

Gender and Educational Dimensions of Handicraft Industry in Mwala District, Kenya

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Abstract

In Kenya, communities have since time immemorial practised indigenous technologies such as woodcarving and basket weaving. The “kiondo” (African Basket) for example, is now an international handicraft while the woodcarvings are exported to all parts of the world as artefacts. In Kenya today, woodcarvings, basketry, Kisii soapstone carvings, jewellery, pottery, gourd decorations, T-shirts and kikois (African shawl), are the major handicrafts. The study was on woodcarving and basket weaving handicrafts among the Kamba community in Wamunyu and Katangi locations of Mwala District in Kenya. It examined the gender and educational dimensions of the two crafts. A total of 100 woodcarvers and 100 basket weavers participated in the survey. These were purposively sampled for the reason that in each location, the target respondents were organised into a major association and groups. In Wamunyu the major association was Wamunyu Cooperative Society whereas in Katangi the basket weavers were organized into groups namely; Yatta South Women Group; Syokisinga Women Group; Assumption Resource Centre; and Katanga women group. Other study respondents included cooperative officials and, programme managers of local Non-Governmental Organisations. Questionnaires, in-depth interview guides, focus group discussions, observation and photography were used in collecting data which revealed certain significant aspects of the handicraft.

Keywords: Gender, Mwala, Handicraft, Woodcarving, Basket weaving

1.0 Introduction

In the Kenyan culture, there has been a gender aspect in the wood carving and basket weaving. This is similar across the African culture. For example, amongst the Luyha community, men specialises in weaving grain baskets, quail cages, beer strainers and wicker doors in their basketry and related crafts. Similarly, amongst the Embu, men, using small branches from a local shrub, weaved the framework of chicken coops. On the other hand, amongst the Meru and Kikuyu, the women specialised in fibre baskets, which were decorated with bands of colour obtained from vegetable dyes (Amin *et al.*, 1983; Ndeti, 1972). This gender aspect to basket weaving and related crafts was differentiated mainly by the workload. Weaving using small branches and reeds required heavy work which was allocated to men while the other was light hence allocated to women (Ndeti, 1972). Similarly, there were gender dimensions to woodworking in the traditional African culture. The industry was, and still is, controlled by the men. As Braedt *et al.*, (2000) state in the study “*Woodcraft Markets in Zimbabwe*”: “When involved in carvings and sculptures, women restrict themselves to the final stages of production, the finishing of the product with sandpaper and polish, and the selling of the product. Of the almost 4,000 participants in the craft industry on the Masvingo-Beitbridge road, there is not a single female carver, “men control most of the processes of craft production...” This observation is true of the industry in other African communities (Hodge, 1982; Fedders, *et al.*, 1979; Amin *et al.*, 1983). Traditionally among the Akamba, woodcarving and basket weaving had gender dimensions. Basket weaving was of two types: that which used reeds and small branches and, that made from strings processed from fig tree, acacia species, baobabs, or sisal. Men controlled the former while the females the latter.

Today, this traditional approach to division of labour at the production level of the two industries persists. Men still manage the greater woodcarving activities with women being limited to lighter aspects of the finishing line such as sand papering and decoration of the carved items. Nevertheless, as Obunga (1995) expresses: “Recent trends indicate that the boundaries separating the men’s tasks from the women’s are breaking up or overlapping as socio-economic circumstances shift”. With respect to basket weaving, the commercialised type today is that from processed strings and, just as the traditional mode, the women control it. Despite the many handicraft practices in Kenya (including pottery, mat weaving, smithing, bead making and sewing), this study focused on two predominant cultural handicrafts among the Akamba community of Kenya: woodcarving and basket weaving. The inherent division of labour along gender lines was a significant focus of the study. Although these two handicrafts are practised in the wider Akamba community, in Kitui, Mwingi and Makueni districts, the study focused on the Akamba of Wamunyu and Katangi locations of Mwala District due to commercialisation aspect of the handicrafts. Noting that woodcarving and basket weaving are elaborate cottage industries and that the two have attained international commercial trade status, the study was limited to the nature and source (over time) of raw materials: who uses what material, for what purpose and, how both men and women respond to apparent changes in the supply of raw materials. The study also endeavoured to assess the education dimension in the two crafts with emphasis on education level of respondents and their descendants; environmental education and business development education.

