



Reawakening Identity: A Study of Use of Proverbs as a Tool in the Performance of the Bukusu After-Burial Oratory Performance (*Khuswala Kumuse*)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines proverbs as used in the Bukusu after-burial oratory performance not just as a specialized performed or coded discourse but as a verbalized and creative genre. Proverbs in the African context are usually acquired and learnt from listening to the elders' talk. The elders are the masters of eloquence, rhetoric and meaning given the vintage position they hold in the African traditional society. Among the Bukusu community, proverbs play an important role in demonstrating the richness of the Bukusu culture. During the after-burial ceremony, the orator uses proverbs to establish a dialogue between himself and the congregation as well as a rhetoric flare where he applies to emphasize a point or a lesson. This paper seeks to investigate how the proverbs are effectively used in the performance of the Bukusu funeral oratory

to contribute to the overall understanding of the Bukusu community both by the Bukusu people and the other communities. The paper identifies and demonstrates the vitality of proverbs in negotiating meaning and re-awakening memory among the Bukusu concerning their identity through the performance of the after-burial oratory *kumuse*. Proverbs are used in *kumuse* as a source of wisdom. The elders use them during the performance of the after-burial oratory to teach values to young people as well as leaders in the community. Proverbs are therefore very important in the performance of *kumuse* ritual among the Bukusu.

Keywords: *Bukusu, Identity, Kumuse, Memory, Oratory, Performance, Ritual*

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Theoretical Framework

This paper will use the theory of cultural memory because of the role of *kumuse* performance in reawakening the memory of the Bukusu community from collective dememorization. This is explained by Edric Caldicott and Ann Fuchs when they argue that the proliferation of theories of cultural memory in particular has been fuelled by the perception that digital technology has created a shift of paradigm which affects the negotiation and articulation of our cultural identities.

Introduction

Death is and has remained one of the most mysterious occurrences to mankind since time immemorial. Because of its nature people all over the world from diverse communities have invented various ways by which to keep the spirit of death at bay. Apparently these approaches play a key role in bringing out the identity of different communities.

The Bukusu society is seen as one of the communities that constitute a uniquely diverse and “stimulating” artistic tradition. One of the traditions is the performance of the funeral oratory. The funeral oratory performance *Khuswala kumuse* is a rare, elaborate and lengthy ceremony performed in honor of a respected Bukusu elder. It is a significant ritual among the Bukusu sub-clan of the Luhya community. The role of *kumuse* goes beyond appeasing the dead and exorcising the spirit of death. The age-old rite has been placed at the centre of the Bukusu community for a long time. The centrality of *kumuse* oratory performance is pegged on the role and ability of the orator to use language eloquently in constructing meaning that enables the community to understand itself hence making identity a major phenomenon. The ritual plays a crucial role in defining the community in terms of how it relates with itself, other communities as well as its overall view of the world. It is noted that the ritual is a form of societal epic in that it recreates the history of Babukusu as it gets passed on from one generation to another. In the oration the performer eloquently highlights the social values and history of the Babukusu. The oratory also contains myths, legends, genealogies, proverbs and other forms of oral tradition. It brings out the identity of the Bukusu community through its content which includes the social, historical, economical, religious and political aspects.

Through the oratory, the people are made to remember their history which may have been fading with time. The Bukusu identify and pride themselves in eloquence, wisdom, narratives, use of proverbs and enigmas such that a person endowed with such a gift is held in high esteem. Proverbs are common features of conversational eloquence in many African cultures.

Kumuse context

The funeral oratory ceremony is performed on the third day after burial (*lufu*) of respected males in the clan who have displayed certain leadership qualities in their time. It is a special ritual performed in honor of departed male elders from respected clans who displayed leadership qualities. *Kumuse* is only staged for people who have participated in the process of procreation who have left behind children to continue the life of the clan community in various capacities as warriors, leaders, wives, etc. Excluded from this ritual are *abasumba* (bachelors), children and childless women. Also excluded are wayward individuals such as those dabbling in witchcraft and sorcery, thieves, murderers or those murdered, struck by lightning or commit suicide.

