Transformation of Gender Power Relations in Igembe Central, Meru County, Kenya Between 1895 and 1963

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Abstract

The gender role theory suggests that socially identified males and females occupy different ascribed roles within divergent expectations of how they should behave. The theory groups men and women separately and assigns them roles based on their biological sex. Historically and across the world, gender roles have undergone considerable transformations. However, few studies have examined such changes in the African context. As an attempt to address this gap, the current research aimed to explore the changes in gender power relations among the people of Igembe Central, Meru County in Kenya, in the colonial era. The findings are based on interviews and guided questions involving a purposive sample of men and women in the region. During the pre-colonial period, Igembe women and men had distinct identities which produced complementary roles and relationships. Following the coming of European colonisers, gender power relations underwent significant changes that emanated from socio-economic and dynamics to fit within the capitalist production system, and which had far-reaching consequences on the community. The study focused on six areas through which the colonizers re-shaped gender-based values and behaviours in the area: colonial rule, Christianity, World Wars, the Mau Mau Uprising, education, and migration. These six and other forces combined to strip men of their traditionally respected status, redefined new roles for both men and women, and redistributed the power relations that existed between the two genders.

Key words: Gender roles, gender role transformations, power relations, colonialism

1. Introduction

Gender roles – values, attitudes, and behaviours that a society considers appropriate for women and men – are diverse and constantly changing. They rise from different cultural histories in different parts of the world, have changed in the past, and are undergoing changes even now (Connell, 2002; Ferreeet al 1999; Silberschmidt, 2004, Walby, 1996). Freeman and Mcelhinny (1996), Holmes (1995), Lakoff (1975), O'barr and Atkins (1987), Oha (1998), Sunderland (1994), Morrel (2005), Fadiman (1982), and others concur that the dynamics of gender, masculinity, and femininity are central to the formation of the society as a whole. Theoretically, the gender role model suggests that socially identified males and females occupy different ascribed roles within divergent expectations of how they should behave. The theory groups men and women separately and assigns them roles based on their biological sex (Eagly 1987). The grouping is premised on a structural approach to gender relations, which maintains that institutions, such as families, organizations, and communities cause men and women to behave differently (Eagly & Wood, 2011). On this note, Diekman and Schneider (2010) and Dulin (2007) have argued that gender roles lead to societal norms and expectation regarding what male and female constitute. When the expectations are loosely followed, both men and women acquire different skill sets. Thus, studies on gender relations offer fundamental theoretical and empirical perspectives that can be useful in understanding the interactions between women, men, and power in a society.

Historically, gender roles were segregated – distinctive boundaries existed between tasks, values, and behaviours assigned to women and those associated with men. For instance, in Latin America, throughout most of the 20th century, familial gender patterns emphasized the dominance of a patriarchal model, where men were the primary breadwinners, arbiters of decision-making, and pillar of authority (Melhuus & Stolen, 1996). In contrast, women were portrayed as mothers and housewives who were dependent on men financially. They had limited autonomy over their decisions. Gender divisions in labour, which were commonly linked with dichotomies in morality, sexuality, and social conduct, determined the responsibility for each gender in the society. In Europe, Tragos (2009) indicates that during the industrial revolution and subsequent modernization in urban areas, male workers exhibited pride in their craft and physical strength

and they earned praise for their skills. The man of the 1900s was strong, confident, competitive, and a decisive patriarch, while women were housewives who depended on men's financial resources. Similar clearly defined role boundaries existed in the United States, Africa, and the rest of the world (Aina, 1988; Connell, 2002; Egodi, 2008; Lawal, 2005; Oke, 2001; Salamone, 2005).

In Kenya, Egara (2005) notes that gender relations were traditionally constructed in terms of power and dominance, which also determined the opportunities and circumstances of men and women. There were basic benchmarks within the masculinity of male functions. Failure to fall within these defined parameters made one unmasculine. A case in point is given of the Luhya of western Kenya, where bull fighting continues to be a prominent ritual; only families with male children could own a bull (Fadiman, 1982). Similar, Fadiman (1982) notes that in the Meru community, men performed masculine roles like being warriors, while women did feminine roles like food seeking, clown dancing, and babysitting. Over the years, these roles have undergone notable transformation, and women responsibilities have increased. In many societies, patriarchy is declining and men are involved in housework and childrearing, while women are increasingly engaged in the work place. There have also been notable power reversals and family arrangements. Connel (1987) notes that marital power struggles are often won by wives, unlike in the past. In Kenya, Amuyunzu and Paul (2006) identify an increasing trend toward come-we-stay marriages, which constitutes a notable deviation from traditional arrangements. They attribute this shift to a range of socioeconomic changes in the 1980s, which impacted masculine identities. Mburugu and Adams (2001) also point out that today's Kenyan societies are a substantial deviation from the patrilineal principle of an inheritance that once prevailed in the region.

