

The Context and Structure of Funeral Oratory among the Bukusu

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Abstract: *Khuswala kumuse (funeral oratory) is a central rite among the Babukusu. It is a significant ritual that defines their worldview and how they relate with their cosmology and themselves. Given its centrality in the Bukusu cosmology, it is important to examine how the orator puts to use language to construct meanings that enables this society to understand itself. This paper is an investigation of how the content and structure of the Bukusu funeral oratory contribute to the overall understanding of the Babukusu historical heritage. Data was collected from pre-recorded cassette tapes of speeches of Manguliechi (a renowned Bukusu orator) and video tapes of the performance of khuswala kumuse ritual for the late Vice-president of the Republic of Kenya Michael Kijana Wamalwa (purchased from Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation, marketing department). These were transcribed and translated into English and generalizations made on the content and context. It was for example noted that the ritual is a form of epic recreating the history of Babukusu. Its structure makes use of a stylized beginning and ending with poetic language. Its content touches on several aspects such as health, politics and economics. This helps in the understanding of Babukusu.*

Key Words: *Funeral Oratory, Content, Context, Structure, Oral Literature*

I. Introduction

Historically, Babukusu are a part of the seventeen or so sub-ethnic groups that constitute the Luhya community of western Kenya. They belong to the larger Bantu speaking group. There is a strong relationship between the history of the Babukusu and the funeral oratory ritual known as khuswala kumuse. For example, the oral artist details the history, culture, law and traditions of the community in the oration. He thus reminds people about their ethnic background. He 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.

To a great extent, khuswala kumuse represents Bukusu cosmological identity. It is a reflection of belief systems of the people. The performer perceives himself as the custodian of social customs and values that are at the heart of the Babukusu. In fact the artist often mentions multifarious aspects of his society – such as material culture, food stuffs, marriage, customs, types of divination and a host of other catalogues reflecting, or at least attempting to demonstrate the bard knowledge of his cultural traditions. Besides, the oration presents a truer picture of popular beliefs about death, myths, traditional songs and modern poetry.

Therefore, the ritual oratory can be in a way read as a narrative of the history of Babukusu community viewed by the oral artist. Indeed, the ritual performer is considered as a chronicler of the history of Babukusu. This paper is an examination of how different aspects of the structure of the funeral oratory fits into the historical context of the Bukusu.

II. Classification Of The Ritual

The Bukusu society has what could be referred to as one of the highly diverse and stimulating artistic tradition. The funeral oratory is part of this tradition. It is a unique form that defies any attempts to confine it within a neat and unproblematic Eurocentric generic classification. What Amuka (1994:6) would refer to as “academic convention of compartmentalizing and dismembering knowledge”. Hence it is not possible to achieve a universal cross-cultural classification even if it becomes convoluted to excess. He continues by saying that a universal schema will of necessity wrench local taxonomic units apart and lump others together. He emphasizes the fact that the researcher must be guided by the local name for the genre and the specification of its requirements. In a similar vein, Okombo (1992:27) argues that

‘Each community engages in social activities and, at the same time, observes itself and makes value judgements on its own behaviour. In other words each community turns its own eyes upon itself and looks at what it does; each community turns its own ears upon itself and listens to its own utterances. On the basis of what it sees and what it hears, a community describes itself and evaluates its own activities’.

Such studies demonstrate the importance of relying on communities for categorization of their verbal art rather than imposing foreign classification systems and generic names. This is so because every community has a discourse about itself and it is the role of the researcher to use the community's nomenclature.

2.1 Genres Of Oral Tradition

Generally speaking, ritual oratory performance embodies most of the oral tradition genres found in the Bukusu society. For instance, the performer uses many proverbs in his oration mainly as a reflection on human society, identifiable as proverbs independent of the context of the ritual performance. The proverbs are chosen in line with the philosophical and artistic aspects of khuswala kumuse performance. Riddles, songs, narratives, and even drama and elements of epic are incorporated in the oratory. This inclusive nature makes the oratory endlessly accommodating. Thus its mode is to subsist by swallowing other genres. The performer exploits the possibilities inherent in this form to achieve remarkable effects. Indeed in the domain of Babukusu ethnopoetics, khuswala kumuse oratory is one of the most prestigious, aesthetically marked style of speech.

2.2 The Ritual As An Epic

The khuswala kumuse ritual can also be read as an epic. Kunene (1970:20) defines narrative epic as one that is mainly concerned with important heroic actions in defence of society. He notes that not all nations are heroic in relation to physical confrontation. Some actions are heroic because they postulate social directions. He further notes that narrative epic is a literary form, which is more than a simple story. That is rather a dramatization of significant social events, which must be factual even if the stylization and presentation require that they be presented in colourful language.

