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## The semiotics of space and time in the Turkana traditional marriage ceremony

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#### Abstract

This paper discusses the semiotic use of time and space among the Turkana during *Akuuta*, the traditional marriage ceremony. All through the ceremony that lasts three days and takes place in the open, the sequence of processes and positioning of participants are regulated mostly by time and space. As a ritual, marriage ceremonies reflect a people's culture, beliefs and attitudes hence deserving analysis from a literary perspective. The data analysed in this paper was collected through observation of a traditional marriage ceremony in Turkana County, Kenya. The study is guided by Umberto Eco's Theory of Semiotics that calls for the treatment of every cultural phenomenon as communicative and meaning making. The findings reveal that the use of space and time, movements, and actions performed within the ceremonial space convey meanings related to love, commitment, fertility, and social cohesion. For example, the exchange of gifts, the tying of ceremonial knots, and the sharing of symbolic foods all carry deep cultural significance within the Turkana marriage ceremony.



## Introduction

Semiotics refers to the “entire sphere of knowledge about signs including their partial descriptions, general theories explaining the nature of the sign connection, as well as the philosophical foundation of these theories” (Tchertov, 2019, p.4). Semiotics, an interdisciplinary theory, is a branch of knowledge as well as a new methodology. It is applied in three main areas of study: Cognitive Semiotics which focuses on meaning exists and works in human minds (Brandt, 2011), Social and Cultural Semiotics which focuses on how sign systems develop and are used in specific social circumstances in a given culture (Thibault, 2014), and Visual Semiotics that focuses on non-linguistic visual signs in art and design (Ribere, 2002). In this paper, the semiotic analysis of the Turkana traditional marriage ceremony falls under social and cultural semiotics with the marriage ceremony is taken as a performed literary text.

As a ritual, marriage has been present since the history of most cultures and the processes involved and codes employed vary from one people to another. Though the fundamental elements may vary, components such as time and space are fixed by tradition and habit. Leeds-Hurwitz (2002) observes that weddings are comprised of numerous elements that evoke countless cultural codes. For Nanda and Warms (2009, p.144) marriage is viewed as “the customs, rules, and obligations that establish a socially endorsed relationship between the kin groups of the married partners.” Memani (2017) concurs and adds that weddings are sites that are embedded with cultural symbolism.

Marriage ceremonies take place within specific time frames and physical spaces where participants take specific positions and roles to play all regulated by cultural norms. Space can only be viewed as a semiotic phenomenon once it is examined in relation to other objects (Gaines, 2013). These objects could be individuals, buildings or anything that occupy space and what they stand for can only be derived when the relationship between the objects is given meaning by a people. Many great thinkers including Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Peirce, Foucault and Eco have shared their thoughts on the perception of space as a background to other objects and relationships (Houser, 1992). According to Peirce, the categories of signs can be understood when they are examined (i) as independent entities (*firstness*), (ii) as relative to something else (*secondness*) and (iii) as mediators between two other entities (*thirdness*). When examining space as a sign, we can only examine it as “relative to something else” and as mediated by other objects or people.

With regard to space in social events like marriage ceremonies, individuals take up positions in relation to other individuals and structures such as altars or houses that are distributed within the geographical space where the event takes place. Foucault (1993, p. 169) asserts that the use of space is social relations in play and “it brings about special effects”. This assertion refers to power relations brought about through the distribution of people within a specific space. Meanings attached to space as a sign are therefore socially constructed and controlled by humans. This paper therefore examines the use of space and time in the creation of meaning during the Turkana traditional wedding ceremony.

## Theoretical framework

This study is guided by Umberto Eco’s *Theory of Semiotics*. Eco based his theory on the works of Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure. According to Saussure (1971), the patriarch of modern linguistics and a great influence in the development of literary theories, linguistics is not the only science interested in signs used in communication, but a branch of a broader science that examines sign systems which he refers to as semiology. Building on Saussure’s work, Eco (1979, p. 7) explains that ‘semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else’. This explanation by Eco (1979) is echoed by subsequent semioticians who equally hold the view that language does not have a monopoly on meaning-making (Segal, 1983).

