


A comparative study of Kikuyu Proverbs and its English equivalents on the role and position of women: A Natural Semantic Metalanguage perspective

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Abstract: Proverbs are part of any culture. They are symbolic as they carry the cultural wisdom and heritage of any community. Studies in the past have shown that proverbs just like other oral traditions help in the construction of identities and ideologies. Such identities and ideologies are as in gender, the roles of those genders and stereotypes alike. Kikuyu proverbs, particularly those on the role and position of women are no different. They are carriers of meaning. Kikuyu proverbs, just like many other proverbs, can be translated to other languages and their equivalents are provided as well. This paper studies selected Kikuyu proverbs about women and their English equivalent. The aim is to investigate whether the Kikuyu and their English equivalent proverbs have a similar semantic structure. The study also makes a comparison of the cultural themes. This study was premised on the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach by Anna Wierzbicka (1996) and Cliff Goddard (2002). Data for the analysis were collected from both oral and written sources. From the collected proverbs, 10 were selected for analysis. The analysis involved semantic explication of proverb texts using the five-part semantic template for proverbs analysis: 'traditionality', 'recurrent situation', 'advice', 'analogy', and 'status as folk wisdom' as proposed by Goddard. The finding was that the selected Kikuyu proverbs did not have a similar semantic structure to their English equivalent. The proverbs lacked elements such as 'advice' or 'analogy' when compared alongside. There was also a difference in their cultural themes.

Keywords: English Proverbs, Gendered Proverbs, Kikuyu Proverbs, Natural Semantic Metalanguage, Proverbs, Semantic Structure.

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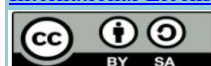
1. Introduction

A Proverb is considered to be an integral part of any culture. According to Rong (2013), proverbs are cultural symbols that represent something. Meider (1997) defines proverbs as short sentences of the folk that contain wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form. This paper aims to answer two questions: do proverbs in the Kikuyu language on the role and position of women and their English equivalent have a determinable semantic context and do they carry with them cultural issues?

Kikuyu language is a Bantu language spoken by the Agikuyu people of Kenya. The Kikuyu people are the largest ethnic group in Kenya (Knbs, 2019). These people occupy the central region of Kenya. The language has also been spread to other regions in Kenya including the Rift Valley, the Coast and the Capital city Nairobi. Proverbs constitute a large part of the Kikuyu community in all facets. According to Barra (1998: ii), proverbs are the quintessence of Kikuyu eloquence they are full of wisdom and embody the maxims of natural law 'written by God in the heart of all men' and so to the Agikuyu they (proverbs) are a precious inheritance. The Kikuyu have a rich culture and proverbs abound. It is not wrong to conclude that "they have a proverb for almost every situation or occasion" (Wanjohi, 1994).

Proverbs have been used to construct gender norms and sometimes gender stereotypes. Kikuyu and English proverbs have evidence of gendered proverbs as will be discussed in this paper. These proverbs will expound on the

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role and position of women both in the Agikuyu and English culture. The study conducted here showed how proverb texts related to the role and position of women in the Kikuyu culture and their equivalent in English can be paraphrased by the use of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach proposed by Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard. To explicate the proverbs, a five-part semantic template for analysing proverbs proposed by Goddard (2014: 190) in their book *Words and Meaning* was put to use.

Proverbs also carry with them cultural issues. Norrick (2015) stated that proverbs can be described through their discourse contexts and within the cultural matrix. Cultural themes can be created from different formations and therefore the status and usage of proverbs can be indicative of a broad range of cultural attitudes associated with different social and historical formations (Goddard, 2014). The purpose of this research is to investigate whether the Kikuyu and their English equivalent proverbs have a similar semantic structure. The article also aims to show how cultural themes are made from these formations in selected Kikuyu proverbs and their equivalent English proverbs.

The choice for this research is justifiable since no study has been done on Natural Semantic Metalanguage and particularly on Kikuyu proverbs. Previous studies on Kikuyu proverbs have focused on critical discourse analysis (Kamwendo & Kaya, 2017), lexical pragmatics (Njuguna, 2010), cognitive semantics theory (Kariuki, 2015) and translation (Raimo, 2017).