The funeral oratory ceremony *Khuswala kumuse* starts at around 8am in the deceased's home and lasts three hours. When the performer *oswala kumuse* arrives in the homestead, he finds everybody seated patiently waiting for him. The congregation (mourners) usually sit in a semi-circle, with women and children occupying the left side of the circle while men the right. The widow(s) and children join the women to sit on the left side with their legs stretched before them.

Before starting the oration, the performer walks to and fro in the middle of the circle in silence creating a line using his staff. The line is called *kumuse*. At the end of the line created, the performer drives the staff into the ground. The hole created by the staff marks the end of *kumuse*. On the path created, the performer (the *oswala kumuse*) will walk and trod throughout the session. He speaks for the first time while walking back from the small hole created by the staff. (Wanjala, 1985:8).

In most cases, the oral artist begins his oration by commenting on the nature of death. He reminds people that they are all mortal and that death has been in existence since time immemorial. Death is depicted as unavoidable. *Oswala kumuse* therefore encourages people to take heart and never lose hope. He also counsels and consoles the bereaved. He preaches against social ills such as laziness, extravagance, bearing false witness, contempt towards the poor, witchcraft, theft, envy, violence, loose morals, and lack of respect for elders. He does also narrate the history of the tribe, its heroes, social organizations and traditions (Maelo 2014).

Towards the end of the performance, *oswala kumuse* runs three times from one end of the *kumuse* to the other. This process is referred to as *khusoma* (wandering). This is the time he specifically mourns the deceased since he is not supposed to shed tears like other ordinary people. To do so, would mean to appear weak before the very people he is meant to protect. At this stage, he beseeches God to take care of the bereaved and welcome home the deceased. He says, “*oli khumuliango kwase okhong’onda nakhong’onda khumuliango, ikulae*”(you said that whoever is on my door and knocks, I will open for him, God our father, see I knock on the door, open the door and let it remain wide open). Most endings of Manguliechi's *kumuse* performances were characterized by his abrupt exit from the arena after which everyone in the audience was expected to stand up immediately and anyone who remained seated risked a tragic misfortune befalling him/her family.

The Oral Artist

The task of performing the oratory is not given to anybody. As Maelo(2014) emphasizes, “...the performance is oral art work that is quite elaborate and sophisticated with a specialized mode of expression mastered only by the initiated-expert.” This art of oratory is obtained through inheritance either from one's paternal or maternal clan. Wanjala (1985: 84) points out clearly who qualifies to perform the ritual and, a member of non-performing clans who tries the ritual garb on and attempts to perform will drop dead in the arena. The performer of funeral oratory is regarded as the custodian of history of the Bukusu people and therefore has to prove himself so by showing a high level of artistry and craftsmanship in the use of proverbs during the performance. This also helps in holding the attention of the audience during the performance. This oration presents a truer picture of popular beliefs about death, myths, traditional songs and modern poetry (Maelo,2014)

There are very severe taboos concerning the *kumuse* regalia, the performer and audience. The oratory specialist is known by almost everybody in the community and

regarded with a lot of awe just like the griots in West Africa. He has a place reserved for him in the audience.

He is a powerful figure, a religious icon, a seer, a prophet. *Oswala kumuse* is a leader of great wisdom. He is admired, revered and even feared by the society. He is an opinion shaper; his oratory influences the attitudes, thoughts and actions of the members of the Bukusu society. The performer is a bearer of the fire. He alone knows the mystery of the supernatural. He is such an important functionary, who, in fact belongs to the sacred order. He has direct access to members of his lineage in the spirit world. He plays a role of being an intermediary of the living and the ancestors. The ritual oratory is therefore one of the means through which the profane world is brought into contact with the sacred world. (Maelo, 2014)

As Wanjala (1985:82) puts it, *oswala kumuse* can be compared to the ministerial and master of ceremonies among the Luo. The ritual performer is specialized and initiated in the traditions of the ritual and he enjoys prestige status as a wise person, hired and paid for his services. He is such a truly encyclopedic person, with rich and sharp knowledge about all aspects of his community. The performer is a supreme elder when it comes to the use of proverbs; he uses them more than an average elder.