The particular case of the Meru community is highlighted in Fadiman (1982), Njogu (1992), and Rimita (1988), who report that the traditional Meru culture was organized along a clan system headed by *Mugwe* and a council of elders, the *Njuri Ncheke,* which comprised highly respected men. This powerful council settled disputes and executed judgments on wrongdoers. M'imanyara (1992) also notes that property ownership and inheritance was a reserve for sons. He further observes that circumcision during initiation enabled boys to prove their manhood and validate it in behalf of the entire community. Such distinctive gender roles hardly exist today and the boundary between the tasks reserved for men and women is increasingly thin. The formal justice system, where both women and men should have equal participation, are responsible for the functions that were performed by the *Njuri Ncheke*. Regarding property ownership, the Kenyan constitution gives both daughters and sons equal entitlements. Similarly, circumcision is done in hospitals based on Christian and scientific values. Much of this transformation can be attributed to the proliferation of western commercial cultures. Connel (1995), Usman (2012), and Morrel (2005) argue that the colonial rule disrupted indigenous orders and installed violent masculinities in hegemonic positions. Further, during the 1920s, African men mobility increased as they were compelled to search for work outside the community. Soon, women found themselves in a new world where burden of household maintenance fell solely on them.

Although many gender relations studies have been carried out in the west, the same is not true of non-western societies, especially in Africa. Instead, research in Africa has focused on masculine and feminine identities. Most of the literature on femininity pays special attention to the rights and position of women in the society (Butler, 2007; Thomas & Gallagher, 1987), while that on masculinity focuses on hegemony. Although Morrel (2005), Kimmel (2005), Hearn et al (2001), and others have drawn attention to this gap, it remains largely unaddressed. Using the Igembe community of Meru in central Kenya as a case in point, the current study explores historical shifts in gender power relation from the late 19th to the beginning of the mid-21st centuries in the African, specifically Kenyan, context. It investigates the various forces emerging from colonialism that prompted some men and women to assume identities that were traditionally

reserved for the opposite gender. Six factors are highlighted: the colonial administration, Christianity, World Wars, the *Mau Mau* uprising, education, and immigration. The focus is on the period from 1895 (the onset of colonial influence) to 963 (Kenya's independence).The study makes notable contribution to the literature on gender-power relations in Kenya, and Africa in general. While acknowledging that gender is socially constructed, many studies narrow on women without giving similar attention to men. Local-level research is needed to bring to knowledge the socio-economic and political realities on gender relations (Mwangi, 2004). The study findings may also provide the feedback needed to initiate evidence-based interventions for improving men-women interactions in Kenya.

1.1. Aim and Objective

The study explores power relation transformations between men and women among the *Ameru* people of Igembe Central from the late 19th to the mid-21st centuries. The specific objective is to assess the changes and continuity of the gender power relations in *Igembe* between 1895 and 1963.

1.2 Materials and Methods

This qualitative study was conducted in Igembe Central, Meru County, Kenya. It relied on both primary and secondary data to analyse gender and power relation trends in the region. Purposive sampling was used to identify thirty individuals from Igembe Central, who were believed to have a clear understanding of how gender relations have changed over time. They included local administrators, religious leaders, and village elders. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain information from these individuals. Additionally, question guides, with both open-ended and closed items, were administered to sixty informants from different locations within Igembe. They allowed for the use of identical questions to participants and, hence, compare the responses. The respondents' ages ranged between thirty and ninety-seven years. Secondary data sources included books, journals articles, local newspapers, periodic reports, among others, and were obtained from local libraries, the Kenya National Archives, and internet. They provided background information on the research themes.

