



**NJHS**

## **Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**

ISSN 2520-4009 (Print) Online Journal homepage: <http://www.theroyallitejournal.com>

### **REBELLION OR REVOLUTION, MASCULINITIES AT CROSSROADS: A STUDY OF HENRY OLE KULET'S *TO BECOME A MAN***

**ANTHONY MUKASA**

University of South Africa

#### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter interrogates masculinity in the pristine Kenyan society. 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. It focuses on Henry Ole Kulet's *To Become a Man* which depicts the Maasai community in Kenya. The setting of the novel is in the Maasai community during the pre-colonial and colonial period. The paper aims to revisit the early forms of masculinity in the early black Kenyan society before Christianity and colonialism. Such an analysis will help the study give a clear chronological interpretation of masculinity in the Kenyan society from the pre-colonial to the postcolonial period. Key to the chapter 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 masculinities? The two key ideas of masculinity the paper 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 beliefs. This study 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.



Print ISSN 2520-4009

© Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 1, Issue 3, May 2017

---

Laura 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 industrialisation and globalisation (3). The emergent forms of masculinities bring to fore the idea that masculinities are not static but fluid. Moreover, they are socially and historically constructed.

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 more cattle. The father's flock have reduced because of selling some cattle to enable Leshao go to school, the latter's refusal to go for raids and influence of western values that perceive raids as criminal acts. The most valued commodity in this community is the cow. One's wealth is measured according to the number of herds. Homework and Rodgers (1991) explain the importance of cattle to the Maasai "Cattle are the structural backbone behind many important stages in life. For instance, they determine the age at which males marry. Men need to be independent and own a good size of herd... (48). Hauff (2003) concurs about the importance of cattle to the Maasai when she avers that "cattle is such a distinctive part of Maasai culture that the two cannot be separated"(8). Leshao's father blames the son for the poverty that has engulfed the family. The old man believes that if his eldest son has also brought dishonor to the family because of 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 on education as a tool of empowerment and the old order that values cattle ownership and raids. Hauff (2003) notes that Western education has been one of the strongest challenge to Maasai culture:

Education is rapidly affecting Maasai culture, and carries with it negative and positive consequences. In order to compete in an advancing world and protect their land, the Maasai must educate their youth. This however, causes conflict in their culture. Those in school are eligible for leadership positions outside of their culture, but are no longer available for leadership positions within. Therefore, outsiders, at times, are no longer respected by their elders...(20)

The old man is of the opinion that Leshao is the cause of his misery as the former has lost status because of poverty. According to Omalla (1981) riches played a great part in becoming a man of respect in traditional African societies. He explains that it was generally believed that something was wrong with person who was unable to possess particularly cattle (4) Moreover, the 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. Mwangi (1990) explains that 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.

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.

Hauff's (2003) assertion that Maasai's have resiliently struggled to maintain their culture point's to the Herculean task Leshao has. As the analysis, proceeds, it is important to put into consideration Barker & Ricardo supposition cited in Chitando and Chiragoma (2012) which posits that:

A gender analysis of young men must take into account the plurality of masculinities in sub-Saharan Africa. Versions of manhood in Africa are: (i) socially constructed; (ii) fluid over time and in different settings; and (iii) plural. There is no typical young man in sub-Saharan Africa and no single version of manhood. There are numerous African masculinities, urban and rural and changing historically, including versions of manhood associated with war, or being warriors and others associated with farming or cattle herding. There are indigenous definitions and versions of manhood, defined by tribal and ethnic group practices, and newer versions of manhood shaped by Islam and Christianity, and by Western influences, including the global media(5)

The above point is pertinent because Leshao is forced to negotiate different forms of masculinities in different contexts. These masculinities among his Maasai community are centered around 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. The most dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic; which has been inculcated in his culture. Morell (2001) notes 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 that an individual is forced to conform to.

