

Towards a reconstruction of the Maasai traditional view of masculinity: Reflecting on Henry Ole Kulet's *To Become a Man*

By:

Dr Antony Mukasa (PhD)

TSC, Kenya

and Dr Charles Kinanga (PhD)*

Lecturer, South Eastern Kenya University (Corresponding Author)

P.o Box 439, 60200, Meru, Kenya

Tel +254722819918

Email: ckinanga@seku.ac.ke

ABSTRACT

This paper is an investigation on the need for a reconstruction of masculinity among the indigenous African communities. The paper argues that there is an apparent disconnect between traditional and modern perspectives on what it means to be a man. The paper is guided by Raewyn Connell's notion of masculinity. The paper seeks to probe into a perceived disconnect between the African traditional conception and the modern view of masculinity with the primary aim of projecting a trajectory of transformation towards a gender-friendly understanding of what it means to be a man. It also analyses the role of language, culture and communication technology in the reconstruction of masculinity. The information in this paper was gathered through documentary analysis. Among the key arguments in this paper is that there is an apparent disconnect between the traditional and modern views on what it means to be a man. The paper also argues that there is need to reconstruct the African society's perception of what it means to be a man in order to render it relevant in modern society. The paper further argues that language, culture and communication technology can play a complementary role in achieving this goal.

Key Words

Hegemonic masculinity, pristine, modern, femininity, patriarchal system, paradigm

1. Introduction

Philip (2006) argues that in post-modern cultural discourse, the individual is socially constructed. As such, the only reality that is known is the one that is created. He therefore categorises masculinity and femininity as social constructs created for the individual as set rules that define the latter. The study interrogates masculinity in a supposedly pristine and colonial Kenyan Maasai society with Philip's assertion in mind. It highlights the strong influence of culture on the masculinity of the main protagonist, Leshao. Through the character of Leshao, Kulet critiques both traditional Kenyan notions of masculinity and modern, western values (modern masculinity brought by the missionaries through education).

1. Ole Kulet's depiction of the dramatic change in Maasai view of masculinity

The paper explores a society in transition, and the changing faces of masculinities among the Maasai, through the life of the young protagonist Leshao. Leshao epitomises counter-hegemonic forces to the dominant mode of traditional masculinity. The young man struggles to understand "real manhood" as he is torn between exogenous western values and the traditional Maasai (mis)conceptions of masculinities. The paper will seek to find out whether Leshao's "liberating" masculinities can break the shackles of traditional Maasai masculinity.

The paper also revisits the early forms of masculinity in the early black Kenyan society before Christianity and colonialism. Key to the paper is to understand how the pre-colonial and colonial Kenyan black man negotiated his masculinity during these two dispensations. Was there any conflict in the various ideas of masculinity? The paper reaffirms that the two key ideas of masculinity the section will be analysing are traditional masculinity (indigenous) and masculinity brought by the missionaries. Indigenous (traditional) masculinity is defined by tribal and group practices. On the other hand, the new version of masculinity is strongly influenced by Christian and western values. This paper argues that the latter is in a constant struggle with traditional masculinity for space within the Maasai socio-cultural context. The struggle originates in the clash between

traditional, indigenous values and exogenous, western values as a result of colonialism. Hauff (2003) aptly captures the clash of these two very divergent cultures when she argues that despite the Maasai proving to be resilient, their culture is still very much threatened by industrialization and globalization. The above assertion points out to the role of modern communication and technology in the reconstruction of masculinity. The emergent forms of masculinities bring to fore the idea that masculinities are not static but fluid. Moreover, they are socially and historically constructed.

Pristine means before the communities in Kenya had any interaction with the Western or Arab world. Hence they were strictly following their cultures which were still uncorrupted or unsullied. The study focuses on Henry Ole Kulet's *To Become a Man*. The setting of the novel is in the Maasai community during the pre-colonial and colonial period.

Henry ole Kulet centers his work during two periods. The period when missionaries had set up centers and were trying to venture into the interior of Kenya. The second period is when Kenya had become a British protectorate. In both periods, the Maasai community was experiencing a rapid transition from a traditional society to a modern society.

Hauff (2003) points out that the Maasai are one of the most celebrated tribes in Africa. The Maasai are a pastoralist group living in Southern Kenya and Northern Tanzania for over 2500 years. They live communally and rely on their herds for subsistence.

