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**The *Nzaiko* of the Akamba: Music and Gender Identity
Construction in the Community****John Kilyungu Katuli
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NAIROBI, KENYA.**ABSTRACT**

One is born male or female (biological gender) but is exposed to social dictates to perform the roles expected of him or her in that society (Kameli, 2011). Gender identity is ones private sense of being a man or a woman, and consists primarily of the acceptance of membership in a particular group of people: male or female. All societies have a set of gender categories that can serve as the basis of the formation of a social identity in relation to other members of society. In most societies, there is a basic division between gender attributes assigned to them. One's gender identity is also influenced through observing and imitating gender-linked behaviors, and then being rewarded or punished for behaving that way. Social factors which may influence gender identity include gender messages conveyed by family, mass media, and other institutions. Music is one of the oldest forms of human communication. It is a natural part of human life; a universal found in all cultures at all times. As a means of communication it serves many functions. It is used as a means of enculturation and hence plays a central role in the process of personal, cultural and gender identity formation. (Blacking,1973 and Shuker, 2001). Among the Akamba of Kenya music is one of the tool used in the traditional education to prepare the youth for special roles according to their gender. This paper therefore looks into the learning and practice of music in the Akamba traditional education and how it worked in the construction of gender identities and roles.

Keywords: *Nzaiko; Construction of gender; Social gender identity; Social factors; personal gender identity; enculturation.*

INTRODUCTION

Normally human beings are in two categories; male and female. The sex of an individual is biologically designated and determined at conception by the genetic composition of the male reproductive cell involved. The gender is, however, assigned mostly at birth by the culture into which one is born. Gender, here, refers to the socially and culturally prescribed or perceived traits and behaviour that male and female are expected to exhibit. This goes hand in hand with the roles assigned to men and women in the society (Kottok, 2000 and Lenkeit, 2001). Among the Akamba when a baby is born the midwives sing and exclaim “**nandu ‘athome,**” it is the people of the gate if it is a boy or “**nandu ‘anyomba,**” it is the people of the house if it is a girl. These exclamations announce not only the sex of the new born but also the role assigned to it. Traditionally Akamba men spend their evenings at the gate to keep vigilance and protect the family from perceived enemy and wild animals, while, women spend their evening at the house preparing food for the family.

The differentiation of human beings into male and female is, therefore, both biological and socio-cultural. One is born male or female and is exposed to social dictates to perform the roles expected of him or her in that society (Kameli 2011). In most societies, there is a basic division between attributes assigned to males and females. As one grows up in a society, one learns, through messages conveyed by family, folklore, observing and imitating gender-linked behaviors, what it is to be a man or a woman. This leads to ones formation of a personal gender identity; an image of self as a man or a woman and the different expectations of behavior. As to whether the attributes and roles assigned to males and females by a culture are biologically programmed is a subject of debate.

Among the Akamba people of Kenya, music, one of the oldest forms of human communication is used in the traditional education to prepare the youth for special roles according to their gender. It is used as a means of enculturation and hence plays a central role in the process of personal and social gender identity formation. Social gender identity, here, refers to the socially or culturally prescribed traits and behaviour that male and female are expected to exhibit while personal gender identity is a private sense of being a man or a woman and the different expectations of behavior (Blacking; 1973 and Shuker, 2001).

The enculturation process among the *Akamba* is more intense during the transition between childhood and youth. This is marked by a series of activities called *Nzaiko*. The term *Nzaiko* denotes a series of structured events through which members of the *Akamba* community acquire its accumulated knowledge, skills and wisdom. It is, therefore, a form of traditional formal Education. Traditionally there are three type of *Nzaiko*. The first and the second *nzaiko* were, traditionally, compulsory for all members of the community. They were made to provide knowledge, skills and qualities that the youth needed in order to live and function well in the society. The qualities acquired gave every member identity and value in the society. Anyone who had not gone though these two *Nzaiko* was not regarded as a proper member of the society and would be treated as inferior or ‘just a child’, irrespective of the age. The third was reserved for only males who are expected to perform special roles in the community.

This research confines itself to the first and the second *Nzaiko*. The two are concerned with inculcating the qualities that distinguish men and women and their different roles in the society.

Gender Identity Construction During First Nzaiko

The first **nzaiko** is also called **Nzaiko ya kavyu**, the circumcision of the knife or **Nzaiko nini**, the small circumcision. It involves circumcision in which, traditionally; both boys and girls had to face the knife. Traditionally, the process was held annually between the months of August and September when there were no rains in **ukambani**, a period popularly known as **thano**. This period was after the harvest. A time when people were not very busy in their farms and there was enough food for the celebrations that accompanied the process. Normally, one would go through the first **nzaiko** between the ages of eight and thirteen years. Anyone who went beyond this age was considered late and would be ridiculed by his age mates. Sometimes a song would be composed about his or her status.