For Eco (1976) semiotics is strictly cultural in nature and he emphasizes on the impossibility of explaining semiosis outside the cultural logic within which it finds its existence. In other words, meanings attached to signs are conventionally agreed upon by members of a group. This therefore means that the meanings are culture-specific. Eco advocates for the study of signs in context because when detached from

the living texture of the text, signs are converted into dead and meaningless conventions (Eco, 1981). In underscoring the usefulness of semiotics as a field, he further adds that “semiotics is also a form of social criticism and therefore one among the many forms of social practice” (p. 298). Lorusso (2015) explains that, for Eco, semiotics is important in unearthing meanings in the study of culture, and on account of its critical nature, it becomes important in effectively understanding hidden meanings.

According to Eco (1981) every cultural phenomenon is communicative. He posits that “a theory of communication is dialectically linked to a theory of signification, and a theory of signification should be first of all a theory of signs” (p. 37). Communication presupposes the presence of a source of the message (signal) and the audience (the recipient), and this audience is the humans who then interpret the message by means of a code. The code systemizes the signal so that it can be received in the absence of those entities which it represents or stands for. Therefore the code is the necessary component for the signification. A sign thus only exists when there is a link between the signal and its correlate is explicated for possible human cognition by means of the code.

Semiotic studies allow a researcher to select from three levels of generalizations; semiographical, semiological and semiosophical (Tchertov, 2019). The semiographical level entails the description of definite signs and sign systems. The semiological level builds on the semiographical level for this is where research is undertaken on the concepts used for descriptions. Semiology entails the construction of theoretical models that describe the structural organization and function of these means. It is in this semiological level that comparative analysis of organizing sign systems of different types and investigations of possible forms of their interaction when various sign constructions are built. The semiosophical level is where discussions are done on the philosophical reasons for selection of those concepts. In this study, analysis at all the three levels is attempted. Therefore, for this study the semiographical level deals with the description of the use of time and space as observed in the traditional wedding. The semiological level gives an explanation on the people’s reasons behind the signs and finally at the semiosophical level discussions are undertaken with regards to the reasons.

### **Description of Turkana Marriage process**

The Turkana marriage ceremony observed in this study is called *Akuuta*. While in other communities the marriage ceremony marks the beginning of cohabitation between the bride and the groom, for the Turkana the wedding takes after many years of cohabitation. This is most likely due to the amount of wealth one is expected to possess so as to pay dowry. It is possible to have a couple cohabit till old age and never get to perform *akuuta* (the wedding ceremony) and in this case, the children born out of the relationship belong to the woman’s clan. Shell-Duncan and Wimmer (1999) observe that it is common to have premarital births in the Turkana community and it is only upon marriage that a man can obtain custody by paying dowry.

Ideally, when a young man is ready to marry, he approaches the father of the woman he will have identified. The approval by the parents of the bride serves as a marriage contract as the bride price expressed in terms of heads of cattle is expressed. A day is fixed when the groom’s family goes to the bride’s family and during negotiations for bride price, the groom presents gifts in the form of tobacco, tea leaves, clothes and blankets to the bride’s family. The bride price is not fixed and sometimes could be as high as hundreds of heads of livestock mostly cattle, camels, goats and sheep. The bride is then “kidnapped” with her consent from her parents home. The elders then bless the ceremony by slaughtering an ox, more of as sacrifice in the blessing ritual. The bride is then stripped of all beads and jewelry and given to the groom’s female relatives especially sisters, cousins and aunts. Fathers adorn their daughters with beads as a sign of boasting of his wealth and expect to attract a higher bride price based on the much he will have spent on his daughter. Once married, it will be her husband’s responsibility to buy beads for his wife and his turn to show off his wealth by the much he spends on making her beautiful.