The transition from tradition to modernity has several ramifications on the Maasai society's masculinities. There is a clash of two types of masculinities; traditional and modern. The Maasai traditional culture propagates an ideal form of hegemonic masculinity. This culturally exalted mode of masculinity is quite challenging to most men who cannot fulfill these public expectations. Nonetheless, they have to struggle so as to be accepted as "real men" by the patriarchal society. The patriarchal society wields a lot of power and there is a strong peer influence among men of different age-sets among the Maasai.

The study concurs with Donaldson (1993) argument about the performance of hegemonic masculinity:

The public face of hegemonic masculinity, the argument goes is not necessarily even what powerful men are, but is what sustains their power, and is what large numbers of men are motivated to support because it benefits them. What most men support is not necessarily what they are. (1)

Donaldson's supposition infers that most men practice hegemonic masculinity so as to wield power over other men and women. However, men struggle to maintain that power. The biggest disadvantage for men, who want to express a divergent form of masculinity from the dominant mode, is the strong Maasai communal set-up. Hence there is a lot of policing for the enactment of these traditional masculine roles. The new version of masculinity introduced by the missionaries which is an anti-thesis of traditional masculinity is perceived (by the Maasai patriarchal society), as effeminate and subservient, compared to the traditional masculinity. The gate keepers of traditional masculinity (elders) enforce their "Ideal" version of masculinity through cultural practices and groups of young warriors called Morans. Jackson (2002) aptly labels that diversion from the ideal masculine norms as "laddishness" (adopting "feminine attributes").

3. Conflict between traditional and modern perceptions of masculinity as portrayed by ole Kulet

The protagonist, Leshao, in *To Become a Man*, is torn between traditional Maasai masculinity and western concepts of masculinity. The father, a traditionalist, wants his son to go on raids so as to bring home more cattle. The father's herd has decreased because he sold some cattle to enable Leshao go to school, the latter's refusal to go for raids is an influence of western values that perceive raids as criminal acts. The most valued commodity in this community is the cow. Hence one's wealth is measured according to the number of cattle in one's herd. Homewood and Rodgers (1991) note that cattle ownership influences the construction of Maasai masculinity because men decide to get married depending on the number of cattle they own. Leshao's father blames the son for the poverty that has engulfed the family. The old man believes that his eldest son has also brought dishonour to the family having acquired the tag of a coward who cannot go on cattle raids. Western values have influenced the school going Leshao, but the father will hear none of it. The father had sent the son to school after the missionaries had promised him that education would bring him more cattle. The father's anger increases because Leshao's age mates who never went to school have gone on many raids and brought many cattle to their fathers. On the other hand, Leshao still goes to school forcing the father to part with more cattle and yet the fruits do not seem to be forthcoming. The father is in a dilemma: the new culture that emphasises education as a tool of empowerment and the old order that values cattle ownership and raids.

Leshao who emerges from school is a changed young man who despises cattle raids as archaic. He detests a very strong element of traditional Maasai masculinity. This really irritates the father. This "pristine" community still upholds traditional aspects of wealth creation and the issue of empowerment through education is still very alien. These two emerging perspectives of masculinities result in the clash between father and son. The father is a traditional Maasai man who is really entrenched in his culture. Evan Mwangi cited in Mbugua (2004) notes the Maasai community is reputed to be one of the most positively impervious to cultural hegemony. He argues that the community has resisted western value systems to retain a deep respect for their pre-colonial mores.

Hauff's (2003) assertion that the Maasai have resiliently struggled to maintain their culture points to the Herculean task Leshao faces. He is forced to negotiate different forms of masculinities in different contexts. These masculinities among Leshao's Maasai community are centered on cattle and pastoral culture, which influence the socio-economic forces in the community, and consequently influence male identities. These masculinities are socially constructed by the society he lives in. Morell (2001) argues that privileges and power are enjoyed by the people who keep the mores of a particular culture. On the other hand, others who have alternative masculinities are not considered "real men". Culture is one structure that holds so much power that an individual may not evade it. Leshao's community espouses a form of hegemonic masculinity to which an individual is forced to confirm. Young Leshao and another convert called Stefano, find themselves in this predicament. This dissent has ramifications.

