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McNair article

### The Separation of Kikuyu Folklore and Marriage

Surrounded by her siblings and peers the Kikuyu child listens intently as her mother continues on with the story. The beautiful young woman has agreed to sacrifice herself in the river in order to save her people from a horrible drought.<sup>1</sup> The child feels admiration for the young woman's bravery, imagining the courage it took to do such a thing for the sake of others. While the child feels admiration, she is also learning. The heroine of the tale has not only demonstrated to her what bravery and selflessness is, but also what a woman in Kikuyu society should be.

#### Introduction

Many societies have used folklore to teach the youth about their social responsibilities. This was no different for Kenya's largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu, who also used stories as a way to communicate their expectations for the up-coming generation. As time went on, however, the impact of these folktales had begun to shift. This was partly due to British colonial influence from the late 1800s to the early 1960s. During this time, competing social values coming from colonial and missionary institutions complicated how younger people would handle their social expectations. Shifting ideas of gender, sexuality, and marriage began to take place for the Kikuyu at a rapid pace, calling into question the roles of previously established institutions such as folklore. This article will examine the changes to Kikuyu marital systems in order to prove that although the meanings of Kikuyu stories might have changed, the use of these stories and their larger cultural significance did not.

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<sup>1</sup> Ngumbu Njururi, *Agikuyu Folk Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 60.

### Resources

The research I have mainly focused on for this project was ethnographic literature. This includes works such as 1938's *Facing Mount. Kenya* by Jomo Kenyatta or 1989's *Voices from Mutoria: Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women* by Jean Davison. By consulting with sources that show various perspectives on Kikuyu culture during and after the colonial period, the changes to Kikuyu marital institutions will become more apparent. I have also examined secondary sources such as Lynn Thomas's *The Politics of the Womb*, in order to provide context for these changes taking place for the Kikuyu and other Kenyan cultures. This will provide a better explanation for what pushed the younger Kikuyu to start making changes to traditional institutions in the colonial period.

### Background

British colonialism was a major catalyst for changes taking place in Kikuyu culture. During the Scramble for Africa in the late 19th century, Europeans began to colonize African territories as well as attempt to make changes to their cultures and institutions. This desire to change African culture came from the belief that Europeans would help to modernize Africa. In the article "Imperialism and Contemporary Africa: An Analysis of Continuity and Change" by Enoch Okon and Victor Ojajorotu, it is explained that this desire to change Africa came from a combination of European elitism and assumed moral obligation.<sup>2</sup> As both authors noted, "Humanitarian idealism and social Darwinism were the ideological justification for imperialism. The European perception of superiority as a race and the 'manifest destiny' to take civilization to

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<sup>2</sup> Enoch Okon and Victor Ojajorotu, "Imperialism and Contemporary Africa: An Analysis of Continuity and Change" *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* vol.5, no.2 (2018), 231.

other parts of the world was given as the altruistic motive for imperialism.”<sup>3</sup> This view was also held by the British when they took over Kenya in 1895. After the takeover, African ethnic groups, such as the Kikuyu, were pressured by the British to make changes to their ways of life. The colonial powers were able to do this through creating their own institutions such as schools and churches. As a result, the young Kikuyu were caught in a struggle between European and traditional Kikuyu values.

### The Value of Folklore

The purpose of Kikuyu folklore was to teach young people about their culture. In the article “Kenyan children literature: Transition from oral to written literature” Author Genga-Idowu explained “In pre colonial Kenya, children and young people were educated, informed, and entertained through oral literature.”<sup>4</sup> As was the case most Kenyan cultures, the Kikuyu also used oral literature or stories, as a way to guide young people. This responsibility was handled by older members of the Kikuyu as it was their job to pass social traditions from one generation to the next. By telling these stories the older Kikuyu were able to outline their expectations of the youth. In turn, when the youth listened to these stories they had role models to aspire to.

Part of these aspirations for young people was to have an adherence to specific gender roles. In Kikuyu society what was considered good behavior depended in part on a person’s gender. As a result stories that were told to the younger generation were separated on this basis. This practice remained largely the same during the colonial era, as the ethnographer Jean Davison observed in her book *Voices from Mutira: Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women*. One woman Wajiku, who recalled her childhood as being in the early colonial period, is noted by Davison as

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<sup>3</sup> Okon et al., “Imperialism Africa,” 231.