Primary data from the interviews and question guides were transcribed immediately after collection for accuracy, validity, and uniformity. All collected information was carefully scrutinized, corroborated, and analysed in relation to respective historical period. Primary and secondary data were presented in narrative form in an effort to discuss the findings. The study adhered to various ethical standards, as stipulated by Kenyatta University. Data collection commenced only after the researcher secured permission from relevant authorities. Information from the informants was treated in utmost confidentiality.

2. Research Findings and Discussions
2.1. Change and Continuity of Gender Power Relations in Igembe, 1895- 1963
2.2 Introduction

In this section, the causes of the transformed gender relations among the members of *Igembe* people between 1895 and 1963 are examined. The underlying premise is that colonial systems have contributed to the changes in gender-based power relations in the region. The section broadens the knowledge on how colonial administration, Christianity, world wars, *Mau Mau* uprising, land tenure policy, and education influenced traditional women-men integrations.

2.3 Colonial Rule, 1895-1963

Europeans, or *Chomba* (men of the coast, as the locals called them), first arrived in Meru toward the end of the 19th century as part of Arab trading caravans (Fadman, 2012). Among the first white traders to reach the

region in 1890s were Karl Peter, William Astor, and Herman Tiedemann. *Ameru* prophesies had predicted the coming of white men who would destroy the society if opposed. The batch of worriers who tried to resist withdrew when they realized the inferiority of their weapons. The elders also feared humiliation and defeat similar to the ones experienced by their much powerful *Gikuyu* and the *Embu* neighbours in 1906 (Mwaniki, 1982). Others felt that collaboration with the invaders would mean increased wealth acquisition. Thus, the colonizers encountered limited military opposition in Meru. By 1906, colonial rule was formally established in the region, following the arrival of Edward Butler, *Kangangi*, local for wonderer (Kimanaa, O.I: 16th Nov 2016).

The *Ameru* began to feel the impacts of the inversion from the early 1900s (Fadiman 1982). Among the most immediate, far-reaching, and socially destructive effects came from the imposition of regional peace and the subsequent suspension of the system of limited warfare. Kaloki (O.I: 18th Aug 2016) says that the colonizers stripped energetic young warriors of their role and purpose – they denied them their only avenue for attaining the livestock need for bride wealth, honourable marriage, and future prosperity. Some dislocated warriors went to work on European-owned plantations in the Kikuyu land, a role that was considered to be of low status. Many informants concurred that such disruptions were among the initial evidence of changing gender relations. Most of the warriors stayed home with no clear purpose or direction in life. Morally, the strict sexual discipline that was previously enforced upon young men was on a gradual decay path; they began to engage sexually with unmarried and, often, uncircumcised women on a scale previously unheard of in Meru. This lack of discipline threatened to destroy the seniority principle that was the backbone of social harmony. It also upset many prescribed forms of relations between different age sets (Fadiman 1982), which had defined specific roles for all community members. Today, young initiated *Amerus* retain a special affinity for the age-mates but no longer take formal age set names that prevailed in the traditional setting (Kimathi, O.I: 29th July 2016).

The colonial governance system was the other most outstanding evidence of European-induced changes in power relations between Igembe men and women. The coming of E. B. Horne, in 1907, saw the gradual introduction of new governance order, which ruled through district commissioners. Instead of the *Njuri Ncheke*, the commissioners instituted a hierarchy of chiefs to collect taxes and liaise with the government. By 1917, the *Njuri Ncheke* had almost stopped functioning and the number of cases handled by these elders dropped significantly. In their place, young men began to rule, and by 1927, the mantle of elderhood had been ripped off by the colonisers (Fadiman, 1982). The new generation ignored the traditional ways and transformed the colonial rule into a reality. In the late 1930s, the administrators had distorted the elderhood that the Igembe tradition conferred on men (Lambert, 1940). The once-revered elders soon found themselves powerless and greatly challenged. On their part, the new commissioners worked to become efficient administrators and made many alterations to the council. This restructuring led to a new definition of masculinity and manhood. As elders' conventional vanished, a formal justice system began to handle criminal cases using native tribunals loosely modelled after the *Njuri Ncheke*. As time passed, government officials gradually reorganized the tribunals to make them conform more to a European pattern. Courts usurped decision-making powers from elders and further weakened men's position. By 1937, the council of elders existed only in the memories of its former members, having been systematically suppressed by the vigour of the British district officers (KNA, DC/MRU, 1939). They soon lost their significance.