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. The protagonist, Leshao, is among the few young people who have joined school. The missionaries were trying to penetrate into the interior: "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..." (p4). The father sends his son reluctantly after Leshao promises to bring more wealth to the family after finishing school and also after the mother intrudes. 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.(Ole Kulet,1972:17)

Leshao's father is in a society in transition. Initially, upward mobility was through cattle raids and one owning more 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 Maasai, has embraced this change. He tries to convince Leshao's father that it is wise to embrace change; because society was 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. (Ole Kulet, 1972:76)

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. Leshao's late mother, despite not being schooled, was quite logical. She had seen the benefits other families that had send their children to school got:

'My husband', she had called him politely, 'yes'. 'The other families seem to be prospering after sending their families to school-(what are you trying to tell me?', he had asked roughly, 'I do not like people who beat about the bush. Speak your mind, woman.' 'I was suggesting, 'she had said in a soft voice,' if I met your consent, that we send Leshao to school and woman! This is my home. It is not ours. It is mine.(Ole Kulet,1972:3)

Unlike the father, Leshao's mother was also open-minded and is does not mind Leshao trying something new. However, in this society, the voice of the woman is not given much space. De Beaviour (1949) rightly defines Kerea ole Merresho's perception of women. He pinpoints that humanity is male and defines the female as the "other". Giele (1978) also concurs with Beaviour when he explains that stereotypical masculinity is portrayed as normal, natural and universal in many societies. Thus how Kerea ole Merresho behaves against women is sanctioned by the society. Leshao's father, Kerea ole Merresho accepts though he intimates clearly that her mother did not influence his decision. Kerea ole Merresho is socialised in a highly patriarchal society that believes that women should live in terror of the man. After all, the man is the "head" of the home and decision making solely belong to him. These are societal constructs advocated by the male dominated society. The negation of women as the subordinate "other" is very much perpetuated by the men like Kerea ole Merresho, who are mostly the leaders of these societies Morten cited in Kramarae and Treichler (1985), views patriarchy as:

It is a way of structuring reality in terms of good/evil, redemption/guilt, authority/obedience, reward/punishment, power/powerlessness, haves/have-nots, and master/slave. The first in each opposite was assigned to the patriarchal father, or the patriarch's Father God, frequently indistinguishable from one another. The second refers to women as "the other" and, in time, to all "others" who could be exploited. The father did the naming, the owning, the controlling, the ordering, the forgiving, the giving, considering himself capable of making the best decisions for all (232).

To Leshao's father, the female place is the kitchen and not in major decision making. Hence women should play subsidiary roles and are accorded very low status Furthermore; he does

---

not want to appear to be “controlled”. These are perceptions perpetuated by agents of gender stereotypes and inequalities. In our context these agents are culture and traditions.

In this pristine society, a young man has to fulfill certain conditions before he becomes a “man”. One of the most profound concerns of the writer in this text, is the treatment of the young man Leshao. He has to undergo major challenges so as to try to fit in a highly masculinised society. Raewyn 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 abandon school. Judith Lorber (1994) points out that individual decision on gender-role expectations are mostly outweighed by societal expectations:

My concept of gender differs from previous conceptualization in that I do not locate it in individual or in interpersonal relations, although the construction and maintenance of gender are manifest in personal identities and in social interactions. Rather I see gender as an institution that establishes patterns of expectation for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, and is built into the major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family and politics. (28: 29)

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 feared 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. Leshao’s father in a dialogue with the young man reveals this:

Your grandfather feared to go on raids and I only inherited ten cows from him. But my grandfather was brave. He fought alone and brought cattle everybody admired. Your grandfather saw them all go without increasing any. I wish I was not his son. ‘But my son, what disturbs my heart is that you bear a resemblance to him... Your age-group have brought to their fathers and to themselves riches while you yourself continue to be a big pipe draining my wealth away. You keep on saying that you are about to complete school which you will never do... (Ole Kulet, 1972:5)

Leshao’s father’s tone reveals bitterness for the son who has not fulfilled the Maasai cultural concept of an ideal man. To the father, this new type of modern masculinity reeks of cowardice. The symbol of the she-goat is an implication that Leshao has been feminized by the modern form of masculinity-transited from hegemonic to subordinate masculinity. Nurse (qtd. in Reddock, 2004) asserts that historically, subordinate masculinities have been constructed and represented as effeminate and infantile to distinguish them from hegemonic forms (5). The paper argues that Ole Merresho is using Leshao as a pawn to solve his frustrations. The old man blames his son for their poverty. Leshao has the onerous burden of solving a generational problem because of his male gender. He is next in line to carry the family lineage.

