

# HOW *NDUUMO* – A GIKUYU WOMEN'S POETIC FORM FUNCTIONS AS A VEHICLE OF PROTEST AGAINST TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SEXIST OPPRESSION IN KENYA

Mwangi P. Muhoro Literature Department, Kenyatta University

## Abstract

*The women's Liberation movement, civil society activists, women rights affirmative action, women caucus, NGOs, CBOs and gender sensitive organizations have been on the fore front in advancing the case for equity and equality not only in the third world countries but in the developed world. The social struggles for equality has been and remains a contentious issue which more often than not revolves around gender disparities in the access to state resources. The womenfolk are entitled for basic protection of human rights and the right to exploit their own wealth.*

*This paper addresses gender issue through the poetry created by Nduumo women artistes as a form of pursuing power emancipation reality in the third world matrix. What is Nduumo poetry? Who performs it? Where and how? In brief, Nduumo is a cultural dance for girls, young and elderly women in the Gikuyu community of Kenya. It is a folk dance performed in Nyakinyua (elderly women) groups as they participate in the development of the nation. Nduumo poetry is central in Kenya's social and political structure. It is the poetry of harambee functions, political rallies, women social meeting and also as an electioneering tool to key politicians in Kenya. Nevertheless, protests against male chauvinism and sexist oppression are central in Nduumo poetry. In the paradigm of poetry and society, it is a verbal weapon for voicing social, cultural, political and economic affairs in the unprecedented disparities in a patriarchal and male dominant world.*

## Introduction

*Imagine yourself talking with a friend who describes two persons you have not met. One is said to be adventurous, autocratic, coarse, dominant, forceful, independent and strong, while the other is described as affectionate, dependent, dreamy, emotional, sentimental, submissive and weak. What are your expectations about these two people? Would it be easier to picture one of them as a male and one as a female? Which would be which? (Williams & Best 1990:15)*

In Africa, the song genre is mainly an invaluable source of poetic discourse that is used in different life situations as a verbal expression on the progress or shortcomings in any given society. The Gikuyu community of Kenya is a group that uses songs to link a variety of experiences of various categories of their cultural setting. This paper is an attempt to highlight the social and political disparities that are reflected in *Nduumo* poetry, an art form performed by Gikuyu women. The question of what the *Nduumo* dance and poetry is and presents thus emerges as central focus of this paper.

Among the early missionary scholars who worked in Kenya, Cagnolo (1933:168) studied Gikuyu folklore. He refers to *Nduumo* as an expression of Kikuyu girls.

The Kikuyu youth spends a great deal of time singing; the girls indeed seem to be born songsters. It may be said without exaggeration that there is no Kikuyu girl who does not sing for an hour a day either alone in the fields or in chorus with her companies. They have a number of special songs, accompanied by a profusion of gesticulations and dances, which go under the name of *Nduumo*.

Like many early missionary scholars of African folklore, Cagnolo found nothing meaningful in the Gikuyu song and dance. To him, there is no comparison between Western and Gikuyu music on which he pours scorn. He

asserts that the Gikuyu music is inevitably a “crude and childlike affair.” He further asserts: “we may still recognize it as the voice of the soul, but it is a soul as savage as its environment (1933:162).”

The focus of this paper is not to condemn Cagnolo but rather to identify the sensitivity of Gikuyu women to gender issues that run across the traditional and modern bias towards the well being of society. The ordinary Gikuyu women are known for their industry especially in their performance of day-to-day economic activities that revolve around agricultural products and petty business within their environment. These activities are the driving force of various family units that struggle to make ends meet thanks to a poor national economic malaise of the past regime.

The elite Gikuyu women are a hardworking lot and participate in national forums that address the issues involving the womenfolk. You are likely to get them working full throttle with Non Governmental Organizations, Community Based Organizations, civil society groups, human rights activists, women liberation movements and also in the so-called Kenya’s women political caucus. It is noticeable that these women focus on the equality and equity in not only the socio-economic well being of women but also the socio-political set-up of the Kenyan nation-state. Their views are echoed in *Nduumo* poetry that expresses the life and spirit of the Nyakinyua women groups in Gikuyu land and its diaspora. With the increasing significance of women’s participation in the building of the nation, these women are marching comfortably in the spirit of the new world order which is being amplified through the auspices of globalization. In taking social and political issues in the land, the youth involved in composing music and dance have adapted and innovated the music to manifest what could be termed as the “*Nduumo* evolution.”

The prominence of this poetry is reflected into the electronic media, mainly in the new FM stations: Kameme Kayu ka Muingi 101.1 FM, Coro 103.7 FM and Inooro 98.9 FM. The public Kenya Broadcasting Corporation occasionally also airs *Nduumo* songs especially while highlighting women socio-economic growth and development programmes. *Nduumo* poetry applies deep symbolism and touches on allegorical language which question the male chauvinism and anti-women attitudes seen through various elements in society: from the high and mighty men to the men in the street or the ordinary local brew consumer who symbolises the family parasitic syndrome: laziness, inactivity and a bother to stomach.

