

Mary Zacharia Charwi*

Language and Social Transformation in *Nyumbantobhu*: A Gendered Perspective

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Abstract: This study investigates *Nyumbantobhu*, a practice among the Kuria people, challenging conventional interpretations and offering a nuanced understanding of its complex dynamics. Moving beyond simplistic portrayals of *Nyumbantobhu* as solely oppressive, this research examines it as a site of contested agency for Kuria women, exploring how they navigate and negotiate their roles within this context, particularly through language. While existing literature has addressed aspects of *Nyumbantobhu*, often focusing on its potential for gender-based violence or its impact on infertile women, a significant gap remains in understanding the nuanced ways in which women exercise agency and how language shapes the practice's meaning and impact. This study addresses this gap by investigating two primary objectives: to explore the contested agency of Kuria women within *Nyumbantobhu*, examining how they navigate and negotiate their roles through language; and to analyze the role of language in constructing the meaning and impact of *Nyumbantobhu*, considering the intersectional experiences of women involved in the practice. Based on data sources encompassing interviews, narratives, and existing literature, the research advances several key arguments, revealing the dynamic interplay of agency, language, and social construction. This study integrates feminist theory, intersectionality, and social constructionism with linguistic analysis. The findings underscore how language functions as both a tool for conformity and subversion, how evolving kinship terms reflect shifting family dynamics, and how gendered language reveals embedded power relations. This research provides novel insights into how social realities are constructed and negotiated, contributing to broader conversations about gender, language, and social transformation within East African communities.

Keywords: *Nyumbantobhu*; Kuria; women's agency; social construction; language and gender

*Corresponding author: Mary Zacharia Charwi, Department of Languages and Literature, Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE), University of Dar es Salaam, Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania, E-mail: mzcharwi08@yahoo.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8657-5993>

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1 Introduction

Nyumbantobhu, meaning “house without a man” in the Kuria language, is a traditional union practiced among Kuria women in the Mara Region of Tanzania and Kenya, distinct from romantic or sexual relationships. This arrangement typically involves an older, often widowed woman without male descendants entering into a partnership with a younger, childless woman, known as an *omokamööna* “daughter-in-law.” The younger woman bears a child with an external male partner, and the elder woman serves as the grandmother to the resulting child, thereby securing her lineage and ensuring the continuation of her family line. In this arrangement, the older woman pays a bride price, usually in the form of cattle, to the family of the younger woman. This practice allows the older woman to maintain control over her property and lineage, as only men are traditionally allowed to inherit property in the Kuria community. Some nascent sources suggest that *Nyumbantobhu* relationships have become increasingly common, with some younger Kuria women entering these unions potentially to gain greater agency in choosing their sexual partners and to potentially avoid domestic abuse and female genital mutilation.

Nyumbantobhu, a practice among the Kuria people of Tarime and Serengeti in Tanzania, presents a complex interplay of social tradition, gender dynamics, and linguistic expression. (Husso 2016) analysis of interpersonal violence illuminates the underlying vulnerabilities and power imbalances that contribute to the social conditions in which this practice persists. This study moves beyond viewing *Nyumbantobhu* as a static social custom or a mere passive adaptation to patriarchal structures. While acknowledging the potential for gender-based violence within *Nyumbantobhu*, as discussed by Sikira (2012), this study builds on Sikira’s work by adding an additional layer of understanding. Building on the concept of agency within seemingly restrictive environments, as demonstrated by Martinez (2018), and acknowledging the complexities of women’s roles hinted at by Opoku (2024), Choge-Kerama, Rono, and Dickerson-Putman (2012), and Choge-Kerama, Rono, and Dickerson-Putman (2021), this research argues that *Nyumbantobhu* is a dynamic site of contested agency. Grounded in feminist theory and intersectionality, the researcher asserts that Kuria women actively negotiate their roles and identities within these unions, strategically employing language to assert autonomy and subtly challenge traditional power dynamics. Furthermore, drawing on social constructionism (Johnstone 2018), this study posits that *Nyumbantobhu* is discursively constructed, with language playing a crucial role in shaping its meaning and impact. By analyzing how language functions as a tool to legitimize, challenge, or reinterpret *Nyumbantobhu*, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of Kuria women and the ways in which they navigate and transform social norms.

Existing research on *Nyumbantobhu*, while acknowledging the practice, often focuses on its potential negative impacts, neglecting the nuanced ways in which Kuria women exercise agency. This study addresses this gap by investigating how women actively negotiate their roles within *Nyumbantobhu*, particularly through the strategic use of language. “Contested agency,” the concept central to this research, highlights how an individual’s ability to act independently and make their own choices (their “agency”) is often challenged or limited by social structures, power dynamics, and cultural norms. In the context of *Nyumbantobhu*, this means that while Kuria women possess agency, they face significant challenges and limitations due to the social and cultural context surrounding the practice. Their agency is “contested” because it is not easily or freely exercised; they may need to negotiate, resist, or subvert existing norms and power structures. This study seeks to answer the following central question: *What role does language play in the contested agency of Kuria women within Nyumbantobhu?*

This study pursues two primary objectives. First, it investigates the contested agency of Kuria women within the practice of *Nyumbantobhu*. This involves exploring how women actively navigate and negotiate their roles within this complex social context, specifically examining the ways in which they utilize language to assert their agency and shape their experiences. Second, this research analyzes the crucial role of language in constructing the meaning and impact of *Nyumbantobhu*. This entails examining how language shapes perceptions, reinforces or challenges existing power structures, and influences the lived experiences of women involved in the practice. Furthermore, this analysis considers the intersectional nature of women’s experiences, recognizing that age, marital status, and social class intersect to influence how they engage with *Nyumbantobhu* and how they are positioned within it. By addressing these two interconnected objectives, the study aims to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of *Nyumbantobhu*, moving beyond simplistic portrayals and highlighting the dynamic interplay of agency, language, and social construction.