The two areas that the father feels has put his family towards a subordinate role (subordinate masculinity) are lack of wealth and cowardice. Wealth in terms of cattle brought from raids. Cowardice implies the fear of going to raids. Omalla (1981) explains

---

that communities such as the Maasai really demanded courage during wartime. They would not initiate a boy until he showed braveness as a warrior. Furthermore, anyone who feared to go to war or raid cattle was considered a coward (1). Cowards were not grouped with other men instead; they were rejected and even punished severely. To Leshao's father his old man drove them from a position of hegemonic masculinity to subordinate masculinity. The latter's fear of going to raids and subsequent reductions of cattle. This explains why the old man is adamant that Leshao must go on cattle raids in this new dispensation. An elder called Ole Nkipida tries in vain to convince Ole Merresho that times have changed. However, this is an exercise in futility:

Stop, stop !If you were born a coward, you do not expect to convince others to be cowards. Are you blind, ole Nkipida? Haven't you seen young boys of our village become rich overnight just by going on cattle raids? Look at Kitika, a boy who did not know how to blow his nose until recently. How many cows did he bring? Did he even get a scratch? What about Kereto? Weren't you in the village when everybody left it to go and admire the heifers he brought? When you talk about buying cattle, I tend to think you are a descendant of the Iltorobo... (Ole Kulet,1972:76)

According to Connell (1995) subordinate category is imposed on people who are marginalized in terms of race, class, ethnicity. Connell opines that people exhibiting hegemonic masculinity dominate other masculinities and create cultural prescriptions of what it meant to be a real man. Wesley Imms (2000) also argues that "Sociological theories represent masculinity as an investment in male-dominated historical and cultural social power structures" (1). By virtue of his sex, young Leshao cannot escape the rigorous rituals so as to make him an ideal "man". Through an examination of the intricate interaction of culture and gender, the study will show how they influence masculinity. Michel Foucault (1977), when theorizing about gender and power, argued that power is located in the social structures such as social institutions that hold society together as opposed to individuals. Young Leshao is amidst these social forces that do not consider his individuality. The young man is striving to escape from this traditional dominant notion of masculinity to the western notions of masculinity. The young man believes that the traditional modes of masculinity are outdated. The dialogue between Mbulung (Leshao's friend) and Leshao reveals the two contrasting masculinities in the text that are in conflict. Mbulung wants to follow the old order, traditional masculinity while Leshao does not want. Leshao has embraced the new masculinity brought by the missionaries albeit with a lot of challenges:

'No. not me. With me, I am a Maasai. I have to fulfill what a man has to fulfill. I want to be circumcised, become a moran, go to Enjure, Olemayo and Embika...

'You mean you will go on cattle raids?'

'Surely, Yes. Do you mean you don't want to go?'

'Not me'

'Is that why you don't want to become a moran?'

'It is one reason. Another reason is that I do not see the benefit of moranship. It used to be important when the morans were guarding the weaker people from the intruders. There are no longer serving this purpose. The government has soldiers who are doing this. All that is left for them to do is to go on cattle raids.'

'But the raids are very important. They bring wealth to our people. They are not evil. They have been there since the creation of Tungani.'

'But our country is developing. We have to do away with the customs which do not benefit us.'(Ole Kulet, 1972:81/82)

In the dialogue between the two young boys, Ole Kulet employs what Gikandi (1987) calls

---

“ a balance of paradigms” (137).The traditional and the new version of masculinity are interrogated through the contrasting views of the two characters. Traditional masculinity as represented by Mbulung and the new masculinity represented by Leshao. The author employs the two differing perspectives to illustrate the place of masculinity within the changing cultural landscape. Mbulung disparages the new version of masculinity. To Leshao, traditional masculinity is outdated. However, to Mbulung this is the epicenter of the Maasai; and cannot be whisked away. It is what makes a Maasai man; moranship, cattle raids and circumcision. Moreover, this form of asserting masculinity has been there for many generations.

Leshao’s father, apart from insisting on the son to go on raids, also wants him to get circumcised. The old man’s dialogue with the son explains the importance significance of circumcision among the Maasai community:

Then breathing through his mouth, he continued. ‘I said, the founder said “You cannot remove an inner joint of meat before removing the top one” because as you know, there is no property of an uncircumcised man. He is a child no matter how big he is. If today you were circumcised, you would not have taken the blue bowl to go and beg for posho. It would have been a great abomination... (Ole Kulet,1972:15)

The old man is preparing Leshao for circumcision and believes that maybe after the ritual, the young man would go on raids. Ole Merresho is an embodiment of a typical Maasai man who has not been influenced by outside cultures. He is the voice of tradition while Leshao is the voice of change.