<sup>4</sup> Genga-Idowu, “Kenyan Children Literature: Transition from oral to written literature” *Bookbird* 36, no.1 (1998): 33.

stating, “Some stories made us think too, The boys were told stories by their fathers and grandfathers and the girls were told stories by their mothers and grandmother near the cooking fire.”<sup>5</sup> This gender divide in storytelling was so that Kikuyu boys and girls would have lessons tailored to their sex. British ethnographer Louis Leakey elaborates on this concept further in his book *The Southern Kikuyu Before 1903* where he wrote,

...Kikuyu children obtained most of their education...being imparted by means of stories with morals...Further education was imparted by making children share in the life of their parents. Girls learned to do agricultural work and to cook...As boys...learned to take a large share in the work of herding goats and sheep.<sup>6</sup>

Leakey’s writings reveal that stories told to young people acted as a supplement to learning gender roles. The combination of hearing specific stories and performing gendered tasks aided young people to become socially accepted in Kikuyu society.

In traditional Kikuyu marriage, the roles of husbands and wives were also very gendered. Thus for men and women to be seen as good spouses they were expected to follow gender specific practices and behaviors. Ngumbu Njururi’s tellings of Kikuyu folklore in his book, *Agikuyu Folk Tales*, provides an insight into traditional Kikuyu gender roles for marriage. For men an example of what a husband should be is found in his telling of the Ogress and Blacksmith’s wife, while expectations of women and wives can be found in the aforementioned story of the Girl and the Drought.

Njururi’s story of the Ogress and the Blacksmith’s wife tells the story of a Blacksmith who left his wife home alone to go on a work related trip. During his trip, the Blacksmith’s wife

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Davison, *Voices from Mutira: Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989), 39.; Davison, *Voices*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> L.S.B Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu Before 1903* (New York: Academic Press Inc, 1977), 2.

gives birth and attracts the attention of an orgeess who lives in the area.<sup>7</sup> The orgeess begins to starve the wife and her new baby in order to eat them later on, which prompts the wife to send for help from her husband. At the end of the story the husband makes it home on time to kill the monster and save his family. The final line from the story states, "...after that he [The Blacksmith ] looked after her [the wife] and his son tenderly and never stayed away from home so long".<sup>8</sup>

The moral at the end of the story reflected real life Kikuyu values in that a man was supposed to be there for his family. This was to provide moral support in addition to cementing the man's place as the head of the family. Men's status in Kikuyu society was heavily related to their role as leaders to their family unit.<sup>9</sup> If a Kikuyu man was not able to run his household up to standard he would not be as respected. Anthropologist and later, Kenya's first prime minister, Jomo Kenyatta, provided a Kikuyu man's perspective on this concept in his 1938 book *Facing Mt. Kenya*. As he noted "The father is the supreme ruler of the homestead...his position in the community depends largely on the type of homestead he keeps, and how he manages it, because the capability of good management of one's homestead is taken as a testimonial...to manage public affairs."<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, The Blacksmith's story is a cautionary tale for Kikuyu men. When the Blacksmith left his family for a long period of time, things fell into disarray with the end result of the family being in danger. The implication is that had the Blacksmith had stayed at home with his family, things would have remained stable. This is not to say that Kikuyu men solely valued their family for managerial purposes. At the same time Kikuyu men also were expected to be loving towards their family, as family was very important to the

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<sup>7</sup> Njururi, *Folk Tales* ,1.

<sup>8</sup> Njururi, *Folk Tales* ,3.

<sup>9</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Mercury Books,1938), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Kenyatta, *Mount. Kenya*, 9.

Kikuyu. It was the responsibility of the man to care for the well-being of all his family. Author Carolyn Clark best summarizes this concept in her article “Land and Food, Women and Power, in Nineteenth Century Kikuyu”, where she noted the difference between men and women’s perceived responsibilities in Kikuyu society. She stated “...women’s decisions were considered binding on women, while men’s decisions bound the whole group.”<sup>11</sup> Despite Clark in this instance, discussing political systems the idea of men being seen as responsible for all still held true in family systems.

In this way Njururi’s characterization of the Blacksmith as careless is plausible.<sup>12</sup> For Kikuyu boys that listened to the story, they would understand that the blacksmith’s actions were irresponsible because of his role as the head of the family. They would also understand that when they would go on to have a wife and children of their own they should not be like the blacksmith. Instead they should strive to be there for their family in order to provide support to them in order to be highly regarded in Kikuyu society.