However, given the present age (21<sup>st</sup> Century) changes in society, characterized by decline in wealth, the bride price is not paid at the beginning of the marriage process. Once the groom obtains the bride’s

father's consent they can move in together as preparation for paying the bride price continue.

### *The first day*

The ceremony is timed to start at the beginning of the moon cycle. The exact dates for the beginning of the wedding are not fixed, but are rather given an approximate time around the first few days after the appearance of the new moon. The observation of the phases of the moon is crucial among pastoralist communities for it is closely linked to seasons.

Among the Turkana, the moon is a deity to whom the people turn to, literally, for blessings. An individual, upon sighting the moon, stands facing it and utters a prayer like, “*Nakinae akiyiar, nakinae ng'ibaren.*” (Give me blessings, give me wealth). Another example of a prayer includes “May this new moon bring me blessings”. When the moon tilts to the right, the people say “the moon has given us favour as a tribe” and when it tilts westwards where their enemies are, they say “the moon has ‘warded off’ our enemies”. The Turkana belief that, by the time man sees the moon, animals had seen it a week earlier. This tilting to the right and to the left is in reference to the moon's waning and waxing crescents that have been associated with the beginning and end of life.

On this first day, upon arrival at the bride's home, members of the groom's party ensure that they settle on the eastern side in such a manner that anyone standing at the bride's homestead has to face East to see them. During *akichum ekumae*, the first ritual in the three-day event, women drive sheep to the bride's homestead. Their movement from the direction of the groom's family is such that they approach the bride's homestead from the East. They slaughter the sheep and cook, but do not stay around to consume it for it is meant for the bride's family. As darkness sets in, the women from the groom's family head back to their camp, leaving the homestead following a path leading eastwards.

### *The second day*

The second day of the ceremony starts at sunrise and the main highlight is the slaughtering of an ox by the groom for his peers and in-laws. This ritual referred to as “*akichum emong*” done inside the animals shed (Some regions of Turkana generalize and refer to all rituals pertaining to slaughter of animals as *akichum ekumae*). The ox is driven by men of the groom's patrilineal lineage to an enclosure at the centre of the homestead where it is speared and once dead, the men ensure that lies on its right before it is skillfully skinned. All this while, selected men sit in a semi-circle, *akiriket*, with their faces the early morning sun. Prayers are uttered by the elders who from time to time gesture at the sun. After the sharing of the meat to the various groups (aunts, bride's parents, uncles etc.), the participants in the ceremony dance out in the open sun, spread out in a circle and always ensuring that the groom and his best men face the East. In the evening as the sun sets, the dances stop and the members retire to their various camps within the compound. Goats, provided by the groom, are slaughtered in each group such that at the end of the ceremony more than fifty goats will have been slaughtered. The meat is eaten roasted or boiled. Men mostly eat their meat roasted and women have theirs boiled.

### *The third day*

On the third morning, there is a “handing over” ceremony of the bride to her husband. The groom and his people approach the bride's homestead from the east. A hide provided by the bride's family is laid out on the ground such that it serves as an altar of sorts, where the oldmen stand on as they perform the “blessings” ritual. The groom, his bride, children and accompanying family members stand facing the morning sun such that the sun's rays are fully on their faces. The oldmen apply *emunyaen*, a mix of water and grey ochre, on the forehead, exposed chests and stomachs of the groom, bride and their children as they utter words of blessings. The ritual is referred to as *akiwos emunyaen* and in some instances the content of animal entrails is smeared on the groom, his bride and children to symbolize approval by the elders and subsequently blessings to start the new family. For cases where the couple already had children, the children officially belong to the

man's family after this ritual. Once the ceremony is done, the groom, now having been officially given his wife, leads the entourage to the East. Women chant praises of the bride, her aunts beg the bride to remain, but the husbands' female relatives urge her own as they troop eastwards, symbolizing the official departure to her "new" home: her husband's home.

