guarded by its beneficiaries, “what with the travelling, conferences, seminars, books and other benefits that are attached to this industry” (p. 16). Am I any less complicit in highlighting the status of Bukusu women?

Highlighting human agency, the French Michel de Certeau acknowledges the impact of day-to-day small subversive acts in social change (Smith, 2001, pp. 162–163). Victimology sanctions power differentials ennobling the powerful in traditional roles and absolving the other of agency, accountability and advocacy. However, assertive and autonomous females in Bukusu folktales and lived reality show that cultural ideologies of unequal gender relations are neither consistent nor successful. Exposure to a variety of beliefs and practices, even those imbedded in folklore, broadens the audience’s outlook. Empowered Bukusu females are not an aberration!

Undergirding kinship rules and expectations are everyday experiences that both reinforce and normalize prevailing traditions. Everyday actions unwittingly reproduce the social order. Acceptance, honor, and the sense of belonging foster similar choices while penalties and ostracism as much as destruction of property warns against deviations. The reproduction of prevailing norms decouples them from contexts in which they originated. Men went out hunting as ethnic settlements overtook more nomadic lifestyles, irrevocably changing socialization patterns and gender roles. Changes in family structure have undergone similar revisions in response to emerging social, economic, and political shifts at national and global levels. Until decades ago, fish was taboo among *Bayaya* clan in the Bukusu community. In our generation, more *Bayaya* eat fish but the change began with a few renegades and in an uncoordinated fashion. Similar prohibitions prevailed against putting down one’s palm while eating or whistling in the dark. In setting precedents, empowered women disrupt established gender hierarchies that depict females as dependent, un-adventurous, and vulnerable; their agency benefits them and the communities to which they belong. In due course, as counter narratives are depicted and legitimized, the novelty wears off as it has for formal education or employment and the political governance of women within Bukusu communities.

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