Plate 1: Kwangya Nzaiko (Nzaiko Procession)
Photo by the Researcher

The event usually started with processional music performance that fetched the circumciser and collected the villagers to the venue of the event.

Once the circumciser is fetched and everybody is gathered at the circumcision venue the candidates are separated into groups of boys and girls. The boys are put under the supervision of men while the girls are put under the supervision of women. Each group forms a circle to shield the candidate as the circumciser operates on him/her. At this point the singers in both groups may perform the song **Mūtani** given below (its music transcription in give ni Appendix 1).

1. Mūtani

Part 1

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. S: Mūtani ūkūtana ndwese kavyū | ...The circumciser circumcising take a knife |
| ‘ndemangĩe mwana ĩnoimwĩāĩ kũũkya | cut my child and tell him/her it is morning |
| C: Mūtani ūkūtana ndwese kavyū | ...The circumciser circumcising take a knife |
| ‘ndemangĩe mwana ĩnoimwĩāĩ kũũkya | cut my child and tell him/her it is morning |
| 2. S: Na Mutani u | ...The circumciser |
| C: Kutana | ...Circumcising |
| 3. S: Ndwese kavyu | ...Take a knife |
| C: ‘ndemangĩe noimwĩāĩ kũũkya | ... Cut my child and tell him/her it is morning |

Part 2

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 4. S: Iya mama inyamu ni I ndeme | ...Iya mother the animal is cut |
| C: Iya mama inyamu ni I ndeme | ...Iya mother the animal is cut |

- | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 5. S: Iya mama inyamu kinziki | ...Iya mother the animal kinziki |
| C: Iya mama inyamu kinziki | ...Iya mother the animal kinziki |
| 6. S: Iya mama inyamu ni I ndeme | ...Iya mother the animal is cut |
| C: Iya mama inyamu kinziki | ...Iya mother the animal kinziki |
| 7. S: Iya mama inyamu kinziki | ...Iya mother the animal kinziki |
| C: Iya mama inyamu ni I ndeme | ...Iya mother the animal is cut |
| 8. S: Iya nindeme Nyamu nindeme | ...Iya mother the animal is cut |
| C: Iya nindeme Nyamu nindeme | ...Iya mother the animal is cut |

The song is in two parts. The message of the first part is **Mūtani ūkūtanan dwese kavyū ‘ndemangīe mwana īnoimwīāī kūūkyā**, the circumciser circumcising, take a knife, cut my child and tell him/her it is morning. The singers are calling upon the circumciser to circumcise the candidates and inform them that this is a dawn of a new life. A life, in which, they are going to know themselves and live as men and/or women. In the second part of the song, a candidate is crying for help from the mother. This is in line with a practice among the Akamba where when one faces a difficult situation one does not call upon the father for help, but instead the mother. This is based on a belief that mothers and women in general, are naturally sympathetic. On the other hand, men are expected to be tough. A father will, therefore, not sympathize; instead he will encourage the one facing the knife to take carage. This is exemplified by the song below which addresses, specifically, the boys, the reason being the song is meant for the boys.

2. Kamwana watemwa

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. S: Kamwana watemwa | ... Young man when are cut |
| Ndukasye ninyie nautema | do not say I cut you |
| Ndunia nikeukaa | the world changes |
| C: Kamwana watemwa | ... Young man when are cut |
| Ndukasye ninyie nautema | do not say I cut you |
| Ndunia nikeukaa | the world changes |
| 2. S: Kamwnai | ... Young man i |
| C: Aiya | ... Aiya |
| 3. S: Nduniani | ... The world |
| C: Keukaa | ... Changes |
| 4. S: Kavisi | ... Young boy |
| C: Aiya | ... Aiya |
| 5. S: Nduniani | ... The world |
| C: keukaa | ... Changes |

In this song, the young men are told that they should not complain about what happens to them. When they face new situations they should face them for new situations will always come as the world changes. This song and

others performed at this stage are made to encourage the candidates to endure the pain encountered. Those who courageously put up with the pain are highly praised. This process is intended to instill perseverance into the candidates, which is greatly valued among the Akamba. It is believed that anyone who withstands the pain of Circumcision can overcome any difficulty. The Akamba seem to have discovered that naturally people tend to do what is perceived by the senses as pleasant and avoid what is perceived as unpleasant. What is pleasant to the senses may however not coincide with what is good for the person as a whole. This calls for what they call **umiisyo**, perseverance; that is, the ability to be controlled or have ones actions guided by will. The Akamba are also aware of the fact that most human endeavours are beset with difficulties, hence, the need to train its members to be ready to suffer in order to achieve worthwhile goals. It is important to note **umiisyo** is used by the Akamba to denote both perseverance and patience, who's both qualities are highly valued in the community.