This is a societal construct in the sense that circumcision prepares a man to move from subordinate masculinity to hegemonic masculinity. Hence the old man expects circumcision to move Leshao from subordinate masculinity (associated with cowardice, marginalization-not owning property) to hegemonic masculinity, which means owning property, courage and going for raids. To Leshao’s father, the young man is an antithesis of an ideal man. Moreover, according to the Maasai, it is not any type of circumcision; but it must be traditional circumcision. The idea of going to hospital for this rite is really looked down upon. In fact it is perceived as an act of cowardice. When Leshao’s father, gets information that the young man wants to go to hospital for circumcision, he is becomes so angry:

To come to the point, I have been fearing that your quietness might be cowardice, cowardice of the knife and you might do what the idiot son of Pushka did. If you did that you would not live to see the next sun, not if Kerea ole Merresho lived. I cannot imagine my son going to hospital, as if sick, just for the mere cutting of the penis-and coming out the next day calling himself a man. The world is spoilt...(Ole Kulet, 1972: 14)

The study contends that some of these prototypes of the ideal man are twisted and distorted to suit a particular group of people. Thus social pressure is imposed on young people like Leshao to conform to societal masculine expectations. Leshao by virtue of not being circumcised would not dare meet morans: “The boy’s heart beat quickly. He knew that if those were morans they would beat him severely. Big uncircumcised boys don’t see eye to eye with the morans” (22).Circumcision is meant to prepare young men to be tough and bold. These masculine expectations are geared towards hegemonic masculinity. Leshao pinpoints clearly that the pristine period is over. Hence the Maasai man has to be dynamic and change with the times. Protections by the morans and going on cattle raids have become obsolete. However, this harsh reality is not going down well with the traditionalists like Leshao’s father, who are keen on maintaining their culture.

---

This paper argues that in traditional Maasai culture, hegemonic masculinity is based on the hyper-masculine ideal of the warrior and cattle raider. Leshao's father is among the elders of the community and is transmitting the dominant culture to his son. The old man fails to understand that times are changing, and society is in a form of transition.

### **Conclusion**

Henry Ole kulet's text *To Become a Man* has effectively depicted masculinity in the pristine Maasai community. Our young protagonist Leshao, despite trying to construct a new masculinity propagated by the white missionaries, does not really succeed. The societal forces that perpetuate the old traditional masculinity resist vehemently. The moderates like Ole Nkipida who share Leshao's new mode of masculinity are also shunned. The old order is quite entrenched in the society that does not accept change easily. It is quite prudent to argue that change especially cultural does not come easily. The study contends that both shades of masculinity – traditional and the new version have their strengths and weaknesses.



---

## REFERENCES

- Barker, G. and Ricardo, C. (2005). "Young Men and Masculinity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Implication for HIV/AIDS, Conflict and Violence." *Social Development papers: Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction, paper N.o 26*, June 2005.
- Beavior, S. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Knopf.
- Connell, Raewyn. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Connell, R. and James, M. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society* 19.6.2005:829-859.
- Chitando, E. and Sophie, C. (2012). *Redemptive Masculinities*. Geneva: WCC.
- Gikandi, S. (1987). *Reading the African Novel*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Griele, J. (1978). *Gender and the USA*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Homewood, K. and Rodgers, W.A. (1991). *Maasailand and Ecology: Pastoralist Development and Wildlife Conservation in Ngorongoro, Tanzania*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Imms, D.W. "Multiple Masculinities and the Schooling of Boys." *Canadian Journal of Education* 25.2.2000:152-165.
- Kulet, H. (1972). *To Become A Man*. Nairobi: Longhorn.
- Kramae, C. & Trichler, P. (1986). *A Feminist Dictionary*. New York: Pandora Press.
- Lorber, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of Gender*. New Haven: Yale University.
- Morell, R. *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Univ of Natal.
- Omalla, D. (1981). *Be A Real Man*. Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House.
- Reddock, R. (2009). *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities*. Kingston: UWI.
- Cattle People :Survival*. (1998). Electronic Document, <http://www.stpt>. Accessed 7/14/15.