A proverb according to Akporobaro F.B.O (2008) is a short popular saying usually in the form of a short moral advice or truth expressed in a concise form. He goes further to describe it as a means by which ideas could be vividly expressed and illustrated. This is what is witnessed in the after-burial oratory performance of *kuswala kumuse* where proverbs are used by the orator in-between the performance to drive a point home. For instance, the Bukusu proverb, “*Silayi munambale kumunyu*” (The only good thing in *nambale* fish is its soup). This is an illustration to show the importance of humility and sharing among the Bukusu. The proverb on *nambale* is used to highlight the cultural virtues of humility and selflessness; that a person is judged not by his/her physical size but the content of character (Wasike 2013).

Yisa, K.Y (1998) asserts that a proverb is a short repeated witty statement of experience which is used to further a social end. He further argues that they are short, cleverly constructed belief statements which are used to perform different functions in society. The functions may include teaching, rebuking, correcting or praising a person for showing desired values. On the other hand, proverbs may help the user to say unpleasant things in an ameliorated manner (Alimi 2012). This is because they are mostly associated with traditional wisdom or attitude.

Crystal Davis (1995:184) comments on the nature of the proverbs: The effectiveness of a proverb lies largely in its brevity and directness. The syntax is simple, the images vivid, and thus easy to understand. Memorability is aided through the use of alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm.

Proverbs are common features of conversational eloquence in many African cultures. As Hazel (2012) correctly puts, “African proverbs and stories draw upon the collective wisdom of oral peoples, express their "structures of meaning, feeling, thought, and expression," and thus serve important social and ethical purposes.” That notwithstanding, the use of proverbs is inevitable because they are highly prized in the traditional African society and are used to portray certain actions or events in picturesque manner (Alimi 2012). Chinua Achebe also comments on the importance of the use of proverbs among his

people, “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palmoil with which words are eaten.” (Achebe 1958)

From the definitions by various scholars, it emerges clearly that proverbs are short, witty statements meant to advice or warn the audience. They are indeed kernel which contains wisdom of the traditional people, code of moral laws and philosophy of both life and moral justice. Proverbs are used to suit every situation and occasion and are often presented using animals. As (Alimi 2012) rightly puts,

Every significant affirmation traditional value or belief can be strengthened and supported with the use of appropriate proverbs. Social problems and personal difficulties can also be settled by an appeal to the sanctioning proverbs.

A good example is the proverb, “*nimwo emboko yaambukhila eng’ana yaambukhilamo*” (Where the mother buffalo crosses the river is the same place where the calf crosses.” The proverb urges the audience not to abandon the old Bukusu ways for the allure of Western cultures but remain faithful to follow their forefathers.

The Centrality of *kumuse* performance and Memory

The study of *kumuse* is important as a genre in Africa. In the African culture, proverbs form a cornerstone of a people’s way of life and cultural expectations. They are used as a way of passing down knowledge between generations. They act as a horse which conveys meaning to their destinations- hearts of the listeners. Proverbs show that the African language is complex and advanced; proverbs are a stylistic literary device, beyond basic fundamental communication. It is asserted that proverbs play significant roles in clarifying, exemplifying, underscoring and influencing communication. This is the reason why *kumuse* performers stand out as supreme elders because of their ability to use more proverbs than an average elder.

In addition, *khuswala kumuse* represents the Bukusu cosmological identity. It is a reflection of belief systems of the people. This is through the narration of history of the community, their culture, law and traditions of the community and as Wasike (2013) rightly puts, “the *kumuse* performance is a genre that uses the occasion of the death of an elderly man in the society to assemble and narrate sketches of the history of the community, and underline the traditional views and ideals about life and death.”