2. Literature review

This study explored crucial literature so as to give conclusive research. The pivotal studies that largely contributed to this research are as follows:

2.1. Proverbs and gender construction

As Karimi (2010) noted gender is socially created through assigning roles and identities such as how masculine or how feminine. This means that various social activities lay the ground for the construction of gender identities and ideologies. These activities bind in different cultures. As a fact, Schipper (2006: 14) mentioned in her book *Never Marry a Woman With Big Feet* that “sex and gender issues have been expressed in oral traditions such as myths and origin stories, fairytales, animal fables, love poems or cradle songs – and proverbs”. Therefore, proverbs can be used to express and promote gender issues. Quarshie and Omari (2021) on the other hand, defined gendered proverbs as proverbs in which males and females are represented explicitly or implicitly. Diabah and Amfo (2014) noted that gendered proverbs tend to be hegemonic because the power and authority of men in societies are unquestionable.

Gendered proverbs make stereotypes. In their study on Akan and Swahili, gendered proverbs Quarshie and Omari (2021) concluded that the direct mention of men in such proverbs is minimal as if they are almost sacred. This highlights the issue of patriarchy and the traditional perception of men as dominant. Proverbs particularly about women highlight “body characteristics such as age, sex, stature or certain traits.” (Schipper, 2006) Other previous studies on the construction of gender in proverbs are as (Khan, 2017; Mayo & Ncube, 2011; Kaker et al., 2018; Kaburi & Wanjiru, 2015; Ndungo, 2002).

2.2. Kikuyu people, language and their proverbs

The World Atlas of Language Structures Online (2013) lists Kikuyu as belonging to the Niger-Family Congo. The current Kikuyu people occupy the central part of Kenya and have also spread out toward other regions such as the Rift Valley, Coast and Nairobi capital city. ‘The Kikuyu native speakers are arguably the most decentralised people in Kenya and are found in virtually every part of the country partly because the language has the highest populace in Kenya today’ (Iribe, 2016).

Robertson (2014) stated that this language has a complex dialect dictum with a lexical similarity with neighbouring languages such as 73% of Embu language, 70% with Chuka, 67% with Kamba and 63% with Meru. This led to the emergence of seven dialects of the Kikuyu language; the Northern Kikuyu, Southern Kikuyu, Ki-Ndia, Ki-Chugu, Ki-Mathira, Ki-Embu, and Ki-Mbeere (Mutahi, 1983). However, with time; Wachera (2008) stated that Ki-Embu and Ki-Mbeere dialects became fully-fledged languages and therefore there are only five varieties of the Kikuyu language. The traditional Kikuyu people were agriculturists; they herd large flocks of sheep and goats, and, to a less extent, cattle, since their social organisation required a constant supply of stock for such varied purposes as “marriage insurance,” payments, sacrifices, meat feasts, magical rites, purification ceremonies, and as means of supplying clothing to the community. (Kenyatta, 1965: xv).

For the Kikuyu people, oral traditions and proverbs are an integral part of their culture. Barro (1998: ii) in her book *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs* noted that ‘for the Akikuyu, proverbs are precious inheritance which must not be lost in the changes taking place now.’ The Kikuyu proverbs about women according to Kareithi and Rogers (2006) give the impression: ‘Women can achieve honour through marriage and mothering, but they can never aspire to the level of manhood, A woman cannot do things the way a man does and women are intrinsically untrustworthy with their speech’ About the same, Mwihi (2006) also noted that some Kikuyu proverbs are constructive in that they build a positive image of a woman. Some are negative because they distort the image of a woman.

2.3. Equivalence and nonequivalence of proverbs

Proverbs are present in many cultures. Every culture has a way of expressing its proverbs. To compare proverbs in different cultures, finding the most equivalent is an important step. However, when Lubis (2018), compared the equivalence and nonequivalence of Indonesian and English proverbs; this was the conclusion: “the ideas expressed in the two cultures are similar but the way the ideas are expressed, of course, is not similar.” Therefore it is

because of this, these people can know many things
this is one of these things
it can be good for someone if this someone thinks about this at some times

Traditionality and Status as Folk wisdom tend to exist in all proverbs since they are thought to be passed from one generation to another. However, the middle part is the content of any proverb. And as Goddard mentions:

The three middle sections—(b), (c), and (d)—give the content of the individual proverb. To anticipate, we will say that the tripartite structure—recurrent situation, proverbial advice, proverbial analogy—is maximal. Most metaphorical proverbs require all three sections, but maxim-style proverbs (like Practice makes perfect) lack the proverbial analogy, and some metaphorical sayings (like Out of the frying pan, into the fire) lack the proverbial advice. (Goddard 2014: 190).