## **Socio-Cultural Origins of Nduumo Art Form**

The Gikuyu community of Kenya comprises of four million people (census, 1999). They occupy the Central Province which is the historical origin of the famed “Mukurue wa Nyagathanga”, in Murang’a district. This mythical origin is very central in the Gikuyu history in that its nine clans: Anjiru, Aceera, Aithirandu, Angari, Ambui, Agathigia, Agaciku, Angui and Aicakamuyu spell out their relationship with their traditional God *Ngai*, *Mwene Nyaga* who created Gikuyu and his wife Mumbi. All the folk songs and wisdom in the community are historically inclined with the socio-cultural and socio-religious framework of the Gikuyu people. *Nduumo* is one of the prominent traditional oral poetic forms that are sung by the community. It is important also because it was and still is the pride of Gikuyu women who compose, sing and dance to its tunes.

From time immemorial *Nduumo* poetry has served as the verbal means of expression for women’s affairs in the land. One of the greatest legendary Gikuyu women, Wangu wa Makeri cherished singing and dancing *Nduumo*. In the Gikuyu oral history, it is alleged that she was a tyrant chief who used to seat on the heads of men as she executed her administrative duties to her lieutenants. In one *Nduumo* song the composer says: *Nyakinyua ino iitu, arume ti ega, niki? Mahenirie wangu agithoitha njaga* – (My fellow Nyakinyua women, why are men are no good? They cheated Wangu and made her to dance naked in a public arena). The story goes that men were desperately seeking to overthrow women from power to free themselves from an emerging domestic captivity. They challenged Wangu to assert her chieftaincy, proof her ability in leadership before men and women by asking her to undress and dance naked.

When she attempted to undress and dance the audience screamed at her for this was unseen before and she was blamed for being too daring and unrespectable. This was considered untraditional and unethical and so she was forced to relinquish her grip on her chieftaincy. Historically, in the Gikuyu traditional society, that marked the end of women power. From hence any woman who attempted to rise to power was likened to be the evolution of Wangu. Men took advantage of the Wangu tale to create a sexist community, which oppressed and to some extent continues to do so to the Gikuyu woman to date.

Today Gikuyu women use *Nduumo* as a means to express their dissatisfaction with the menfolk in the community. Among the issues addressed through this form is the consumption of illicit brews by men and its impact on the social economic status of the community. For the last five or so years the drinking of local brews like *Kairaci*, *Simbawine*, *Mutukuru* and *Kumikumuni* among others has led to the tragic sudden death of drunkards in various parts of the country. First it was in Murang'a district, then in Naivasha and very recently in Nairobi area. The same brews are alleged to have reduced men into "cabbages" or indifferent husbands who have failed in their conjugal obligations in their families. It is against such a backdrop that women for instance in Kangemi (Nairobi), Kangema and Mugoiri (Murang'a district), Maragua and Saba saba (Maragua district), Gatundu (Thika district) among others have led peaceful demonstrations to force or address the old and new administration in Kenya in matters of banning dangerous locally manufactured brews.

The Kenyan women are in earnest fighting not only for their domestic freedom but also the economic bait more than the political stand points as they endeavour to be self-reliant after being failed by their partners.

Luthira in Jayawarda (1986:97) says:

*Freedom depends on economic conditions even more than political, and if a woman is not economically free and self-earning, she will have to depend on her husband or someone else and dependants are never free.*

The Kenyan women are aware that if their husbands cannot be reliable breadwinners, there is the danger of getting assistance from other men, for more often than not such help has strings attached. Things can even turn sour if such men assist with an eye on sexual favours from poor women. The situation is compounded by the emerging issue of HIV/AIDS scourge as a real emerging social and economic disaster in the contemporary world. The Gikuyu women are an example of a class struggle of lower class people airing their concerns through *Nduumo*. Their Nyakinyua women groups are symbols of women's struggle in the socio-economic front as well as ideals of nationalism in Kenya.

## **Socio-Political Realizations in Nduumo Through Women's Emancipation Paradigm**

The Kenyan women have of late realized the need to participate fully in the political activities of the nation as a means to bridge the gender disparities, which exist between them and their male counterparts. The history of the Kenyan nation-state cannot be discussed without reflecting on the pre-colonial and colonial times. This is especially so for the colonial administration interfered with the social, political, religious and economic structures of the traditional African societies.

In 1920s, the colonial administration had a conflict with Gikuyu women that riveted on the new methods of farming introduced by the former and their indigenous manner of conducting cultivation in their shambas. The women rejected the construction of terraces in the farms as a modern approach to curbing soil erosion. They felt that their indigenous method of growing crops like sweet potato vines and cassava as cover crops served the purpose of soil conservation. In one *Nduumo* song-text the singer asserts: *Tutikwenja benji, ucio ti unduire wiitu kuu ni gute mugunda, muthungu ndekia nditware ni kwa riuu.* (We reject the idea of digging terraces, that is not a traditional [method of our forefathers], that is a way of wasting land, hey, whiteman leave me alone, it is time for dry weather). This assertion boils down to the scenario that the foreigners exploited the traditional African ways of life without consulting the people.

