Title:
"The girl and her brother'.
Concepts of slavery and gender relations in a Gikuyu folktale from Central Kenya.'[1]

Abstract

In colonial parlance African women were often compared with slaves: sold to the highest bidder and working like beasts of burden, African women were associated with victimhood and commodification. This discourse entered suffragette activism in Europe, and especially payment of the bridewealth was singled out as an argument in the discussions. 'Kikuyu women' were regarded as a case in point, and, with a major European presence during colonial times, Central Kenya was one of the areas that featured strongly in these debates in the British metropole. African views on marriage and bridewealth in relation to slavery hardly had a place in these debates, Central Kenya being no exception to this general rule.

In this article I propose to study accounts, evaluations and memories of gender relations and slavery from the vantage-point of Gikuyu public debate. The paper offers an analysis of one folktale that reflects on marriage and bridewealth in connection to issues of household autonomy, interdependence, gender, force and agency.

Keywords

Folktales; Gender relations; Slavery; Gikuyu

*Titel***:**

"Het meisje en haar broer'. Conceptualiseringen van slavernij en genderverhoudingen in een Gikuyu sprookje uit Centraal-Kenya.'

Samenvatting

In het koloniale taalgebruik werden Afrikaanse vrouwen vaak vergeleken met slaven: verkocht aan de hoogste bieder en werkend als lastdieren werden Afrikaanse vrouwen geassocieerd met slachtofferschap en commodificatie. Dit discours deed zijn intrede in het suffragette-activisme in Europa, en vooral de betaling van de bruidsschat werd als argument genoemd in de discussies. 'De Kikuyu vrouw' werden hierbij als een voorbeeld beschouwd, en met een grote Europese aanwezigheid tijdens de koloniale tijd was Centraal-Kenia een van de gebieden die sterk figureerden in deze debatten in de Britse metropool. Afrikaanse opvattingen over huwelijk en bruidsschat in relatie tot slavernij hadden nauwelijks een plaats in deze debatten, en Centraal-Kenia vormde geen uitzondering op deze algemene regel.

In dit artikel stel ik voor om verhalen, evaluaties en herinneringen aan genderrelaties en slavernij vanuit het perspectief van Gikuyu publiek debat te bestuderen. De paper biedt een analyse van een sprookje waarin huwelijk en bruidsschat verbonden worden met kwesties als autonomie van het huishouden, onderlinge afhankelijkheid, gender, dwang en handelingsmoge-lijkheid.

Sleutelwoorden

Sprookjes; Gender-verhoudingen; Slavernij; Gikuyu
The 'white man's burden'

[1] Inge Brinkman, African Studies, Ghent University, Inge.Brinkman@UGent.be

In his essay 'African modes of self-writing' Achille Mbembe (2002, p. 259) notes that the traumatic constitution of African modes of writing the self are centred around three historical processes that are often conflated into one single meta-narrative – 'a unifying centre' as Mbembe calls it. The experiences of slavery, colonialism and apartheid together represent 'an originary form of suffering'. Similar conflations are often made in postcolonial studies and decolonisation debates, that often refer to slavery, racism, colonialism, apartheid, etc., as if these hierarchical processes are not specific in time and place (cf. Cooper, 1995).

As Mbembe notes, however, there was a shift in European thinking between these three historical processes. During the time of slavery and abolition, the issue was whether or not Africans could be situated within the circle of humanity. In Mbembe's words (2002, p. 245): 'Could we find among Africans the same human person, merely disguised by different designations and forms?', often answered in the negative. In other words, the hierarchical relations were based on the idea that Africans had no consciousness, no morality, no political order, no aesthetics, no identity, etc. of their own. With the advent of colonialism during the nineteenth century, a significant shift occurred. Non-similarity of Africans was no longer based on the idea of emptiness (non-humanity). Instead, the ground for 'difference' was precisely because Africans 'had an identity of their own' (Mbembe, 2002, p. 247). This identity, called 'custom', could never 'correspond with our own', it was minutiously segregated from 'our civilisation'. In a third view, Africans were 'in principle' not dissimilar to 'us'. 'Custom' could be overcome and 'the black' could in principle 'be *converted* to' becoming an 'autonomous individual capable of thinking for himself and exercising reason' (Mbembe, 2002, p. 248).

Much can be held against Mbembe's three-tiered scheme. Franz Fanon (1952, p. 88) indicated how 'the Black' is turned into 'an object in the midst of other objects', while Aimé Césaire (1955) equalled colonisation to 'chosification'. Also Mbembe's (2001, p. 179) own notion of the colony as 'a series of hollows' points to a continued dehumanisation of Africans, colonised and Black people. In other words, the ideas that were used to justify the slave trade, continued in the colonial context.

All the same, it is true that early colonialists indeed saw their project as sharply differing from the period before. At the time, colonial rule was justified precisely with the idea to end slavery, slave raiding and the slave trade (Miers & Klein, 1999). The 'white man's burden' was indeed to 'free' the 'captives' and 'serve their needs' (Kipling 1899). In this context, it is not surprising that early colonials were eager to classify people as slaves and to 'liberate' them, even if locally these people were not viewed as slaves at all. Colonial propaganda was precisely that European presence was a necessity, as without European protection, people would be raided and traded, becoming helpless victims of the slave trade. This was a widespread justification for colonial rule and acquired form in many smaller and larger instances. Also in the case of Central Kenya – discussed here – this was a recurring trope, nearly casually employed. To cite just one example: as Francis Hall (1938, p. 439; see also Eliot, 1905), colonial military in Central Kenya, put it in 1894: 'if I didn't look after them, they would be carried off at once as slaves'.

'Liberating African women'

The trope of the 'white man's burden' and the discourse with its related practices on colonial rule as ending the slave trade, took a particular direction in terms of gender politics. In colonial parlance African women were often compared with slaves: sold to the highest bidder and working like beasts of burden, African women were associated with victimhood and commodification. John Boyes, a traveller in Central Kenya who proclaimed himself King of

the Gikuyu,[2] wrote in 1911 (pp. 265-266; Cf. Eliot, 1905, pp. 237-238): 'They do not, of course, regard women in the same way that we do, but look upon them more in the light of slaves, the value of a wife being reckoned at about thirty sheep. The women have to do all the work of the family and house, the man himself doing practically nothing.' Boyes' view can be placed in Mbembe's second line of thinking as it maintains a very strong opposition between 'us' (civilisation) and 'them' (custom).

Similar images of 'the native woman', but differently assessed, also entered the third strand of thinking that Achille Mbembe distinguished. The assessment was geared towards the 'emancipation' of 'native women', an aim shared in the metropole as well as in the colony by groups as diverse as suffragettes and missionaries. Activist groups in Britain, like the Committee for the Protection of Coloured Women in the Crown Colonies, regarded polygamy, widow inheritance, female circumcision, forced marriages, and especially the brideprice (as it was called[3]) as proof that African women were treated as slaves. In her interpretation of the Kenyan case, Brett Lindsay Shadle (2006, p. 59; also Thomas, 2003, pp. 53, 75-76) put it like this: 'This required no explanation, only description: women were transferred in exchange for money or property, which was the essence of slavery, the commoditization of people.' It was a widespread colonial discourse; for example, not only in British, but also in French views 'native women' were reduced to victims as they were thought to passively accept 'their slavery', being utterly 'ignorant' (Ha, 2014, p. 70; also: Quirk & Rossi, 2021, pp. 252-254).