2.0 Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Community

Wamunyu and Katangi are locations in Yathui and Katangi divisions of Mwala District. The Yathui and Katangi divisions cover an area of 533.0 Km² and 568.0 Km² respectively. According to the 1999 national population census, Yathui had an enumerated population of 65,567 persons. The two divisions are some of the areas mostly affected by drought. They are semi-arid, receiving rainfall that is too low to sustain any meaningful agriculture. Water shortage is very acute and people walk up to 10 kilometres in search of the commodity for both domestic and livestock needs. Over the years, these divisions have been on relief food supply almost on a permanent basis (GoK, 2002-2008). Consequently, the divisions are amongst the top four poor divisions in the greater Mwala district. Of the enumerated population from the 1999 national census, Yathui had an estimated poor population of 60,860 persons, constituting 92.8% of its population while Katangi had 42,140 persons, constituting 86.0% of its population. The combined poor population from the two divisions, constituted approximately 17.2% of the greater Machakos County.

2.2 Target Population

The target population consisted of wood carvers from the Wamunyu Co-operative Society and its environs; basket weavers from the Yatta South Women group, Syokisinga Women group, Assumption Resource Centre (ARC) and Katanya Women group in the Katangi area; officials from these organisations and representatives of non-governmental organisations working within the study area. Farmers from the study location were also included in the sample to give views on whether they engage in tree planting activities in the area.

2.3 Sample and Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select the practitioners of the handicrafts under study. The method was used to delineate weavers from wood carvers. This brought out two study groups from which the researcher randomly selected practitioners as they worked on their pieces. In each category, one hundred respondents were interviewed during the study.

Table 3.1: Sample Population

Administrative area	Handicraft practised	Registered Members	Number interviewed
Wamunyu	Wood carvers	1200	100
	Cooperative officials	2	2
	NGO Heads		1
	Focus group discussions		5
Katangi	Basket weavers	2030	100
	NGO heads	2	1
	Focused group discussion		5
	Cooperative		2

2.4 Research Tools and their Administration

The questionnaires were administered to cooperative officials and programme managers running non-governmental organisations. In-Depth Interview Guides Interview schedules were used for the 100 wood carvers and 100 basket weavers in the sample. A total of 10 focus group discussions were conducted – 5 for wood carvers (men) and 5 for basket weavers (women). Observation record sheets were also used to obtain qualitative data. Photography was used to capture the men and women in their daily routines of wood carving and basket weaving. The instrument also came in handy to reinforce some of the key instruments in the study.

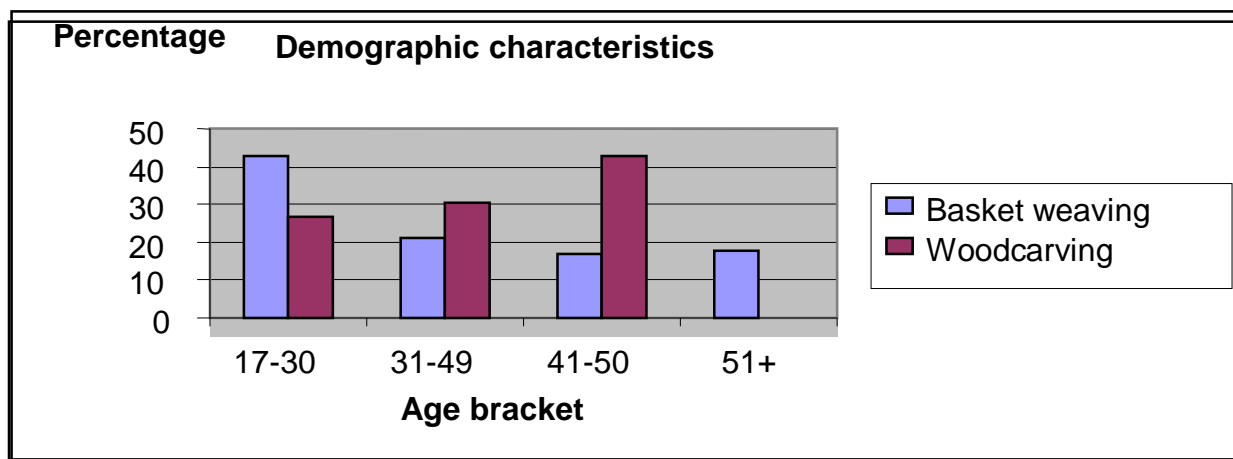
2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Once the researcher left the field, the data was organised, themes created to categorise the questionnaire items by type of information sought. This was coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) - frequencies and percentages calculated as per the questions asked