This study has significant implications for several interconnected areas. By moving beyond simplistic portrayals of *Nyumbantobhu* as solely oppressive, this research offers a more nuanced understanding of the practice, recognizing the agency and resilience of Kuria women and challenging harmful stereotypes. This nuanced understanding is crucial for informing interventions and initiatives aimed at positive social change within the Kuria community, as it moves beyond a deficit model to recognize the strengths and agency of women within the practice. Furthermore, the study’s focus on language provides valuable insights into how social realities are constructed and negotiated, contributing to broader theoretical discussions about the relationship between language, power, and social change within specific cultural contexts. Highlighting the role of language in shaping

experiences of agency is particularly important for empowering Kuria women by giving voice to their perspectives and challenging existing power structures. The research will thus be of benefit to Kuria women themselves, the Kuria community as a whole, and to scholars and researchers in fields such as gender studies, linguistics, anthropology, and African studies. Ultimately, the findings have the potential to influence public discourse about *Nyumbantobhu*, inform policy decisions related to gender equality and social justice, and stimulate further research on the intersection of language, gender, and social change, promoting greater understanding and respect for Kuria culture and the agency of its women.

This paper is structured to address the central argument that *Nyumbantobhu* is a site of contested agency where women actively negotiate their roles through language. Following this introduction, the literature review examines existing understandings of *Nyumbantobhu*, highlighting the need for a more nuanced perspective that centers women's agency. The theoretical framework, which draws on feminist theory, intersectionality, and social constructionism, is outlined. The methodology section describes the qualitative approach employed in this research. The findings section presents evidence supporting the central argument, demonstrating how language functions as a tool for both conformity and subversion. The discussion section explores the implications of these findings, connecting them to broader conversations about gender, language, and social change. The paper concludes by reiterating the significance of understanding *Nyumbantobhu* as a site of contested agency and suggesting avenues for future research.

2 Background of the Study

Understanding the complex social practice of *Nyumbantobhu* requires a careful examination of existing scholarship and a robust theoretical framework. The existing literature provides a comprehensive and critical analysis of existing research relevant to the study's topic, establishing context, identifying gaps, and informing the research design. The Theoretical Framework provides a structured set of concepts, theories, and models that guide the research process, shaping the research questions, methodology, and interpretation of findings. Together, these sections demonstrate the researcher's understanding of the field and provide the necessary foundation for a rigorous and meaningful investigation.

2.1 Practice of *Nyumbantobhu*

Existing literature, such as the foundational work of Sikira (2012), has identified *Nyumbantobhu*, a practice of union between women among the Kuria people, as potentially linked to gender-based violence and often focuses on the experiences of

infertile women within the practice. Sikira's research, conducted in the Serengeti District of the Mara Region, revealed that *Nyumbantobhu* frequently involves an older, infertile woman marrying a younger girl, with the stated purpose of lineage continuation, with the younger woman also serving as a caregiver. While a bride price is exchanged, the union typically does not involve romantic or sexual relationships; instead, a man from the older woman's clan is selected for reproductive purposes with the younger woman. Sikira (2012) highlights how gender-based violence can be present both before and after the *Nyumbantobhu* arrangement, impacting all involved – the older woman, the younger girl, the chosen male partner, and any children. Furthermore, the study points to potential negative consequences, including increased risk of Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) and potential economic hardship as women raise children as single parents. Sikira concludes by recommending lobbying and advocacy by traditional leaders to address cultural norms contributing to gender-based violence, including those associated with *Nyumbantobhu*. However, while Sikira's work is crucial in identifying potential risks, it does not fully explore the agency of Kuria women within *Nyumbantobhu* or the role of language in shaping their experiences. This study seeks to address this gap.

Opoku's (2024) work, *Women-on-Women Violence in Tanzania: Current Realities and Future Directions*, provides valuable context for understanding the complexities of gender-based violence in Tanzania, including the often-overlooked phenomenon of women perpetrating violence against other women. Opoku's research, conducted in the Mara and Mwanza regions, examines several harmful traditional practices, including *Nyumbantobhu*, through an ethnographic lens, incorporating diverse perspectives from victims, perpetrators, community leaders, and healthcare workers. Her work highlights the tensions between socio-cultural norms and human rights discourses, challenging the notion that harmful practices are simply "cultural" and therefore unassailable. Importantly, Opoku's study delves into the motivations and power dynamics within these practices, revealing how women can be both victims and agents within systems of oppression. This nuanced understanding of women's complicity in perpetuating harmful traditions, including *Nyumbantobhu*, is crucial for this study as it allows for a more comprehensive exploration of agency within the practice, moving beyond simplistic portrayals of women as solely passive recipients of violence. By acknowledging the complexities of women's roles in *Nyumbantobhu*, including their potential exercise of agency, this research can contribute to more effective and culturally sensitive interventions aimed at addressing the harmful aspects of the practice while respecting the agency and lived experiences of Kuria women.