Likewise the story of the Girl and the Drought outlines certain goals and traits for Kikuyu girls and women. In the story there is a lovely young woman who is loved by her parents and is newly engaged.<sup>13</sup> While this is going on, there is a huge drought that is threatening the livelihoods of the Kikuyu in the area. In order to stop this drought it is discovered that God wanted the girl to be sacrificed in a river. The story ends with the girl agreeing to be sacrificed despite wanting to get married. She drowns in the river and as soon as she has been sacrificed the rain comes back and the Kikuyu are saved.

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<sup>11</sup> Carolyn M. Clark, “Land and Food, Women and Power, in Nineteenth Century Kikuyu” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 50, no. 4 (1980) 360.

<sup>12</sup> Njururi, *Folk Tales*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Njururi, *Folk Tales*, 60.

Although the story does focus on the value of a woman to be selfless for the sake of her people, these values can also be applied to marriage. This is because obedience was also stressed as a trait Kikuyu women should have in their marriages. Going back to Davison's *Voices from Mutira*, another woman named Wanoi recalls her mother telling her "...the best way to be with the husband is to be obedient. When you are told anything, you will do it without asking questions..."<sup>14</sup> In the same way the story also stresses that women should do as they are told. The girl's willingness to be sacrificed is framed positively. She did what she was told and as a result her community was saved. Likewise, Kikuyu women should do what they are told in marriage to better serve their husbands.

Another duty of wives in traditional Kikuyu culture was to take care of their husbands. Going back to Kenyatta, he states "Each wife has a special duty assigned to her in the general affairs of the homestead...But the duty of looking after the husband...cleaning his hut, supplying him with firewood, water, food, ect., is shared by all".<sup>15</sup> A traditional Kikuyu wife was supposed to take care of and cater to her husband. An example from this can be seen when revisiting Clark's article, where she talks about the Kikuyu practice of work parties and the expectation of wives to carry out their husbands wishes during these functions. As she noted, "Men who could entreat the women of their families to cook and distribute food...had a greater chance of expanding...their own following."<sup>16</sup> For the Kikuyu work parties served as a way for men to get large projects done as well as demonstrate their resources and leadership skills.<sup>17</sup> Having work parties allowed men to further contribute to their social status. This is important because similar to the story, women were told to contribute for the good of others. In this case Clark noticed how

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<sup>14</sup> Davison, *Voices from Mutira*, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Kenyatta, *Mount Kenya* 180.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, "Land and Food," 365.

<sup>17</sup> Clark, "Land and Food," 366.

mostly married women were serving food to expand their husband's reputation. This aligns with the theme of the Girl and the Drought story because women are told to prioritize others' needs. Like the main heroine in the story, real life women's obedience was praised in service to others.

### Changing Times

In the 1930s up until the end of British colonialism, European influence would begin to change aspects of Kikuyu marriage discussed in the last section. As I have mentioned before, this was due to European institutions which created difficult situations for young Kikuyu members. One of the ways this happened was young African men moving away from their communities. As a part of the modernization of Africa, Europeans began to build and expand cities, providing work and schooling opportunities for young people. Mostly young men would take these opportunities due to the fear that young women would get pregnant if they lived in the city.<sup>18</sup> However as a result of this arrangement, young men became less influenced by traditional values. As Lynn Thomas explains in her book *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* where she wrote, "...young men who attended school and worked...viewed themselves as sophisticates, no longer bound by the knowledge and advice of local elders."<sup>19</sup> Although Thomas is writing specifically about Meru men, this concept also applied to young Kikuyu men. In general, men who lived away from their communities were able to avoid or ignore traditional community expectations.

Even though some men purposely evaded traditions, others were simply not able to abide by these values due to their conditions in European ran cities. One of these traditions Kikuyu

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<sup>18</sup> Lynn M. Thomas, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (California: University of California, 2003), 112; Davison, *Voices*, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, *Politics of the Womb* 119.



men were not able to easily follow was living away from their families for long amounts of time. Going back to the story of the Blacksmith's wife and the Ogress, the moral of the story was for men to stay with their families in order to lead and care for them. Yet during the mid to late colonial era this expectation of living with one's family, couldn't hold up because Kikuyu men in cities could only afford to take care of themselves. Luise White's article "Separating the Men from the Boys: Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Terrorism in Central Kenya, 1939-1959", points out how keeping families psychically together was difficult. In the article she noted how most men working in these cities didn't make enough money to support a family and that "...only skilled workers or the clerks earned salaries that could pay the rent for a family house..."<sup>20</sup> Even though some Kikuyu men might have wanted to follow traditional marital values, there was a real possibility they would not be able to.