As the conflict between the Africans and the whites intensified, political activism emerged and women were not left behind in the struggle for freedom. In 1920, one political activist and a journalist of *Gikuyu Muiiguithania* magazine was arbitrary arrested. One legendary Gikuyu heroine Nyanjiru led women in protesting the act in Nairobi City. The white regime responded by shooting our heroine and other protesters to send a signal to future challengers of the despotic white regime. The women composed *Nduumo* songs to denounce that act of inhumanity.

The dehumanizing act did not deter political activism to cool but rather activated those who were left alive. In the

1940s and the early 1950s, the clamour for political freedom gained ground in Kenya. The singing of *Mwomboko* and *Nduumo* songs reflected on the bad governance executed by the foreign domineering forces. One memorable *Nduumo* song says:

*Mbariki ikihia I ndiari muugi wa kumenya  
Ni Kenyatta wanjiriire, ikarangagwo na rugio ikoima maguta.*

*When the castor oil seeds were cooked, I was still ignorant. It is Kenyatta  
who enlightened me, that they are roasted on a pan till they produce oil.*

Among the Gikuyu, castor oil is a totem of traditional beauty for it produces seeds that were dried and roasted to provide oil to be used by women *Nduumo* and Gitiro dancers. The verse in the song is an allegory of the struggle for freedom. This points out at the need for armed struggle to attain social political and economic freedom in Kenya. Freedom is likened to oil that is very essential for smoothening the bodies of the Gikuyu people. The plants like castor trees among others are quite important in the socio-economic activities that revolve on the material culture of the community.

Like Balick and Cox (1996:99) note:

*Throughout the world plants are the basis of human culture. We use plants to meet our most basic needs for food, clothing and shelter. Most indigenous societies, which traditionally have lacked the metals and synthetic ubiquitous in western society, rely almost entirely on plants for their needs.*

The two authors observation is not limited to western society for the situation is equally the same in African communities. Plants provide food, fuel, herbs, rafters and posts for construction of shelter, furniture, oil and walking staffs for the community's needs. The women in Africa cherish nature's provision of beautiful plants in their respective environment. In one *Nduumo* song the singer insinuates the Gikuyu proverb that says: *maguta makuru matinaga rwiimbo* (old/used oil cannot be used in beautifying oneself in readiness for a dance). This proverb is a sexist reference to old women who are not suitable for marriage. The Gikuyu men cherished polygamy and they justified it by claiming that old women once married would no longer be wooed again for marriage. Thus, men selfishly prefer young girls even if they are their daughters' or granddaughters' age. The idea is to acquire a young lady for taking care of his conjugal rights in his old age: *Gatumia ga kundirithia ukuru*. (A smallish woman for enabling one to walk safely in one's old age). As Arber and Ginn (1991:33) observes:

*Negative image of older women are shown to be related to the rise of patriarchy, and it is argued that such images contribute to the social control of women. [...].*

The consequence of the double standard of ageing for women's self-perception as they age and for their valuation by others as sexual partners and employees is discussed.

In recent times the case for older women who have reached menopause attempting to follow the path of older women who marry younger colleagues has opened a new dimension on the rights of women.

This was triggered by the recent marriage between a famous politician Wambui Otieno, a 67 year old woman to John Mbugua a 29 year old young man. The couple rose to the limelight of the entire Kenyan nation as they were featured in both the print and the electronic media. The old men reacted to Mbugua's choice by advising him with the wisdom of the Gikuyu proverb which says: *kindu gikuru kiega no irigu* that is, (The only good ripe old thing is a banana fruit). To the old men, one marries for co-creation and furthering the lineage of one's clan. As such, Mbugua has missed the point in marrying his "grandmotherly" Wambui.

However, to the dismay of many parents, it is ironical that most young men have been approving Mbugua's daringness, by justifying that with the present economic trends where young girls close examine a potential young suitor, scrutinize his economic base, give impossible ultimatums and finally dismiss one as "bore", a rich old woman is a kind of way forward to one's personal poverty alleviation programme. The debate continues to rage on with the old and young women showing anti-wambui-ism by simply referring to Mbugua as a materialistic misguided young man Mbugua's mother wished Mbugua would die and be buried for shaming her but ironically and sadly too, she

faced her demise hardly after his son's escapade and honeymoon with Wambui was over. Wambui's 42 year old daughter referred to her as "cradle grabber" but the stoic Wambui threatened to disinherit her if she continued to question or make a fuss about her consummation with Mbugua.

Having been a brave freedom fighter Wambui looks set to secure her controversial marriage and there are no signs she will turn back like the biblical Lot's wife. This researcher hopes that *Nduumo* singers will come up with a song about Wambui Otieno. *Nduumo* songs have a history of reflecting social and political protests as evidenced in the so-called Mau Mau songs. When Wambui was involved in the struggle for Kenya's independence, political mobilization advocated and adapted *Nduumo* songs to disseminate propaganda about the evils of colonialism. An example is the song that reads:

*Ngari ya atumia niyo ya mbere*  
*Yoimite Nairobi ta thaa ithaatu*  
*Igikinya Nyiri ta thaa thiita, tugikora anake matwetereire*  
*Tungakena muuno, nyumba ya Mumbi*  
*Igicokera ithaaka.*

The women's vehicle was the leading one  
It had left Nairobi at around 9.00 a.m.  
It arrived at Nyeri at around 12 noon  
We met the youth waiting for us  
We shall be very happy, when the House of Mumbi  
Will get back its land.