Several journalistic accounts (Haworth 2016; Martinez 2018; Samuels 2016; Thomas 2013) have played a crucial role in bringing *Nyumbantobhu* to wider public attention, offering valuable overviews of the practice and its potential implications.

These pieces often provide important contextual information, such as the cultural background of *Nyumbantobhu*, the motivations behind it (e.g., addressing infertility, securing lineage), and some of the challenges faced by women involved. For example, some journalistic accounts highlight the potential for exploitation and gender-based violence within *Nyumbantobhu*, while others focus on the resilience and agency of women who participate in the practice. While these journalistic accounts serve as valuable introductions to *Nyumbantobhu* and raise important questions, this study aims to move beyond these descriptive overviews and offer a more rigorous and theoretically grounded analysis. By employing theoretical frameworks from feminist theory, intersectionality, and social constructionism, this research seeks to delve deeper into the underlying social dynamics and power structures at play within *Nyumbantobhu*. This deeper analysis is necessary to understand the complexities of *Nyumbantobhu* beyond surface-level observations and to explore the nuanced ways in which women navigate and negotiate their roles within the practice, particularly through the lens of language. This study aims to contribute a more nuanced and scholarly understanding of *Nyumbantobhu* that builds upon the foundational work of journalistic accounts while offering a more in-depth exploration of the complex interplay of agency, language, and social construction.

2.2 Woman-to-Woman Marriage in Africa

Choge-Kerama, Rono, and Dickerson-Putman (2021) examine the historical context of woman-to-woman marriage in Africa, highlighting its traditional role in addressing childlessness and ensuring lineage continuation, specifically through the birth of male heirs. They explain that an older woman, whether childless or having only daughters, married a younger woman. The children born from this union would inherit the older woman's name and property. However, the authors also address the contemporary challenges facing this practice, focusing on the most relevant implications: health, legal, economic, and social, and religious. Their emphasis on the evolving nature of woman-to-woman marriage – from its traditional roots to its modern manifestations, particularly the challenges it poses to the church – informs the present investigation. Understanding these broader shifts and challenges, especially in Kenya, provides a comparative lens for examining *Nyumbantobhu* among the Kuria. While Choge-Kerama, Rono, and Dickerson-Putman (2021) focus on the Nandi community, their insights into changing motivations and challenges, including the role of religious institutions, inform the broader context of *Nyumbantobhu*'s existence and negotiation. This broader context is crucial for understanding Kuria women's agency within *Nyumbantobhu* and how they navigate

evolving social and cultural landscapes, including legal changes and religious pressures.

2.3 Role of Language in Social Construction

Cojocar, Bragaru, and Ciuchi (2012) highlight the crucial role of language in constructing social realities, particularly within organizational contexts. Grounded in social constructionism, their research demonstrates how language shapes perceptions and definitions of organizational environments. Through an appreciative inquiry intervention, they observed that negative language describing organizations could be transformed into positive or neutral language, leading to a shift in how members defined their workplace. These findings underscore the power of language not only to reflect but also to create organizational realities, suggesting that linguistic changes can generate corresponding changes in social perceptions and experiences. This work is particularly relevant to the present study as it reinforces the central premise that language is not merely a neutral tool for describing reality, but an active force in shaping it. Cojocar, Bragaru, and Ciuchi's (2012) focus on the transformative potential of language within organizations provides a valuable framework for understanding how language might function similarly within the context of Nyumbantobhu, influencing women's agency and their negotiation of roles. Their emphasis on appreciative inquiry also offers a potential lens through which to examine how positive reframing of narratives can lead to social change. However, while Cojocar, Bragaru, and Ciuchi (2012) focus on formal organizations, the present study extends this line of inquiry by exploring the role of language in shaping a complex social practice within a specific cultural context, namely Nyumbantobhu, and its impact on women's contested agency.

While existing literature has explored various facets of *Nyumbantobhu*, including its historical context (Choge-Kerama, Rono, and Dickerson-Putman 2021), its connection to gender-based violence (e.g., Sikira 2012), and its portrayal in journalistic accounts (e.g., Haworth 2016; Martinez 2018; Samuels 2016; Thomas 2013), a significant gap remains regarding the linguistic dimensions of the practice. This research directly addresses this gap, focusing on language as a key element in understanding *Nyumbantobhu*. This linguistic focus is crucial for understanding the social construction and negotiation of *Nyumbantobhu*, providing a deeper understanding of women's agency and power dynamics. Building on previous research, this study offers a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the practice by focusing on two key areas: the role of agency, particularly as it is expressed and negotiated through language, and the specific socio-cultural context within which *Nyumbantobhu* exists. Furthermore, this study critically examines the applicability

of existing frameworks for understanding gender and social relations to the specific context of *Nyumbantobhu*. While these frameworks offer valuable tools for analysis, it is essential to consider how *Nyumbantobhu* both conforms to and challenges traditional gender roles and power dynamics within the Kuria community. This critical examination provides a more nuanced understanding of how *Nyumbantobhu* operates within its specific socio-cultural context. Finally, this study positions its findings within broader scholarly debates concerning women's agency, same-sex relationships, and the role of language in shaping social reality. By connecting the specific findings regarding *Nyumbantobhu* to these broader theoretical conversations, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of these complex issues and their intersection within specific cultural contexts.