It is important to have an idea of Bukusu history for the simple reason that the after-burial narration is largely a historical discourse that is used to illuminate different versions of the community’s past (Simiyu, 1997; 1990). The performer thus reminds people about their ethnic background and also exhorts the members of the community to live up to the work of heroes and the moral rectitude and courage of the community. Some songs in the oration refer to hard times in the past, for instance, when the Babukusu experienced war with other communities and her resistance to colonial rule. The performer perceives himself as the custodian of social customs and values that are at the heart of the Babukusu.

As Maelo puts it, the Bukusu society has one of the highly diverse and stimulating artistic traditions, and part of this tradition is the funeral oratory. *Kumuse* is examined as a text because of several features. As Chris Wasike (2013) argues, looking at the style of performance, the content and thematic emphasis of each of its individual narrative renditions and the general arrangement and structure of interaction between the oral performer and his audience the oratory performance stands out as literary genre. Given the centrality of the funeral oratory among the Bukusu, the orator (performer) skillfully uses

proverbs to construct meaning which in turn enables the community to understand itself through memory. The ritual takes the community back to the foundation as it shares the past experiences of the heroes and events. As Chris Wanjala puts it, “*kumuse* means the foundation of the community” and when the funeral reciter describes a line inside the oval shape of the arena formed by the audience during performance, he is literally taking back his listeners to the essence and core foundations of the community’s culture and history (1985). In a sense, the purpose of assembling at the home of the deceased person on the third day after burial (*lufu*) is for the community and the throngs of mourners to go back to the foundation of the living community (Wanjala 2013). Nonetheless, the carnivalesque nature of this ritual is often more emphasized by the reciter than the apparent solemn mood occasioned by death of the individual (Wanjala 2013)

The study of the funeral oratory *khuswala kumuse* is vital not only to the Bukusu community but in the entire study of history of mankind. It is an example of research especially fieldwork, in the field of memory where the experiences of ethnic forms are collected.

Given the changing times and subsequent departure (death) of both the performers and candidates of *kumuse* performance, there is an urgent need to research and document the Bukusu after-burial ritual for posterity and also to rescue the memory of the people before they die.

One of Maurice Halbwach’s seminal studies entitled *On Collective Memory* states that our memories are socially constructed. He writes, “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize and localize their memories” (Halbwach:38). The ritual of *khuswala kumuse* plays a critical role in reawakening the memories of the Bukusu community. The people are reminded of the Bukusu history, about the Chetambe wars, the legendary figures that ever lived among many other issues. As Halbwach argues, we always remember the past from the perspective of our contemporary world hence the reason the Bukusu community performs the *kumuse* ritual.

The reference and association of the after-burial oratory to *kumuse* (arena or ‘platform of performance’) alludes to the ‘last dance performance’ in honour of a deceased elderly male member of the society. This can be likened to the classical Greco-Roman speeches that extemporized and honoured fallen war heroes in ancient times (Dixon, 1971). *Kumuse* congregations are presided over by specially recognized cultural raconteurs or *baswali* (sing. *omuswali*) who are revered orators, spiritual icons and cultural repositories. Like the respected town criers from traditional Nigerian societies, the Bukusu *kumuse* performer is a praise-singer who extols the virtues, achievements and conquests made by his community (Wanjala, 2013).

Wasike (2013) explains why the oratory performance can be regarded as a literary text, the genre’s most conspicuous feature is the ability of the narrator to cobble and play around with words while sustaining attention of his listeners in a rapid recounting of the Bukusu past, present and future, the ritual is only performed to commemorate the death of a revered Bukusu male elder among specific clans of the sub-tribe. (13)

The Bukusu generally look up to *kumuse* as a narrative art form that inspires ethnic patriotism and pride in their culture (Simiyu, 1997; Wanjala, 1985). This clearly brings into perspective the issue of identity. As researchers put it, memories are not static representations of past events but “advancing stories” through which individuals and communities forge their sense of identity.

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