Women's participation in Kenya's searching for socio-political and economic emancipation is evident in this verse. The words of the song are a form of historical allusion on how Kenyans were incarcerated in various parts of the British East Africa colony under her eminence the Queen of England.

The journey in reference began from Lang'ata concentration camp in Nairobi and it was destined for Nyeri via Murang'a and Kirinyaga districts of Central Kenya. The key words are "will get back its land" which is a reference to the land grabbed by the foreign forces. The Kenyan women were and are still very much attached to land for their survival. They are espoused as the mothers of Kenya's seeds for freedom. In one song entitled: *Atumia a Gitatia maendeleo* (The women of the development Group), the singer urges women to ululate for her for bearing the seeds of freedom. She sings:

*Nyakinyua munjugire ngemi I x 2*  
*Ni inyuji mwaciarire njamba cia Kenya*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera*  
*Nyakinyua, ululate for me x 2*

You are the ones who mothered the heroes/heroines of Kenya  
Harambee, harambee is ours by choice.

*Muroria wiyathi ni wau I x 2!*  
*Ti uyu wa Kenya muguthaaka naguo*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*

Why are you querring who owns uhuru, freedom!  
Well, it is not Kenya's uhuru that you can joke with  
Harambee, harambee is ours by choice.

The singer is aware of the tendency of conservative male cynics of failing to recognize women's participation in the search for Kenya's independence. Like Eneke the bird in Chinua Achebe (1958), if one's efforts in achieving a significant goal is not hailed, one should not be shy in praising oneself. The *Nduumo* singers praise themselves for

bearing freedom fighters. Still, the women have been in the forefront in harambee development projects. That is why they assert: "Harambee is ours by choice" which implies that they are not coerced to take part in the noble national endeavours – to improve their lifestyles through personal struggle in women group units.

The oppression of women did not start or end with the demise of colonialism. Immediately after Kenya attained its independence only men were issued with identity cards. It is in 1978-79 when the government considered this extreme anti-women administrative misnomer and began issuing them with the documents. Yet during the state of emergence, the women like their male counterparts were issued with pass-books. They recall the draconian rule in the songs which says:

*Wacemania, wacemania na muthungu mwtia bathi*

*Ndatuire na bathi mbuku iri muhuko*

*Na inyui arume, rekei tuheo ibandi ta arume*

*Ngari itari namba menya ni ya muici*

*If you come across a white, demand his passbook*

*I used to walk with my passbook in the pocket*

*You men! Let us also be issued with identity cards like men*

*A vehicle without a numberplate is suspected to be a thief's.*

The words of the song not only point out the colonial oppression but also highlights neo-colonialism that emerged after Kenya attained its political independence. The women thus challenge the men to let them be issued with identity cards as a show of the recognition as bona fide citizens of Kenya. They liken a human being without an identity card to a stolen vehicle/or one without a numberplate as a disguise to the evils committed by its owner. Further this may refer to a woman or a man without a spouse. Apparently, in the traditional African set up women and children played the second fiddle in family matters.

In the song *Nitwarega Kuria Ciahora* (We object to eating cold food), the singer broaches the idea of male chauvinism. When an animal like a goat or sheep was slaughtered in a home, and it happened very often, women ate the meat in the evening after men had their share during the day. The delicious parts of the animal especially the famous *ngerima* (a kind of largish African sausage) was the preserve of men.

This oppression is also reflected in one folk song for children that disparages the womenfolk as being uncomfortable when eating special meat dishes. It says: *Muthuri wathinja nguku ndukae kuhe mwariguo, mwariguo aruma arithiga akiumbukaga wui iya! Ni kunyua thubu wa nguku.* (Elder! when you slaughter a chicken, please do not allow/give your daughter, if your daughter bites a piece, she will start moving as if she is flying! wui iya! For taking the chicken soup). This shows that even children were encouraged to disparage girls so that they remained an exploited lot. This reminds one of Francis Imbuga (1988) whereby the women of Membe an imaginary village in Luhya land were not allowed to take chicken. When pastor Ngoya breaks from the tradition and feeds his daughter Aminata and other women with chicken, the male conservative elements like Jumba profess doom for the community and consequently denounce Christianity, which advocates change.

## The Language of Nduumo Singers

The singer's of *Nduumo* utilize their creative designs to use a suitable and appropriate language for their target audience. The integration of Kiswahili and English words in some of the phrases in the songs put a lot of humour and variety in the performance of the dance. In one popular *Nduumo* song the singer says:

*Huti karibu nihinguriruo ndonge huti karibu*

*Werokamu niwakinya kwa Wanjiku werokamu*

*Wero! Werokamu nowakinya homa mucii citindauni.*

Knock! Welcome - open for me to enter, knock, and welcome

Welcome, you have arrived at Wanjiku's home - welcome

Well - welcome you have arrived at home - sit down.