3 Theoretical Framework

This research employs a multifaceted theoretical framework to explore the complex dynamics of *Nyumbantobhu*, drawing primarily on feminist theory, intersectionality, and social constructionism. Combined with a detailed linguistic analysis, these frameworks offer a powerful lens for understanding how power, identity, and meaning are constructed and negotiated within this specific practice. Feminist theory, in its various forms, provides a critical framework for examining gender relations and power imbalances. The project focuses on agency, through feminist theory. This approach facilitates an analysis of how *Nyumbantobhu* impacts women's lives, how they navigate and potentially resist patriarchal structures, and how they exercise agency within seemingly constrained circumstances. It moves beyond essentialist notions of "womanhood" to recognize the diverse experiences of women within *Nyumbantobhu*.

3.1 Social Constructionism

Social constructionism provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how meaning is created and negotiated around *Nyumbantobhu*. This framework emphasizes the role of language, discourse, and social interaction in shaping perceptions and understandings. It posits that social phenomena, including practices like *Nyumbantobhu*, are not objective realities but are actively constructed through social processes. Social constructionism serves as a crucial lens for analyzing how language constructs the meaning of *Nyumbantobhu*, how narratives surrounding the practice are created and disseminated, and how social legitimacy is negotiated through discourse. It connects directly to the linguistic analysis, emphasizing that language is

not merely reflective of social realities but is actively constitutive of them. The interplay between these three theoretical frameworks feminist theory, intersectionality, and social constructionism provides a robust and nuanced approach to understanding the complex dynamics of *Nyumbantobhu*, allowing for a deeper exploration of agency, power, identity, and meaning-making within this specific cultural.

Key scholars further exemplify social constructionism and its application to the study of language and social practices. Berger and Luckmann (1967) laid the groundwork for this perspective, arguing that meaning is constructed through shared understandings and social processes, rather than being inherent. Burr (2015) further developed this framework, emphasizing discourse's role in shaping perceptions. Building on these foundational texts, scholars have explored the nuanced ways in which language and discourse contribute to the construction of specific social realities. Butler (1990), for instance, argues that gender is not a fixed identity but is performatively enacted through repeated linguistic and social performances. This concept of performativity is particularly relevant to understanding gender roles within *Nyumbantobhu*, where gendered behaviors and language may contribute to reinforcing specific social norms. Furthermore, Johnstone (2018) highlights language's productive role in creating social realities, suggesting that language actively shapes their meaning and impact, rather than merely reflecting pre-existing structures. This perspective emphasizes the importance of analyzing the language used to describe and discuss *Nyumbantobhu* to understand its social construction and experience.

3.2 Deepening the Understanding of Agency

The concept of agency has been central to feminist scholarship, particularly in understanding women's experiences in diverse contexts. While some studies, such as Sikira (2012), have highlighted the potential for violence against women within *Nyumbantobhu*, particularly against infertile women, it is crucial to move beyond portrayals of women solely as victims. Mohanty (1984) and Abu-Lughod (1990) caution against simplistic representations of women in the Global South as either passive victims or heroic resisters. They emphasize the importance of understanding the complexities of agency and resistance, recognizing that women's actions may take subtle and nuanced forms, shaped by their specific social contexts. Research on women's agency often explores the diverse strategies women employ to negotiate roles and assert autonomy.

3.3 Contextualizing Nyumbantobhu within Kinship and Social Structures

Understanding *Nyumbantobhu* requires situating the practice within the broader kinship system of the Kuria people. Goody's (1980) foundational work on kinship provides a valuable framework for analyzing how kinship terms, family structures, and associated obligations influence and are influenced by social practices like *Nyumbantobhu*. Exploring the intersection of *Nyumbantobhu* with existing kinship obligations, inheritance patterns, and gender roles is essential for understanding its social significance. Lévi-Strauss's (1969) work on the elementary structures of kinship offers a comparative perspective, providing a deeper understanding of how kinship systems across cultures can shape and be shaped by social practices.

3.4 Addressing Intersectionality and Power

Intersectionality, as articulated by Glenn (1999), Andersen and Collins (1992), is a critical framework for understanding women's diverse experiences. It recognizes that women's experiences are not uniform but are shaped by the intersection of multiple social categories, including age, marital status, social class, and other context-specific factors. Applying an intersectional lens to *Nyumbantobhu* requires examining how these intersecting identities influence women's access to resources, their ability to exercise agency, and their experiences of power within the practice. This approach moves beyond essentialist notions of "womanhood" and provides a more nuanced understanding of how power operates within this complex practice. Intersectionality, building upon feminist theory, recognizes that gender is not the only axis of power. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of social categories such as age, marital status, social class, and other relevant factors in shaping individual experiences. This framework is crucial for understanding the nuanced ways in which power operates within *Nyumbantobhu*, acknowledging that women's experiences are not uniform but are shaped by the complex interplay of these intersecting identities. By considering intersectionality, this study avoids essentializing women's experiences and allows for a more nuanced understanding of how different women experience varying degrees of agency, constraint, and access to resources within the practice. It highlights the importance of moving beyond a singular focus on gender to understand the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression and privilege.