### Discussions on the use of space and time

#### *The right hand and the East*

For the Turkana people, it is evident that there is strict adherence to the use of east and west direction which goes hand in hand with the use of the celestial bodies, that is, the sun and the moon. The set up of the wedding space is such that, upon arrival at the bride's family, the groom's party ensures that they settle on the eastern side in such a manner that anyone standing at the bride's homestead has to face East to see them. Even as the groom's family settles, men and women in separate camps, they ensure that men are to the right and women to the left.

Lienard (2004) observes that two fundamental directional axes determine all the representations Turkana visions of space. The first of these axes is modeled on the path of the sun from east (*kide*) to west (*too*). The other relates to the courses of rivers, upstream (*kuju*) downstream (*kwap*), which in Turkana approximately follow a southwest/northeast (with, of course, local and regional variations). In the daily pastoral, these two axes are regularly called upon to guide action. The herds require pastures but also large quantities of water. This is why the migrations seem to take place along (or near) river basins in the beds from which wells can be dug. The general direction of movement of camps and herds will therefore very often be specified in terms of movement upstream (*akilot kaju*) or downstream (*akilot kwap*).

During *Lokururet*, the first process in the three-day event, women from the groom's family approach the bride's homestead from the east heading west towards the rising moon. When heading back to their camp, the women leave eastwards on a different path as illustrated below.

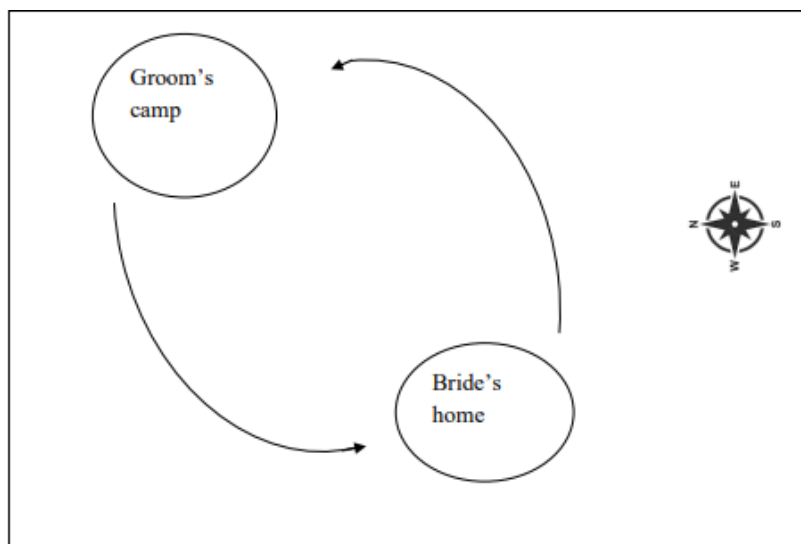


Fig. 1. Path followed by women from groom's family during *Lokururet* (Authors, 2023)

In the bride's homestead, the set up obeys the same use of right and left, east and west. The men occupy spaces to the right and to the east. The men's sitting space, *akiriket*, is to the east facing the two wives' huts. The elder wife's hut is to the right hand of the *akiriket* while the younger wife's hut is to the left. The entrances to the huts face the rising sun's direction. The opening to the clearing used for the ritual of the killing the bull by the groom's party on the second day of the wedding faces the sun too. The fence cordoning off this space is made from thorny branches cut from the nearby bushes and placed in a circle.