The response to difficult circumstances is, however, not expected to be uniform for the two sexes. This is displayed by the songs performed by the two groups immediately after the process of circumcision. The responses and attitudes expected towards the circumcision pain for the men are exemplified by the song **Kavyu nimaitha** below.

3. Kavyu nimaitha

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1. S: Kavyu nimaithai kavyu nimaitha | ... The knife is an enemy i the knife is an enemy |
| C: Kavyu nimaithai kavyu nimaitha | ... The knife is an enemy i the knife is an enemy |
| 2. S: Kavyu nimaithai kavyu nimaitha | ... The knife is an enemy i the knife is an enemy |
| C: Kavyu nimaithai kavyu nimaitha | ... The knife is an enemy i the knife is an enemy |
| 3. S: Kau katema | ... That which cut |
| C: Mwenda 'ka kavyu nimaitha | ... The lover of women the knife is an enemy |
| 4. S: Kau katema | ... That which cut |
| C: Mwenda 'ka kavyu nimaitha | ... The lover of women the knife is an enemy |

In this song the circumcision knife is presented as an enemy. When faced with an enemy one should never relent otherwise the enemy would kill him. This is the response and attitude men are supposed have to toward difficult situations in life. According to Kitheka Ngatu (personal Interview) a man should never say 'I cannot' when faced with a difficult situations; instead, he should ask 'what can I do about it?' Kitheka (ibid) stressed that when one says 'I cannot' the mind goes to sleep hence the situation is never handled. On the other hand when one asks 'what can I do about it?' the mind is put to work and there is a possibility that a solution would be found. The men are therefore expected to view difficult situations as an enemy and react to them with alertness and aggression. As the men perform **Kavyu nimaitha** the women perform **Kyenzi kiui** below

4. Kyenzi Kīuī

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. S: Kyenzi | ... The circumcision knife |
| Kīuī kyatemwa | wasp's comb when cut |
| Nīkīūlalaka Kīuī | it is hitching wasp's comb |
| C: Kyenzi | ... The circumcision knife |
| kīuīkyatemwa | wasp's comb when cut |
| nīkīū lalaka Kīuī | it is hitching wasp's comb |

2. S: Kyenzi ... The circumcision knife
C: Kĩũĩ ... Wasp's comb
3. S: Kyatemwa ... When cut
C: Nĩkĩũ lalaka Kĩũĩ ...It is hitching wasp's comb
4. S: Kyenzi ... The circumcision knife
C: Kĩũĩ ... Wasp's comb
5. S: Kyatemwa ... When cut
C: Nĩkĩũ lalaka Kĩũĩ ...It is hitching wasp's comb

The emphasis in this song is on the results of circumcision that requires attention, sympathy and care. The wounds of circumcision, that are 'itching' need to be nursed. The song also has swaying rhythm that gives it a soothing gentle character. The women are therefore expected to be sympathetic, gentle and caring.

After the two groups have tried to outdo each other for a while they come together for more music performance and celebration that includes two very important activities; namely the **kuilukya**, giving presents to the candidates and **Kuvakwa mauta**, smearing oil. **Kuilukya** is a process in which the dancers, parents, relatives and everybody present gives presents to the candidates (plate 3). The presents given range from money to live animals like chicken and goats. Plate 3 below is a demonstration by **Enziu**, traditional dancers.



Plate 2: Kuilukya Contest .

Plate 3: Enziu Traditional Dancers Demonstrating Kuilukya
Photos by Researcher

In the plate, a candidate is holding a chicken and a goat given to him is tethered. It is important to note that the relatives, especially, the father and the maternal uncle are expected to give durable present like female livestock that are expected to give birth and multiply to become the basis of wealth for the candidate. The research found out that the presents are given equally to both male and female candidates. The process goes on, hand in hand with **Kuvakwa mauta**, to show the candidates' parents gratitude to those involved in the event for their generosity in giving the presents and for attending the event. This the parents do by giving food and/or beer to those thanked. It is, however, the mother of the candidates who supplies the food and drinks. Most of the songs petitioning for the processes of **Kuva kwamauta** refer to the mother. The process of **Kuva kwamauta** concludes the major activities of the first **Nzaiko**.