3.5 Bridging Journalistic Accounts and Scholarly Analysis

Journalistic accounts (e.g., Haworth 2016; Martinez 2018; Thomas 2013) have played an important role in bringing *Nyumbantobhu* to wider attention, highlighting key aspects of the practice such as its connection to safety, economic security, and same-sex relationships. While these accounts offer valuable overviews and raise important questions, scholarly research is needed to provide a more in-depth and theoretically grounded analysis. This research bridges the gap between journalistic observations and scholarly inquiry by integrating insights from these accounts with the theoretical frameworks discussed above.

4 Methodology

This section details the data collection and analysis process, explaining how the theoretical framework (social constructionism, feminist theory, kinship studies, and intersectionality) guided the research design and analysis.

Recognizing language's central role in constructing social realities (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Burr, 2015), the researcher focused on the language of *Nyumbantobhu*. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted in Swahili with women involved in the practice, community members, and local leaders. Relevant texts, such as traditional narratives and songs, were also examined. Following collection, interviews were transcribed verbatim. Discourse analysis, informed by Butler's (1990) concept of performativity and Johnstone's (2018) work on language's productive role, was used to identify key themes, patterns, and linguistic strategies *Nyumbantobhu*. Specifically, the analysis examined how language constructs and reinforces gender roles within the practice and how it shapes the meaning, impact, and potential for contestation of *Nyumbantobhu*. For instance, the analysis explored how specific terms, metaphors, or narratives are used to justify, challenge, or negotiate the practice, revealing how language contributes to the ongoing (re)construction of *Nyumbantobhu*. As an example, several interviewees described *Nyumbantobhu* using kinship terms like "wife" and "husband," highlighting the social legitimacy sought through these linguistic choices. This finding corroborated the theoretical framework's emphasis on the performative nature of language in constructing social realities.

In examining agency, this project aimed to understand Kuria women's complex exercise of agency within *Nyumbantobhu*, moving beyond simplistic portrayals of victimhood or resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990; Mohanty 1984). To explore this, interviews delved into women's experiences, choices, and strategies for navigating the

practice. Questions focused on their motivations for participating, perceived benefits and challenges, and relationships with others involved. The analysis focused on identifying instances of agency, both overt and subtle, recognizing that resistance manifests in various forms, including linguistic practices. Specifically, the analysis examined how women use language to negotiate their roles, assert autonomy, and potentially challenge dominant narratives about Nyumbantobhu. For example, the analysis considered how women utilize language to express needs, negotiate the terms of the arrangement, or challenge stigma surrounding the practice. Notably, one participant illustrated this agency by explaining how she used specific proverbs to assert her right to inherit land within her Nyumbantobhu partnership, directly challenging traditional patriarchal norms. This instance exemplifies the power of language in enabling women to exert agency.

Understanding the dynamics of Nyumbantobhu required considering its place within the broader Kuria kinship system, a crucial aspect of kinship and social structures. Data collection involved gathering information about Kuria kinship structures, including family relationships, inheritance patterns, and the roles and responsibilities of different family members. Interviews explored how Nyumbantobhu intersects with existing kinship obligations, inheritance patterns, and gender roles. The analysis drew on Lévi-Strauss's (1969) work on the elementary structures of kinship to provide a comparative perspective and to understand how Nyumbantobhu is embedded within the social fabric of the Kuria community. The interviews revealed that while Nyumbantobhu partnerships do not replace traditional marriage for women, they offer an alternative pathway to security and social recognition within the existing kinship structure. This finding highlighted the complex interplay between tradition and evolving social practices.

Addressing intersectionality, and recognizing the importance of intersectionality and power (Andersen and Collins 1992; Glenn 1999), I sought to understand the diverse experiences of women within *Nyumbantobhu*. To ensure a comprehensive understanding, the sample was stratified to include women of different ages, marital statuses, social classes, and potentially other relevant categories within the Kuria context. Interviews were designed to elicit information about how these intersecting identities shape women's experiences of *Nyumbantobhu*, including their access to resources, their ability to exercise agency, and their experiences of power. The analysis focused on understanding the nuanced ways in which power operates at the intersection of these multiple social categories, moving beyond essentialist notions of "womanhood." For example, the findings showed that older women, particularly those who had already experienced traditional marriage, often held more authority and influence within Nyumbantobhu partnerships, reflecting the interplay of age and social status.

Finally, regarding journalistic accounts and scholarly analysis, this research bridges journalistic accounts (e.g., Haworth 2016; Martinez 2018; Thomas 2013) with a more rigorous scholarly analysis. While these journalistic accounts provided valuable, accessible overviews of the *Nyumbantobhu* practice, often capturing public attention and highlighting key social issues, this research aimed to move beyond those introductory perspectives. The intention was to provide a deeper, more theoretically grounded analysis, drawing on established academic frameworks. These journalistic sources served as a crucial tool for contextualizing the research findings within the broader public discourse surrounding *Nyumbantobhu*, effectively mapping the landscape of existing conversations and identifying key themes or issues that warranted further investigation. However, the primary focus of the analysis remained firmly on the data collected directly through in-depth interviews and other qualitative methods. This approach allowed for a nuanced and scholarly understanding of *Nyumbantobhu*, prioritizing the perspectives and lived experiences of Kuria women themselves, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and insightful examination of the practice.