In the debates African women's own assessments and evaluations had no place. For the Kenyan case, especially in the 1920s and 1930s commissions were set up, meetings were held, and colonial administrators wrote reports to investigate the issue of 'female slavery', but in all this no African women's voices were heard: the sole African who was invited to comment on the matter was one of the first African social anthropologists – a man – namely Jomo Kenyatta, later to become Kenya's first president (Shadle, 2006, pp. 58-71).

Conceptualisations

The colonial debates referred to various concepts without reflection as they were deemed self-evident: 'tribe', 'men', 'women', 'marriage', and other concepts in the debate had fixed meanings that mirrored metropole usage of them. Since the early 1970s, the notion of ethnicity in Africa has been the subject of intensive scholarly debate (for an overview, see Lynch, 2018). Colonials assumed 'tribal' identity to be a given in Africa, and directly related it to neatly bordered languages (cf. MacArthur, 2012). It was precisely this expectation, that informed the history of ethnic imagination in many contexts: John Iliffe's (1979, p. 324) oft-quoted statement summarized it neatly: 'Europeans believed Africans belonged to tribes; Africans built tribes to belong to'.

Of course, prior to colonialism, 'groupwork', to borrow the term from Schoenbrun (2021), had existed. As I wrote in my thesis (1996, 33):

> The fluidity in ethnicity and the fact that ethnicity was only one among many frameworks of identity, did not mean it was inexistent. In simultaneous sense, ethnicities were exclusive: by becoming Kikuyu, one ceased to be Kamba. Rites marked the change of ethnicity, implying the importance of attachment to one community and not the other. Identity is nothing new, its diachronic closure is.

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[2] Various spellings of Gikuyu exist, 'Kikuyu' being the most common during the colonial era, while presently 'Gikuyu' is used mostly.

[3] The term brideprice was already criticised by Evans-Prichard in 1931, as the word implies a purely economic transaction, similar to 'purchase'. He proposed bridewealth instead – a term now widely used – to mark the wider implications of the transferences.

There exist clear examples of the gendered nature of these identity construction processes during the colonial era. While for men the meanings of 'tribe' became ever more relevant, this was much less the case for women. 'A woman is a woman, there is no tribe,' a Maasai man told Richard Waller in Nairobi (cited in White, 1990, p. 33). And Luise White (1990, p. 33; Also: Brinkman, 1996 pp. 30-36) was told about women's changing ethnicities during fieldwork in the 1980s:

> One woman was born in Meru, journeyed to Ukambani, where she was married and widowed; then she went to Kikuyu, married, and 'became a Kikuyu.' The process seemed commonplace to her daughter: 'I don't know how my mother became a Kikuyu, the Kikuyu are the ones who could tell you how she became one of them'.

Intermarriage between people of different communities indeed formed one way of changing ethnic affiliation. Yet, just like 'tribal' affiliation, 'marriage' might take on different forms than what was expected in colonial circles. In Central Kenya, the practice of woman-woman marriage, centred around mutual care and joint production, not on sexuality and reproduction, was and is for example quite common. At times this could lead to complex household structures encompassing various marriages: Njambi & O'Brien (2000) giving an example of one household that encompassed four marriages that were all four viewed as entirely legitimate.

Furthermore, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí has argued that the dichotomous thinking in terms of 'men' versus 'women' in Africa is largely a product of colonial thinking: *The invention of women* (1997) is the title of her book. Although her study has been criticised (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003), linguistic terminologies often indicate that much more differentiated categorisations are in place than plainly 'men' versus 'women'. The Gikuyu language is a case in point: we find at least six categories: small child/ren (*kaana/twana*); young boy/s (*kahĩĩ/tũhĩĩ*); young young girl/s (*kairĩĩtu/tũirĩĩtu*); initiated boy/s (*mwanake/aanake*); initiated girl/s (*mũirĩĩtu/airĩĩtu*); married man/men (*mũthuuri/athuuri*); and married woman/women (*mũtumia/atumia*). While historically 'men' and 'women' were important social and political categories in Central Kenya (Thomas, 2003, p. 16), the linguistic categories suggest that gender, age and ritual status intersect in much more complex manners than the dualistic framework of colonial and metropole discourse.

Indeed, Carolyn Martin Shaw (1995, pp. 28, 47, 51) criticised the colonial discourse on 'male dominance', holding that it was precisely this discourse that 'was, in part, productive of the distinctions between men and women in Kikuyu culture.' Instead Shaw stresses the interdependence of women and men in Gikuyu gender ideology, and mentions bridewealth as an item in this interdependence. Similarly Greet Kershaw (1997, p. 24) argues against the usual interpretations of Gikuyu marriages of the colonial era: 'The brideprice, far from being a price paid for a chattel, marked the beginning of a relationship and rights for a man and a woman and their natal kin.' Amrik Heyer (2005, p. 41) holds that at the end of the nineteenth century women received their own house (*nyũmba*) and fields upon marriage, expressing 'the "female" aspect of clan: matrifocal, self-contained, creative, and oriented to sustenance and cyclical time.' Only during colonialism, this female clan-aspect was undermined as the *nyũmba* increasingly came to signify male wealth, power and identity. Only as a consequence of this, Heyer (2005, p. 42) writes, 'Bridewealth, paid increasingly in cash, was directly linked to the new value of wives as agricultural producers whose labour was controlled by men.'

These views stand in contrast with Claire Robertson's argument (1997a, p. 41) who states that 'women were regarded by men as property,' Although Robertson does not use the word 'slavery', the stark inequality and property rights that she mentions point into the

direction. In other words, the assessment of the changing Gikuyu gender relations in relation to marriage and bridewealth was strongly divergent in academic literature (see also Thomas, 2003, pp. 16, 191).

Sources

It is noteworthy that in the academic studies, oral literature is often used as evidence. Claire Robertson (1997a, pp. 41-42; also Thomas, 2003, pp. 14-15) views folktales as useful for studying 'ideological constructs', and arrives at the conclusion that 'although they derive mainly from female storytellers, they still present a fairly uniform view of women imbued with male dominant ideology'. Carolyn Shaw (1995, p. 35) likewise holds that oral tradition 'represents Kikuyu ideology', yet her interpretation differs from that of Robertson as she concludes that the folktale she analyses 'clarifies what men and women stand to gain and lose in the Kikuyu gender dynamic'.

Here I want to argue that oral literary genres are crucial sources as they represent voices that were not heard in the colonial debates. Yet, instead of the assumed straightforward reflection of 'ideology' that Shaw proposes, I wish to view folktales rather as 'socially symbolic acts' (Jameson, 1981; Zipes, 2006, p. 3) that form 'a means for understanding the real world through standard metaphorical clichés as well as through highly innovative articulations and inferences' and at the same time invite people 'to imagine and contemplate worlds more just and ideal than their realities,' whereby they 'can be both provocatively subversive and trivially traditional' (Zipes, 2006, pp. x, xi). Folktales are not real, but 'they are also not unreal' (Zipes, 2006, p. xii): they offer us a means to consider and reconsider ourselves and the world.

I will focus on a folktale in the Gikuyu language. Gikuyu is a Bantu language with some 7 to 8 million people identifying themselves as Gikuyu-speakers; mostly in Central Kenya, but living all around the globe. Central Kenya is situated between Kenya's capital Nairobi and Mount Kenya, a region that was deeply affected by Christian missionary influence, by European settlers occupying the most fertile lands, and by British colonialism. It was here that the so-called Mau Mau war was fought in the 1950s (for more info on Gikuyu political history, see all publications of John Lonsdale, e.g. Berman & Lonsdale 1992).