### *Sitting arrangement*

The men during this marriage ceremony sit in a semicircle facing the east, too. The arrangement of the ritual space is undertaken by non-initiates. A semi-circle of *edome* branches (*Cordia sinensis*) is placed on the ground, to the west of the ritual area, close to the hut of the bride's mother. The tree species could vary depending on the region because (Ejore, Ongugo, Kemboi, Ogunga, Mwenja, & Owino, 2020). Two rows of men sit in a semi-circle behind the row of laid down branches. At the centre of the front row in the semicircle, the *akiriket*, is the senior most member among those present. Seniority in this context is determined by who first performed *esapan*, the Turkana rite of passage into adulthood. The second person sits to his right then the next to his left and it continuous alternating that way till everyone involved in the event is seated. The two agesets *ng'imoru* and *ngirisae* occupy a row each; the elders at the front and the younger ones at the/ back row. The agesets are distinguished by the colour of ostrich feathers on their head gear; the older men the age of the parents, (*ng'imoru*), have black feathers while the groom's party (*ngirisae*) wear brown, pink or grey coloured feathers. Though not the focus of this paper, it is worth mentioning that the use of the different colours of ostrich feathers is another semiotic sign employed by the Turkana to distinguish between age sets. The front row is occupied by the ageset of the groom and bride's parents, while the second row is occupied by the groom's agemates. The groom, sandwiched between his two best men, are seated at the centre in *shukas* that are of a different colour from the rest of the men in the row. The centre as a position is used symbolically to communicate one's social status, position in society and age.

### *Sacred and symbolic spaces*

Padoan (2021) posits that "space is not only constructed but also endowed with agency". That is to say space has the capacity to contribute to meaning-making when interpretations are made in relation to other objects. For example, while the marriage ceremony takes place in open spaces with no physical barriers, participants have the choice of designating particular spots to symbolically represent a given space as a court, an altar, a path or home. Among the Turkana, land is communally owned and when fences are constructed, it is mostly around the animal enclosures; therefore events such as marriage ceremonies can occupy as much space as desired. Even so, it was observed that there were fixed spots and paths (with no physical marking) where participants moved to and from throughout the ceremony.

The elderly preside over any type of ceremony or party and make any important decision in relation to the community. Oldmen sit outside the bride's hut to address any issues arising in the course of the ceremony. Their number is always odd, that is, they either sit in threes, fives, sevens and so on. This space occupied by the oldmen serves as an open court. In this particular wedding observed in the collection of data for this paper, a dispute arose during the first evening's ceremony when sheep were bring driven to the bride's mother. The bride's male relatives blocked the entourage from the groom's family because there were relatives who had not received their portion of the dowry. The oldmen stepped in and after deliberations, it was agreed that the ceremony proceeds while the groom's family sort the issue overnight.

Another instance of a sacred space is observed during the *akiwos emunyen* (smearing of grey ochre) ritual which takes place on the third day. The hide laid out for the newlyweds and their children is treated as an altar where elders stand saying prayers and giving blessings to the new couple. The use of cowhides in rituals is widespread among most nilotic people to whom cattle are revered and treated as sacred.

### *Celestial bodies and their connection to life and death*

Among many African traditional societies, the sun, the moon, stars and planets are deeply intertwined with beliefs, rituals, and cosmological understandings related to life, death and wider human existence and experience. For the Turkana people, life is closely linked to these celestial bodies. As Oxby (1998) puts it, social relations are coordinated and organized in periods defined by light and darkness. Time is measured in terms of market days (a week as the period between one market day and the next), the month is marked

by the moon cycle and the year is made up of 12 complete moon cycles. For the Turkana, the year is divided into two “years”; the dry year and the wet year. Korobe (2021) discusses in detail the naming of the months in Turkana which reflects the seasonal changes as well as the socio-economic and cultural activities people engage in at different times during the year.

In an attempt at the semiosophical analysis, that is to understand why the moon is considered in the timing of the wedding among the Turkana. Equally, there is need to examine this element in relation to the culture of the people. There is little written about the Turkana and hence the need for a link to the other Nilotic communities and by extension ancient Egyptian culture: their common origin. At the same time, since no records exist from ancient Egypt, a link to other Mediterranean cultures would be fruitful for there is evidence that cultures along the mediterranean borrowed heavily from ancient Egypt particularly the Greeks and later the Romans. Vella (2019) in her study documents the aspects of culture that Rome adopted from Ancient Greece which in turn had borrowed heavily from ancient Egypt.