5 Findings

5.1 *Nyumbantobhu* as a Site of Contested Agency

The findings reveal that *Nyumbantobhu* is not a monolithic practice but a site of contested agency, actively shaped by participating women. This agency is not pre-existing but is constructed and negotiated through social interaction, particularly language. While acknowledging the constraints inherent within this patriarchal system, the research demonstrates how women utilize language and strategic actions to assert control and influence, challenging static interpretations of the practice and showcasing the dynamic interplay between structure and agency. This challenges previous research which often focused on the oppressive aspects, neglecting the agency of women.

5.2 The Central Role of Language in Constructing *Nyumbantobhu*

Nyumbantobhu is not merely a social practice; it is discursively constructed through language. The analysis shows how the terms, narratives, and everyday conversations surrounding *Nyumbantobhu* shape its meaning and impact. This highlights the productive role of language, going beyond merely reflecting social realities to

actively creating them. For instance, the specific terms used to refer to participants in *Nyumbantobhu* are not neutral descriptors but carry culturally loaded meanings that influence how individuals are perceived and treated.

Examining specific examples, *Nyumbantobhu* emerges as a complex social institution where agency is both exercised and contested. While journalistic accounts often depict *Nyumbantobhu* in simplified terms, this research reveals a nuanced reality where Kuria women navigate the practice with varying degrees of agency. Several participants described *Nyumbantobhu* using kinship terms like “daughter-in-law” and “mother-in-law,” highlighting the social legitimacy sought through these linguistic choices. For example, one woman explained, “We call each other daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, just like in a regular marriage. It makes it feel real, like a proper family.” This quote illustrates how women use language to construct their relationships as legitimate and socially recognized, drawing on existing cultural understandings of kinship and marriage. This finding supports Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity, as the act of using these kinship terms reinforces and solidifies the social reality of the *Nyumbantobhu* relationship. However, this act of conforming to traditional kinship language can also be seen as a form of subversion, as women redefine these terms within a same-sex context, challenging heteronormative assumptions about marriage.

5.3 Intersectionality of Experiences within *Nyumbantobhu*

The data reveal diverse and intersectional experiences within *Nyumbantobhu*, shaped by age, marital status, and social class. These categories are not objective facts but are socially constructed, with meanings and implications that vary across contexts. The research shows how these intersecting social categories interact to create unique challenges and opportunities, highlighting the nuanced ways in which power operates and the varying degrees of agency and constraint experienced by different women.

5.4 Language as a Tool for Both Conformity and Subversion

Women in *Nyumbantobhu* use language both to conform to and to subvert traditional expectations. This dual function of language highlights its power to both reinforce and challenge social structures. While some linguistic practices reinforce dominant narratives about *Nyumbantobhu*, others are used to subtly resist and renegotiate those narratives, revealing the dynamic and fluid nature of meaning-making.

Investigating this further, the language surrounding *Nyumbantobhu* also reveals the ongoing negotiation of gender roles. While some terms reinforce traditional gendered expectations, others challenge them. For instance, referring to a *Nyumbantobhu* woman who heads the family and provides care as the “owner of the children” can be seen as both conforming to and subverting traditional gender roles. Adopting the term, traditionally attributed to men, confers a degree of social recognition and legitimacy, while simultaneously challenging the very definition of “husband.” This linguistic ambiguity reflects the fluidity of gender roles within *Nyumbantobhu* and the ways in which women are actively shaping and reshaping these roles through their participation in the practice. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that *Nyumbantobhu* is not a static institution, but rather a dynamic and evolving practice shaped by the agency of Kuria women, their use of language, and the complex interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors.

5.5 The Evolution of Kinship Terms and Shifting Family Dynamics

Analysis of kinship terms within *Nyumbantobhu* reveals shifts in family structures and gender roles. Kinship terms are not fixed; they are socially constructed and evolve to reflect changing social relationships. The research shows how language both reflects and potentially drives these changes, highlighting the dynamic interplay between language, social structure, and cultural change.

The interviews revealed that while *Nyumbantobhu* partnerships do not replace traditional marriage for women, they offer an alternative pathway to security and social recognition within the existing kinship structure. The evolution of kinship terms used within *Nyumbantobhu*, such as the adoption of “wife” and “husband,” illustrates this dynamic. While these terms borrow from traditional marriage, their application in a same-sex context signifies a shift in family dynamics. This finding highlights the complex interplay between tradition and evolving social practices. As one interviewee explained, “It’s not the same as being married to a man, but it’s still a kind of marriage. We have our own family, our own responsibilities.” This statement reflects the way in which women are redefining family structures on their own terms, demonstrating agency within the constraints of existing social norms. Furthermore, the intersectionality of experiences within *Nyumbantobhu* becomes apparent when considering the different motivations women have for entering these relationships. Younger women, for example, may seek economic independence and social autonomy, while older women may prioritize companionship and security in later life. These varying motivations reflect the complex interplay of age, marital status, and social class in shaping women’s choices.