3.0 Results

3.1 Demographic Characteristics

3.1.1 Age Bracket of Respondents



One hundred female basket weavers were interviewed. These were sampled from Katangi (72.3%), Syokisinga (4.3%), Nzewani (4.3%) and Wamunyu (19.1%) areas of Mwala District. They ranged from 17 to 80 years of age. Majority (42.9%), as demonstrated in, were over 40 years of age. Following this age group was the 31-40 years age bracket (30.6%). The age bracket 17-29 had 26.5% of the respondents.

The woodcarvers found on site during the research ranged from 17 to 65 years of age with the majority (43%), as shown in , being in the age bracket of (17 to 30) years. Following this age bracket (at 21%) was the (31 to 40) year olds, while 17% were aged between 41-50 years and 18% of the respondents 51 years old and above. High frequencies of the respondents were to be found in the ages 26 (7.1%), 28 (8.1%), 32 (6.1%) and 40 (5.1%) years of age respectively. This could be as a result of the high unemployment rates among the youth as well as high primary and secondary school drop-out rates in the area, owing to monetary returns from the sales.

3.1.2 Marital Status and Family Size

A larger group of the basket weavers (76.0%) were married at the time of this study; 14.0% single and 10.0% widowed. Of the married, 57.1% had spouses whose main occupation was farming; while some (28.6%) of spouses were engaged in business and 3.6% were involved in wood carving. A small number (10.7%) had spouses with formal employment, which mainly was in the teaching (7.1%) and vehicle driving (3.6%). Few respondents (3.6%) had spouses that were casual labourers. All the respondent basket weavers had children, whose number ranged from one to 10 per respondent. The average number of children per respondent was five. Most children (42.8%) were in the 13 to 24 years of age bracket, followed closely (35.8%) by the 0 to 12 age group. Basket weavers with children 25 years of age and above formed 21.4% of the respondents. About 74% of the respondent woodcarvers acknowledged having children. The number of children ranged from one to 16 per respondent, with most respondents (59.5%) having one to four children.

Of the respondents with children, 83.8% had children in the age bracket of 0-12 years of age, while 51.4% had in the age bracket 13-24. Only 29.7% had children whose age was above 25 years.

3.2 Educational Dimension of Handicraft Industry

3.2.1 Education Level of Respondents

Majority of the woodcarvers (60.8%) had attained primary school level of education and only 38.1% had secondary school education while 1.0% acknowledged having no formal education. More respondents, 85.9% were married with the rest (14.1%) giving their marital status as single. Of the married respondents, only 6.8% had spouses who were in formal employment. About 60.8% had spouses whose main occupation was farming, and an equal percentage of 16.2% had spouses who were either housewives or in self-employment. Of the self-employed spouses, 8.1% were basket weavers. Most (85.3%) of the basket weavers had attained primary school education, but only 14.7% had attained secondary level of education. A larger group of the respondents (57.5%) indicated having spouses who had attained primary school level of education. In comparison, (34.2%) had spouses with secondary school education whereas (8.2%) had those with no formal education.

3.2.2 Education Level of Dependents

Relatively, most children of basket weavers (63.6%) had some form of education. Of these, few (7.5%), however, had tertiary level of education; majority (39.1%) had primary level of education, while the rest had attained either secondary (24.2%) or nursery (29.2%) education. Overall, none of the spouses had tertiary education. Comparatively, more spouses (57.1%) had attained primary as opposed to secondary (42.9%) education. On the children's level of education of woodcarvers, only 8% of the respondents indicated having a child who had attained post-secondary education; just a small number of respondents (15%) had children with secondary level of education. Most, though not substantial, (36%), had children with primary school education, while 34% had children with pre-primary education. The rest (7%) had not joined school.