Gikuyu oral narratives have been recorded since the early twentieth century, albeit mostly rendered only in summarised form, in English translation, and often evaluated from a racist and paternalistic stance. To underscore this point, we can simply mention the title of the ethnographic study written by the British couple Routledge: *With a prehistoric people*, published in 1910. The assumption was clear: African peoples had not yet reached the 'stage' of history, they were still prehistoric. In their work, the Routledges offer some translations of Gikuyu oral narratives, and during the colonial era, various other publications contain translations of folktales. For the postcolonial era, various scholars wrote on Gikuyu oral genres, and notably the work of Kabĩra & Mũtahi (1988) is relevant. In 1992 I carried out fieldwork in Central Kenya to listen to oral storytelling (Brinkman, 1996, esp. pp. 147-153) and as of 2016, some shorter visits were carried out.

The story rendered in transcription and translation in this article was told by Esther Njeri in May 1992. At least since the beginning of the twentieth century, different versions of this story are told in Gikuyu-speaking communities. In the volume published by Routledge, two versions are rendered, one told by an elderly woman, the other by a young man. Carolyn Martin Shaw (1995, pp. 47-59) analysed these two versions, pointing to the multiple possibilities for interpretation. According to her, the story can be seen as a man's coming of age story, as a story of the transition from Kikuyu to Maasai, and as indicative of men's dependency on women's productivity. Especially this latter reading is relevant for this paper, as Shaw (1995, p. 47) writes: 'The folktale illustrates brothers' dependence on sisters'

bridewealth and productive labor for their well-being and prosperity.' She (Shaw, 1995, p. 52) notes that the female and the male performer of the two versions offer different characterisations: 'The differences in the two versions highlight differences in men's and women's perception of their relationships—from the woman's point of view, the dutiful and caring sister versus the selfish and demanding brother, and from the man's point of view the bold and fearless brother versus the bountiful, lost sister.'

Carolyn Martin Shaw only had access to these translations of the early colonial period, and she is wary of the words employed by the Routledges: 'Both versions of the folktale were presented only in English, so I have no way to check the translation of phrases such as "the price of his sister," "bought a wife," and "bought eight girls" (Shaw, 1995, p. 48). She suspects that this terminology is related to the already increasing influence of the cash economy in the colonial era, making no further statements about gender and property. My interpretation will take Shaw's analysis further as it is based on a more recent fully transcribed text, and I will detail the indications on gender relations, agency, and slavery in the text.

Summary of the narrative

The story tells about two orphaned children, a boy and the girl. The boy often leaves his sister alone and wanders about. One day some men pass by the house and, as they see how pretty the girl is, they approach her. The girl refuses to go with them, referring to the responsibilities towards her brother, and the men leave again. Although the girl informs her brother about this incident, he dismisses her account as 'women's fears.' After repeated visits, one day the men come with great resolve, and they take her along. Before leaving, the girl uses her household tasks as an excuse to postpone the departure in the hope that her brother returns in time. Finally she sings a song on top of the roof, recalling her brother how he had dismissed her warnings. On the way she drops oil from a flask that she filled as well as maize grains so as to enable her brother to find her and she continues singing. Finally her brother hears her singing and starts the pursuit. Yet, he becomes tired and loses track of the party as they travel all the way to the country where the young men came from.

The girl stays in this new country for a very long time and she begets children from the man who wooed her. Her brother continues to look for her, but by the time he reaches her new abode he looks different as his hair is unkempt and he is dirty. He even invites children to urinate and defecate on him in return for some food, and it is in this state that he arrives at his sister's place and meets with her children. As usual he asks the children for food after urinating and defecating on him. The children tell their mother about the incident, so the following day she hides and she recognizes her brother. As she comes out of her hiding place, she explains her children that they have met with their uncle. The brother starts working as a herdsman for the family. When the children have grown up, they help to plan their escape. They lock all the huts of the homestead with self-made strings, and start their journey back, driving the goats of the locked village along. In the morning, none of the inhabitants can leave their hut, and 'So those people returned to their country with their sister', the story ends.

Characters and agency

Indicating agency does not deny the power relations involved, but it does qualify notions of absolute victimhood and reduced personhood (cf. (Shaw, 2002, p. 20). It is obvious that in the narrative force is involved: the girl is taken to her new abode against her will. In colonial summaries of such events wordings would be used like: 'raiding for women', 'capturing women as slaves' (Hall, 1938, p. 439). The girl is indeed ordered to come along despite her direct statements indicating that she does not want this. When her brother calls upon her to

stop, she answers that with three men in front and three men behind she is in no position to stop and wait for her brother. The girl likewise refers to force when she relates to her condition in terms of theft as she explains to her children: 'And over there was theft, I was taken by your father,' again stressing that this move was involuntary.

Yet, the colonial interpretations of slave raids and absolute victimhood are not present in the narrative. Firstly, the girl character clearly shows agency in the narrative. She engages in dialogue with her captors, and initially sends them away, stressing her negative evaluation of their proposal: 'No, I won't go'. She tries to warn her brother, and when the men return, she negotiates postponement of their departure for more than a day. She takes the initiative to sing the song, to leave an oil and millet trace, and she manages to smuggle her brother into the household by telling the father of her children: 'We have found a labourer'. Far from a hapless victim, she appears as a resourceful and creative character in the narrative.

Furthermore, the captors hardly fit the stereotypical notion of 'slave raiders'. They – although presented as ogres – address the girl in dialogue, speaking of love. Although the girl is 'bothered', the visitors plead with the girl, whose name they have learned – Wamwerũ, and they pay various visits before they finally announce: 'Now we are not leaving you'. Even then, they allow the girl to carry out the various tasks, patiently waiting for her, so that they have to spend the night in the homestead. Furthermore, they give the girl permission to sing a song, although they do not know the reasons for this request. Only after all this, they order the girl to descend and the party leaves. It is important to note that this is the first actual order the men give.

In another variation of this story that is often told, the brother tries to ensure that the home is safe by using a song to enter the house. His enemies, however, learn the song and manage to enter the house as the girl unsuspecting opens up for them. Confronted with the danger, she starts singing and immediately her brother comes and kills the men. In that variation the men are described as wild and hairy: a reference to ogres which adds to their negative portrayal. Furthermore they do not manage to take away the girl: they are killed while being in the homestead (eg. Kabira & Mũtahi, 1988, pp. 82-84).

In the version discussed here, the men who lead the girl away are called ogres and the noun class for *irimũ* (ogres) is used, but here the brother's actions are not aimed at protecting the homestead. The brother, who remains anonymous, is negatively evaluated from the start. It is said that he leaves his sister alone and has become a 'wanderer'. The word used in Gikuyu has definitely negative connotations: the dictionary renders it as 'wanderer' and as 'extremely obstinate and unruly person'. The verb *kũrũũra*, with which the noun is connected, has been translated as 'to roam, loaf, wander about aimlessly' (Benson, 1964, pp. 277, 558). No reason is offered for the brother's behaviour towards his sister. It is made clear throughout the narrative that the girl cannot be accused of any neglect; she consistently behaves in a dutiful manner towards her brother. The brother's behaviour, to the contrary, is marked by abandonment and lack of care.