In the first chapters of *To Become a Man*, the missionaries had started setting up schools. However, most of the people were not willing to send their children there. This is a resistant to the new age of education and communication technology. Leshao, is among the few young people who have joined school. The missionaries were trying to penetrate into the interior of the country: "Leshao was one

of the herds boys, different from the rest in that he had gone to school. He still had one term to go..." (4). The father sends his son reluctantly after Leshao promises to bring more wealth to the family after finishing school, and also after the mother intervenes. During this period, most young Maasai men were joining moranship. These young men would later go for cattle raids. Such raids brought a lot of cattle which was a source of wealth. Leshao's father is in a dilemma and is not sure if the decision to send his son to school was right:

The old man had thought if the eight years a boy went to school were to train him to become a better moran, then the whole training was a failure since the ones who did not go to school made the best morans. The old man was very annoyed at those boys who left school, not because he valued school more than he valued his skin sandals, but because their return cast doubt upon the promises his son often made to him, saying that as soon as he completed school he would be employed and would make him rich. His son's promises had once been backed by Reverend Walker (whom the Maasai simply called 'Waka'). (Ole Kulet, 1972:17)

Leshao's father is in a society in transition. Initially, upward mobility was through cattle raids and the acquisition of cattle. However, with the coming of the missionaries and colonialists, education is now slowly becoming the tool for upward mobility, albeit with many challenges. Education is struggling to replace moranship and cattle raids in the social construction of Maasai masculinity. This brings to fore the malleability of masculinities. Maasai masculinities are not static but susceptible to change. An elder, Ole Nkipida, is one person who despite being a Maasai has embraced this change. He tries to convince Leshao's father that it is wise to embrace change because society is in transition. However, Leshao's father, Kerea ole Merresho will hear none of it:

'I wish you had gone around as I did and seen how the other young Maasai boys have progressed. They have bought better cattle than the ones we have. We should let our boys be like them. Let us not hinder them. You might not see the truth of it now, but I am telling you, we are being left behind by other villages because of encouraging our boys to join moranship, let alone cattle raids because they are becoming out of date and —'

'Stop, stop! If you were born a coward, you do not expect to convince others to be cowards. Are you not, ole Nkipida? Haven't you seen young boys of our village become rich overnight just by going on cattle raids.... (Ole Kulet, 1972:76)

4 Towards a reconstruction of masculinity withon the Maasai traditional heritage

Education is perceived as a form of escapism from "real Maasai manhood" by the traditionalists like Leshao's father. According to the traditionalists, education is a kind of a shortcut that avoids rigours that characterize true moranship like bravery, risk, violence and has "feminized" Maasai men. That is why Leshao's father has the temerity to call a fellow elder a coward. The cowardly tag is a big insult especially in a community socialised into warrior hood. The conflict between the two opposing masculinities is evident and education is a catalyst for change. Though Ole Nkipida tries to convince Leshao's father, Leshao's father is very adamant that his son will never go to school. In fact, Leshao's late mother is the one who convinces the old man to allow the young boy to attend school.

However, in this society, the voice of the woman is not given much space. This scenario corroborates Spivak's (1988) argument that the voice of the subaltern (in this instance, women in the Maasai male dominated society) is never given space. Spivak asks the key question whether the subaltern can speak. She points out the voice and space of the subaltern is subjugated in the dominant discourse consciously or unconsciously. De Beauvoir (1949) rightly defines Kereia ole Merresho's perception of women. She explains that humanity is male and defines the female as the "other". Griele (1978) also concurs with Beauvoir when he explains that stereotypical masculinity is portrayed as normal, natural and universal in many societies. Thus, how Kereia ole Merresho behaves against women is sanctioned by the society. Apart from being obstinate, the father exhibits excessive hegemonic masculinity. Talle (1988) contends that the Maasai are a male dominated society and women are subordinate in all aspects of culture. He notes that the Maasai culture promotes male dominance and subordination of women through customs such as clitoridectomy (female circumcision) and forced marriages. Messner (2004) observes that patriarchy (an ideology that privileges particularly old men) is a global phenomenon. Thus, patriarchy is not limited to the Maasai but to many societies worldwide. Messner further asserts that the biological fact of being male places men in privileged positions.