Another issue that arose for young Kikuyu men wanting to follow traditional marital values was difficulties in paying bridewealth.<sup>21</sup> Rachel Jean-Baptiste and Emily Burrill comment on this difficulty which led young Kikuyu men to disregard the teachings of their elders in the work "Love, Marriage, and Families in Africa". As they noted, "Many young men had earned money working in labor wage jobs, but wages stagnated in the 1930s and the 1940s, along with the capacity of poorer younger men to meet older men's requests for bridewealth."<sup>22</sup> In this way many Kikuyu men were in a tough position because not only were they away from family, but they were not able to afford regularly seeing that family or starting a family by traditional

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<sup>20</sup> Luise White, "Separating the Men from the Boys: Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Terrorism in Central Kenya 1939-1959" *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23, no.1 (1990): 8.

<sup>21</sup> Rachel Jean-Baptiste and Emily Burrill, "Love, Marriage, and Women's Bodies, Past and Present" in *Holding the World Together: African Women in Changing Perspective*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 280.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Baptiste et al., "Love, Marriage, and Women" in *Holding the World Together: African Women in Perspective*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 280.

standards. In these ways the difficulties that came with living away from home would begin to present major challenges to the traditional lifestyle expected of Kikuyu men.

As a consequence of young Kikuyu men being unable to afford following established marital customs, these traditions would begin to shift. An example of this comes from another Leakey writing titled "The Kikuyu Problem of the Initiation of Girls", where Leakey again defended Kikuyu men. In the article he describes the difficult situation that Kikuyu men were made to face if they were Christian and had a desire to get married. Leakey noted how young Kikuyu men couldn't afford extremely high bridewealth and thus chose to violate both their Christian and Kikuyu values, by living with their future wives despite not being legitimately married.<sup>23</sup> What is notable about the situation that Leakey is describing, is that women are also defying traditional values. Recall the story of the Girl and the Drought, where the main character is praised for her obedience to authority. Young Kikuyu women who decided to live with their partners despite not being married, this story's moral was not as binding. This is because in preparation for Kikuyu marriage, family consent for the union was required.<sup>24</sup> In order for a young couple's engagement and subsequent marriage to be considered legitimate both men and women would have to participate in ceremonial practices which depended on their family's participation. An example of this was Kikuyu women participating in a beer ceremony with their family to confirm their engagement to a male suitor.<sup>25</sup> Although the ceremony was to confirm whether or not the potential bride wanted to get married, her family's consent was still needed because her family's participation in the ceremony would provide witness to the woman's desire

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<sup>23</sup> L.S.B Leakey, "The Kikuyu Problem of the Initiation of Girls," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* Vol.61, (Jan. - Jun., 1931) : 277-285, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2843834?>

<sup>24</sup> Davison, *Voices*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Kenyatta, *Mount. Kenya*, 166-167

to marry her suitor. If a woman's family was not present for this ceremony then she would not be able to get married in a way that was socially accepted. A Kikuyu woman who lived with her partner despite not being married most likely skipped or went against traditional customs such as the beer ceremony, because the practice and others like it were meant to legitimize Kikuyu couples getting married. Women's role in going against these marriage customs showed that the shift in marital traditions was affecting both sexes.

Young people's defiance of conventional marital practices caused the power of Kikuyu folklore to change. As the expectations laid out by elders' stories were violated by young people in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, folktales began to lose their original meanings. The young people who were of marrying age and living in cities were unable to uphold the values folktales were meant to reinforce. Although people's attachment to these stories would begin to shift, this did not mean that Kikuyu folktales as a whole were null and void. Rather it meant that these stories being told began to take on new meaning.