In 1957, a woman, *Ciakaraine,* was appointed to the local council. This new development not only changed men-propagated discriminations, but also represented a notable shift in power relations. Now, more than ever, the men felt threatened (Mwenda O.I: 9th Sept 2016). Today, men and women have nearly similar opportunities to be community leaders. The changes also implied that henceforth, the hegemonic masculinity would be feminine – males who had hitherto exercised hegemony would now share authority

with women. Today, civil disputes are handled by the government; elders have limited influence on them. Raiding, warfare and the former elaborate initiation rites are things of the past. Disputes arising from bride wealth payment are dealt with at a close family levels and, occasionally, not paid, as revealed buy this study. Previously, the *Njuri Ncheke* acted as guardians; in the contemporary settings this responsibility is vested in the national and county government and police officers, who include women. Overall, the pillages and plunders of the colonization era led to the stagnation and, often, decline of traditional cultural pursuits in this community. Kinyua (O.I: 4th Feb 2017) asserts that the social fabric was changed and new cultural structures emerged. A new generation of elites was created and nurtured by the colonizers. They were armed with structures of modern states.

The colonial rulers also brought a series of labour reforms with them, among them the recruitment of labour to the settler economy, cash crop production, institutionalization of wage migration, imposition of the hut tax, and abolition of cattle villages. Women now had new socio-economic opportunities due to increased market and legal institutions. The introduction of wage labour was a notable change instrument as far as gender relations are concerned. In some cases, women were required to provide wage labour for European-owned plantations. The 1919 Northerly circular in Kenya, for instance, ordered district officers and chiefs to procure women and juvenile labour for private and public works (Hood, 1993). Women were forced to draw away from their usual economic activities. The imposition of the hut tax and abolition of cattle villages by compelled men to seek wage labour outside their homestead to raise money for tax payments. By 1943 many men were out on migrant labour, leaving women with increased agricultural and household tasks. Further, initially, Africans were not allowed to grow cash crops. However, beginning the 1950s, Kenyans could engage in cash crop production; many men and women utilized the opportunity. The colonizers also introduced private property ownership rights, including the individualization and registration of land in men's names. Such reforms denied women their traditional access and control of land. From 1895, Kenya embarked on a series of land reforms to shift from traditional tenure system to private ownership. Notably, the new system excluded women from ownership (Wangari, 1998). Thus, the colonialist-introduced ownership system served to further relegate women to inferior positions.

2.4 Christianity, 1895-1963

Europeans brought their religious structures, notably Christianity, with them to the Meru land. Before Christianity, *Mugwe,* who was likened to a king, was considered the Meru leader. The *Mugwe* was an important male personality who intervened directly between God and the clan for blessings. He assumed vital roles as a leader in the formation of age-sets and blessed young men during their initiation raiding ventures. His leadership was also perceived in the assemblies of community leaders (Murithi, O.I: 14th Sept 2016) and Kaloki (O. I: 20th Aug, 2016). The arrival of missionaries was a direct assault on the Meru belief system. To the missionaries, many tradition beliefs were strange, backward, and evil. They began focusing on eliminating native customs and to turn adherents into Christians. The mission was against many customs, such as traditional healing and the veneration of ancestors. The activities of elder councils, *Kiama* and *Njuri Ncheke* surrounding initiation rites were questionable. Christian youths were required to have separate circumcision ceremonies from the traditional method (Baimwendwa, O.I: 14th Sept 2016). Many elders began disapproving old customs and refused to teach traditional songs and dances to their descendants. Today, it is difficult to find traditional healers or diviners in the area. Most church leaders say they have not used traditional healers – their parents took them for treatment in hospitals – and do not believe them.

Among the many rules introduced by Christianity was the abolition of polygamy. The practice of polygamy in Kenya, and Igembe in particular, offended the very strict western Christian views about marriage. Missionaries made much efforts to eradicate it. They demanded the registration of the first marriage, not

only to teach the indigenous communities that the administration did not recognize polygamous contracts as valid according to the protectorate laws, but also as a protection of the first wife in any of the protectorate courts. The dissolution of such marriage could only be obtained by man in a legal divorce. Many men in polygamous families, who wanted to be baptized into Christianity, sent away former wives, along with their children. Such was a direct insult on the Meru traditional family roles and structures.