3.2.3 Business Development Education

Majority (63.6%) of the weavers acknowledged receiving business related advice. This advice was from different institutions, the highest proportion being visitors (33.3%). Other institutions included, the Ministry of Co-operative Development, MS Kenya, SIDA and, the Area Local Chief.. About a third of the respondents did not receive any business related advice, while about 2.3% stated that they rarely got any.

Majority of (63.2%) of the carvers had benefited from business development services from various organisations. These organisations included: Small and Micro Enterprise Programme (SMEP); Ministry of Co-operative Development; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO); and Trade Craft; The Ministry of co-operative had the most beneficiaries (46.0%). Closely following this was SMEP (32.0%) and, UNESCO (14.0%). Trade Craft had the least beneficiaries at 6% and 2% respectively.

3.2.4 Access to Environmental Education

The study observed that while most wood carvers and basket weavers were aware of the negative environmental impact of their activities, very few were taking the initiative to reverse the trend. This was more so because they were aware about the disappearance of certain tree species from their farms and their suppliers. It was observed that there had been an attempt to start tree nurseries to encourage the carvers raise seedlings for planting but these had not succeeded as witnessed at the Wamunyu Co-operative Society. During the interviews, the researcher learnt that most carvers had resorted to stealing wood from people's farms at night. The data analyzed revealed that wood carving and basket weaving were basically driven by economic gains and no meaningful resource management strategies had been put in place. This, in turn, had resulted into complete depletion of certain tree species which had been used in the past and now had completely disappeared from their farms and environs. The co-operative society which manages most of the sales for the finished products has no tangible efforts to mobilize the carvers and weavers to put in place substantial sources of raw materials

3.3 Gender Dimensions of Handicraft Industry

3.3.1 History of the Two Handicrafts

The oldest respondent in woodcarving has been in the trade since the year 1950 and youngest 2002. The majority (59%), joined between the years 1990 and 2002. The peak years that significantly had many of the respondents joining the trade were 1992 (9%) and 1997 (9%).

Others include 1990 (5%), 1993 (6%), 1994 (5%), 1995 (6%), and 1998 (5%). This increase could perhaps be linked to recurrence in droughts as well as increased demand for handicrafts in the international market. All the sampled women basket weavers belonged to a project. Majority (87.2%) belonged to Yatta South Women Group Association (YSWG). The rest (16.8%) came from the other three projects: Syokisinga Women Group, Assumption Resource Centre (ARC), and Kwakatenya Women Group.

Most (47.9%) of these weavers had been in the trade for less than 11 years. In comparison, 37.5% had been in the business for between 12 to 20 years. Few (14.6%) had done over 20 years.

As illustrated in figure 4.12 below, about 34% of the weavers stated that basket weaving was their only commercial occupation. Of the 66% that indicated otherwise, majority (63.0%) engaged in farming as another occupation; while the others, respectively, informed of engaging in retailing of vegetables (22.2%), fruits (18.5%) and, clothes (3.7%).

3.3.3 Sources of Raw Materials

The researcher noted that the wood carvers had different sources for their raw materials. Comparatively, these sources could be grouped into two: local and external sources. Figure 4.4 shows the proportion of the sources of raw materials. Local sources constituted the largest contributor (at 71.7%) of the raw materials for the carvers.

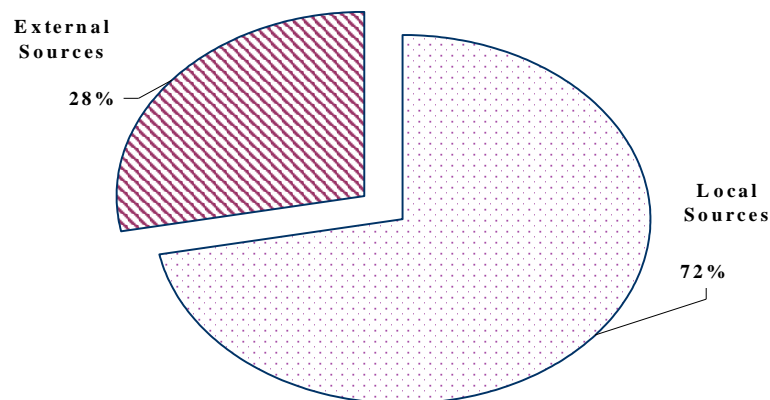


Figure 4.1: Sources of Raw Materials

Understandably, all the carvers sourced locally for their raw materials. Most popular of the local sources (53.2%) were the local wood traders. Other local sources included: local forests (39.3%); and the Cooperative Society (7.4%). On the other hand, 39.5% of the carvers practised direct external sourcing. The most popular of the external sources was Karura Forest (14.9%); Ngong Forest (9.6%) and Nyeri, Maasai land, Narok, Meru, Kitui, and Mbitini which accounted for 15% of the sources.