Construction of Gender Roles during the Second Nzaiko

The second **Nzaiko** was variously referred to as **Nzaiko ya kamuliili or Kutonyeelwa**, being entered **Nzaiko ya kulika**, the circumcision of entering or **Nzaiko ilanene**, the great circumcision. The chief idea underlying this **Nzaiko** was emerging from childhood and entering adulthood. This involved understanding the self and assumption of responsibility. The novices learned the wisdom and secrets of life in the society. The second **nzaiko** was, therefore, a means for ‘entering’ the community’s way of life. One had to go through it to be regarded as a true member of the society (Kavyu, 1972). Lindblom (1920:45) affirms this when he says

Every **Mukamba** man must have taken part in it, if he wishes to be regarded as a true member of the community and a properly educated person...the person who has not gone through this **nzaiko** is looked at as inferior and is put at par with **kiimu**, the new born.

While in the first **Nzaiko** there was no formal instructions, in the second **Nzaiko** the novices were formally instructed by the **Avwikii**, great teachers of the community. The novices were called **Asingi** while their instructors who were known by the name above originating from **kuvwika** to cover or broad over. The **Avwikii** were elderly, experience and respected men and women chosen by the parents of the **Asingi**. The duty of the **Avwikii** in instructing was called **kutaa**, to give advice or educate and the product was **musingimutae**, an educated or advised **musingi**.

This research established that, although, the duration and order varied, the events were uniform in all the villages and regions where the second **Nzaiko** was conducted. On the first day, early in the morning, the **Asingi** were taken to **Nzaiko** hut where they took off their ornaments and reminded naked. The **Nzaiko** hut was relatively larger than the dwelling huts and had two separate sections one for the boys and the other for the girls. It also had two entrances. Most of informants asked why the **Asingi** were to be naked said that the candidates were taken to be ignorant of everything including themselves. One of the informants used the song below to explain the situation.

5. Kirimu Kitundumele (born squatting)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. S: Mwasyaa uilili kitundumele vai? | ...You say uilili where is it squatting? |
| C: Iyaiai kiini kirimu kitundumele nziani
Kitundumele vai
Ai ni kirimu kindumele nziani | ...Iyaiai this a kirimu squatting at the path.
where is it squatting?
this a kirimu squatting at the path |
| 2. S: Mwasyaa uilili ngakelany’a masilai | ...You say uilili I cross the paths |
| C: Ayaiai nakila ikumi
ngakilany’a meanene
ngakilany’a masilsai
ainakilai kumi ngakilany’a meanene | ...Ayaiai I cross ten
I cross big ones
I cross the paths
ai I cross ten I cross the paths |

The song refers to the candidate as **kirimu. Kiimu** or **Kirimu** among the **Akamba** is a new born. The new born in this case is squatting on a path. The squatting position is a position of instability in which one is neither standing nor seated. The new born is not only squatting, it is squatting on a path. A situation where it has already left its place of origin but has not arrived at any destination. Being naked, the candidates are, therefore, expected to observe themselves and their colleagues. They get to know that “there is hair not only on their heads but also

“under the clothes”. In other words, they are supposed to understand themselves and their function in society better.

They spend a greater part of the first day “learning educational’ songs from the **Avwikii**” (Mbiti 1969:124). The **Avwikii** met in advance to draw the programme of events and the songs and dances to be performed for the days that the event would take. They then practiced the songs and rehearsed the lessons for each song to ensure uniformity in the information passed on to the **Asingi**.

Some of the song texts were extremely open on sex matters as one of the informants, Kitheka Ngatu (personal interview July 2010) narrated. Such songs were sung alternately between boys and girls. The girls sung to ridicule the male sexual parts while the boys ridiculed the female sexual parts. According to Kitheka (Ibid) before this time the candidates were expected to be ignorant about sexual matters. Although the candidates might have known that boys were different from girls, they did not know why. Through the songs and the conversations, the candidates learned that nature has it that human beings are in two categories - male and female. The categories, so to speak, are gender specific. These assist in highlighting the role of each category in the production of new society members, the youth that ensure continuity of life in the community. The discussions were categorical that although the candidates should show modesty in sexual matters in public, they should not show feelings of shame when they are with their age mates. They also learned that attraction between the male and female members of society is a normal thing and the feeling of desire or tender affection for the opposite sex, show of kindness and longing for each other should eventually end up in marriage. In marriage each has to take up their responsibilities seriously; some of which are naturally programmed. The song below demonstrates that some of the responsibilities are gender specific.

