

**Note:**

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- Brinkman, Inge, 'Notes to the Gikuyu narrative by Esther Njeri, 1' (VLIR-UOS Team project "Storytelling and Young People Coping with Crisis: Oral Narratives and Crisis Management in Kenya and Ethiopia", 2023) <https://www.ol4d.ugent.be/>.

## NOTES TO THE GIKUYU NARRATIVE BY ESTHER NJERI

These are the notes to the audio and transcription/translation of the story told by Esther Njeri in 1992. The audio and transcription/translation are available on <https://www.ol4d.ugent.be/>, in the section web-publications and video's.

### Performance context

In 1992, Inge Brinkman was engaged in her Ph.D. research entitled 'Gikuyu gender norms and narratives'. She stayed for eight months in Kenya and carried out fieldwork in various locations in Central Kenya to listen to performances of Gikuyu oral narratives. She soon came in contact with Jane Wangarĩ who already started up the fieldwork while Inge was still in Nairobi studying in the archives and listening to narratives in other locations.

It so turned out that Esther Njeri, a woman who was 35 years old at the time of interviewing, proved to be a highly skilled storyteller who had knowledge of a rich variety of folktales. She told in total nine narratives: on May 30 she told four and the next day another five. This was the final story she told during those two meetings.

### The narrative in historical perspective

This narrative goes back a long time. The story transcribed and translated here has a wide distribution in the Central-Kenyan region and is also now known in different versions by many storytellers. At least since the beginning of the twentieth century, it is told in Gikuyu-speaking communities. Thus in the volume published by Routledge (1910, pp. 290-296), two versions are rendered, one told by an elderly woman, the other by a young man. Versions of the narratives also appear in later publications.

The plot may vary according to the narrator. Central to the plot are an orphan brother and sister, with at least an attempt to take away the girl to a far-away place. In some versions the girl is rescued in time by her brother before she is actually abducted, but in most versions the brother is described as negligent and the girl is taken away, either willingly or against her will. The men who come to take the girl away are invariably strangers, at times they are denoted as 'Kamba' men, in other variations they are ogres. In the version discussed here, this is rather ambivalent: the narrator states that the strangers are ogres, but the other elements of the story do not reveal the usual characteristics of ogres, such as eating people. In some variations the story ends with a harmonious reunion, but in many versions there is a fight with or an escape from the people of the far-away place.

The story by Esther Njeri of 1992 is analysed in my Ph.D. dissertation (1996, p. 147-153). I have also recently attempted a further interpretation of the narrative in "The girl and her brother'. Concepts of slavery and gender relations in a Gikuyu folktale from Central Kenya' (under review for KAOW-ARSOM).

### Language in the narrative

The story knows some interesting language aspects. Thus the narrator seems to start off with a Kiambu variation of Gikuyu, but also uses Kĩndia, one of the variations spoken more to the North. Perhaps the narrator had personal ties with this region, but other narrators also use Ndia pronunciations during their story-telling. This is both regarded as adding to the quality of the story-telling and also as a way to make the story more lively and interesting for the audience. The region where Ndia (in Kĩrĩnyaga County) is spoken is regarded by many as the best-versed in ‘traditional culture’ (communication with James Wachira, Ghent, July 2023).

Some words in the text may presently not be known to all Gikuyu speakers. The narrator was relatively young at the time of the performance in 1992, but three factors may increase the chance that not all terms in the narrative are understood by young Gikuyu speakers. Firstly there is the time gap of the performance in 1992 to the present day. Secondly the narrator’s familiarity with traditions of storytelling, and, thirdly, a tendency to refer to things of the past in oral narratives. The reference to *theegi* (pantry), making cords out of bark, and other may hence be new to younger audiences.

Transcribing the Gikuyu language used in oral narratives is not easy. Not only does it often lead to dilemma’s on vowel length and other, of course also the narrator does not use any punctuation, so any transcription involves choices of where to place comma’s, full stops and other marks. Translation is of course even more of a dilemma. We decided to stay relatively close to the original Gikuyu, but still make an attempt to make the text good to read in English.

We sincerely hope that with the audio, the Gikuyu transcription, and the English translation, this narrative becomes accessible to many: to academics in the field of linguistics, history, literature, and other, and especially to Gikuyu speakers, young and old.