3. Research methodology

The study used a qualitative research design to collect and analyse data. And like Jackson et al. (2007) noted about qualitative research; the focus turns to understanding human beings' richly textured experiences and reflections on those experiences. In this study, the data for analysis were collected from both written and oral sources. These sources were three selected native Kikuyu speakers who were competent enough in Kikuyu proverbs, a self-introspection method from the researcher who also speaks the language and from three texts: 1000 Kikuyu Proverbs by G. Barra, Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs by Simpson and Speake and Gnomologia Adagies and Proverbs by Thomas Fuller as well as internet sources.

The procedure for data collection was as follows; the researcher searched for proverbs relating to women from the book mentioned above. Some of the proverbs directly mentioned women; 'aka', (pl) 'muka' (sg.) or 'mutumia', while others inferred the roles of women such as 'nyina' (mother) The proverbs were written down. The researcher then grouped them in recurring patterns and themes. The proverbs that had stated clearly the equivalences with the English ones were then written down. A further collection was done through interviewing three native Kikuyu speakers. Two old men and one woman were purposely selected for this interview. The researcher asked them to give any Kikuyu proverb relating to women. The results were recorded. The data from the book and from the respondents was then compared and written down.

The procedure for collecting data for the English proverbs was; the researcher looked over for English proverbs mentioning women from the dictionary of proverbs. The proverbs were written down. The researcher also searched the internet and through a self introspection and the data was compared and written down. A total of 10 proverbs (Kikuyu proverbs and their English equivalents) were selected for analysis.

4. Findings and discussions

The data collected was used for analysis in this section. Ten proverbs were selected from the collection which involved interviews from three participants, proverbs collection book and dictionaries, internet sources and a self-introspection. The analysis here shows that women were regarded differently in both the Kikuyu and English contexts. Culture plays an important role in how women are referenced and the context in which the proverb is used. This study has also identified that the purportedly English equivalent proverbs could not be equivalent once they are explicated using NSM five-part semantic template for proverbs analysis. Some equivalent proverbs lack the contents of individual proverbs such as 'proverbial advice' and 'proverbial analogy' when they are put into comparison.

The collected data on Kikuyu proverbs and their equivalents show that the Kikuyu people use proverbs to show their general attitude toward women. Kariuki (2015), stated that proverbs in Kikuyu reveal the way Agikuyu people think; women are not apt in a way to be trusted in handling such matters of importance as they require good communication skills, wisdom, and knowledge to achieve the desired results. The findings and analysis are as follows:

4.1. 'Aka na ng'ombe itiri ndugu' and 'A woman is to be from her house three times, when she is christened, married and buried'

Barra (1998: 2) lists the two proverbs as equivalents. I will discuss each briefly and attempt to make an explication of each of them to compare their semantic structure:

a.) *Aka na ng'ombe itiri ndugu*

Literal translation: Wives and oxen have no friends

This proverb means that there are things so precious (to a man) which may not be given to your friends no matter how much you love or respect those friends. These things are 'wives' and 'oxen'. Among the Agikuyu, cows were very important. "Cows were some of the commodities used in paying the bride price and it is no wonder that women are normally equated with them" (Ndungo, 2006).

Here, the woman is compared to cattle and also shown as a property of a man. She does not have equal status with a man. Cattle were used as part of the bride price. "The dowry price was of cultural value and a girl was a source of wealth since she could be married off and earn the family a lot of riches in terms of cattle and goats" (Kariuki, 2015). The woman is commodified as an item of trade. It is for this reason, that a wife and cattle could not be given to a friend.

b.) *A woman is to be from her house three times, when she is christened, married and buried*

This proverb shows how the early modern English people viewed women. Women were housewives. Their roles were limited, she lacked the freedom to leave her house unless she was at her place of worship so she could be baptised and married, at her husband's house after her wedding and when she died. Her freedom was curtailed and she was at the mercy of her husband. Gilman (2020), noted that the human female was originally restricted in the range such as even the knowledge of the land she lived in when she moved; she followed the man's warpath. Even after civilization advancement, the woman remained stationary. Crawford (1998), mentions that during Early modern England, Reformers taught that marriage and maternity were the ideals of female life. The ideal of the good woman was class-specific; to be obedient and silent, a wife and mother, busy with her household concerns.