The words *huti* and *karibu* refer to the Kiswahili *hodi* and *karibu* respectively and they mean “knock at the door” and “welcome”. *Werokamu* is the English word “welcome” while *homu* is “home”. *Citindauni* refers to the English words “sit down”. These wordings indicate the spirit of accommodation and assimilation of the Gikuyu language to other languages in the daily communication process.

To some extent these words also reflect how simple the Nyakinyua *Nduumo* dancers are taken lightly by the political leaders who use or misuse them in their endeavour to advance their popularity through hoodwinking of the populace. The singers are at times made to sleep in poorly arranged rooms where sanitation is a concern. At such times they wish they slept in the traditional home shelters where they have space and peace of mind unlike storey buildings where modernism rob them their privacy and decency. Some of these storey buildings are the home for brothel operators who have no respect for human dignity nor decorum. In one song-text the singer questions the others: *Atumia a ikundi-turaire ku? Turaire nyumba cia nyoni.* (Hey fellow women group members – where did we spend the night?

We slept in birds’ nests). The nests in question refers to small cubicles in night clubs or bar and boarding facilities where the women are exploited and oppressed by menfolk who score shots in political games. After singing for the powers that be they receive peanuts in form of pocket allowance for the daunting task.

The singers also pinpoint how some men discourage them from pursuing formal education for fear of being equal to them. The male chauvinists assert that education is no good for a woman for her beauty should be seen through how she relates with her husband and also bringing up his children and finally her level of submission to their husband as the bible says. The women express their discontent in the song, *Gwatia Tawa.* (Light a Lamp) which says: *Gwatia tawa ndikonuo ngithoma ibuku i ni mundurume – reke tugithomei – giki kia ngumbaru – tucinde arume* (light the lamp so that your man does not see you reading a book, let us pursue education – This adult education – let us beat men in it). It is worthy noting that this has emerged from adult education reports that women are actually beating men and men have opted to drop out of the programme rather than be defeated by women from whom they have always looked down upon. It is ironical that one has to light a lamp so as not to be seen yet light is an agent that fights darkness. The point put across is that a lamp is a symbol of education and development. Women are struggling to pursue adult education to catch up with new demands of contemporary life. Recently, one Mirugi Ng’ang’a Kimani, an 84 year old former Mau Mau fighter caused a stir in the nation when he chose to pursue formal education as a classmate of his great grandchildren in an effort to take advantage of the newly launched free primary education.

The paradigm of social and political protest has always been standing out feature of *Nduumo* poetry. Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya adopted a private capitalist system of development that made the gap between the rich and the poor to widen by the day. This situation has produced an unbalanced society and women normally bear the brant of economic domination, which creates “financial monsters” which equally swallow the money that would otherwise develop the nation to greater heights.

The telling truth is that the major role for foreign private investors has given rise to scams of high magnitude like Kenren and the Goldenberg that are the ultimate avenues for emptying public coffers. The *Nduumo* singers intertwine social and political matters as the song *Cumbi ni Kiru* (Salt is Weighed in Kilos) asserts:

*Cumbi ni kiru, sukari ni kiru*  
*Mugaruri thirikari athimuo kiru*  
*Maundu ni kiru, na mucii ni kiru*  
*Muthuri ukuhura muka athimo kiru*

Salt is measured in kilos, sugar is weighed in kilos  
So let the one who engages in a coup de tat be weighed in kilos  
Things are done in kilos, even homes are weighed in kilos  
So let the man who beats wife, be weighed in kilos.

This song alludes to the attempted coup of 1971 that was precipitated by Kenyatta’s highhandedness. The *Nduumo* singers are denouncing the abortive coup planners and recommend that the villains be measured in kilos as a way of recommending for the law to be applied so that they are prosecuted.

It is the reference of the man who beats his wife that pinpoints the sexist oppression of wife beating which captures our attention. This trend is a worrying one as it has led to murder of spouses or maiming which renders one invalid. This retrogressive behaviour is highly challenged in *Nduumo* poetry.

## The Socio-Economic Struggles of the Nyakinyua Women

Women groups are very important social units that form the basis for developmental issues in the African societies. During the colonial times, most households were constructed with the local materials from the immediate environment. Thatching houses was a common phenomenon that signified the level of poverty among Africans. It is against such a background that women came up with the idea of pulling their meagre resources together to buy iron sheets for roofing their houses in turns till every member was served. This later extended to the buying of water tanks and paying school fees for their children. The nobility of feeding and work ethics is registered in the following verses of a *Nduumo* song:

*Madamu muceere ni uhiire I x 2*  
*Warikia kuruga tuthii gitati*  
*Harambee, harambeeni iitu ya kwiiendera*  
*Mabati maria mari weru I x 2*  
*Tukwendia mooko na twendie maguru*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera*  
*Madamu akiriria githeri x 2*  
*Gia gukario ni aria matinda thome.*

Madam! The rice is cooked and ready x 2  
After you are through with cooking, let's for group work  
Harambee, harambee is ours by choice.  
The iron sheets which are somewhere in the bush  
Will make us sell our hands as well as legs  
Haramabee, harambee is ours by choice.  
Madam! Add faggots into the fire in the hearth.  
To feed the idlers who spend the day outside the gates.