This evaluation is reinforced as he tells his sister off when she tries to warn him. He refuses to listen to her and employs a stereotype ('women's fear') to dismiss her. When the girl is finally led away, she refers to his dismissal in her song, indicating that he should have listened to her. The brother's song once again reveals his misjudgement: he tells her to stop which the girl is in no position to do. In the song he furthermore says goodbye to his sister, casting doubt on his intentions to rescue her. Indeed when he becomes tired, he and his companions just go to sleep, thereby missing a final opportunity to keep up with the strangers.

The whole process can hardly be summarized by the term 'slave raid'. The girl's agency and the politeness of the young men offer an interpretation that belies the simple colonial evaluations of violence and victimhood. All the same, the encounters between the sister and the men who court her reveal a clear hierarchical pattern. During these encounters

the girl is allocated most of the speech and action. Yet, in the interaction between the girl and the men, the men always take the initiative for the conversation: the girl always only reacts. The men never pose a question: they do not want the girl to express her wishes; but merely state their own and urge her to comply. The girl's answer does not contain any arguments which relate to her own wishes and ideals, she only refers to the responsibilities for her brother. Likewise in her actions her own desires are not essential: she does everything in her power to take care of her brother and all actions to delay the departure belong to the realm of home management and a number of them are specifically geared towards her brother. The brother seems hardly deserving of such care as he fails to carry out his duties: he is negligent by leaving his sister alone, and he acts rude and sluggish when she is threatened.

Bridewealth meanings

As soon as the party sets on the way, the girl is no longer a girl: the word to indicate a is used: she is no longer referred to as *mũirĩĩtu* (girl), but as *mũtumia* (married woman). In her new country, she has children with the man who took her from her home country. As indicated, however, the couple is not properly married: it concerns a case of 'theft'. Without the transfer of any bridewealth, marriage did not exist: relations between a man and a woman without the transfer of bridewealth was regarded as illicit (Shaw, 1995, p. 55; Shadle, 2006, p. 7). A wife would 'unlock the life' of her husband, as they together would continue his family line. At the same time, the bridewealth paid by her husband's family would also 'unlock the life' of her brother, as this would enable him to marry. As Kershaw (1997, p. 24) notes, a brother could hence use 'my goats' as a term of endearment to refer to his sister.

This 'wealth-in-people'-reference (Guyer, 1993) does not amount to slavery in Gikuyu conceptualisations. To the contrary, a woman would enable her parents to live on through her brother's children. If her husband had too much land, she could enable her parents and brothers to work that land. Greet Kershaw (1997, p. 24) summarises it as follows: 'The brideprice, far from being a price paid for a chattel, marked the beginning of a relationship and rights for a man and a woman and their natal kin.' Such bridewealth could be transferred in small instalments over many years (Ambler, 1988, 18), but in this case nothing is transferred at all and no arrangements are made for later transfer. No relationship develops between the two families, indeed implying that the girl is not properly married.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Central Kenya was in a situation of crisis as rinderpest and famine were rampant. Therefore in some areas the councils of elders decided to postpone all bridewealth instalments, but this was viewed as an emergency measure brought about by a crisis situation. Some families took to 'lending' members of the household as pawns to other families in order to survive. This concerned especially women, and as the crisis intensified, exploitation of such women increased, women's labour came to be seen as a commodity, and women were sometimes kept in another household more or less permanently (Ambler, 1988, pp. 97, 132-133, Robertson, 1997b, p. 35).

Yet in the narrative discussed here it does not concern a case where a woman may have been pawned and ended up in a 'second-class marriage' (Wright, 2004, p. 416): it is obvious that this concerns a household of sufficient means. There seems to be enough food and the girl can even prepare extra's before she has to leave. All the same, it is stressed that the girl and the brother live on their own: they are orphans and apparently have no other kin to live with. Without parents or other kin they have no access to direct channels of wealth; the brother has no alternatives at his disposal.

The story significantly ends with the siblings leaving the village taking a herd of goats along. Although the woman has lived for a long time in the new place and her children have grown up in the village, all the people are locked in – including the husband/father, and they leave with the goats. The brother needs these goats to get married. Initially the brother is

ending up as a poor vagrant, but ultimately this state is reversed and he and his sister become the owner of much livestock. The simple colonial trope of 'native women' as slaves – be it through raiding or through the payment of 'brideprice', all conflated, is not sustained here. The narrative rather stresses the dependence of a brother on his sister's care and on the bridewealth to which he gains access when his sister marries.

Nineteenth century slave trade

As we saw, the orphan state of the siblings is stressed; they are all alone. This important factor is added to by stressing that the brother became 'a wanderer', who 'would leave his sister alone'. Without his presence, the sister is put in a difficult position vis-à-vis the strange men. Incompleteness – be it of parents, of brothers, of sisters – could seriously endanger household autonomy.

In this narrative, the girl is abducted by men said to be ogres. Often, the men are indicated as strangers, and in many renderings of the story this is further specified as Kamba, neighbours to the homeland of Gikuyu. The story, however, does not dwell on the girl's conditions. When the food stock is depleted, the young man becomes a poor and hungry vagrant. Without his sister he reaches a state of complete helplessness. His hair grows long, he becomes unrecognisable, and he comes to utter degradation when asking children to excrete on him in return for some food. This situation is immediately redressed when he sister resumes her position as caretaker. As he enters the homestead as a worker, the exploitation of his labour is stressed: his condition as a herdsman in the strange land is compared to that of a slave. How hard the girl had worked, we do not know. Whether she felt like a slave, either in her brother's homestead or in her new abode, is not a subject in the narrative.

Central Kenya knew no system of internal slavery nor were the people living in this region involved in the slave trade until halfway the nineteenth century. Even the local term mostly used for 'slave': *ngombo*, in a dictionary of 1914 from the area close to Mount Kenya where the slave trade had hardly reached was rendered *ngombo* as: 'servant, one provided for by another' (Peterson, 1999, p. 44). The caravan trade reached the central region through the eastern and southern fringes by the 1850s. This, according to Ambler (1988, pp. 70-72, 116-117), led to the 'commercialization of female labor', whereby men increasingly exerted rights not only over female labour, but also over the women themselves. In effect then, these women ended up as slaves, as the meanings of pawnship and captivity were thwarted towards full ownership right.

In turn, this development resulted in an increased amount of violence, especially towards women, and the abduction of women who could be offered for purchase increased over time. Especially during the 'famine of Europe' that occurred between 1897-1902 raiding for women sharply rose. As a consequence gender relations were upset and peaceful intermarriage between men and women of different groups to cement trade relations diminished. Furthermore, while during the famine Kamba and Maasai girls ended up as permanent 'pawns' in Gikuyu households, at the same time many Kamba men lost their position as middlemen in the ivory trade and took to raiding for Gikuyu and Maasai women instead. Although these women were often fully integrated into the household, they were indeed regarded as slaves as they could be taken for sale (Robertson, 1997b, pp. 35, 37, 41; Ambler, 1988, pp. 70-72).

How did people not knowing a system of slavery before make sense of these new processes? This narrative may be one example. It describes a case of abduction: the girl is taken away from her home against her will. All the same, the female character in the story cannot be reduced to victimhood. Rather a prominent place is given to her as a character: her speech and actions are detailed. In this, she does not subscribe to classical notions of slavery: she can hardly be said to act as if she were 'socially dead' (cf. Patterson, 1985). Her captors,

although insisting, do not resort to violence and can even be said to act politely towards the girl. The story stresses the brother's suffering as a consequence of his sister's abduction; eventually he is said to reach the state of a slave. The story has many interlocking nodal points: unpaid bridewealth, interdependence between brother and sister, lack of male protection, lack of sisterly care, lack of parental protection, forced marriage, etc.