Christianity also served to redefine traditional gender roles. As stated in Uchendu (2008), Christian doctrines trace women's inferiority from the teaching that Eve was created from Adam's rib. Hence, women cannot be independent. In Meru, like elsewhere, missionaries provided specific guidelines on family structure, thereby redefining the status of both men and women. The picture of a family life provided by this new teaching was that the male was superior to the female – God created Adam first, and when He realized that the man was lonely, He created the woman Eve to be Adam's companion and helper. Since the woman was made from the man, she is inferior to him (Mithika, O.I: 13th Nov 2016). Like other major religions, Christianity continues to perpetuate the submissive nature of the female person. Churches invalidate and counter traditional gender norms.

2.5 World Wars, 1895-1963

The Europeans also brought World Wars with them to Africa. As from 1914 (World War I), Africans were not only required to participate in a foreign battle, but also to make sacrifices for it, and at huge losses (Okuro, 2002). Of the 1,650,000 African potters in the war, over 50,000 men died, leaving women to take up roles that were traditionally not theirs. This study confirmed that some of the dead men were from Igembe. Thus, the First World War was a sudden and violent disruption to the lives of the Igembe people. It placed enormous responsibilities on men in their prime of life and they, in turn, abandoned their community roles to serve in the military.

The war brought large-scale destructions to the Igembe warriors. The men who went to war were proud patriarchs; those returning were weak individuals with little purpose. The strong man who went to war did not return; he had lost a part of himself on the battlefield. Many of them were physically devastated – from poisonous gas, machine gun fire, and powerful artillery shells – and found it challenging to resume their former roles as family providers. Something else, worse than physical harm, happened: the returnees had significant nervous breakdown and anxiety. Some of them were traumatized by the carnage unleashed by unfamiliar weaponry. Many resorted to irresponsible drinking and faced other issues. Before the war, such psychological conditions were not considered an illness for men. Although it was acceptable for women to become hysterical and nervous, if such happened to men, it was a sign of a birth defect. Suddenly, however, men became regularly subjects of psychological symptoms.

Although military services were reserved for men, the war had a heavy toll on women too. Since their husbands failed to live to traditional expectations, women began to assume masculine roles, leading to changed relationships. Traditional gender balances tipped over and women became stronger than they were before the war. It is not that the women changed, but their role became stronger, only because men were weakened in the battlefield, allowing the former to demonstrate their abilities as never before. Natural abilities can be triggered by social event, as was evident in the post-war Igembe. The war facilitated the development of predisposed female attributes that were rarely were seen before 1914. Dissent from gender norms was, perhaps, more tolerable among women as they took up previously masculine roles. In contrast, male dissent was not so readily accepted. Since World War I destroyed many lives and reshaped the political order, it is understandable to view it as a catalyst for enormous changes in all aspects of life for the Igembe community, including ideas about gender roles and behaviour of women and men, as was described by the participants. Notably, the aftermath of the war witnessed women doing men role for the first time.

Economically, returning men displaced many women from their wartime occupation. Today, women head many households.

World War II (1939-1945) was another decisive event with an outcome. The war spread from Europe to the rest of the world and once again, young men were sent to war. Jobs normally performed by men, could easy be taken over by women. The patriarchal conventions that had regulated the relation between male and female started to slide, and a new relationship between the genders was created and has to some extent been in society even since. After the war, people needed a new way of viewing the world. A new wave individualism began and it can be argued that the first step towards post-modernity were founded here. What followed was a deviation from the traditional society. During the 1950s, anti-colonial struggles between Kenyan communities and British colonizers began taking roots.By the end of World War II, a vigorous nationalist movement, the *Mau Mau* uprising, had emerged to regain community land and freedom from the colonizers. It served as another platform for gender role transformations. \