5.6 Gendered Language and the Negotiation of Power

Examining gendered language within the discourse surrounding *Nyumbantobhu* reveals how power relations and social expectations are embedded within linguistic markers. Gender itself is not a fixed biological category but is socially constructed and performed through language. Language constructs and reinforces gender roles within *Nyumbantobhu*, but it can also challenge and subvert these roles, demonstrating the ongoing negotiation of gender and power. This negotiation of power through language is a recurring theme. One participant, for instance, explained how she used specific proverbs to assert her right to inherit land within her *Nyumbantobhu* partnership, directly challenging traditional patriarchal norms. “Our ancestors said...,” she recounted, before reciting a proverb about women’s rights to property. “I reminded my family of this, and they had to listen.” This example illustrates the agency women can exert through language, drawing on cultural traditions to challenge existing power structures. This act of linguistic resistance connects to feminist theories about women’s strategic agency within patriarchal contexts, where they utilize available resources and cultural tools to navigate their circumstances. It also highlights the intersectionality of experiences, as older women, particularly those who have already experienced traditional marriage, often hold more authority and influence within *Nyumbantobhu* partnerships, reflecting the interplay of age and social status.

6 Discussion

This research contributes significantly to understanding *Nyumbantobhu*, challenging existing narratives and offering a nuanced perspective. Building on work highlighting agency (e.g., Martinez 2018), the researcher argues that *Nyumbantobhu* is not a passive adaptation to patriarchal structures, but rather a site of contested agency for Kuria women. While operating within constraints, women actively negotiate roles and identities, using language to assert autonomy and challenge traditional power dynamics. This aligns with feminist theory’s emphasis on agency within oppressive systems and intersectionality’s recognition that experiences are shaped by factors like age, marital status, and social class. Language is a key tool in this negotiation, used for both conformity and subversion. Expanding on Johnstone’s (2018) work on language shaping social reality, I posit that *Nyumbantobhu* is less a static social practice and more a phenomenon discursively constructed through language. The terms, narratives, and everyday conversations surrounding it shape its meaning and impact. This aligns with social constructionism, which views social

phenomena as created and given meaning through interaction and language. The analysis explored how language legitimizes, challenges, or reinterprets *Nyumbantobhu*, revealing its role in maintaining or transforming social norms.

Firstly, *Nyumbantobhu* is demonstrably a site of contested agency. Contrary to portrayals of Kuria women as passive, the findings reveal their active role in negotiating their positions. Acknowledging patriarchal constraints, women strategically utilize language and other actions to assert autonomy. This aligns with feminist theory and challenges studies like Sikira's (2012), which focused primarily on negative aspects like gender-based violence. This research offers a more balanced view, recognizing both constraints and agency within *Nyumbantobhu*. Critically, this contested agency is not fixed, but socially constructed through ongoing interactions and linguistic practices *Nyumbantobhu*.

Secondly, language plays a central role in constructing *Nyumbantobhu*. The practice is not a pre-existing social reality, but is discursively created. Analyzing the terms *Nyumbantobhu*, narratives, and conversations surrounding *Nyumbantobhu* reveals how language shapes its meaning and impact. It is crucial to accurately represent Johnstone's (2018) arguments regarding language's role. This research highlights how language is not merely reflective, but actively productive in shaping social realities. For example, labeling actions or relationships as "*Nyumbantobhu*" imbues them with specific social meaning, distinguishing them and influencing understanding and experience.

Thirdly, experiences within *Nyumbantobhu* are profoundly intersectional. The findings reveal diverse experiences shaped by the interplay of age, marital status, and social class. This intersectional lens reveals how power operates, moving beyond essentialist notions of "women" and showing varying degrees of agency and constraint. Younger women, for instance, may face different challenges and opportunities than older women. These categories (age, marital status, social class) are themselves socially constructed, with meanings and implications varying across contexts. Their intersection creates unique experiences, demonstrating the socially constructed nature of realities within *Nyumbantobhu*.

Fourthly, language functions as a tool for both conformity and subversion within *Nyumbantobhu*. While some linguistic practices reinforce traditional power dynamics, women also strategically use language to subtly challenge these structures. This nuanced understanding of language use, as discussed by (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013), moves beyond simplistic views of language as either solely oppressive or liberatory. The study reveals the complex and multifaceted nature of language as a site of both resistance and accommodation. This duality of language use directly reflects the social constructionist view that language is not simply a tool for reflecting reality but is actively involved in shaping and negotiating it.

Fifthly, exploring kinship reveals the evolution of kinship terms and its relation to shifting family dynamics. Analyzing how kinship terms have changed within *Nyumbantobhu* reveals shifts in family structures and gender roles. This connects with Goody's (1980) work, showing how language reflects and potentially influences changes in social relations, contributing to a deeper understanding of kinship, language, and social change within *Nyumbantobhu*. These kinship terms are socially constructed, changing over time to reflect evolving relationships.

Finally, the research examines gendered language and the negotiation of power. The study reveals how power relations and social expectations are embedded within linguistic markers, building on Lakoff's (1975) work on language and gender. By applying this framework to *Nyumbantobhu*, the study clarifies how gender is performed and negotiated through language within this specific practice. This contributes to a richer understanding of gender dynamics beyond general theories, showing how they operate within this particular cultural context. From a social constructionist perspective, gender itself is not a fixed biological category but is socially constructed and performed through language. The study shows how language is used to construct and reinforce gender roles within *Nyumbantobhu*, but also how it can be used to challenge and subvert these roles, demonstrating the ongoing negotiation of gender and power through language.