6. **Inyaa mwana** ..,(The mother of the child...)

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Inyaa mwana | ...The mother of the child |
| Mwana nukuiya | the child is crying |
| 2. Ndwose mwana | ... Take the child |
| Wakilye nondo | put breast into its mouth |
| 3. Utie ne the | ... Leave it with the father |
| Nayu ukuka | then come, |
| Ngwonye kindu | I will show you something else |

The singer informs the mother that the child crying; that she should breast feed the child before leaving it with the father. The singer presents breast feeding as a responsibility that is sex specific and biologically determined. Even if the father wanted to breast feed the child, he would not do it. The responsibilities that are biologically determined influence other activities in the community, this includes the economic activities.

In one of the days the boys were give miniature arrows and bow and were sent with the mock weapons to hunt lizards, grass hoppers and other rodents. These animals represented wild animal and enemies. This practice according to Kitheka (Ibid) was made to make them good both in animal chase and in war. The girls were sent to collect **nzali**, small twigs. This represented gathering of fuel which was part of every woman’s daily occupation. After the boys had finished the mock hunting and the girls had finished collecting **Nzali**, they returned to an open ground in front of the **Nzaiko** hut singing. Plate 4 is a demonstration by the Lundi traditional dancers on how the candidates returned to an open ground in front the **Nzaiko** hut carrying the **nzali**.



Plate 4: Women carrying Nzali
Photo by the Researcher

Here the **Mwaikii** and his wife take a vessel full of beer which they drink and spit it out over the multitude of **Asingi** as a blessing.

Conclusion

From the forgoing discussion we can conclude that the Akamba people of Kenya used music in their traditional education to prepare the youth for special roles according to their gender. Music, hence, plays a central role in the process of personal and social gender identity formation. It is also clear that the music is used to show that some responsibilities are gender specific and biologically determined. The responsibilities that are biologically determined influence other gender specific roles in the community. This includes the economic activities.

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A SHORT RESUME:

i) The Researcher:



John Kilyungu Katuli is an Assistant Lecturer and a PhD candidate at the Department of music and Dance, Kenyatta University. He holds a B.Ed.(Arts) and M.A. degrees of Kenyatta University. His area of specialization is in African Music and Ethnomusicology. In addition to teaching, he coordinates the teaching and learning African Instruments and dance. He is also a School of visual and performing Arts E-Learning programme coordinator. He has attended several workshops and seminars on E-learning and module writing for Distance and open learning. Mr Katuli is the founder Secretary and current National Treasurer of the Kenya Association for Musical Arts Education (KAMAE) and also a member of Organization for Social Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA). He has attended and presented several papers in Local and International Symposiums and Conferences. He has four articles published as chapters in books. He has served in several Boards of Management of Secondary Schools in Kenya. He is currently involved in a project sponsored by the Kenya Permanent Presidential Music Commission, to documentation of both Traditional and Contemporary musics of Kenya. The project has so far led to the production documentaries of Ndumo Dance of the Agikuyu, Mbeni dance of the Akamba; a series of Ngoma za Kenya and a Biography of Kenyan Musicians Volume 1.

ii)



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APPENDIXES

1. Score of the Transcribed Songs

i nya - mu ni I nde - me I - ya ma - ma i nya - mu ki - nzi - ki I -
i nya - mu ni I nde - me I -

- ya ma - ma i nya - mu ki - nzi - ki I - ya ma - ma i nya - mu ni
- ya ma - ma i nya - mu ki - nzi - ki

I nde - me I - ya ma - ma i nya - mu ki - nzi - ki I - ya ma - ma
I - ya ma - ma i nya - mu ki - nzi - ki

i nya - mu ki - nzi - ki I - ya ma - ma i nya - mu ni I nde - me I -
I - ya ma - ma i nya - mu ni I nde - me

- ya ni nde - me Nya - mu ni nde - me I - ya ni nde - me Nya - mu
ni nde - me ni nde - me ni nde - me

Song 1. Kamwana Watemwa (When the boy is cut...)

Ka - vya ni mai-tha i ka-vyu ni mai-tha Ka - vya ni mai-tha i ka-vyu ni mai - tha Ka-

- vya ni mai - tha i ka-vyu ni mai - tha Ka - vya ni mai - tha i ka-vyu ni mai - tha Kau

Ka - vya ni mai - tha i ka-vyu ni mai - tha

Song 2: Kavyu Maitha... (The knife is an enemy..)