The study found that wood carving raw material sources had changed over the years for 93.8% of the carvers. These changes were explained based on four reasons. Ranked in descending order, these reasons were: government restrictions (40%); exhaustion of the raw materials from the indigenous forests (36%); scarcity of the materials (16%); and the raw materials having become expensive (8%). The chart below illustrates the importance of the reason for the change in sources of raw materials as advanced by the carvers.

The raw materials used in basket weaving were paper nylon, sisal, dye (mainly that from bark of trees referred to in Kamba as *kinamba*), and acrylic knitting yarn. All the weavers used sisal as a raw material for their products. Some had graduated to exploiting other raw materials in addition to the sisal. The products produced were similar in concept, the exception being in the value addition. This value addition, as well as product differentiation, could be from the use of dyes (82.9%), paper nylon (14.3%), acrylic knitting yarn (4.1%), or *kinamba* (6.1%). The dye formed the most popular raw material for the different purposes. Sources for the raw materials were varied as demonstrated under Figure 4.13. Most respondents (87.8%), however, purchased from traders found in the local market. Other significant source identified was the weaver's farm (22.4%). YSWG and Kitui were as well mentioned as sources. Two reasons were given for sourcing the raw materials as described.

These were non-availability of the sisal locally (96.9%) and, lack of the time to process the raw materials for use in weaving the baskets.

3.3.5 Eligibility for Each Craft

There were varied opinions as to who qualifies to be a wood carver. Majority (78.1%) of the respondents were of the opinion that anybody could be a wood carver, while 15.6% indicated that only experienced persons qualified. Few (3%) viewed it as a man's job. Some, but very few of the respondents, 1% and 2.1%, deemed the trade to be for primary school dropouts and those above 18 years of age respectively.

The arguments for the various outlooks were just as diverse. Most (80.7%) argued that wood carving was an income-generating activity, and therefore did not see why there should be restrictions as to who joins the trade, especially now that there was a scarcity of formal employment. An estimated 9.7% contended that school dropouts did better in the trade. Others, though small in number (1.6%), were of the opinion that women could not be wood-carvers, as they could not carve. This latter group was supported by 8.1% of the respondents who added that culture did not allow women to carve wood. The women, however, could engage in the finishing stage of carvings (e.g. painting, dyeing or decorations), a fact that was observed during the study.

According to majority of the weavers (38.8%), only women qualified to be basket weavers. Some respondents (26.5%) opposed this view, stating that anyone could qualify to be a weaver. Others (34.7%) limited the qualification to only those who were members of the project. Not surprising, most respondents (91.8%) denied there being male basket weavers in the study area while 8.2% disagreed with this lot, stating that there indeed were men involved in weaving.

4.0 Discussion

From the foregoing, it emerged that both wood carving and basket weaving have distinct gender orientation; wood carving is popular among men while women dominate basket weaving. Though, some women were found to participate in wood carving, they took part on the finishing of the artefacts and marketing with only one woman reported to participate in the actual wood carving. The same situation was observed with Mwenge Carvers Association in Tanzania where only men took part in woodcarving with women only one woman participating in distribution of the products (Makawa, 2009) Men were however reported not to participate in basket weaving at all. The women who participated in basket weaving were of relatively older age bracket compared to the male counterparts who participated in woodcarving. Basket weaving is an activity that demand less energy and can be done when one is seated. Therefore older women who are taken to be weak can as well participate in the activity. In fact when women grow older they might be forced to abandon other activities e.g. farming and participate in weaving Woodcarving on the other hand is an activity that demands more energy from the collection of raw material to carving. There woodcarving is undertaken by relatively younger men who are considered stronger.