Since in the five part semantic template for proverbs analysis, 'traditionality' and 'status as folk wisdom' are present in all proverbs; the explications here will only include the tripartite structure 'recurrent situation, proverbial advice, and proverbial analogy'. The following table shows the semantic structure explication of the proverbs:

Table 2: Semantic explication for 'Aka na ng'ombe itiri ndugu' and 'A woman is to be from her house three times, when she is christened, married and buried'

Kikuyu Proverb: Aka na ng'ombe itiri ndugu	English Equivalent: A woman is to be from her house three times, when she is christened, married and buried
Recurrent Situation It is often like this: two kinds are in one place at one time one kind is people, the other kind is things, these kind are very good to someone if one kind moves to other place this is not good because of this, it is good if these kinds can be in one place at the same time	Recurrent Situation it is often like this one kind of people live at the same place at the same time this kind of people can't be at other places if this kind of people move to other place for a long time, it is not good it is good if this someone live at that same place at all time
Advice Because of this, There are things that are very good, these things should be at one place all the time	Advice -
Analogy It is like this two kinds live in one place One kind are one kind of people, they are good the other kind are cows [m] they are good very bad things happen if they are not at one place at one time	Analogy -

Discussion

From the explication above, the two proverbs; though listed as equivalent, fail to show similarity in their semantic structure. The English proverb equivalent lacks the advice and analogy element when compared to the Kikuyu proverb. Culturally, the English people introduce the aspect of religion. A woman is expected to first practice religion and then take on her duties as a wife. Crawford (1998), notes that religion was an important factor and women were expected to practise it. Spirituality, apprehension of the divine, and oneness with God were the priorities of many women. The Agikuyu culture has a traditional cultural practice instead. The mention of oxen alongside women-only shows how they value their livestock. And as discussed earlier, traditional Kikuyu were agriculturalists and their cattle were used in the dowry negotiation process.

4.2. 'Gutiri mutumia wenjagirwo mbui kwa nyina' and 'Once sold, ever sold'

a.) *Gutiri mutumia wenjagirwo mbui kwa nyina*

Literal translation: No married woman will have her white hair shaved at her mother's.

This means that girls among the Agikuyu aspired to find husbands and get married and none of them wished to grow old in their parent's house. Barra (1960: 16), stated that the Kikuyu girls would go round with bald heads which they were shaved periodically by their relations (mothers), however, once the woman was married; she left her relations and would therefore never be shaved by her mother.

b.) *Once sold, ever sold*

Barra (1998: 16), gives this proverb as the English equivalent.

This proverb means that once something has been exchanged with another in whichever form be it a commodity or monetary value, that something cannot be returned. The table below shows an attempt to illustrate the semantic structure of both proverbs:

Table 3: Semantic explication for ‘Gutiri mutumia wenjagirwo mbui kwa nyina’ and ‘Once sold, ever sold’

Kikuyu proverb: Gutiri mutumia wenjagirwo mbui kwa nyina	English Equivalent: Once sold, ever sold
Recurrent Situation it is often like this: one kind of people are at one place at one time these kind of people don't want to live at that place for a long time because of this, this someone wants to move from that place to somewhere very far for a long time	Recurrent Situation It is often like this: Something is at one place at one time after this, something happens to this something this something moves somewhere else because of this, this something is at other place for a long time
Advice because of this: when someone thinks about moving far for a long time, it is not good if this someone thinks about moving on after sometime	Advice because of this: if something moves to one place for sometime, it is good if this something be at that place for a long time
Analogy it is like this: when one kind of people is at one place something is done to that someone's head(m) Because of this, that someone moves to somewhere else before this something is done	Analogy -

Discussion

The English proverb equivalent semantic structure does not have the analogy element which is present in the Kikuyu proverb. This shows that the semantic structure of both proverbs is not similar yet they are mentioned as equivalents. The Kikuyu proverb creates an image of women as complete only when they are married. Culturally, among the Agikuyu, “shaving was a ritual ceremony for purification and cleansing” (Kang’ethe, 1991). This ceremony involved: shaving the heads (kwenja) of (boys) and girls. Their bodies were painted with red ochre mixed with oil, after which they were dressed in new clothes. Then they were introduced as full-fledged members of the community (Kenyatta, 2015).