Conclusions

What is a slave? It seems a question that can be answered in a straightforward manner; it is a person owned by another person. Yet, 'ownership' is not a fixed category; it can be differently defined in different times and different cultures. The definition of slavery knows a longstanding debate in academia and has led to fruitful discussions on slavery and enslavement as concepts (cf. Kopytoff & Miers, in: Miers & Kopytoff, 1977, pp. 3-82; Burns, 2023; Becker, e.a., 2023). This has included discussion on marriage and bridewealth (Kopytoff & Miers, in: Miers & Kopytoff, 1977, pp. 7-9; Quirk & Rossi, 2021, pp. 252-254). In colonial parlance African women were often compared with slaves: sold to the highest bidder and working like beasts of burden, African women were reduced to victimhood and commodification. This discourse entered suffragette activism in Europe, and payment of the 'brideprice' was singled out as an argument in the discussions. Local accounts, evaluations and memories of slavery, marriage and bridewealth had no place in these debates.

My modest contribution to these debates involves a call to study oral narrative (and potentially other oral verbal artistic genres) as a way to further understanding in the realms of conceptualisation and memory production. This case-study presented a Gikuyu oral narrative that relates marriage and bridewealth to issues of household autonomy, interdependence, gender, force and agency. In the narrative, the issues of slavery and bridewealth are assessed differently from the colonial and the British feminist activist evaluation. The story does not subscribe to the facile associations between 'the native women', slavery and absolute victimhood.

In no way the case-study proposes to diminish the hierarchies, the suffering and traumas of slavery and in the slave trade. To the contrary, this paper criticises the facile ways in which 'slavery' has often been defined and points to ways of remembering that go beyond dehumanisation, showing through this narrative that slavery concepts and evaluations may be far more complex than is usually assumed. In this, it may be worthwhile to not only look for direct references to memories of slavery, but involve the wider contexts of changing notions of pawnship, abduction, and commodification.

Achille Mbembe (2002, p. 259; see also: Greene, 2003; Graeber, 1997; Shaw, 2002, pp. 1-2, 8-9) pointed out that 'there is properly speaking no African memory of slavery', or at most one characterized by diffraction. At the surface this may be so, but as Rosalind Shaw (2002, pp. 49-50) has pointed out, narrative and ritual may form 'modes of memory' to remember these events. Such is not diffraction, but creating a memory framework beyond everyday knowledge and indicative of the contradictory and messy ways of history production.

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I wish to acknowledge the invitation to speak for the members of the Academy, and I thank the audience and the anonymous reviewers for their input. It goes without saying that responsibility for any error squarely rests on my shoulders. I would like to invite the institute to change its name, as the notion 'overseas' reasons from a Eurocentric perspective and creates uncalled-for oppositions.

I want to heartily thank James Wachira for his willingness to review the transcription/translation of the narrative, and Jane Wangarĩ for her assistance at the time of

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Transcription of the narrative

Duration of the narration: 12min30.
Performer: Esther Njeri.
Age: 35 years old (at the time of recording).
Place and date: Mwĩmũtoni, 31 May 1992.
Audience: Jane Wangarĩ.
The audience regularly says: 'Mmm' or 'Ĩĩ' as is usual during storytelling sessions, to interact with the narrator.
Transcription and translation: Jane Wangarĩ, Inge Brinkman (checked by James Wachira and his father).

Mũthuuri-rĩ akĩgũra mũtũmia, agĩciara twana twĩrĩ: rĩu kahĩĩ kamwe na kairĩĩtu. Agĩcooka agĩkua. Akua-rĩ na mũtumia agĩkua. Mũirĩĩtu na mwanake magĩtigwo. Rĩu magĩtũũra, makĩĩreraga, makĩĩreraga, magĩtũũra, makĩĩreraga matarĩ na nyina na matirĩ na ithe . Mereraga.

Mwanake rĩu rĩrĩa maikarire mũno agĩtuĩka mbũrũũri. Rĩu agatigaga mwarĩ wa nyina na nĩ bũrũũri, nĩ ta werũ-inĩ ta kũrĩa kwa maaya.[4] Rĩu mũirĩĩtũ agatigagwo e wiki. Atigwo e wiki-rĩ, rĩu andũ nĩ makĩonaga mahĩtũkĩra hau. Makĩonaga atĩ mũirĩĩtũ ũyũ nĩ mũthaka mũno, mũno, mũno. Agagĩũkĩra kuo kũmũũria. Magakĩmwĩra/Akamwĩra: 'Rĩu ĩthuĩ-rĩ noo tũkwende mũno mũno makĩria.' Nake agakĩmeera: 'Ĩhĩĩ-ĩ, niĩ ndingĩenda gũthiĩ kwanyu-ĩ, toondũ mũũrũ wa maitũ ndakĩri kuo. Angĩũka akore gũtarĩ mũndũ-rĩ, egũka kũheo irio nũũ, na tũtikĩrĩ maitũ kana baaba.' Agakĩĩrwo: 'Ĩhĩĩ nĩ tũthiĩ.' 'Ĩhĩĩ ndigũthiĩ.'

Mũũrũ wa nyina-rĩ agacooka, agooka. Agakĩheo irio, akarĩa. Akamwĩra: 'Rĩu-rĩ, gũkũ nĩ kuuma andũ meekũnjĩraga atĩ tũthiĩ nao na ndameera tũtigũthiĩ nao ũtookĩĩte.' Akamwĩra atĩrĩrĩ: 'Aa, ũcio nĩ guoya ũrĩa wa aka.' Agakĩmwĩra: 'Ti guoya, nĩ mookaga.' Aanake magatũũra mookaga o kũiyira mũirĩĩtu o kũiyira mũirĩĩtu. Nake mũirĩĩtu nĩ mũirĩĩtu mũmũ ngoro mũno. Ndeendaga gũtiga mũũrũ wa nyina. Nake mũũrũ wa nyina nĩ athiaga agatinda nakũrĩa egũtinda, mbũrũũri ndeegũtinda mũgũnda. Mũirĩĩtu nake agĩtũũra athĩĩnagio, athĩĩnagio, athĩĩnagio. O agooka akeera mũũrũ wa nyina. Nake akamwĩra: 'Thiĩ, thiĩ, ũcio nĩ guoya ũrĩa wa aka.'

Mũthenya ũmwe-rĩ, nĩ akĩĩrirwo: 'Rĩu tũtigũgũtiga. Rĩu-rĩ, tũtigũgũtiga.' Agakĩĩra mũndũ ũcio – nĩ marimũ – akĩmũĩra, 'Ĩhĩ, rĩu rĩ, onagũtuĩka ndũkũndiga-rĩ, noo ngĩtigire ndakĩruga, nĩ geetha ngĩrugĩre mũũrũ wa maitũ.' Agakĩĩrwo: 'Ruga, nĩ ngũgweterera.' Agĩkĩruga irio ikĩhĩa. Akĩĩrwo: 'Nĩ tũthiĩ, Wamwerũ nĩ tũthiĩ.' Akĩmwĩra: 'Ĩhĩĩ, ndingĩthiĩ itakiĩĩte.' Mũirĩĩtu akĩruta mbembe, akĩhũũra, akĩhũũra, akĩhũũra, ikĩhinya. Akĩĩrwo: 'Wamwerũ, nĩ tũthiĩ.' 'Ĩhĩĩ, ndingĩthiĩ itarugĩĩte ũcũrũ.' Akĩruga. Akĩĩrwo: `Mwerũ, nĩ tũthiĩ.' Rĩu ndooĩ arataanya atĩ mũũrũ wa nyina no egũũka na rĩu nĩ aikarĩĩte matukũ maingĩ atagĩũkĩĩte. Agĩkĩmwĩra: 'Ĩhĩĩ-ĩ, tũtigũthiĩ, toondũ noo nginya nyenje ngwacĩ.' 'Gĩthiĩ ũkeenje, nĩ ngũgweterera.' Agithiĩ, akĩenja. 'Mwerũ nĩ tũthiĩ.' 'Ndingĩthiĩ itarugĩĩte.' Akĩruga, githĩ mũthenya ndwagĩtuka ũcio. Makĩraara. Ĩrĩa njamba irĩa ndinagĩũka.