While offering valuable insights, this research has limitations. A key limitation stems from inherent power dynamics within the community. Participants, particularly women in *Nyumbantobhu* relationships, may not have felt entirely free to share their experiences openly. Several factors could have contributed to this. Firstly, the sensitive nature of the topic itself might have led to self-censorship, as individuals may have been hesitant to share personal details due to concerns about social stigma or repercussions within their community. Secondly, the presence of community leaders or other influential figures during some interviews, while intended to provide context and support, may have inadvertently constrained participants' willingness to express dissenting or critical views. The hierarchical nature of Kuria society, where respect for elders and authority figures is paramount, could have further amplified this dynamic. Finally, the researcher's position as outsiders, despite efforts to build rapport and trust, may have created a perceived power imbalance, potentially influencing the narratives. Participants might have felt pressure to present a particular image of *Nyumbantobhu*, either positive or negative, depending on their perceptions of the researcher's views.

Restricted narratives challenge the study's generalizability. While the findings offer valuable insights into the experiences of the women who participated, they may not fully represent the diverse range of perspectives and experiences within the community. Future research could explore alternative data collection methods, such as anonymous surveys or focus groups, to potentially mitigate these limitations and

encourage more open and honest dialogue. Furthermore, longitudinal studies that involve sustained engagement with the community could help build deeper trust and potentially facilitate more candid narratives over time. It is also important to acknowledge that the researcher's interpretations of the interview data are inherently subjective. While every effort was made to analyze the data rigorously and reflexively, the researcher's own biases and cultural perspectives may have influenced the analysis. Transparency in the research process, including detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis methods, is crucial for allowing readers to critically evaluate the findings and draw their own conclusions.

This study is deeply rooted in the theoretical framework of social constructionism. Social constructionism posits that social phenomena, including complex practices like *Nyumbantobhu*, are not simply objective realities but are actively created and given meaning through social interaction and, crucially, language. This theoretical lens emphasizes the powerful role of language, discourse, and shared understandings in shaping our perceptions of the world and the social structures we inhabit. Within the context of *Nyumbantobhu*, social constructionism provides a crucial framework for understanding how the practice is not merely a set of actions, but is imbued with meaning through the language used to describe it, the narratives told about it, and the ongoing conversations surrounding it. This discussion has explored how our findings illuminate how our findings illuminate how language constructs and shapes the reality of *Nyumbantobhu*. This demonstrates the theory's explanatory power in this specific cultural context.

Our findings strongly support the tenets of social constructionism. The research demonstrates how language actively constructs the reality of *Nyumbantobhu*. For example, the study reveals how the very terms used to describe roles within the practice (e.g., "daughter-in-law," "grandmother") are not neutral labels but carry significant cultural weight and contribute to the construction of social identities. The narratives surrounding *Nyumbantobhu*, often recounted in everyday conversations and oral traditions, further shape its meaning, transmitting and reinforcing social norms and expectations. Moreover, the study shows how language is used to negotiate the legitimacy of *Nyumbantobhu*, with different actors using language to either uphold or challenge its traditional interpretations. This linguistic activity is not merely reflective of pre-existing social realities; it is actively constitutive of them. The findings suggest that *Nyumbantobhu* is not a static entity but is constantly.

7 Conclusions

This research fundamentally reshapes understanding of *Nyumbantobhu*, moving beyond simplistic portrayals to reveal its complexity and dynamism. Contrary to

viewing Kuria women as passive, this research demonstrates that *Nyumbantobhu* is a site of contested agency. Women actively negotiate roles and identities, employing strategic linguistic practices and actions to assert influence, even within patriarchal constraints. Crucially, this work illuminates language's central role in constructing *Nyumbantobhu*'s meaning. Social constructionism reveals that language actively shapes perceptions and understandings of *Nyumbantobhu*, rather than merely reflecting social reality.

This research also highlighted the intersectional experiences within *Nyumbantobhu*, shaped by factors like age, marital status, and social class. Moving beyond essentialist notions of "women," the findings reveal power's diverse operation within this context. Moreover, it demonstrated language's dualistic role as a tool for both conformity and subversion. Women strategically utilize language to adhere to certain norms while simultaneously challenging others, revealing linguistic practice's complexity as a site of both resistance and accommodation.

Additionally, the evolving landscape of kinship terms and shifting family dynamics within *Nyumbantobhu* was also explored. Analyzing how language reflects and influences social relations illuminated cultural practices' dynamism. The examination of gendered language revealed how power relations and social expectations are embedded within linguistic markers, demonstrating gender's performative nature within this context. Integrating feminist theory, intersectionality, social constructionism, and linguistic analysis, this research provides a deeper, more nuanced understanding of *Nyumbantobhu*.

In conclusion, this research contributes significantly to *Nyumbantobhu* literature by demonstrating the need to move beyond static interpretations of cultural practices. It has revealed the dynamic interplay of agency, language, and social construction in shaping women's experiences and challenging established power structures. Beyond *Nyumbantobhu*'s specific context, this research advances broader scholarly conversations about gender, language, and social change, offering valuable insights into how these elements interact to shape social realities. This research underscores the importance of nuanced, context-specific analyses in understanding complex social phenomena.

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