### This narrative and crisis situations

This narrative features in the VLIR-UOS OL4D-Team project: ‘Storytelling and Young People Coping with Crisis: Oral Narratives and Crisis Management in Kenya and Ethiopia’. In May 2022 the OL4D-Team members gathered for the first Annual Meeting in Diani/Kwale, Kenya. We engaged with various trainings and courses, including a ‘workshop-rehearsal’ to practice the various workshop tools that we had learnt. During the workshop rehearsal the story of Esther Njeri formed our starting point. In the next boxes you will find some brief notes on this activity:



## **BOX 1.**

### **Socratic Circle**

[Procedure: We sat in a circle and one by one posed questions to the group]

And:

### **Think-Pair-Share**

[Procedure: Each participant first considered a question individually, then discussed it with one other participant, and then these pairs reported their reflections on the question to the group]

The participants agreed that this narrative tells a lot about crisis situations, especially in the domain of gender relations. The orphaned state of the children and the brother's negligent attitude result in a severe crisis and mark their vulnerability, firstly for the sister who is abducted, and subsequently for the brother who comes to utter degradation.

A Belgian participant felt that the references to urine and defecation in the story were potentially shocking. We agreed that these references serve to indicate to what degree the brother's situation had deteriorated in the absence of his sister.

The participants have a background in literary studies and we engaged in analyzing the characterization, narrative structure, narrative time and space. It was especially noted how much action is attributed to the sister in the narrative, while the brother remains relatively passive. The girl takes all kinds of initiatives to save the situation, but the brother does very little.

We also noted that the conversations between the men/ogres and the girl are quoted directly and show a fair degree of politeness. The men allow the girl to carry out the tasks and wait for her. Also in the later conversation between the female character and the father of her children, the man listens and agrees. The brother, on the other hand, in the beginning of the story tells his sister off and is not willing to listen to her.

The crisis is ultimately resolved by the joint effort of the brother, the sister and the children, at the cost of the people in the far-away country who are locked up and lose their livestock.

## **BOX 2. Text-to-World connections**

[Procedure: Each participant considered how this narrative relates to wider societal issues, followed by a group discussion]

One of the participants in the workshop told that he knew a young boy with albinism who was abducted to be killed. His body parts and organs were meant for wealthy buyers who believed potent charms could be made of them. It was only through his cell phone that he could warn his relatives and was rescued in time. The participant drew the connection between the vulnerability of the orphans in the narratives and that of people with albinism in Eastern Africa. He related how people with albinism are isolated and how often there are reports of such cases of abduction and murder in the media. He also pointed out how new media, like the cell phone, can serve to save lives in such cases. The girl in the narrative also tried to communicate, through her singing, but to no avail.

This account was told by a person with albinism, showing how it is not always possible to disentangle Text-to-World and Text-to-Self connections.

### **BOX 3. Text-to-Self connections**

[Procedure: Each participant considered how this narrative relates to their personal life]

Two accounts from the participants stood out during this part of the workshop.

The first account came from one of the Ethiopian participants. As a young man he had walked home from school. As usual the girls had left earlier, to already start helping their mother with the household chores. On this particular day, other youngsters came back running to him, telling that his sister had been abducted. There was nothing he could do.

Until today his sister is in the household of her kidnappers; she is married there and has children. Yet, she is unhappy about her life. To this day, the participant regrets that he did not walk together with his sister on that day and that he had not been able to do anything to protect her. By now the law has changed in Ethiopia, but at the time when this happened there was no legal protection and the family had no other option than to leave the girl with the kidnappers.

The second account came from one the Belgian participants. During the 1990s there was a massive case in Belgium with girls who were abducted and murdered (the Dutroux case). One night the daughter of this participant did not come home. The participant can still recall the immense fear and panic that engulfed her when she realised her daughter was not at home. In the end, the daughter was found, safe and sound, but even the memory of this fear renders her emotional.

These accounts indicate that a fairytale – regarded as fictional and something of the past – actually can be related to current societal issues and personal experiences. The accounts also indicate that societal issues and structures – such as legal possibilities, new media developments, public debate, etc. – are often directly related to personal experiences. The way in which the participants connected the narrative told by Esther Njeri to crisis situations in their personal life or in the societal context depended on their background. This revealed how the different historical trajectories of Ethiopia, Kenya and Belgium shaped the audience’ experience of the narrative.

The narrative does not provide an immediate solution to any of the societal and personal crisis situations that were discussed. Yet, all participants experienced it as helpful to relate the different accounts to the narrative, share their experiences with the other participants, and listen to the connections drawn by the other participants. We also noted the crucial role of communication, legal protection, and mutual responsibility in addressing gendered crisis situations in the family.

The workshop rehearsal made us realise even more that reflecting on such a fictional tale can lead to very personal and potentially sensitive accounts. The ethical aspects of this, especially when organizing workshops with minors, are an important aspect of our OL4D-Team project.

### **References**

- Brinkman, Inge, *Kikuyu gender norms and narratives* (CNWS: Leiden 1996).
- Brinkman, Inge, ‘The girl and her brother’. Concepts of slavery and gender relations in a Gikuyu folktale from Central Kenya’, *Kaow-Arson*, under review.
- Routledge, W. S. & K., *With a Prehistoric People: the Akikuyu of British East Africa* (London: [1910] Frank Cass, 1968).