Maraara-rĩ, ningĩ gũkĩrooka gũkĩa. Akĩĩrwo: 'Wamwerũ, nĩ tũthiĩ.' 'Ĩhĩĩ, ndigũthiĩ itatuĩrĩire mbũri mĩrĩo.' 'Gĩthiĩ ũtue.' Agĩtua, akĩreehe agĩcuuria. Akeerwo: 'Wamwerũ, nĩ tũthiĩ.' 'Ĩhĩĩ, ndigũthiĩ itarugĩĩte maguta.' Kĩruge. Njamba ndĩrĩ na ihenya-ĩno. Ĩreenda ĩtige mawĩra moothe, matige mahingio. Agĩkĩruga. Agĩĩkĩra kanandũ. Eekĩra kanandũ-rĩ, agĩkĩĩrwo: 'Nĩ tũthiĩ.' Rĩu na maũndũ moothe agĩĩka, na makũu nyũmba, na make rĩu marĩa egũkuua. Maguta rĩu nĩekĩra kanandũ. Eekĩra tũnandũ twĩrĩ: ka maguta na ka mwere. Rĩu akĩĩrwo: 'Nĩ

[4] This is a portmanteau that derives from the words *maa* and *aya*. The word *maya* is a demonstrative pronoun which means *these ones.* The word *maa* in the context of the narrative is a signifier of the Gĩkũyu dialect evident among the language speakers in some parts of Nyeri and Kirinyaga.

tũthiĩ.' Rĩu o na nĩ akiagire kĩĩgwatio. Agĩkĩmwĩra: 'Reke nyambe nginye haha nyũmba igũrũ-ĩ, nyambe nyine karwĩmbo.' Agĩkĩhaica nyũmba igũrũ. Akĩina akiuga:

Gacara igũrũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Noo ndaakwiraga, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Nĩ thigaanagwo, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Nĩ arũme atatu, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Nawe ũkanjira, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Nĩ guoya wa aka, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria

Haya. Akeerwo: 'Wamwerũ, nĩ tũthiĩ.' 'Ĩhĩĩ, reke nyambe nyine rĩngĩ.' Ndooĩ areenda aine nĩ getha arore kana mũũrũ wa nyina noo akĩigue ee harĩa arĩ. Akĩina akĩigua ndaraigua. Akĩĩrwo: 'Uma.' Agĩkiuma. Rĩu agĩthiĩ na kanandũ gake. O mathiĩ o harĩa mahuurũka-rĩ, agaita maguta na agaita mwere. Magĩgĩthiĩ, magĩgĩthiĩ. Rĩu arathiĩ o akĩinaga, we. Mũũrũ wa nyina nĩ akiĩguire, ee kũndũ kũnene mũno. Akĩigua na kanua kau-rĩ nĩ ka mwarĩ wa maitũ. Agĩkĩĩra aanake arĩa angĩ: 'Rĩu ũcio-rĩ nĩ mwarĩ wa maitũ.' Rĩu magĩkĩambia rũgendo. Nao arĩa githĩ too maragĩthiĩ. Agĩthiĩ, agĩkĩinaga:

Gacara igũrũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Noo ndaakwĩraga, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Nĩ thigaanagwo, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Nĩ arũũme atatũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Na we ũkanjĩra, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Nĩ guoya wa aka, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Ngwacĩ irĩ mwatũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Ũcũrũ ũri itara, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria

Mũtumiia agĩgĩthiĩ o akĩinaga. Nake ũrĩa rĩrĩa aiguire nĩ araigua, agĩkĩmwĩra:
Wamwerũ witũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Rũũgama hau, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Nguugĩre ũhoro, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria

Nake agakĩmwĩra:
Gacara igũrũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Ndũũgame na kũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Thuutha nĩ atatũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria
Mbere nĩ atatũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria

Agĩthiĩ o magĩkĩinaga. O makĩinaga. O makĩinaga. Ũrĩa mũthuuri nginya rĩu aya makĩnoga. Akĩnoga nĩ kũmakinyĩra. Na rĩu nĩ gũgĩtukire. Noo aya toondũ nĩ bũrũri wao githĩ matigũgĩthiĩ tu. Ũrĩa rĩu akĩraara. Arara aya nao magĩthiĩ biũ, magĩthiĩ biũ. Mũirĩĩtu nĩ agĩtwarĩrwo kũndũ kũnene biũ. Kũnene kũnene. Kũndũ o na mũũrũ wa nyina atangĩigua.

Agĩtũũra na agĩikara matukũ maingĩ biũ. Ona akĩgĩa na twana, kũrĩa athiire. Agĩa na twana-rĩ, ũrĩa nake mwanake wa nyina agĩtũũraga o athiaga, o athiaga o athiaga o ooragĩrĩria. Nĩ gwagĩkinyĩre ihinda agĩkinya mũciĩ ũcio – wa mwarĩ wa nyina. Agĩkora twana. Akora twana-rĩ, toondũ athiaga o akĩhooyaga irio, athiĩ kuo, akeera twana: 'Mũrĩ eega?' 'Ĩĩ. Nĩ kwega' 'Twana tũtũ, mũmĩĩre-ĩ na mũthugumĩre-ĩ na mũhe irio.' Twana-rĩ tũkamũmĩĩra na tũkamũthugumĩra na tũkamũhe irio. Akarĩa, agacooka agathiĩ. Nĩ agĩthiire o kinya kwa mwarĩ wa nyina na agĩkora twana. 'Twana tũtũ, tũrĩ eega?' 'Ĩĩ.' 'Mũmĩĩre-ĩ na mũthugumĩre-ĩ na mũhe irio.' Twana tũrĩa-rĩ tũkĩmũmĩĩra na tũkĩmũthugumĩra na agĩcooka akĩheo irio, akĩrĩa.

Nĩ ũndũ nake Ngai nĩ akĩrĩ o kĩũndũ giake-rĩ, ndegũthiĩ rĩu mũciĩ ũngĩ. Rũũciũ akarooka o kũ, akarooka o gũkũ. Twana tũgĩũka tũkĩĩra nyina: ‘Gũkũ kuma mũndũ-ĩ, wĩna gĩcuĩrĩ kĩnene atwĩra atĩrĩrĩ,: tũmũmĩĩre na tũmũthugumĩre-ĩ na tũmũhe irio.’ ‘Nĩmũmũheire?’ ‘Ĩĩ.’ ‘Na mwamũthugumira?’ ‘Ĩĩ.’ Rĩu nyina akĩigua nĩ anyiitwo kĩũndũ kĩnene mũno. Ngoro rĩu yake igĩcooka o harĩa. Noogũkorwo nĩ mũũru wa maitũ ũrĩa ndatigire, nĩ we ũrathĩĩnĩka ũguo. Rĩu-rĩ ee mũtumiia rũũcio rũrũ rũngĩ-rĩ agĩũka. Ooka-rĩ ningĩ akĩĩra twana tũrĩa o ro ũguo.