2.6 The Mau Mau Uprising, 1895-1963

The *Mau Mau* uprising (1952-1960) was dominated by the Kikuyu, Meru and Embu people. Rebel leaders from Meru, such as field marshal Musa Mwariama and general Baimungi, were notable participants. Like other forces, the revolt affected the Igembe community's way of life socially, economically, and politically. Due to widespread inductions, mass meetings and attacks on the colonizers and Africa, the British government declared a state of emergency in October 1952. Thousands of local men and women fled to the forest, established a *Mau Mau* guerrilla base, and took a solemn oath to defend their land. Traditionally, only men participated in such vows. The fact that the *Mau Mau* oath involved both men and women is an indication that gender roles for Igembe women had changed. They had turned into warriors, something that was unheard of in the Kenyan society. Over 10,000 men lost their lives during the rebellion and many more were imprisoned. Like with the two World Wars, women were forced to take up increased responsibilities (Caroline, 2005). By giving and taking oaths, female *Mau Mau* adherents, broke important gender relations. Gender barriers in leadership and combat roles also were also broken give that the women's wing of *Mau Mau* had a prominent female leader. The legacy of women who participated in the struggle resulted in a shift in traditional gender roles. It also laid the basis for social and political change in the contemporary society following the 1963 independence. The new government acknowledged women's roles in the nationalist struggle and some of them were handed political responsibilities.

2.7 Education, 1895-1963

The British government introduced a series of socio-economic and political policies to facilitate the integration of Kenyan societies into their colonial economy. Men began enrolling in education programmes to prepared them for employment in public and commercial services. By 1937, many schools had mushroomed in the early mission stations within Meru. They became sites for socialization and construction of the elite masculinity; thy deprived women equal chances to education and redefined the gender divide. Women were no longer just the domestic worker; they also became the uneducated. Missionaries sought to socialize and shape the youth into real men and women. Coopers (2002) posits that in many parts of Africa, the introduction of schools enabled the missionaries to tear down the beliefs and practices of the African people. This enabled the missionaries to put aside kinship ties, councils of elders, age groups and other social aspects of the African culture. The missionaries entrenched individualism in the entire education process and dismantled the communalism that was common in traditional non- formal teaching Ntombura (O.I: 15th Aug 2016). However, increased education for men served to subordinate women participation in public power and decision-making position.

With increasing urbanization, especially after World War II, education for women appeared to grow. However, it was not until 1949 when the first girls' school was started (Chege, 2001). As the traditional perception that the masculinity had to be constructed away from women changed, mission schools increased female enrolment. Admission for both men and women became pegged on their conversion to Christianity and not the traditional age-sets (Fadiman, 1982). Fathers and elders continued to lose control over the generation of elites whom they expelled from their homesteads. Education also provided several positive benefits in the early days; it offered a few bright warrior-age youths alternative success avenues, which would eventually take them away from their families and clan. Through their earnings, the elites realized that they could establish independent livelihood without relying on their fathers to allocate them land and bride wealth. Between 1937 and 1947 schooling had become an attraction for warriors; the viewed it as a means to acquiring jobs within the colonial economy. Through employment, youths anticipated to earn enough wages to be able to pay taxes and purchase European goods. Due to equal schooling opportunities, men and women acquired new masculine and feminine identities. Hegemonic masculinity was no longer based on traditional practices, but the acquisition of western education and waged labour.

2.8 Migration, 1895-1963

The development of labour-intensive plantations in white lands, as well as the need for solders and potters in the World Wars, resulted in massive male emigration from all parts of Kenya. The colonial government considered the *Ameru* population a large labour reservoir. Besides, various factors, such as increased land scarcity in African reserves, the desire for higher living standards, preference to industrial occupations, tax demands, and bride wealth, impelled many men to take employment outside their homes. By 1943 many Meru men were out on migrant labour, leaving women with increased agricultural and household tasks. They got into hoeing, trading, and other male-designated roles. Men increasingly participated in migration as a family survival strategy, resulting to an increasing scarcity of traditional male labour and new roles for women.