The word *mandamu* (Madam) shows the dignity of the *Nduumo* singers in attributing their importance to those ladies who work in schools or offices who are constantly referred with etiquette touches. Eating is a prerequisite for enabling them to work hard in the field. The “idlers” in question are their irresponsible husbands who spend the day chatting without contributing to the welfare of the family socio-economically. Women are called upon to use their guts to maintain their families. Their struggle to acquire iron sheets from the bush signals the hard work in the shamba or in cutting down trees to get money to buy iron sheets. Though cutting down of forests can lead to desertification where there are no re-forestation programmes, women require fuel to prepare food for their families. Since the government does not give traditional means/alternatives for acquiring fuel, there is normally a conflict between the government and its citizens. Like Balick and Cox (1997:197) observes: “because indigenous peoples have seldom been involved in the planning process, conflicts have often arisen between them and the western-educated preserve managers. Conflict has been particularly acute over the management of Amboseli National Park in Kenya, which is overgrazed and thus capable of supporting far smaller animal populations than in the past.” Such conflicts occur because of poor government policies in integrating the community in the centre of decision-making process through dialogue. The male dominance more often than not is responsible for the failures in community development. The social and political arrangements oppress the womenfolk right from the biblical setting to the contemporary formal and informal settings. Writing about the oppression of women through male dominance in the western world Sandy (1981:15) asserts:

In western society as individual males and females, we understand the meaning of the divine command in the Garden of Eden – “yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you” - and were affected by the

attitude toward women expressed in the events that led to the fall of Adam and Eve. We also understand that when our founding fathers declared” that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by the creator with certain unalienable right,” they had men and not women in mind.

This observation indicates that women are not only demeaned in Africa and the rest of the third world, but also in the developed countries of the world. The biblical allusion makes the disparities on gender take a different dimension in that this is a document that its authors are said to have been inspired by God. The man is referred to as the head of the family while the woman is a helper to his plans in the home. So the question, which arises, is: **Is it God’s will that woman be dominated by man?**

From another different religious perspective, Jayawarda (1986:95) postulates:

Gardhi’s basic ideas on women’s rights were equality in some spheres and opportunities for self-development and self-realization. He believed that ‘woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities’, and realized that her contemporary subordinate position was the result of domination by men.

These views are similar to the ones echoed by *Nduumo* singers who blame the status quo where women are discriminated and prejudiced through gender as the machination of a domineering male world. *Nduumo* poetry on development sensitizes the populace to the merits and imperatives of self-reliance. This notion of sensitization has boiled down to the recent spate of women demonstrations against an emerging social order or disorder where men have abdicated their familial obligations, yet they dominate in inheritance issues.

Weber in Lukes (1986:29) notes that “Domination in most general sense is one of the most important elements of social action” and that “without exception every sphere of social action is profoundly influenced by structures of dominancy” in a given social group, community or society.

## **The Emergence of Social Cultural Awareness Groups**

Like in the western society, African societies have of late risen against gender disparities that paint negative images of women in contemporary world.

The women’s liberation movement wave has swept across the globe and so in Kenya it is no exception. The sources of women oppression emanate from conservative elements in society that control the whims of power in the land. The customs of the land and at times the laws have precipitated the state of women being disinherited. *Nduumo* singers highlight the various forms of sexist oppression witnessed by the past and contemporary societies. In one song the message says:

*Hingāi na mukome mwi maitho*  
*Arume moigaga gia aka gitikagio kiarara*  
*Na ati gutiri thoome utemaguo ni aka*  
*Riu nitwarega gutemagiruo thina ni arebi.*

Shut your doors and sleep with open eyes  
Men say women’s counsel is believed after night.  
And still there is no decision that is determined by women  
Now we reject decisions by trouble-shooting drunkards.

The womenfolk are determined to fight negative forces of African traditions whereby good or bad decisions were left in the hands of men. They no longer wish to tolerate drunkard husbands in the name of maintaining cultural norms. Their cause is amplified by civil society activists, proponents of women rights in the state as nationalism and protests by women, more so the agitation against irresponsible behaviour is a positive norm especially the state of woman raising issues on family life sustenance against the backdrop of drunk spouses. Male reformists and women rights groups have endeavoured to play a key role in compromising traditional and modern realities. In recent times the case of Wambui Otieno (mentioned earlier) and the entire Umira Kager clan from Luo Nyanza became a national concern as she battled to bury her husband, Silvanus Melea Otieno, the criminal lawyer in their

Upper Matasia home (Near Nairobi) while on the other side the clan wished to rest his remains in Nyalgunga (near Kisumu). Recently, as the controversial politician/widow rose into the national limelight for marrying a 29-year-old man, new trends in the fight against gender disparities have emerged.

Her detractors refer to her as a child spoiler whose aim is to satiate sexual lust. This is similar to what Arber and Ginn (1991:38-39) points out as “The idea that women’s dangerous sexual appetites [...] men’s damnation” as being unacceptable to the male dominated world.