#### The Changing Impact of Folklore

The changing times caused an evolution in the way folklore was received. With new ways of life becoming possible for young Kikuyu members and older stories not having the same impact as they once had, stories began to transform. An excellent example of the changes taking place in Kikuyu folklore is found in the book *Reclaiming My Dreams: Oral Narratives by Wanjira Wa Rukenya*, by Mukabi Kaiba and Njogu Waita. The book is set in the 1980s and focuses on the telling of folklore by an older woman by the name of Wanjira. What makes Wanjira's storytelling notable is the nature of her characters in comparison to those in Njururi's version of Kikuyu folktales. The contrasts between these two storytellers illustrates the shift in

Kikuyu culture, especially in regards to marital gender roles. While Njururi's characters mostly fall in line with traditional expectations similar to what was outlined by Jomo Kenyatta in the 1930s and Davison's interviewees who grew up in the colonial era, Wanjira's stories demonstrate changes to folklore after British colonialism had ended in the 1960s. The characters from Wanjira's stories, in particular the women, are much more independent and more likely to use the resources available to them to solve problems.<sup>26</sup> The self-reliant nature of these characters is reflective of the broader changes taking place in Kenyan culture.

One of the stories Wanjira tells of the ogres, Manga and His Father, illustrates the changing nature of characters in Kikuyu folklore. The story begins with a handsome young man who is so good looking that every girl in the village falls in love with him and decides to follow him home after a community dance. However after a while each of the girls stops following the young man when they notice that he is actually an ogre. Unfortunately for one of the girls following the ogre, this fact does not become known until she has already been lured into the monster's home. As a result of the girl not recognizing the danger she is in, she becomes trapped and forced into slavery by the ogres. After a while of this arrangement the ogres eventually bring the girl two baby boys to cook for them. The girl decides that she will not do this and instead decides to raise the two babies in secret from the ogres. Years later, when the baby boys have grown up into men, the girl decides to use her adopted sons to escape the ogres. In order to do this she tricks the ogres into agreeing to be tied up under the guise of practicing escape drills. Once the girl is able to successfully tie up the ogres, the story concludes with the girl's adopted sons beating the ogres to death.

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<sup>26</sup> Mukabi Kaiba et al., *Reclaiming My Dreams: Oral Narratives by Wanjira Wa RuKenya*, (Kenya, University of Nairobi Press, 2010) 25-26.

Wanjira's story of Manga and His Father, turns the values demonstrated in Njururi's story of the Girl and the Drought on its head. While the story of the Girl and the Drought views female obedience as a good thing in service to others, Manga and His Father sees this same obedience as a means to an end. The girl in Wanjira's story agrees to be a slave and cook for the ogres in order to save her own life. However the girl's obedience is also used as a weapon against the ogres, because she is able to gain their trust in order to trick them into believing that they are safe. Rather than girls being encouraged to be obedient for the sake of others, the story shows obedience for the sake of the individual. The story also pushes an image of an empowered woman due to the main heroine's character growth. She at first is tricked and forced into being a slave for two ogres but by the end of the story she uses the resources she has to kill the ogres.

The story of Manga and His Father is more reflective of the time after the colonial period due to the role of the main female character. Unlike many earlier stories, the girl in Wanjira's tale uses her own wit and resources to save herself. This resourcefulness of the girl falls in line with the feminist movement taking place in Africa after the end of colonialism. By the 1970s African feminism became more pronounced as women began efforts to change their image in Africa.<sup>27</sup> Part of this effort was to change the aforementioned expectation of African women to be obedient in relation to men. Wanjira's stories, which were told in the 1980s, demonstrate the effects of this effort. The story of Manga and His Father shows the struggle African women faced as they were becoming more feminist. Like the girl in the story they were expected to be obedient, yet Wanjira's tale also advocated for these women to use this trait for their own benefit rather than anyone else's'. Wanjira's story not only played into African feminism by having a

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<sup>27</sup> Marc Epprecht, "Sexuality, Africa, History" *The American Historical Review*, Vol.114, No.5, (December 2009) p.1263.

main heroine who did things for herself, but also demonstrated how values present in folklore were able to change.

### Conclusion

The ideals set out by traditional Kikuyu folklore suffered from being impractical. What had once worked in the past had become harder to attain due to influence of British institutions, such as schools and churches. As a result, young Kikuyu members who were of marrying age were put in the difficult position of having to compromise values taught to them in traditional folklore. The Kikuyu values such as remaining close to one's family for men and being obedient for women, were no longer as simple. British colonialism began to pull at these young people, causing many to change their approaches to Kikuyu culture in order to adapt. A consequence of this was folklore would begin to adapt as well. Kikuyu stories that had once stressed the importance of following certain gender roles began to change in their meaning or were replaced by stories that reflected the modern standards of the time. Rather than becoming obsolete, these stories were able to change in order to continue serving as the social tools for the upcoming generations. In short, this post-colonial folklore came to embody a newer version of the Kikuyu.

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