Nao hwai-inĩ nyina nake akĩĩrwo o ũguo: `Mũndũ ũrĩa-rĩ nĩ egũkĩĩterĩngĩ-ĩĩ, atwĩĩra tũmũmĩĩre na tũmũthugumĩre-ĩ na tũmũhe irio.’ ‘Nĩ mũmũheire?’ ‘Ĩĩ.’ Mũtumiia rĩu akĩgĩa na kĩeha kĩnene mũno o na ndaarie. Kwarooka gũkĩa-rĩ, akĩmenya: ‘Rĩu-rĩ, kaĩ ngũthiĩ nĩ kwĩhitha, ngwĩhitha.’ Akĩĩra ciana: ‘Nĩ ndathiĩ mũgũnda.’ Akĩikĩra o theegi, agĩkira. Magĩkĩĩrwo: ‘Angĩũka-rĩ mũmũhe irio-ĩ, o ũguo mũkĩmũheaga.’ Akĩingĩra theegi, akĩingĩra theegi, mũndũ ũrĩa-rĩ nĩ agĩũkire. Agĩkora twana tũrĩa: ‘Twana tũtũ, mũrĩ eega?’ ‘Ĩĩ.’ ‘Mũmĩĩre-ĩ na mũthugumĩre-ĩ na mũhe irio.’Agĩthiĩ kũmĩrwo ũguo-rĩ mũtumiia ũrĩa akiuma na theegi na ihenya, agĩcũũthia, ũguo akĩona nĩ mũũru wa nyina. Wũũĩ! Akĩrĩra. Akĩgĩmuoya. Agĩĩtia ciana ciake maaĩ. Agĩgĩthambio. Akĩheo maaĩ agĩthamba na akĩheo ngũo. Ĩĩ, agĩgĩikara rĩu ee mũtheru biũ. Rĩu agĩgĩikara na njĩra njega o na njuĩrĩ akĩenjwo. Magĩkĩĩrwo: ‘Ũyũ-rĩ, ũyũ nĩ maama waanyu. Ũyũ-rĩ, ũyũ nĩ maama waanyu, na gũkũ-rĩ nĩ kũiywo, ndaiyĩrwo nĩ baaba waanyu. Kũrĩa andutire-rĩ twaikaraga no’yũ.’ Rĩu-rĩ magĩgĩikara. Nake mũrũme agĩgĩũka, akĩmũũria: ‘Kaĩ ũgĩire na mũgeni?’ ‘Ĩĩ, nĩ mũndũ wa wĩra. Nĩ tuona mũndũ wa wĩra’ Agĩtũĩka nĩ mũndũ wa wĩra, nĩkũrĩithia arĩkĩrĩithagia. Nĩwe akũrĩitia. Ahaana ta ngombo o ũguo. Agakĩrĩithagia o ũguo. Agĩtũũra arĩithagia, arĩithagia.

Rĩu mũthenya ũmwe nĩ meeciririe ũhoro wa kuuma bũrũri ũcio. Rĩu magĩgĩikara, makĩmenya: ‘Rĩu ũrĩa tũngĩĩka nĩ geetha tũkoima bũrũri ũyũ-rĩ?’ ‘Tũthiĩ na we, mũũru wa maitũ-rĩ.’ Rĩu ciana cia mũtumiia ũyũ nĩ ciana ciatũikire, ciana nene. Makĩĩrana: ‘Rĩu nĩ ngara tũrĩtumaga gũkũ, tũgagĩtuma ngara rĩu nĩ irĩa cigakuua mĩrigo.’ Magatuma ngara o makĩigaga o makĩigaga. Magĩcooka makĩũũa ndigi, makĩũũa ndigi. Nyingĩ biũ. Rĩu rĩrĩa meehaarĩirie ũhoro wa kuuma bũrũri ũcio-rĩ ni geetha magacooka kuuria kwao-rĩ, moohire nyũmba. Makĩoha nyũmba, makĩoha nyũmba. Makĩoha rĩu ta nginya itũũra riũ, ta nginya o hau hagatambia. Makĩoha itũũra riũ rĩothe, makĩoha. Mooha-rĩ, magĩkĩĩrana: ‘Rĩu nĩ hindĩ nĩ tũgũgĩthiĩ.’ Magĩkĩhũũra mbũri, nĩ ũtukũ, makĩhũũra mbũri, magithiĩ. Mathiĩ-rĩ, rũũcinĩ gwa kĩrooka gũkĩa-rĩ, mũndũ agakĩinainia mũrango gwake ũguo, akaigua: ‘Ai, mũrango ũcio anga nĩ mũhingĩre na nja.’ Agakiugaga mbu, agakiuga: ‘Uuu, hingũra-ĩ, ndĩ muobere, ndĩ muobere, ndĩ muobere.’ Nake ũrĩa ũngĩ: ‘Ndĩ muobere, ndĩ muobere, uuu, o na niĩ ndĩ muobere.’ (narrator laughs) Mationire wa kũmahĩngũrĩra. Andũ acio magĩcooka bũrũri wao na mwarĩ wa nyina.

Rũgano rwakwa rũkĩrĩĩkĩra hau.

Translation from the Gikuyu

Duration of the narration: 12min30.
Performer: Esther Njeri.
Age: 35 years old (at the time of recording).
Place and date: Mwĩmũtoni, 31 May 1992.
Audience: Jane Wangarĩ.
The audience regularly utters: 'Mmm' or 'Ĩĩ' as is usual during storytelling sessions, to interact with the narrator.
Transcription and translation: Jane Wangarĩ, Inge Brinkman (checked by James Wachira and his father).

A man married a woman, she gave birth to two children: now one boy and a girl. Then he died. He died and the woman died: the girl and the boy were left behind. Now they stayed and stayed, and they raised themselves. They stayed and raised themselves since they had no father or mother. They raised themselves.

The young man now when he had grown up [stayed long], he became a wanderer. He would leave his sister alone and he was a wanderer: and it was in the wilderness such as that of these ones.[5] So the girl would be left alone. When left alone, now people would notice her while passing by. They would see that the girl was very, very, very pretty. One of them would pass by to ask her. One told her: 'Now we, we can just love you very, very, very much.' And she would tell them: 'No, I wouldn't like to go to your place, because my brother is not here. If he comes and finds that nobody is here, who will give him food? And we don't have a mother or a father.' She would be told: 'No, let us go.' 'No, I won't go.'

Her brother would return home. And then he is given food and he eats . She tells him: 'Now, there were people here who were telling me that I should go with them, and I told them that I would not go with them unless you come.' He would tell her: 'Pshaw, (go, go) that is women's fear!' She says: 'It's not fear, they have been coming.' The young men kept on coming for the girl, coming for the girl. And the girl is a hard-heartened girl. She did not want to leave her brother behind. And the brother would go and spend his day wherever he wandered and not in the field. And the girl, she kept on being bothered, being bothered, being bothered. Every time her brother was back, she would tell him. But he, he would tell her: 'Go! Go! That is women's fear.'