This status quo can only be reversed through the strengthening of the affirmative action in Kenya. More men should change heart and support the cause for equity and equality of genders as a way forward to harmonise family and social affairs. The social order in society will concretize the ideals of African nationalism and improve structures of good governance in the land, a feat achievable through collective actions of citizens and their leaders.

*Nduumo* dancers and singers demonstrated in the 1990s that through poetry and music, they would raise important mind-boggling issues like Moi’s bureaucracy which accommodated detention without trial and the incarceration of real and imagined political activists at the famous Nyayo Torture Chambers. They proclaim: *Rekia ciana ciitu, tutiheiruo wiyathi wa kunyamaramania, Nitwarega wathani wa thukumu ta wa mbari ya Nyakeru*. (Release our children, we were not granted freedom so that we torture each other, we say no! to imperialistic rule that resembles that of the house of white lady (queen).

These words were sung by Release Political Prisoners (R.P.P.) along Nairobi streets as they challenged the Nyayo era of tribulations and ethnic chauvinism. The Kenyan people resented and protested against arbitrary arrests in the nation and this became the mother of the much touted second liberation movement in Kenya that countered the fangs of neo-colonialism, thanks to Kenyatta’s and Moi’s dictatorial regimes, which had no respect for human rights. Raphael (1970:106) notes: “Natural or human rights are a species of claim-rights or rights of recipience. They are called ‘natural’ because, like natural law, they do not depend on man-made law.” Every right thinking citizen should always endeavour to ensure that he/she accords to others these societal requirements that are not negotiable.

There are Non Governmental Organizations and Community Based Organizations that have drummed up the support for socio-economic programmes which promote the recognition and appraisal of womenfolk in Africa. This augurs well with the developmental democracy where women feature prominently in economic ventures aimed at improving their lifestyles and those of members of the nuclear and extended families.

## **Nduumo and the New World Order**

The contemporary societies have emerged as entities, which interact in a borderless participation that borders on modern technology and the spirit of globalization. The idea of free market economies enables different communities of the world to utilize consumer goods from different parts of the so-called global village. The role of women in development is summarized in this *Nduumo* song:

*Wakurima niarekuo arime*  
*Wambiacara ahure mbiacara*  
*Nawe karani utuikire mathabu*  
*Nawe ndagitari ututhoondekage*  
*Nawe mwarimu uthomithie na hinya*  
*Bururi urenda maendereo.*

The one who chooses farming should cultivate  
The one who conducts business should perform it  
You the clerk should calculate and balance accounts  
You the doctor should treat us well  
You the teacher should teach diligently  
The nation requires development projects.

The above lines indicate that the Kenyan woman is involved in farming activities, petty and moderate business ventures, in the professional courses like the teaching and the medical ones. This is in toeing the line of the New World order where women are involved fully in all aspects of life. It is imperative that political activities in any state are determined mainly by the economic state of a nation.

As Manley (1991:110) asserts:

At all points of history political activity takes place within the context of the economic conditions which the productive forces shape. This is not to say that politics cannot affect economies. Political action may delay or accelerate the evolution of productive forces. Certainly, political action can help to shape the social consequences, which flow from these forces, but in the end it is economics, which dictate the ground rules.

In the Kenyan context, the politics of the day have always dictated productive forces which determine the amount of money the government acquires as tax for the development and essential services like health and education. In the past Moi regime the agricultural centre collapsed due to illegal importation of goods that otherwise are produced in Kenya, for instance sugar. This was driven by political heavy weights and businessmen and women connected to them. This resulted to the collapse of women group's projects and one *Nduumo* song the singer says: *Ndatura nduagira ng'ombe, na ngukama na ndiume iria*, (I have always fed my cow, but when I milk it, it does not provide milk). This implies that the agricultural sector, which has been the main stay in Kenya, is the "cow" which fails to provide milk due to the exploitation by the government through political intervention.

It is ironical that the same KANU system has always capitalized on the Nyakinyua women dancers who perform *Nduumo* in political rallies as their vehicles to advance political mileage. In the December 27, 2002 General Elections the KANU presidential candidate incorporated *Nduumo* dancers in his campaign machinery. They accompanied him in his campaign trail as a weapon to symbolize his closeness to the ordinary persons. After the elections were over, nothing as appertains to the development of culture from KANU bigwigs seems to be favouring these humble *Nduumo* dancers. All in all, it observable that women groups which have traditional folk songs which with time turn into popular art forms have a vehicle to communicate the socio-cultural and political as well as economic activities in their endeavor to participate in the globalization spirit tackling issues bordering on the new world order.

## The *Nduumo* Evolution

The contention that *Nduumo* is a cultural dance is gaining/attracting new dimensions and challenges as it continues to feature in the electronic media houses. Kameme F.M., Coro F.M. and Inooro F.M. as well as in hotels, motels cultural centers which advance the revamping of traditional and popular arts. It is common to here programme presenters/broadcasters referring to *Nduumo* ya Coro, *Nduumo* ya Kameme in reference to various types of musical presentation/programmes their respective stations have to offer.