Indeed the khuswala kumuse oratory can be studied as societal epic, spread over several generations. In the oration, the performer interweaves the theme of family, social and national morality. He highlights the courage, values and history of Babukusu. The oratory contains myths, legends, genealogies, proverbs and other stories about the society's past experiences and institutions. For instance the ritual performer highlights the wars and conquest of Babukusu with other tribes on their immigration route. He refers to the battles with Kalenjin, Ateso, with whom they fought bitter battles over land and animals.

III. Setting And Context Of The Performance

Khuswala kumuse is a rare, an elaborate and lengthy ceremony performed in honor of a respected Bukusu elder. The performer is invited three days after the noise and bustle of the actual burial have subsided. This is one of the most important events in Babukusu's social life, and whenever it is held, many people will gather from many miles around to witness the performance and listen to the wise words of the performer.

The performance is an oral art work that is quite elaborate and sophisticated with a specialized mode of expression mastered only by the initiated. Indeed, the ritual is acted out by a specialist. This art of khuswala kumuse is obtained through inheritance, either from ones paternal or maternal clan. Wanjala (1985:84) makes it abundantly clear who qualifies to perform the ritual when he notes that, "it is believed that an imposter from non-performing clans who tries the ritual garb on and tries to perform will drop dead in the arena. There are acute taboos about the very regalia which the ritual leaders put on for the performance".

This specialist is known almost by everyone in the community. He can be compared to griots in West African societies. These are professional and casted praise singers and tellers of accounts. For example among the Mandinka, the griot was traditionally a court poet attached to the king for the purpose of singing the king's glories and recording in his songs important historical events surrounding the ruling family. The same duty was performed among the Ashanti of Ghana by the court poet known as Kwandwumfo; among the Rwandese of central Africa such a poet was called an umusizi; among the Zulu of southern Africa, the Imbongi (praise singer) traditionally played that role; and so forth (Okpewho, 1985:4). In the same vein, oswala kumuse can be compared to ministerial and master of ceremonies at funerals among the Luo people (Wanjala, 1985:82). As aforementioned 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's history and customs.

The ritual is performed in honour of old men who have gone through all rites of passage demanded by their community and who have witnessed their own grandchild circumcised. There are exceptions though as in Nangendo (1994:150) reminds us, "the rituals can be performed on the basis of one's age (kamase kamakora) and maturity (buangafu) even if one had no male grandchildren".

The ritual performer occupies space created for him by 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.

The ceremony usually starts in the morning at about 8.00a.m. It lasts for approximately three hours. When oswala kumuse arrives in the deceased's homestead, he normally finds mourners already seated, expecting him. The funeral congregation normally sits in half-circle, with women and children on the left hand side and men on the right hand side. The widow(s) and children of the deceased sit on the side of women with their legs stretched.

The performer is escorted to the scene of performance by the hosts. He then makes his way into the circle formed by the funeral assembly. Before the performer starts the oration, he normally walks to and fro in the middle of the circle in total silence, creating a line, which is called kumuse. At the end of the line he has formed, he stops and drives his rod into the ground. The hole created by the rod marks one end of kumuse. On this created path, oswala kumuse will walk and trot throughout the khuswala kumuse session. He speaks for the first time while walking back from the small hole created by the rod (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 inescapable. 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.

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 mortals. To do so would be to appear weak before the very people he is to protect. At this stage, he beseeches God to take care of the bereaved and to welcome home the deceased person. He says, “*oli khumuliango kwase okhong'onda ndimwikulila, papa Wele nakhong'onda khumuliango, ikula kube khwasie*” (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).

3.1 Superstitions

There are a number of superstitions that are associated with the ritual and also talked about in the course of the performance of the ritual. These are part and parcel of the context and setting of the ceremony.

3.1.1 Performer Superstitions

On the eve of the performance of the ritual, oswala kumuse abstains from having sex with his wife to keep the purity and sanctity of the ritual. In case the performer fails to observe this, then it is believed that misfortune would befall him.

Again he should not greet anybody nor be greeted while on his way to the ceremony. This is meant to avoid bad luck of whatever nature that might befall the performer. The performer should enter kumuse while facing the North. The North is symbolic of origin, or beginning, or birth. The Babukusu believe that their cradle land is in the North (Egypt). The performer therefore faces the North in honour of the great ancestors of the community.