The moon in ancient Egypt was a god of virility and fertility, motherhood, rebirth, birth cycle. During the New Kingdom of Egypt, Khonsu was worshiped not only as the moon god, but also as a god of love and fertility (Mark, 2016). It was not uncommon for civilizations to link the moon and fertility, as the moon was believed to be associated with menstrual cycles. According to Garcia-Fernandez (2015), the moon in ancient Egypt did not only mark the passing of time, but also ruled the ritual realm. It was a male god and mostly represented as a youthful man, possibly because it was also associated with rejuvenation. Marriage ceremonies are dependent on the moon cycle. The exact dates of the ceremony are not given by the elders until there is a sighting. Besides marriage ceremonies, the lunar phases serve as markers of other cultural events such as *asapan*, the initiation ceremony, and rituals honoring ancestors.

### *Triangles, Circles and arcs in marriage rituals*

It is believed that there existed a people quite advanced in the past with advanced technological expertise that account for the construction of the pyramids, mathematical equations still in use today, and writings on stone historical monuments across the globe. Since we do not have records from these ancient times, we must rely on archeologists and oral history, and in this study we add semiotics and semiosophical deductions and inferences. When asked for reasons behind constructing a circular hut, for example, people often respond that they found it done that way by those who preceded them. While they may not have explanations at the moment, connections may be made to other concepts in the world in the world.

From observations made during the Turkana marriage ceremony for this study, there were many instances when shapes were employed whether is spatial arrangements, dance patterns, drawings on surfaces or carvings, as well as moldings of tangible objects. For instance, during the Turkana wedding dances, the performers were arranged in a circle with the soloist(s) at the centre. Dances involved foot stumps, jumps into the air and displacement in back and forth movements as well as sideways while always maintaining the shape of the circle.

The divine connection between shapes and man has been a subject of study since antiquity. Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of a circle around the Vitruvian man (circa 1490). He came up with the concept of squaring the circle – a male figure perfectly inscribed inside a circle and a square to illustrate the connection between humans and the universe. According to Isaacson (2017) who did a book on Da Vinci, the Vitruvian man encoded within it the Great Pyramid of Giza. The Vitruvian man's angle between the vertical line to the navel and the one from the navel to the tip of the right hand touching the circle is the exact figure as that of the side slope pyramid, that is, 51.843 degrees. The great pyramid embodies the ratio of the radiuses of the earth and moon. This is purely meant to illustrate the link between shapes, divinity, celestial bodies and man's interest in meaning making and interpretation.

The Turkana wedding ring, *alagama*, worn by women around their necks are circular. Apart from the practicality of wearing a circular shape around the neck, there is the association of circles with perfection. The circle is taken as a perfect shape and also that a circle has neither a beginning nor an end. In

ancient civilizations, circles, spherical shapes and circular patterns represent the cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth. In ancient Egyptian religion, the symbol of the “ankh” resembles a looped cross, representing life and immortality. In Mesopotamian mythology, the “ouroboros”, a serpent or dragon eating its tail, represented the cyclical nature of time and eternal cycle of creation, destruction and renewal. In ancient Greek religion, the “cosmic egg” symbolized the universe’s primordial state before creation and therefore the perfect spherical or circular shape of the egg represented the potential for new life and the unity of all existence. The circular shapes and patterns in marriage ceremonies are not by arbitrarily used, but rather find their legitimacy in the significant position marriages occupy in the creation of life hence completing the cyclical nature of life and death. Besides symbolizing infinity, circles also symbolize unity and solidarity among a people. Marriages are covenants between two people and by extension their families and larger community.

### **Conclusion**

By analyzing the semiotics of space and time in the Turkana marriage ceremony, we gain insight into how cultural meanings and values are embodied, enacted and transmitted through spatial arrangements and temporal rhythms within the rich and vibrant cultural tradition. The use of space and time, movements, and actions performed within the ceremonial space convey meanings related to love, commitment, fertility, and social cohesion. For example, the exchange of gifts, the tying of ceremonial knots, and the sharing of symbolic foods all carry deep cultural significance within the Turkana marriage ceremony.



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