

Institutions of Socialisation in Karamoja and Their Impact on Gender Roles

The Akiriket (the Karimojong Parliament)

The Akiriket is a deeply rooted structure that brings together key influential elders, leaders, and primarily men to discuss important issues affecting the community, ranging from economic, social, political, and cultural aspects. It is also a place for initiating young men into manhood. Women's participation in this forum is limited due to cultural norms. Women typically attend specific events to collect meat or when political leaders share important information. However, they do not communicate during Akiriket sessions, as it is not permitted. Despite this, decisions affecting both men and women are made in this platform.

This institution has shaped women to take a back seat in any platform, as men have been trained to take the leadership role of representing the community, actively participating, and making decisions that affect the community.

Ekeno or Aperit (Fireplace)

The Ekeno, or Aperit, is always found in the kraals and manyattas, where a fire is lit every evening. This is a structure where teachings and grooming of both boys and girls take place by their mothers, fathers, aunts, and uncles. In fact, at the kraal, the boys, fathers, and uncles have different fireplaces from those of the girls, mothers, and aunts. At the fireplace, the fathers and uncles groom boys on what is expected of them in the community as per the Karimojong culture. The grooming involves giving advice, sharing experiences, teaching cultural norms, initiations, and telling stories (both factual and fictitious). The same applies to the girls, with mothers and aunts teaching them what is expected of them by the Karimojong culture.



Figure 1: Elders sharing meat, during akiriket.

Gender inequalities rooted in the culture are reinforced during these sessions. Boys and girls are taught to accept these norms as normal. For example, women should never question men or raise their voices to men, and men should be brave, fierce, and protective. These teachings lead to practices such as forced marriage, where girls are told to expect their parents to identify suitable suitors for them at the right age of marriage. This often happens to cement relationships with friends' families or to gain wealth in the form of livestock.

During gender training activities, women shared stories of how they could not attend school because they were forced to marry men chosen by their parents. One woman shared her painful story of living in misery because of the violent man her parents chose for her. Men, on the other hand, shared the pressure of being brave and protective, even when they were afraid. They felt forced to fight enemies to be identified as men, or else they were ridiculed and made to feel less of a man in the community. Men had to go on raids even when they feared not making it back, due to the pressure of gender roles reinforced by community institutions.

Culture

The Karimojong culture expects women to be loyal to men, soft-spoken, and not to argue, especially over decisions made by men. For example, if a father decides that his daughter should marry a wealthy man, he would receive cows from him whether she liked him or not. She could be beaten if she attempted to reject the marriage. Women are expected to take care of the family from a young age to old age. Girls are trained to take care of the family by carrying young children, cooking, fetching water and firewood, decorating themselves, being attractive, and smiling as much as possible to get married at an appropriate time. At the age of five, girls are introduced to casual labour, including accompanying their mothers to fetch firewood, burning charcoal, and going to urban centres to provide services such as babysitting and other domestic work.



Figure 2: Women picking up parts meat from the Akiriket (This is usually the liver and neck of the animal slaughtered)

Men are expected to be brave, fierce, go-getters, strong, and challenging. They are expected to marry wives with dowry and have as many children as possible. Anything less would invite insults and affect their self-esteem, as it is a direct attack on their ego. At the age of four, boys are introduced to shepherding and community meetings, where they observe decision-making processes in preparation for their future roles.

Women who are not traditionally married in Karamoja do not hold any status. They do not perform certain community rituals and have no authority to speak in certain platforms. They are called “Ngakapukui,” meaning those who have not paid dowry. This still applies today. Girls who start having children before dowry is paid continue staying at their parents’ home, and all the children born belong to her father until prepayment for the children is made. She will only move to the man’s home to start her family when the dowry is paid. Educated women who stay with their boyfriends before traditional marriage are not recognised as married according to tradition. When a woman who is not traditionally married dies, she will

be buried at her paternal home unless the dowry is paid to her dead body. This applies even to educated Karimojong women.

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