The English proverb however does not mention anything about women, it gives the exchanging of goods for trading purposes. Trade in Early modern English was profit-based Salmon (2020), mentioned that ‘though mediaeval ethics had supposedly condemned the profit motive, and taught about usury and the unjust prices that had shackled the growth of capitalist practices, not much was done.’

4.3. ‘Giathi githaragio ni gaka kamwe’ and ‘One cloud is enough to eclipse the sun’

a.) Giathi githaragio ni gaka kamwe

Literal translation: A market can be spoiled by one woman.

This proverb means that a single occasion can be disrupted by one woman by creating chaos and destruction. The use of a diminutive form ‘gaka’ (small woman), stresses the fact that a woman may be insignificant in terms of size and appearance but she can be very dangerous and destructive. “She may be insignificant as far as the society is concerned but the effects of her cunning and scheming nature can be disastrous” (Ndungo, 2006).

b.) One cloud is enough to eclipse the sun

This proverb means that one act is enough to complete a long journey. This means that people should not ignore small beginnings since they can yield great things. The semantic explications can be done as follows:

Table 4: Semantic explication for ‘Giathi githaragio ni gaka kamwe’ and ‘One cloud is enough to eclipse the sun’

Kikuyu Proverb: Giathi githaragio ni gaka kamwe	English Equivalent: One cloud is enough to eclipse the sun
Recurrent situation It is often like this: many people are in one place at on time these people want something to happen one kind of people want something to happen in this place this someone says something because of this something very bad happens	Recurrent Situation It is often like this: Someone does something for sometime this someone thinks there are small people because of this, this someone does something at this time after this, this someone knows there are big people
Advice -	Advice if someone does something for sometime it is good if this someone knows that it is something very good if they do this something for sometime
Analogy	Analogy

many people are in the market* because of this, there are one kind of people this kind of people says something very bad because of this, this someone spoils* things at this one place	it is like this: many people want something to happen these people feel they are small people like cloud* these people do one big thing because of this, these people do very good things
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Discussion

The Kikuyu proverb lacks the advice element which is present in the semantic structure of the English proverb. The researcher concluded that the proverb lacks ‘proverbial advice’ since it is not possible to determine to whom the advice could be passed. In a societal setting, the proverb would serve as a warning not to engage in women’s fights since they are capable of spoiling events.

The proverb portrays women as chaotic. The Agikuyu economy was based on agriculture and they traded their commodities in the markets. Robertson (1997), mentions that the Kikuyu women were confined to local trading only and that this proverb has been charged with representing women as disruptive. The English proverb has no mention of women at all. Therefore, it is not enough to argue that the two proverbs are equivalent.

4.4. ‘Mbaara ya aka ndiri ng’ Ondu’ and ‘Words are for women, actions for men’

a.) Mbaara ya aka ndiri ng’ Ondu

Literal translation: Women’s strife has no sheep

Barra (1998: p.48), highlights that in the Kikuyu community if one wounds another in a quarrel, he must pay a sheep as a fine. Therefore this proverb means that ‘in women’s strife, nobody incurs such a fine since women’s quarrels are usually words only.’

b.) Words are for women, actions for men

This means that only serious exploits were left for men in Early modern England. Women were only expected to speak but not much action was expected of them. This paints women as weak and simple-minded.