Before the 1930s, migrants were largely unmarried males or squatters who moved as whole households. Young men played a minor role in agriculture; their main responsibilities included cattle keeping, hunting, and warfare. The advent of colonial rule made their warrior role obsolete, and from the 1930s, many of them were involved in migration. It became essential for women to hold their rural households together, protect, and manage land in their absence by their husbands (Amadiume, 1987). They assumed male roles, including land validation, to protect men's right on land and de facto farm managers. Women provided household food supply from farming and seasonal trading to meet their monetary needs (Mwendwa O, I; 22nd Oct 2016). These changes reflected a significant erosion of men's decision-making powers within households, as was reviewed by some of the informants. Moreover, some women with education also migrated to work as teachers, nurses, clerks, and other professions, leaving their husbands to attend the domestic chores. The traditional pattern of migration within the country, which was male dominated, is increasingly becoming feminized. The study revealed a striking increase in women migration – women migrate and move independently to fulfil their economic needs, and not simply to join their husbands. This relatively new phenomenon – women migrating to look for jobs – constitutes an important change in gender roles in the Meru society. The emergence of female breadwinners also puts pressure on traditional gender roles within families.

The notion of male breadwinners received a variety of challenges in the 20th century. Economic restructuring led to increased unemployment of persons with strong linkages with masculine notions of strength and physical labour. Another challenge was posed by women's entrance into the labour force and at different level provided clear challenges to the links between employment and masculine identity. Finally,

unemployment returned to become an apparent feature of the economic landscape. The respondents felt that the impact of prolonged unemployment would seem to be a fruitful area from the exploration of masculinities. For it is here one might assume that there is a major assault on one of the most fundamental pillars of male identity. Some of the respondents noted that unemployment was a time when masculinity reflected in the ability to provide comes to be called into question. Thus, it potentially provides a challenge to traditional masculine identities. Griffin (1985) suggests that unemployment could threaten the stability of a traditional masculine identity constructed around discourses such as bringing home a wage and freedom from the domestic spheres. From the above few examples, it can be assumed that unemployment does indeed have a profound effect on men's perception of self-worth and self-identity. This study confirmed the breadwinner issue, with the men claiming that they feel useless for being unable to provide. The gendered division of family labour has also been upset by the loss of male employment through urban job retrenchment and structural adjustments. Women are compelled to seek additional income-generating activities to support the family. As migrants' destination countries became tighter during the 1980s and 1990s and remittances thinned out, many families came to rely on women and their farming activities for day-to-day support. These women became the de facto resource managers and decision makers, particularly within the agricultural sector (Muriki, O, I; 25th Aug 2016).

3. Conclusion

The study explored the changes in gender relations among Igembe families in the colonial era. Attempts were made to show how colonialism, Christianity, education, world wars, female labour participation, migration, among others had a profound implication on gender roles, values, and identities. Colonial administrators dismissed the council of elders and replaced it with a new form of governance modelled after the European form of rulership. They inflicted further humiliations on the male seniority by appointing women to work in administrative roles, serving as predecessor to the Kenyan constitution today, which confers equal rights to both men and women. Further, the imposition of hut taxes and abolition of cattle villages compelled themen to seek wage labour outside their homestead leaving women to take dual roles. Christian missionaries of the 1910s and 1920s tore down the established beliefs and practices of the Igembe people. They did away with kinship ties and age group systems, while civilizing the circumcision through the introduction of hospital circumcisions. Men who returned from World Wars found it hard to return to their former practice as family providers. They were also unable to meet traditionally imposed expectations, forcing women to assume their roles. The Mau Mau uprising not increased the burden for women, but also facilitated their active participation in political and military affairs. The transformation of labour policies, equal education opportunities, and subsequent emigrations, also served to destabilize previously established gender roles. Overall, the arrival of European colonisers marked the beginning a series of transformations in gender relations that created new versions of masculinity and femininity.

4. Recommendations

The study shows a need to carry an in-depth research on the changing gender relations in the African socio-economic and political contexts since the world is changing very fast. There is need to rethink the notion that only man is the sole decision maker and breadwinner in the family. Men and women should note that life will never be the same again. Roles should not be monopolized and labelled as masculine or feminine. The needs of the society are ever-changing due to the dynamic cosmopolitan society as well as technological advancement. Rather they should be ready to adapt all the time as human beings rather than as men and women. In the contemporary society, some men are presented at home in a domestic environment working as women become increasingly assertive, apparently triumphing in all roles. Men are said to be anxious and

confused about what their role is today. This calls for the government's intervention to sensitize men that they should not feel threatened by these social changes. They should embrace the change rather than returning to the idea of a traditional "real" man. There is need to intensify campaigns against the risks of holding onto the stereotype of male domination and female subordination. This is dangerous and does not allow for change.

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