Leshao has to undergo major challenges so as to try to fit in a society that places masculinity at a higher pedestal. Connell (1995) explains that hegemonic masculinity is constructed through difficult negotiations. Leshao and the father are victims of a dominant discourse in the strong Maasai patriarchal society. That is why the father is under pressure to make sure Leshao joins the raids and abandons school. Lorber (1994) points out that individual decision on gender-role expectations are mostly outweighed by societal expectations. Lorber's observation explains the predicament Leshao finds himself in. His individual will does not count much. His father and society expects him to follow the pattern previous Maasai men have followed. If the young man takes a different course it seems that he will be shunned. It is rather unfortunate that Leshao cannot ignore these societal forces. Omalla (1981) explains that among the Maasai, anyone who declined to go to war or raid cattle was considered a coward. Moreover, the so called "cowards" were not grouped with other men, but instead they were rejected.

Conclusion

Henry Ole Kulet's text *To Become a Man* has effectively depicted masculinity in a transitional Maasai community. The study has established that the dominant form of masculinity in the supposedly pristine Maasai community is traditional hegemonic masculinity. It is a form of masculinity constructed in a dominant, aggressive and violent manner. Characters like Leshao who attempt to subvert this dominant form of masculinity face a lot of resistance. The societal forces that perpetuate the old traditional masculinity resist vehemently. It is quite prudent to argue that change especially cultural does not come easily. Agents of change such as education face a lot of resistance in this rigid society. The study also contends that culture and language (discourse of communication) are used as vehicles to propagate masculinist sexual ideologies by agents like the traditional Maasai patriarchal society. The group uses the two to perpetuate the narrative of traditional masculinity as the ideal form of masculinity. The traditional masculinity in this chapter clearly fits into Donaldson's (1993) description of hegemonic masculinity. Donaldson argues that hegemonic masculinity can be negated, challenged, renounced, imposed, constructed with difficulty, modernised but not necessary enjoyed. He further argues that this form of masculinity that passes

itself as natural can harm, deform, deny but not necessarily satisfy. The paper contends with Donaldson's assertion that this form of Maasai traditional masculinity propagates cultural ideals that do not correspond to the real personalities of most men. On the other hand, the new modern version of masculinity brought by the missionaries seems to borrow heavily from the teachings of Christ. It can be categorised as a form of Christian masculinity that negates hegemonic attributes of masculinity such as aggression and violence. It espouses values such as forgiveness and non-violence which are categorised by most patriarchal societies as subordinate.

References

- Cattle People: Survival*. (1998). Electronic Document, <http://www.stpt>. Accessed 7/14/15.
- Connell, Raewyn. (1995), *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1994). *The Second Sex*: New York.
- Donaldson, M. (1993). What is hegemonic masculinity? *Theory and Society* 22:643-65.
- Griele, J. (1978). *Gender and the USA*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Hauff, L. (2003). "The Effects of Development on the Maasai," Unpublished Diss. St. John's University.
- Homewood, K., & Rodgers, W.A. 1991, *Maasailand and Ecology: Pastoralist Development and Wildlife Conservation in Ngorongoro, Tanzania*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Jackson, C. (2002). "Laddishness as a self-worth protection strategy," *Gender and Education*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 37-50.
- Kulet, H. (1972). *To Become A Man*. Nairobi: Longhorn.
- Lorber, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of Gender*. New Haven: Yale University.
- Mbugua, P.K. (2004). "Issues of Identity in Ole Kulet's: Is It Possible" Unpublished Masters disss, University of Nairobi.
- Messer, Donald E. (2004). *Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence*:
- Messner, M. (1992). *Power at Play: Sport and the Problem of Masculinity*. Boston: Beacon.
- Morell, R. (2001). *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Univ of Natal.
- Omalla, D. (1981) *Be a Real Man*. Evangel Publishing House: Nairobi.
- Philips, J.K. (2006). *Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature*. New York: Palgrave.

Spivak,G.(1998, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Available from
<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Spivak%20>(Accessed: 12,May,2017)

Talle, A. (1988). *Women at a loss: Changes in Maasai Pastoralism and their effects on gender relations*. Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Social Relations.

Wa Thiong’o, N. (1972). *Homecoming*. London: Heinemann.