Having formal education is a key pillar in adoption of any technology, business management, environmental conservation as well as business relations (Kiumbuku, et al, 2013). In the study area the level of education of the respondents was generally low. A similar situation was observed with woodcarvers in Tanzania (Mwenge Woodcarvers) where majority (88%) had attained primary education with the rest (12%) having no formal education. None had attained secondary and tertiary education (Makawa, 2009). In Ghana 52% of the woodcarvers had 1st cycle education, 25% had 2nd cycle education and 22% did not have formal education (Okra, 2002). From the respondents perception having formal education was not of much significance to the two crafts and anyone can participate regardless of education level. Woodcarvers (who are men) were found to have attained higher education than basket weavers (who are women). In the study Majority of basket weavers (85.3%) had attained primary education only as compared to 60.8% of woodcarvers. This against 38.1% of wood carvers who had secondary level education and 14.7% of basket weavers who had the same level of education. In Africa boy child education has been prioritized as compared to that of girl-child. Due to this girls are likely to be the first ones to be pulled out of school when resources are not enough (Katherine et al, 2010). Considering the roles and duties associated with each gender, women duties are taken not to require formal education since they are culturally restricted to household roles and taking care of the family. Men on the other hand, should acquire formal education so as to be able to secure gainful employment.

The education level of the respondent's dependants was also low, even though most families were young and had children who were still in school at varied levels.

The majority, (for both carvers and basket weavers) were at primary level of education. 24.2% of the children of basket weavers and 15% of the woodcarvers children had attained secondary school education and with only 7.5% and 8% children having post-secondary education for both basket weavers and woodcarvers respectively. Owing to the low monetary returns from the sales of the products and the low level of education of the respondents, it is likely that they may not afford or recognise the purpose of educating their children. This has resulted to high primary and secondary schools dropout rates. This was evidenced by having a big number of woodcarvers being of 17-30 age bracket which is considered as the age they should be attending post-secondary education. Furthermore school dropouts were perceived to do better in the trade.

Business development education is very important in any enterprise especially on marketing, financial management, business planning and setting the prices of the products. Lack of business development education had made most of the traders to run their businesses at a loss or to realise very low returns in the past. This motivated some institutions to initiate some training to the craftsmen and women as well as other participants in the industry. The respondents (both woodcarvers and basket weavers) acknowledged having received business related advice and education. The institutions that were mentioned to have facilitated included; Ministry of Cooperative Development, MS Kenya, SIDA, SMEP, UNESCO and Trade Craft. The trainings were possible since the respondents were well organised into cooperatives or groups and therefore mobilising them was easy. Their organisation attracted the interest of the institution to offer business development education.

From the study, it was noted that the woodcarvers and the basket weavers were aware of the negative environmental impacts of their activities although very few had taken the initiative to reverse the trend. Their activities had led to total depletion of some plant species. The two activities were entirely driven by economic gains and there were no meaningful resource management strategies. There was therefore urgent need for training on sustainable use and management of natural resources.

Participation in the two crafts was disaggregated by gender. Men participated dominantly in woodcarving whereas women participated in basket weaving. It was however acknowledged that some women participated in woodcarving although they were involved in polishing of items. This Participation has been shaped by culture which places men in woodcarving and women in basket weaving. Traditionally among the Akamba, woodcarving and basket weaving had gender dimensions. Basket weaving was of two types: that which used reeds and small branches and, that made from strings processed from fig tree, acacia species, baobabs, or sisal. Men controlled the former while the females the latter.

Today, this traditional approach to division of labour at the production level of the two industries persists. Men still manage the greater woodcarving activities with women being limited to lighter aspects of the finishing line such as sand papering and decoration of the carved items. This was observed in Mwala district where respondents felt that men qualified to participate in wood carving but not basket weaving whereas women were only eligible to participate in basket weaving. Nevertheless, as Obunga (1995) expresses: "Recent trends indicate that the boundaries separating the men's tasks from the women's are breaking up or overlapping as socio-economic circumstances shift". With respect to basket weaving, the commercialised type today is that from processed strings and, just as the traditional mode, the women control it. In Mwala district women participated in basket weaving through women-based projects. This was found to be a hindrance to men participation in the activity since they would not be admissible into the women groups.

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