One day, she was told: 'Now we are not leaving you. Now we are not leaving you.' She said to that person – they were ogres (*marimũ*) –, she said: 'No, now, even if you are not leaving me, I need to cook so that I cook for my brother.' She was told: 'Cook, I will wait for you.' She prepared food and it was cooked. She was told: 'Let's go, Wamwerũ, let's go.' She told him: 'No, I won't go without preparing some gruel.' The girl took out maize, she pounded and pounded and pounded the maize until it was finely ground . She was told: 'Wamwerũ, let's go.' 'No, I won't go without cooking porridge.' She cooked. She was told: 'Mwerũ, let's go.' Now, he did not know that she hoped that her brother would return home, as now he had stayed away for many nights without returning. She told him: 'No, we shall not go, unless I dig out some sweet potatoes.' 'Go and dig, I will wait for you.' She went and dug. 'Mwerũ, let's go.' 'I won't go without cooking.' She cooked. That day was over and they spent the night. And this warrior had not come back home..

After they had spent the night the next morning she was told: 'Wamwerũ, let's go.' 'No, I won't go without feeding the goats some sweet potato vines.' 'Go and cut them.' She cut them and hang them up. She was told: 'Wamwerũ, let's go.' 'No, I won't go without cooking fat.' 'Then cook.' She cooked. This hero was not in a hurry and wanted to ensure all

[5] The narrator indicates with a visible gesture the direction of such a place.

the chores were accomplished. She cooked and put it in a small gourd. After she had put it in the small gourds, she was told: 'Let's go.'

Now all the things were done: the things in her house and she also put some of the fat that she was to take with her. She put hers in a small gourd. She then filled in two small gourds: one with the cooked fat and one with millet. Now she was told: 'Let's go.' Now she failed to find an excuse. But she told him: 'Let me first reach here on top of the house, so that I can first sing a little song.' She climbed on top of the house. She sang and said:

Gacara igũrũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,[6]
But I told you, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
I was being spied on, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
By three men, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
And you just told me, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
That they were women's fears, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria.

Okay. She would be told: 'Wamwerũ, let's go.' 'No, allow me first to sing again.' He did not know that she wanted to sing so that she could find out whether her brother could hear her from wherever he was. She sang, she listened, she did not hear [any reply]. She was told: 'Come down.' She came down. Now she went with her small gourd. They went and wherever they rested, she poured out oil and threw some millet. They went. And they went.

Now, as she went, she was singing and her brother heard her from an extremely far place. He knew that that was his sister's voice. He told those other youngsters: 'Now that one, that is my sister.' So they started the journey while the sister and the ogres (*irimũ)* were inching on she kept singing:

Gacara igũrũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
But I told you, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
I was being spied on, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
By three men, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
And you just told me, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
That they were women's fears, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
The sweet potatoes are in the *mwatũ*[7], thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
The porridge is on the firewood platform, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria.

The woman continued going while singing. And when that one (her brother), realised that her sister could hear him, he said to her:

Our Wamwerũ, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
Stop there, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
I bid you goodbye , thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria.

And she told him:

Gacara igũrũthĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
I will not stop here, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
Behind me there are three, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria,
Before me there are three, thĩĩ thĩĩthĩria.

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[6] *Gacara igũrũ* is the boy's name, *thĩĩ thĩĩthĩrĩa* is rendered as 'to be urged insistently': Routledge, *With a prehistoric people* 290; Benson, *Kikuyu-English* 522.
[7] A special container for holding cooked food.

She went, while singing; while singing, while singing... The man now became exhausted, really exhausted. And he became worn out while trying to catch up with them. And it was already night. Since these ones [The ogres (*marimũ*)] were in their own country, they continued walking. This other one [the brother] spent the night at the far point to which he had followed them. These other ones proceeded with their journey. They went exceedingly far. And the girl was taken to a very faraway place. Far. Far. A place where her brother could not hear her singing.

She resided there and lived for many days. And she got children in this place where she was living. So, when she got children, her brother, he kept on going and going and going while enquiring. And a time came when he arrived at the home of his sister. He found the children. When he found the children, and because he kept walking while begging for food, he went there and said to the children: 'Are you well?' 'Yes, we are well.' 'You children, defecate on me and urinate on me and give me some food.' The children would defecate on him and urinate on him and then give him food. Then he would eat and then would proceed with his journey. He kept walking until he arrived at his sister's place and he found children: 'You children, are you well?' 'Yes.' 'Defecate on me and urinate and then give me food.' Those children defecated on him and urinated on him, then offered him food, and then he was given food and he ate. Because God has his own mysterious ways, he [the brother] did not go to any other place. Every next day he would just go to his sister's place. The children finally came to tell their mother: 'There was a man here. He has long hair. He told us to defecate and urinate on him and then we offer him food. 'Did you give him?' 'Yes.' 'And did you urinate on him?' 'Yes.' Now the mother experienced an extraordinarily strong feeling. Her heart now retraced her past. She wondered: 'Probably it is my brother whom I left who is the one suffering like that. Now, eh, the woman, … the next morning he came. He came and once again told the same thing he had previously told them [the children].

And in the evening the mother was also told again: 'That man came again and he told us to defecate and urinate on him and then we give him food: ' `Did you give him?' 'Yes.' Now the woman felt such great anguish that she was unable to talk. When the next morning came, she decided that she was going to hide: 'Now I must hide.' She told her children: 'I am going to the field.' She hid in the *theegi* [pantry, place where cooking utensils are kept] and kept quiet. They had been told then: 'If he comes, give him food as you have always been.' She hid in the pantry, she hid in the pantry. That man finally came. He found the children: 'You children, are you well?' 'Yes.' 'Defecate on me and urinate on me and then give me food.' When he was about to be defecated on, the woman left the place quickly as from where she had observed, she saw that it was her brother. Oooh! She took hold of him. She then ordered her children to bring him water. He was then cleaned. He was given water and he bathed, and he was also given clothes. Yes, and now he became extremely clean. He adopted acceptable ways, and his hair was also cut. They were then told: 'This one, this is your uncle. And over there was theft, I was taken by your father. Where he [the father of the children] brought me from, we were living together with this one [the brother].' He started living with them.

Then when her husband came and was back, he asked: 'You mean you received a guest?' 'Yes, he is a hand. We have found a labourer.' He became a labourer, a herder. He would be the one herding. He was to herd as a slave. He embarked on his herding. He would herd. He continuously herded.

Now one day they pondered over relocating from that country. So, they continued staying in that country until they knew how to leave: 'Now what shall we do to leave this country?' 'We leave with you, brother.' Now the children of that woman, the children had

already grown up. They told each other: ‘Let us weave a big basket here, we shall weave a big basket. The ones that we will use to carry our luggage.’ They wove big baskets and put them together in a secure place. Then they peeled barks to obtain cords. Peeled barks to get cords. Lots of them. Now when they had prepared themselves to leave that land to return to their country, they tied up the houses. They tied up their houses. They tied up their houses. Now they tied up the entire village.. They tied up the village.. When they had tied it up, they all agreed it was time to leave.’ They drove off all the goats. They did this in the night. They drove off the goats. They went, they went. After they left, the following morning at dawn, someone would try to open their hut’s door like this [demonstrates] from inside. Then the one trying to open the door would feel: ‘Ai, that door is like it is locked from the outside.’ S/he would then call out for help, thus, ‘Oh dear! Open this door for me. I have been locked in.’ ‘I have been locked inside.’ ‘I have been locked inside.’ And this other person: ‘I have been locked inside, oh dear! I have also been locked inside.’ [narrator laughs] They never found anyone to open for them. So those people returned to their country with their sister. My story has ended there.