The semantic structure of the proverbs can be explicated as follows:

Table 5: Semantic explication for ‘Mbaara ya aka ndiri ng’ Ondu’ and ‘Words are for women, actions for men’

Kikuyu proverb: Mbaara ya aka ndiri ng’ Ondu	English Equivalent: Words are for women, actions for men
Recurrent It is often like this one kind of people are at one place at the same time these kind of people say some very bad things to other people of one kind many people know about these bad words because of this, many people don't think about this kind of people at all	Recurrent it is often like this: two kinds of people are in one place one kind say many things, this one kind of people cannot do a thing all they do is say the other kind does many things, this kind of people does not say many things because of this they make something happen
Advice -	Advice because of this, It is not good to think about something one kind of people says
Analogy It is like this: when one kind of people does something very bad to someone, many people think of doing something else, Because of this, these many people think about sheep* But if this people is of one kind, many people don't think anymore about that one kind of people	-

Discussion

From the above explications, it is evident that; the Kikuyu proverb lacks the advice element in the semantic structure while the English equivalent does not have the analogy element. The proverbs are therefore not similar in their semantic structures. Culturally, among the Agikuyu, women were regarded as quarrelsome according to the proverb. Their quarrels were not taken seriously. This is in contrast to men’s quarrels that would lead to seeking atonement by paying a fine in the form of sheep. Kenyatta (2015), states that among the Agikuyu, before the introduction of the European monetary system, sheep and goats were regarded as the standard currency. This shows they were of value and so could be used for reconciliation processes among men.

Among the English people, women are seen as people not to be trusted with big issues. Theirs were words and tales while the men engaged in important issues that involved action. Both proverbs, however, talk about women and create an ideology that women cannot be given tasks that require skills and knowledge. Their place is in telling and retelling of things done by men, and even so when they are involved in altercations like the Kikuyu women, no reconciliation process is necessary as women are considered to be generally quarrelsome.

4.5. ‘Aka eri ni nyungu igiri cia urogi’ and ‘Woman’s jar breed men’s war’

a.) *Aka eri ni nyungu igiri cia urogi*

Literal translation: Two wives are two pots full of poison.

This proverb could be interpreted that two women, especially co-wives will always quarrel because they are competitors for one husband. ‘‘This rivalry arises from a competitive situation.’’ (Ndungo, 2006). The Kikuyu people were traditionally polygamous and a man could have as many wives as possible.

b.) *Woman’s jars breed men’s war*

This proverb references women in terms of war. It means that it is from women that all man's troubles arise. The explication of the proverbs is as follows:

Table 6: Semantic explication for ‘Aka eri ni nyungu igiri cia urogi’ and ‘Woman’s jar breed men’s war’

Kikuyu Proverb: Aka eri ni nyungu igiri cia urogi	English Equivalent: Woman’s jar breed men’s war
Recurrent situation It is often like this: one kind of people is at one place at one time These one kind of people are two because of this they can do something very bad	Recurrent situation one kind of people are at one place Other kinds of people are at the same place One kind of people does something very bad because of this, the other kind of people feels very bad
Advice -	Advice because of this if one kind of people is at one place this one kind of people can say very bad things It is good if this kind of people does not say something
Analogy It is like this If there are two-one kind of people at the same place at the same time somewhere The other kind of people knows that these kinds of people are like poison*	Analogy It is like this: Many people know about one kind of people doing bad things to other people These kinds of people do something very bad when the other kind of people is at that place

Discussion

From the semantic structure above, the Kikuyu proverb lacks the advice element. The proverb references women as poison, they are destructive and dangerous. The use of pots to describe women can be interpreted as a source. However, they are sources of poison. Pottery by clay in the traditional Kikuyu culture was a role reserved only for women. Also, the Agikuyu pots were very important. They cooked their food using earthen or clay pots. The English people however reference women with warfare as the equivalence of the proverb.

5. Conclusion

From the above analysis and discussion, there is clear evidence regarding the semantic structure of the selected Kikuyu proverbs and their English equivalents. The Kikuyu proverbs about the roles and position of women reveal that there is a difference when compared to the English equivalents. Some proverbs showed a lack of some semantic elements of the tripartite structure as proposed by Goddard. NSM helped to show that the proverbs in comparison are not as equivalent as they were insinuated to be.

The analysis also revealed the cultural motivation in the proverbs studied. There was evidence of cultural themes in aspects of traditional rituals and ceremonies, religion, warfares and general societal perceptions. The representation of women is similar in showing that women were regarded as simple-minded. However, among the Agikuyu people, the image of women being disruptive, dangerous and malicious seems to come out strongly. Either way, the image of women created in those proverbs shows a marginalised woman in both cultures.

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