The Kayu ka Muingi, Kameme F.M. has a commercial advertisement which revolves around *Nduumo*: *werokamu guuku gwa Kayu ka Muingi — citindauni*. (Welcome to Kameme F.M. station —Then relax and sit down). The popular musician Epha Maina has a number which he calls *Nduumo* ya Kirinyaga (Kirinyaga's *Nduumo*) which is a traditional touch of the art form fused with modern technology oriented music instruments. The female singer Queen Jane Nyambura of Queen-Ni-Ja Les Les musical outfit sings, dances and dramatizes *Nduumo* songs: donning traditional attire to capture the attention and concentration of her patrons in music spots where she performs as a professional musician. More female singers should emulate her.

With the current trend where the youthful generation composers are incorporating, adapting and adopting *Nduumo* lyrics to fuse them in *reggae*, *hip hop* and *rap* music pieces, a kind of music evolution pivoting on traditional indigenous artistry is being witnessed in Kenya. This new trend should be encouraged, as folklore is accommodative of new experiences precipitated by new lifestyles and the immediate environment.

## Conclusion

The disparities expressed in *Nduumo* poetry by composers of the past and present generation that culture and bad laws of the land are the agents which sustain the negative images of women in society. Women have been exploited in socio-economic arrangements as well as being “sex-exploited” physically by a male dominated society that seems not to have a place for women. This trend is however, being reversed through women movements, Community Based Organizations, Non Governmental Organizations and also male reformists. *Nduumo* emerges as (social) verbal technique for addressing the gender disparities existing in today’s societies. The gender dimension to poetry manifested in *Nduumo* songs; past and present reveal more about the African woman’s perspective on traditional norms and customs that unfortunately is supported by some women and male chauvinists. The situation is changing due to educational exposures in the form of seminars and workshops which focus on gender issues and community development.

## Appendix: A sample Nduumo Song-Narrative

### ATUMIAAGITATI

1. *Atumia a gitati kia Mariira x 2*  
*Na Kigumo nimageretie muno*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
2. *Atumia a gitati kia Mariira x 2*  
*Na Kigumo nimageretie muno*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
3. *Nyakinyua munjugire ngemi I x 2*  
*Niinyui mwaciarire njamba cia Kenya*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
4. *Nyakinyua munjugire ngemi x 2*  
*Niinyui mwaciarire njamba cia Kenya*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
5. *Muroria wiyathi ni wau I x2*  
*Ti uyu wa Kenya muguthaaka naguo*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
6. *Muroria wiyathi ni wau I x2*  
*Ti uyu wa Kenya muguthaaka naguo*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
7. *Nyakinyua mujugire ngemi I x 2*  
*Ii uyu wa Kenya muguthaaka naguo*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
8. *Nyakinyua munjugire ngemi I x2*  
*Ti uyu wa Kenya muguthaaka naguo*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
9. *Mandamu muceere ni uhiire x2*  
*Warikia kuruga tuthii gitati*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
10. *Mandamu muceere ni uhiire x2*  
*Warikia kuruga tuthii gitati*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
11. *Mabati maria mari weru x2*  
*Tukwendia mooko na twendie maguru*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*
12. *Mabati maria mari weru x2*  
*Tukwendia mooko na twendie maguru*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiendera.*

13. *Chai yuyu wakwa na kamugate x2*  
*Ngunyaira ku ni aria matinda thoome*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiyendera.*
14. *Chai yuyu wakwa na kamugate x2*  
*Ngunyaira ku ni aria matinda thoome*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiyendera.*
15. *Muroiga uriri wina ngunguni x2*  
*Nani kairaci na njohi ya mutu*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiyendera.*
16. *Muroiga uriri wina ngunguni x2*  
*Nani kairaci na njohi ya mutu*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiyendera.*
17. *Kibiriti gitingiakia mwaki x2*  
*Ni kwinyuirwo ni njohi mai thiina*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiyendera.*
18. *Kibiriti gitingiakia mwaki x2*  
*Ni kwinyuirwo ni njohi mai thiina*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiyendera.*
19. *Murumia ndumia ta ndarama x2*  
*Ni agake nyumba yaaake muti-iguru*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiyendera.*
20. *Murumia ndumia ta ndarama x2*  
*Ni agake nyumba yaaake muti-iguru*  
*Harambee, harambee ni iitu ya kwiiyendera.*

## Reference

- Arber, S and Ginn, J. (1991). *Gender and Later Life: A sociological Analysis of Resources and Constraints*. London, Newbury Park & New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Balick, Michael, J. & Cox, Paul, A. (1996). *Plants, People and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany*. New York: Scientific American Library.
- Jayawarda, K. (1986). *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third Worlds*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd.
- Imbuga, F.1988. *Aminata*. Nairobi: E.A.E.P.
- Lukes, S. (1986). *Power*. Oxford (U.K.): Blackwell Publishers.
- Manley, M. (1991). *The Poverty of Nations: Reflections on Underdeveloped and the World Economy*. London: Pluto Press.
- Raphael, D.D. (1970). *Problems of Political Philosophy*. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Sanday, P, R. (1981). *Female Power and Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Vidrivitch, C.C. (1997). *African Women*. Paris: Westview Press.
- Williams, J. E. & Best D. L. (1990). *Measuring Sex Stereotypes A Multination Study*. New Park, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications.