



# Gendering the Child in Luhya Popular Songs: An Analysis of Vincent Ongidi's 'Mama Mulayi' and Kennedy Khaemba's 'Mayi Mutiti'

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## Abstract

The representation of children in song lyrics remains under-explored, even though children are the primary recipients of gendered socialisation and thus a critical site for the reproduction or contestation of gender norms. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between popular music and the construction of gender roles within the Luhya community of Western Kenya. Drawing on a qualitative design that integrates thematic analysis with critical discourse analysis, we analyse the lyrics of selected Luhya popular songs - Vincent Ongidi's 'Mama Mulayi' and Kennedy Khaemba's 'Mayi Mutiti' - to determine how children are represented and how those representations either reinforce, contest, or subvert prevailing gender narratives. We aim to uncover how child narrators perceive gender and whether these portrayals, as perceived by the child narrators, uphold, question, or overturn dominant gender narratives. Guided by Judith Butler's notion of gender as a performative act, we treat the songs as cultural texts that participate in the ongoing construction of children's gender identities. The findings reveal that female characters are consistently positioned as domestic helpers and caretakers, responsible for household chores and child-rearing, whereas male characters are portrayed as heads of household, custodians and inheritors of land, and primary economic providers. While both songs largely reinforce these conventional roles, *Mayi Mutiti* contains occasional counter-narratives that suggest a nascent questioning of the male-as-authority trope. By foregrounding child narrators' perspectives, the findings demonstrate that Luhya popular music not only mirrors prevailing gender norms but also contributes to their ongoing negotiation and, in limited cases, subversion. The paper fills a gap in the literature on children's roles in Kenyan pop music and highlights the urgency of examining these representations amid ongoing societal transitions that render rigid gender scripts increasingly problematic.

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## Introduction

This article examines a particular facet of cultural transmission—the gendering of children—as it appears in Vincent Ongidi's *Mama Mulayi* and Kennedy Khaemba's *Mayi Mutiti*. While popular songs often echo prevailing social conditions, they also actively shape those conditions; thus, the portrayal of children in these tracks offers a window into the gender ideologies that circulate within the Luhya



community. By foregrounding the child as the primary locus where indigenous knowledge systems are conveyed and renegotiated, the study moves from the broader discourse on development and to a focused analysis of the baKhayo and baNyala sub-groups. In tracing how these songs construct and reinforce gendered expectations, the paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the intersection of gender, childhood, and popular culture in Luhya contexts. The findings aim to inform educators, policymakers, and cultural practitioners about the mechanisms through which popular music can either sustain or contest traditional gender norms, thereby enriching our understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary Kenyan society.

### **Literature Review: Popular Music, Gender and Childhood**

In many African societies, including the Luhya community of Western Kenya, music plays a central role in social life, serving as a medium for entertainment, education, and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. Popular music, particularly in oral cultures like the Luhya community of Western Kenya, serves as a vehicle for transmitting cultural values and norms (Coplan, 1994). Luhya popular songs, often performed at social gatherings, ceremonies, and broadcast via radio, reach a wide audience, including children, making them significant agents of socialisation. The selected songs feature children as narrators who perform gender directly or implicitly convey messages about childhood through their keen observations of familial spaces.

Challenging the traditional view of children as passive recipients of socialisation, childhood studies emphasise children's agency – their capacity to act intentionally and shape their own lives and the lives of others (James & Prout, 1997). This perspective recognises that children are active participants in their own socialisation processes. They interpret, negotiate, and resist adult norms and expectations, creating their own unique identities and social worlds (Corsaro, 2011).

Childhood is not a universal, static experience but rather a socially constructed and culturally mediated phenomenon (James & Prout, 1997). The ways in which societies perceive, treat, and define children are shaped by cultural values, beliefs, and power dynamics. Gender, a similarly fluid and socially constructed concept, plays a crucial role in this process, influencing how children are socialised into specific roles, behaviours, and expectations from a very young age (West & Zimmerman, 1987). We delve into the intersection of these two constructs by examining how child images are gendered in the selected popular Luhya songs.

We posit that Ongidi's *Mama Mulayi* and Khaemba's *Mayi Mutiti* participate in constructing children's gendered identities. The concept of gender, as understood within the feminist framework, is not a biological given but rather a social construct, actively created and recreated through cultural practices, language, and institutions (Butler, 1990). From a very young age, children are exposed to these constructions, internalising expectations and norms that shape their identities and their understanding of their place in society.

Music is a powerful tool for articulating cultural values, beliefs, and practices, and in the African context, it is often used to assert and negotiate social positions. Popular music provides a platform for marginalised voices to be heard and for the enactment of resistance against dominant cultural and political forces. Research on African popular music specifically highlights its role in reflecting and shaping social and political realities (Barber, 1987; Erlmann, 1991). Studies on music in various African contexts have explored themes of cultural identity, social change, and gender relations, demonstrating the importance of analysing music as a form of cultural expression and social commentary.

From lullabies sung in infancy, music permeates the lives of children. Beyond its entertainment value, music serves as a powerful agent of socialisation, shaping children's beliefs, values, and behaviours



(Hallam, 2010). In particular, popular music, with its widespread accessibility and cultural currency, has become a significant source of information about gender. It is a powerful cultural artefact, capable of shaping perceptions, normalising behaviours, and reflecting the complex tapestry of societal values.

Similarly, Nyairo & Ogude (2005) aver that popular music in Africa is a potent cultural force that transcends mere entertainment, serving as a powerful medium for expressing social, political, and economic realities. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between popular songs and gender representation, arguing that while music can be a vehicle for challenging patriarchal norms, it often acts as a canvas, reinforcing and perpetuating traditional, and often problematic, gender stereotypes. Popular music is also a crucial medium for documenting a community's history. Nyairo and Ogude (2005) posit that popular forms have the capacity to forge, clarify, and articulate the bond between cultural affairs and political existence. They contend that popular music documents a peoples' history and gets woven into the soundtrack of events, moments, and experiences through the themes and concerns of songs. In the context of gender, popular songs not only reflect the political realities of the community but also the gendered experiences.

Some studies have explored the role of music in rituals and ceremonies (Ominde, 1986) while others have examined the thematic content of traditional Luhya songs (Wanjala, 1994). Studies on African music emphasise the importance of music in transmitting social norms, reinforcing cultural identities, and negotiating social change (Chernoff, 1979; Nketia, 1974; Frith, 1996; Walser, 1993). However, there is a dearth of research specifically focusing on the gendering of children within Luhya popular music. This paper seeks to analyse child images in two selected Luhya popular songs, contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay among gender, childhood, and cultural production in the Luhya community.

The Luhya community possesses a rich and vibrant musical tradition. Analysing the lyrics of popular Luhya songs provides a valuable lens for examining how gender is assigned, understood, and performed in the context of childhood. This paper aims to identify the prevalent themes, symbols, and linguistic cues that contribute to the construction of children's gendered identities, ultimately exploring how these musical representations influence the socialisation and understanding of childhood within the Luhya community.

The paper argues that popular music, as a pervasive and emotionally resonant cultural force, plays a significant role in shaping children's understanding and performance of gender. Through an analysis of lyrics, music videos, and the broader cultural context in which popular music is consumed, this paper examines how music reinforces, challenges, and sometimes complicates traditional gender norms. African popular music is a site of cultural politics, where issues of power, identity, and resistance are played out (Barber, 1987).

Studies on the representation of gender in music have shown how songs can reinforce traditional gender roles, sexualise women, and promote harmful stereotypes (Whiteley, 2000; Leonard, 2007). The paper proceeds from the role of lyrics that portray women as passive, dependent, and primarily within domestic spaces as home carers, while men are depicted as active, assertive, and sexually dominant (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011). These stereotypical representations can shape children's expectations and limit their understanding of the possibilities available to them.

Gender is a social reality. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between popular music, gender, and Luhya society. By analysing popular music through a gendered lens, the paper seeks to illuminate the community's history, specifically its gendered history. Research on African music has



explored the diverse ways in which gender roles are reflected and negotiated within various musical traditions.

Studies have examined the performative aspects of gender in traditional music (Askew, 2002) and the ways in which contemporary African music addresses issues of gender equality and women's empowerment (Euba, 2002). Mwaura (2009) observes that the Gikuyu popular song is a site where gender politics can be fruitfully examined. In his study, he opines that popular music reflects and reinforces the oppressive nature of patriarchal systems. For instance, women are often objectified and sexualised in popular music, reinforcing their subordinate status in society. However, popular music also provides a space for women to challenge these norms and assert their agency. Having discussed popular songs as one avenue for portraying gender, we proceed to theorise gender in the context of this paper.

### **Theorising Gender: Feminist Theory**

Feminist criticism, far from being a contemporary phenomenon, extends back to ancient Greece, as noted by Habib (2005). This historical depth underscores the enduring nature of the questions and critiques that feminism brings to bear on societal structures and cultural representations. Selden et al. (2005) offer a framework for understanding the evolution of feminist thought, categorising it into three distinct waves, each marked by its own concerns and approaches. This paper, however, adopts a specific understanding of gender, informed by the perspectives of key figures such as Kate Millet, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Butler, who collectively posit gender as a product of 'cultural politics' (Selden et al., 2005).

At the heart of this understanding lies a crucial distinction between sex and gender. Following Millet (in Selden et al., 2005), sex is defined as a biological attribute, while gender is a psychological construct, a culturally acquired sexual identity. This separation is vital for analysing how societies imbue biological differences with meaning and how those meanings shape individual experiences and social interactions. Virginia Woolf, a foundational figure in feminist thought, further illuminates this trajectory by asserting that gender identity is socially constructed (in Selden et al., 2005). Her avowal regarding gender establishes a foundation for current discussions concerning how social norms and expectations shape the perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

According to Selden et al. (2005), Simone de Beauvoir's observation, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman... it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature', encapsulates the core argument that gender is not an inherent quality but rather a product of socialisation. Feminist theory, therefore, offers a critical lens through which to examine the processes by which gender roles and identities are constructed and maintained. This framework aligns with the broader understanding of gender as a social construct (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Drawing on these insights, this paper adopts Judith Butler's (2004) notion of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed identity but rather a continuous performance, a 'stylised repetition of acts' that solidifies and reinforces societal norms. This perspective emphasises the fluidity and malleability of gender, highlighting the role of social practices in its ongoing construction. In essence, people 'do' gender through their everyday interactions, appearances, and behaviours, often unconsciously perpetuating existing power structures and expectations.

Therefore, this paper proceeds from the understanding that gender is not a static, inherent attribute but a dynamic, fluid process shaped by cultural forces and enacted through repeated actions. This perspective offers a tool for analysing cultural products, revealing the subtle ways in which they contribute to the ongoing construction of gender in society. The implications of this understanding



are far-reaching, and the paper critically examines the norms and expectations that shape lives and considers possibilities for challenging and transforming them. Specifically, drawing on Millett's (Selden et al., 2005, p. 123) distinction between biologically determined sex and culturally acquired gender, this analysis understands gender as a psychological construct shaped by societal norms and expectations.

In conclusion, the critical framework offered by feminist theory, with its emphasis on the social construction and performance of gender, provides a valuable tool for analysing a wide range of cultural phenomena. By understanding how gender is constructed and maintained through social practices, the paper identifies how cultural products reinforce or challenge existing norms. This framework ultimately illuminates how cultural expressions, such as Luhya popular songs, actively participate in the ongoing performance and (re)construction of gender.

### **Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative approach, prioritising the nuanced interpretation of textual data. This paper centres on the analysis of 'Mama Mulayi' by Vincent Ongidi and 'Mayi Mutiti' by Kennedy Khaemba. These popular songs were chosen through purposive sampling. Ongidi performs in the luKhayo dialect of the Abakhayo, whereas Khaemba sings in luNyala, the language of the baNyala; both dialects belong to the broader Luhya linguistic family. By juxtaposing songs rendered in distinct Luhya dialects, the sample captures the specific ways in which gender is inscribed in childhood representations across Luhya subgroups, whose gender norms can differ markedly. Practical considerations also shaped the selection: both recordings are readily accessible through broadcast archives and online platforms such as YouTube, ensuring that the data are transparent, verifiable, and reproducible.

This sampling strategy, guided by the research question, the presence of the child narrator, and the theoretical framework, also involved the deliberate selection of songs featuring children as narrators. The primary data consists of transcribed and translated lyrics of the selected songs. The song lyrics were first transcribed from the original recordings and then rendered into English through an interpretive, culturally-sensitive translation process. Rather than a literal, word-for-word conversion, the translation negotiates idioms, proverbs, and other culturally embedded elements so that the indigenous understanding embedded in the texts is preserved for readers outside the Luhya-speaking community. These English versions constitute the primary material for the ensuing Critical Discourse Analysis, which examines how power structures and ideological frames operate within the lyrics to construct, challenge, or subvert prevailing gender narratives.

The analysis proceeds through a two-fold coding strategy. First, a thematic coding procedure isolates the recurring motifs that articulate the gendering of childhood, pinpointing how motherhood and fatherhood are portrayed through the child-narrator's voice in each of the two selected popular songs. These themes are then compared across the songs to reveal convergences and divergences in the representation of gender.

When the coded material surfaces power relations or ideological assumptions, the paper augments the thematic lens with a critical-discourse-analysis (CDA) reading. This CDA component interrogates the ways in which the lyrics reproduce, contest, or re-configure dominant gender narratives within the Luhya cultural sphere, thereby exposing the underlying structures of authority and belief.

### **Results and Discussion**

In this section, we examine how the child narrator interprets gender roles in the two selected popular songs. Our analysis shows that the child narrator is an active agent in the gendering process, serving



as a conduit for entrenched gender scripts and repeatedly echoing the expectations within a patriarchal framework. The subsequent narrative analysis will explore whether, and how, these embedded gender roles might be challenged or subverted, highlighting the paradoxical role of the seemingly innocent child narrator in sustaining established gender norms. This juxtaposition allows the discussion to trace how childhood narration can both reinforce and reconfigure cultural constructions of gender. We first address the conformity of gender roles as depicted in Ongidi's *Mama Mulayi*.

### **The Child as a Voice of Conformity: Reifying Binary Gender Roles**

The pervasive force of societal expectations often compels children to absorb and subsequently enact gendered roles. In the narrative, the child's voice validates the distinct responsibilities allotted to each gender and aligns with cultural norms (Opondo, 2014). Through this socialisation, the child narrator internalises these gendered expectations and, in turn, projects them onto the broader community, thereby reinforcing established binaries.

Ongidi's song *Mama Mulayi* (Mother is Good) exemplifies this dynamic. By placing the maternal figure in the title, the piece foregrounds the gender associated with childcare. Although the father is later praised, the mother receives the initial and most extensive commendation, with subsequent verses linking her to domestic spaces and child-rearing (Opondo, 2014). The opening lines underscore the mother's centrality in the child's life and, by extension, within the social hierarchy, establishing a clear hierarchy of gendered roles.

*Mama Nafoyo Mareba Ndugule  
Omukhana Aoko Paskalia  
Omukhana wabene  
Nyimba mama, mulayi kuwakholera*

#### Translation

(My)Mother Nafoyo Mareba Ndugule  
Daughter of Aoko Paskalia  
The (revered) daughter of her parents  
I sing you, mother, for the good things you did to me

The opening lines explicitly honour the mother – by name – and thank her for the good she has done for the narrator. Though the phrasing appears to be a straightforward tribute, it quietly upholds the cultural assumption that a woman's primary identity is that of caregiver and nurturer. In acknowledging the mother's beauty and her role in child-rearing, the child narrator both recognises and reproduces these gendered expectations. Whether the narrator's compliance is deliberate or subconscious, the text foregrounds the mother's performance of duties traditionally assigned to women, thereby reinforcing the link between femininity and the domestic sphere that feminist scholars such as Beauvoir (1949) have critiqued. Moreover, the narrator's gratitude underscores a deep-seated dependence on the maternal figure, while simultaneously affirming the socially prescribed role that the mother occupies. In line with feminist theory (Butler 2004; Connell 2005), the mutually enacted performances of the child and the mother serve to legitimise and perpetuate the conventional assignment of women to domestic labour, illustrating how personal affection can be intertwined with broader patriarchal structures.

The song functions as a vivid illustration of motherhood as a performed role. By narrating a mother's obligations toward her child, it accentuates the gendered split that assigns a wide-ranging set of duties to women. The text foregrounds the mother's importance through the sheer volume of responsibilities



she assumes. From the infant's first months – breast-feeding, soothing, and nurturing – to later stages in which she imparts etiquette and household skills, the mother is portrayed as inseparably linked to every phase of the child's growth. She appears whenever the child requires sustenance, comfort, or direction, and even at socially significant events such as weddings, she remains ever-present, labouring without respite. This exhaustive depiction consolidates the cultural expectation that the private sphere and the work of raising children belong principally to women, thereby reinforcing traditional gender norms. The following lines encapsulate how the child narrator's mother portrays the confinement of women to the domestic sphere of child-rearing.

Solo: *Milimo kiomunyumba mama kekesia abana baye*

All: *Mama mulayi ×2 akhila papa*

Solo: *Tsinyimbo mbao nyimba Mareba kekesia Ongidi waye*

All: *Mama mulayi ×2 akhila papa*

#### Translation

Solo: Mother teaches her children house chores

All: Mother is better than father

Solo: I now sing, Mareba taught her (child) Ongidi

Generally, by showering praise, the child narrator serves as a witness to the performance of gender roles ascribed by his mother to him, roles that mothers are central to in the child's life. Even the teaching of traditional arts, like songs, is attributed to the mother. The child's act of praising the mother, paired with the mother's performance of domestic duties, together forge a narrative that both validates and perpetuates the conventional division of labour. In this representation, motherhood functions as a guarantor of traditional gender roles: the mother is portrayed as responsible for every aspect of the child's care and upbringing. Moreover, this depiction operates performatively, reinforcing prevailing social norms and expectations surrounding gender and work.

The mother is relegated to the private realm, charged with childcare and household tasks, whereas the father occupies the public sphere, tasked with financially supporting the family. Her visibility persists at pivotal moments – weddings, funerals, and night-long vigils – reinforcing the cultural script that situates women within the domestic domain and casts them as primary caregivers (Chodorow, 1978). Such portrayals echo broader gender debates that routinely allocate household responsibilities to mothers (Lorber, 1994). The child narrator's account foregrounds the mother's implied, gender-coded performances, thereby upholding conventional expectations of femininity. Since gender is commonly understood as a binary of female and male, the ensuing analysis will turn to the ways in which masculinity is similarly constructed and affirmed.

In contrast to the mother's nurturing and central role within the home, the father in the song is primarily associated with economic power. His role is confined to that of the provider, a pattern that mirrors the patriarchal arrangements typical of many societies (Giddens & Sutton, 2017). Moreover, the father's anonymity – he is not named, unlike the mother – suggests a more remote, perhaps less emotionally intimate, position within the family, especially from the child's perspective (Collier, 1988). The child narrator delineates the multiple functions a father performs.

Solo: *Bima bomwidala papa kekesia abana baye*

All: *Papa mulayi ×2 akhila mama*

Solo: *Masomo kabasungu, papa asomia bana baye*

All: ...

Solo: *Ifisi niyekhola, papa mulayi akhila mama*



All: ...

Solo: *Shishebo neshiakhola, papa mulayi akhila mama*

All: ...

Solo: *Ikhwe niyekhola, papa mulayi akhila mama*

All: ...

Translation

Solo: Father teaches his children moral conduct at home

All: Father is better than a mother

Solo: Father teaches his children whiteman's education

All: ...

Solo: At the time of fees, father is better than mother

All: ...

Solo: At time of circumcision, father is better than mother

All:...

Solo: At the time of payment of dowry, father is better than mother.

All: ...

Apart from the omission of the name, the father's functions are portrayed solely as sources of authority. His involvement is described in terms of instructing "the general conduct of the home", that is: setting household rules and expectations, financing school fees to enable formal schooling, supervising initiation rites, and participating in dowry negotiations and payments. Although these duties are undeniably significant, they restrict the father's role to economic and social domination, thereby perpetuating traditional power asymmetries that can marginalise women. It is important to stress that the song does not necessarily advocate such inequality; rather, it offers a child's viewpoint rooted in the artist's (Ongidi's) cultural setting. The child narrator, immersed in prevailing social norms, simply observes and recounts the existing gendered roles.

Nonetheless, the song's concluding stanza endeavours to reconcile this portrayal by underscoring the importance of kinship, regardless of gender relations.

Solo: *Bosi balayi ×2 bakhila omwicha*

All: *Bosi balayi ×2 bakhila omwicha*

Translation

Solo: All (parents) are good ×2 (they are) better than a friend

All: All (parents) are good ×2 (they are) better than a friend

By foregrounding the primacy of both mother and father, the lyrics privilege kinship over external social ties, thereby positioning parental figures as the central sources of affection and guidance. This concluding emphasis serves to temper any inclination toward rigid gender hierarchies: rather than elevating one parent above the other, the narrative presents the two gendered roles as mutually reinforcing components of a successful family system. Consequently, the passage highlights the significance of familial support networks and the persistent strength of kinship in furnishing stability and a sense of belonging (Dunbar, 2018). Moreover, it underscores the argument that, despite their embedded power relations, family relationships can provide a depth of commitment and assistance that peer friendships do not always guarantee (Pahl, 2000). It is important to note that the song does not overtly champion either gender; instead, it mirrors the prevailing power dynamics and societal expectations that shape the child's perception of maternal and paternal roles.



The close reading of Ongidi's *Mama Mulayi* demonstrates how child narrators, though seemingly innocent, can subtly yet potently sustain traditional gender hierarchies. Their naive observations and sincere expressions of gratitude echo and reinforce communal expectations, drawing a line between the domestic sphere reserved for women and the economic arena associated with men. Although the song strives to temper this dichotomy with a theme of familial cohesion, the entrenched gendered roles remain the prevailing motif.

In sum, the child's voice in *Mama Mulayi* functions as a conduit for reaffirming the gender order of the Abakhayo Luhya community. By foregrounding the mother's centrality to household duties and the father's role as breadwinner, the narrative perpetuates these culturally sanctioned divisions. Examining the piece through the lens of a child narrator reveals how cultural schemata are transmitted and reinforced across generations. A comparative analysis with other Luhya performers—such as Kennedy Khaemba—will further illuminate the intricate interplay among childhood perspective, gender construction, and cultural identity within the Luhya milieu.

### **Challenging Tradition: Subverted Gender Roles in Kennedy Khaemba's *Mayi Mutiti***

Having examined the gendered configurations in Ongidi's *Mama Mulayi*, we now turn to Kennedy Khaemba's *Mayi Mutiti*. The song foregrounds the power relations that structure families, especially within polygamous marriages, and thus provides a productive site for interrogating prevailing social norms and their possible subversion. Feminist scholarship argues that gender roles are not fixed natural laws but culturally produced constructs that can be renegotiated, contested, or even inverted (Butler, 2004; Lorber, 1994). *Mayi Mutiti* (The Last Wife) exemplifies this argument. Through the eyes of a child who witnesses the differential treatment of the first (senior) wife and the second wife, the lyrics reveal how the latter gradually appropriates spheres traditionally reserved for men—such as decision-making and resource control—thereby destabilising the established hierarchy. This song invites a critical reassessment of the family's gender order and underscores the fluidity of power within polygamous settings. Although this subversion has detrimental effects on the primary family, it simultaneously illustrates the possibility of renegotiating and reshaping gender roles.

To illustrate how gender roles can be destabilised within the household, we centre our analysis on the figure of the second wife, *Mayi Mutiti*, and trace how she accrues both economic resources and social authority. These acquisitions reconfigure the family's power hierarchy and reveal the fluid nature of gendered positions (Butler, 2004; Connell & Pearse, 2022). By close-reading the song's lyrics, we show how the child narrator perceives these transformations, interpreting the shifting balance of power as a challenge to the patriarchal order. Consequently, *Mayi Mutiti* emerges as a symbolic commentator on women's capacity to contest and renegotiate their prescribed roles (Moghadam, 2023).

*Kennedy Khaemba eya Wanyama lekha mbole kembona  
embolera papa baulire  
embolira Banyange baulire  
Mayi bosu Mungo bakana  
Mayi mutiti naye alikho si  
njebile nomwenya munome*

#### Translation

Kennedy Khaemba of Wanyama let me say what I see  
I am talking to my fathers to listen  
I am telling Banyange people to listen  
All mothers in a home are equal  
What is it that the second (last) wife has?



I ask, and you can curse me

The opening stanzas of Kennedy Khaemba's song *Mayi Mutiti* foreground the marginalisation of the first wife and her children while contrasting their deprivation with the conspicuous wealth and favour lavished on the lineage of the second wife. The narrative hints at the privileged treatment received by the second wife's family in the same way it alludes to paternal authority: gendered expectations of the father's role are invoked when the child-narrator bitterly remarks on the unequal distribution of resources. From the outset, the lyrics expose this asymmetry, depicting the first household's neglect and the special attention granted to Mayi Mutiti's family. This juxtaposition sets up a subtle yet potent reversal of power relations. Though the child narrator is presented as a seemingly impartial witness, he functions as a narrative conduit, relaying observations that crack the veneer of the patriarchal order (Moyo 2023). Viewing the events through the child's eyes, the song reveals how gendered power can be renegotiated from within the domestic sphere itself.

Such a perspective invites a broader literary analysis of role subversion, highlighting the fluidity and transformative potential of entrenched social structures. Within the polygamous setting of *Mayi Mutiti*, the second wife appropriates functions traditionally reserved for men – particularly economic control and decision-making – thereby destabilising the conventional hierarchy and prompting a re-examination of familial power dynamics (Ndlovu 2022; Chikwe 2024). The child's testimony thus becomes a critical instrument for exposing and contesting gendered inequities embedded in the family's patriarchal façade.

*Omwoyo kulingo  
Eng'otole nonyolire papa we  
Commercial banki mayi mutiti  
Eng'ondo nonyolire wuhi  
Commercial banki mayi mutiti  
Yakhaba okhukaba mukunda mwikhala ne mayi mutiti ...*

Translation

(My) Heart is at home  
When you (father) get Coins  
You take it (coins) to the little mother, the Commercial Bank  
When you (father) get Coins  
You take it (coins) to the little mother, the Commercial Bank  
Even in land allocation, you confer with little mother ...

In these lines, the "Commercial Banki Little Mother" operates as a metaphor for the financial authority that Mayi Mutiti, the second wife, exercises over the household's resources. Although the husband remains the nominal provider, the fact that income is routed through Mayi Mutiti grants her direct control and decision-making power – a marked departure from the patriarchal norm in which the husband alone administers the family's finances (Ndlovu & Moyo, 2023). This reallocation of fiscal authority produces tangible disparities between the two co-living units. The child narrator's observation thus illustrates how gendered shifts in economic control manifest in material living standards (Kumar, 2021). By privileging the second wife's access to capital, the household reproduces a new hierarchy that challenges traditional notions of male-centred provision and highlights the gendered consequences of financial governance.

*Mayi mutiti achianga muchoo ya mabati  
Ne mukhulundu anianga mumioko, mayi anianga mumioko*



*Ne nimbeya ngwoyo mumioko  
Mayi wange ali bubi*

Translation

Little mother goes to iron-roofed toilet  
While the first mother relieves herself in the cassava, mother excretes in cassava  
If I am cheating (come and) see there she is  
My mother is in a bad state

In many polygynous households, economic authority frequently migrates from the husband to his second wife. The husband's income is often routed directly to her, which effectively makes her the chief steward of the family's finances (Smith, 2010). Although this reallocation may appear modest, its ramifications are extensive. Access to the husband's earnings enables the second family to secure material advantages that are visibly reflected in living conditions: the second family occupies a durable iron-sheet-roofed dwelling—a marker of relative wealth and stability—whereas the first family is forced to use a cassava plantation as a makeshift latrine, a stark visual of deprivation and marginalisation. This spatial disparity illustrates the gendered power shift that accompanies fiscal control. By monopolising household resources, the second wife not only raises the standard of living for her children but also consolidates her status and influence within the broader kinship network (Ahmed & Osei, 2021; Ndlovu, 2022).

The second wife's influence reaches far beyond the simple accumulation of material assets. By entering spheres that have traditionally been reserved for men—particularly the negotiation and division of land—she cultivates a sense of agency for herself and her children. Her husband repeatedly consults her on subdivision decisions, a practice that, while unsettling to the first family, signals a reorientation of household power relations (Jones 2008; Agarwal 2022). Such involvement directly challenges the gendered logic that has long confined women to passive beneficiaries of their husbands' earnings. Instead, the second wife actively shapes pivotal land-use choices, a domain historically monopolised by men (Deere & Doss 2020). Her involvement in traditionally male domains also instils a sense of agency and empowerment in her children. She actively participates in land subdivision decisions, and her input is sought by the husband, even though this involvement may be perceived as a threat by the first family (Jones, 2008).

*Yakhaba okhukaba mukunda mwikhala ne mayi mutiti  
Ati oyu omukabe khusrare  
Omukabe luyongo, mukabe mumachi*

Translation

Even in land allocation of land, you confer with little mother  
(She says) That that one gives him stoney area  
Give him less fertile or water-logged land

The lines make it clear that the second wife is an active agent in the subdivision of land, and that her choices carry considerable authority. The clause “even in land allocation you confer with little mother” is especially illuminating: it signals a collaborative process in which the husband deliberately solicits the second wife's opinion, treating her assessment of land distribution as valuable. This involvement directly contests the prevailing assumption that women are barred from decisions concerning property and inheritance. By taking part in land-management decisions, she exercises a form of power that exceeds the conventional expectations attached to her roles as wife and mother. In gendered



terms, this can be read as a symbolic appropriation of a sphere traditionally reserved for men; the second wife transcends prescribed social constraints and actively shapes the family's future.

Therefore, the song *Mayi Mutiti* serves as a commentary on women's capacity to contest and reshape entrenched gender hierarchies. By seizing control of economic assets and taking part in decisions about land, the second wife unsettles the customary family order and expands the limits of female agency. The child-narrator's viewpoint allows the audience to observe this shift with a mixture of admiration and apprehension, as the familial power relations are irrevocably reconfigured.

The inversion of gendered roles in *Mayi Mutiti* resonates with feminist theories that deny the existence of innate, immutable gender characteristics. Scholars such as Judith Butler have argued that gender is a performative construct, produced and reproduced through socially mandated behaviours (Butler 2004). Within this framework, the second wife's actions can be read as a conscious performance of authority that subverts the dominant script and opens a space for alternative forms of womanhood.

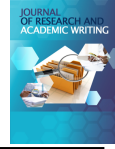
Nevertheless, it is important to note that the song also conveys a tangible sense of discomfort and injustice for the first wife and her children. They observe their mother being positioned as the architect of the family's future, a role that subverts conventional gender expectations and inevitably reshapes their own ideas of what women can become. Although the second wife's actions may appear empowering at first glance, they simultaneously marginalise the first wife and inflict suffering on her offspring. In this way, the song lays bare the paradoxes that emerge when attempts to overturn entrenched power structures are made within a fundamentally patriarchal system.

Kennedy Khaemba's *Mayi Mutiti* is therefore more than a lament about the first wife's plight in a polygamous household; it is a nuanced interrogation of power relations, gendered hierarchies, and the possibilities for subversion. Rendered through the innocent eyes of a child, the narrative exposes the subtle yet consequential ways in which the second wife contests traditional male dominance and appropriates authority within the domestic sphere. While the moral evaluation of her tactics remains contested, the song ultimately demonstrates that gender roles are not immutable categories but fluid constructs that can be renegotiated – and even radically transformed. By foregrounding the agency of the second wife, *Mayi Mutiti* critiques the constraints of the patriarchal order and invites consideration of how women may shape their own destinies, even while operating within conventional social frameworks. Consequently, the piece contributes meaningfully to contemporary debates on gender equality and the intricate dynamics of familial power.

In sum, *Mayi Mutiti* offers a compelling case study of gender-role subversion within a polygamous context. Through the figure of the second wife, the song illustrates how women can challenge established hierarchies by seizing economic control and entering domains historically reserved for men. This portrayal resonates with feminist theories that emphasise the performative and mutable nature of gender, underscoring individuals' capacity to destabilise normative expectations and create space for alternative expressions of agency. The song's lasting impact lies in its ability to provoke scholarly dialogue about gendered power, economic authority, and the ongoing pursuit of equality across diverse cultural settings. By exposing the reversal of entrenched norms, *Mayi Mutiti* encourages listeners to question traditional assumptions and envision a more equitable future, reminding us that gender roles are continuously negotiated, redefined, and open to new configurations that empower women in unforeseen ways.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that contemporary Luhya popular songs operate as contested arenas in which childhood gender identities are simultaneously reinforced and questioned. Using Judith Butler's



theory of gender performativity, the analysis demonstrates that the lyrical conventions of Ongidi's *Mama Mulayi* enact the dominant scripts of femininity and masculinity, whereas Khaemba's *Mayi Mutiti* destabilises those scripts through ironic juxtapositions and alternative narratives. In *Mama Mulayi*, the child-narrator reproduces the community's gender expectations, internalising a pervasive body of gendered knowledge and thereby performing the prescribed roles of boy and girl. By contrast, the child-narrator of *Mayi Mutiti* mourns the reversal of those very expectations that he witnesses within his own family, exposing the possibility of an inverted, more fluid gender order. Together, these two songs illustrate that, among the Luhya - particularly the baKhayo and baNyala sub-groups - gender is not a static attribute but an ongoing performance. Children acquire, imitate, and at times contest this performance, revealing how gender is continually reproduced and renegotiated within the community.

The central contribution of this article to Luhya studies lies in the articulation of a performative framework for analysing childhood representations in contemporary Luhya popular music, a perspective that has been largely absent from ethnomusicological and gender-focused scholarship. By foregrounding the ways in which children's voices are embedded in, and occasionally reshaped by, popular songs, the paper uncovers a dynamic dialogue between cultural tradition and emergent social change. The contrast between *Mama Mulayi* – which reinforces normative gender scripts and thereby supports a developmental trajectory that aligns children with established social roles – and *Mayi Mutiti* – which problematises those scripts and opens space for alternative self-definitions – demonstrates how gendering the child can both stabilise community cohesion and, when subverted, foster a more restorative form of development that encourages critical reflection and agency.

Nevertheless, the findings highlight the need for broader inquiry. Comparative work with other Luhya ethnic groups could clarify whether the observed patterns are specific to the baKhayo and baNyala or reflect broader generational shifts across the nation, especially in the context of changing socioeconomic conditions.

In sum, these Luhya songs substantiate Butler's contention that gender is produced through repetitive cultural enactments. By continually contesting and reshaping childhood gender scripts, Luhya songwriters both reflect prevailing norms and generate momentum for social transformation. Accordingly, investing in grassroots programmes that safeguard and revitalise vernacular music and establishing venues for emerging artists will amplify such performative interventions. This strategy encourages critical interrogation of entrenched gender expectations and equips future generations to craft more equitable gender narratives.

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