During performance of the ritual oswala kumuse should not swallow saliva. In case he salivates, he spits, but the audience cannot. This shows that he is different from the rest of the people; he mystifies himself. He also purifies himself. By spitting the performer is symbolically seen as getting rid of anything deemed bad or unclean. He has to be pure since he is performing a sacred duty and standing on a holy ground. This act can be compared to Muslims when fasting, they constantly spit; supposedly to keep pure. Swallowing can also be looked at as being similar to eating. The performer therefore abstains from “eating” to serve his society and the deity. Again he should not point his rod at a person unless administering a curse. Such an action is believed to cause instant death of the person pointed at.

3.1.2 Superstition among the Mourners

Once the ritual oratory is in progress, the mourners are not allowed to walk around, cross the path created by the performer. The congregation sits in silence and only responds at the prompting of the performer. This is meant to maintain order, serenity and solemnity of the occasion.

Sneezing while the ceremony is in session is not allowed by the performer. Sneezing is viewed as an expression of spite and disgust. As a result, it is assumed that such an action is a show of disrespect towards the performer and that such a person, is sort of dismissing what is being said. As such, in case one sneezes, she/he must leave the session immediately.

3.2 The Structure of the ritual

The analysis of the structure of the Bukusu funeral oratory stems from the thesis that structure is an important aspect since it is a vehicle through which the concepts imbued in the oratory are communicated. This involves the arrangement of actions, images and episodes that constitute the oratory. These aspects differentiate the oratory from other utterances and elevate it into an art form.

Indeed the *khuswala kumuse* text has a discernible internal logic, a sequence of stages; it has a beginning, middle and an end. The ritual for instance, is performed in the same way as narratives, proverbs, riddles are performed.

3.2.1 Formulaic Beginning

The ritual has formal and even formulaic framework. It has a kind of opening formula where the performer begins his oration with an invocation of spiritual powers to guide his performance or some other introductory device. For example the performer begins by acknowledging the supremacy of Wele (God) as the sole creator and provider. He also acknowledges his dependence on Wele as his servant. He says, “*ese semanyile elomo ta, semanyile khuloma ta, khendeebe Wele wang’ali, khendeebe Wele Wenche, Wele Mwana, Wele Kuka, Wele Mukhobe*” (I do not know the words to speak, I do not know how to speak... let me ask the Truthful One, let me ask God of the Universe, God the Son, God of our ancestors, the Good God).

In so doing, the performer establishes his right to perform by referring to God and sometimes to his forefathers. This also helps to enhance the sacred mood that prevails during the ritual performance. There are also formulaic comments to indicate that the performer is about to change his theme in the course of the performance. These formulae are like sign posts in an essentially homogeneous and endless terrain. Any other elements including proverbs, riddles, songs and the invocations appealing for spiritual support can appear in any position in the text.

The formulae are brought into play in response to internal as well as external factors. For instance, if the performer is addressing an issue, and in the process spots an important figure among the congregation, he may change the topic to address that person. For instance, he says; Musikari Kombo, “*nabone wekhale awowo, wekhale abweenawo*” (Musikari Kombo I can see you are seated there, you are seated over there).

Hence there is sometimes an impromptu, unplanned character in the text of his oratory or the order in which ideas are arranged. This kind of shift cannot be said to be a deviation within the text but a way of accommodating these issues.

3.2.2 Unity in Development

Again the ritual may glide from the mundane to the abstract, a light to sombre mood. As this happens, a certain unity of development is maintained. This patterning is mainly based on repetition and parallelism, which are key aspects of structure. Repetition can be of a word, line, idea or phrase which can appear at regular or random intervals. For example the performer would say:

Enywe babandu ba Kenya. OMuchaluo noli anano, Omunandi noliano, Omumia noliano. Omukikuyu noli anano, Omumeru noli anano, Omuembu noli anano, Omutiko noli anano, Omukiriama noli anano, Omumasaba noli anano. Efwe khumanyile sifuno sia Kenya, menya Mukenya nga Wele nekenya, Linda Kenya nga Wele nekenya. Wamalwa Linda Kenya nga Wele nekenya. Mukhisa Linda Kenya nga Wele nekenya, Munyasia Linda Kenya nga Wele nekenya. Bona Wele kenyile semutetea, bona Wele wenyile semulinda, semulinda sibala.

(You people of Kenya, a Luo if you are here, a Nandi if you are here, a Teso if you are here, a Kikuyu if you are here, a Meru if you are here, Embu people if you are here present, Digo people if you are here present, Giriama people if you are here present, Masaba if you are here present. It is you who know the value of Kenya. Stay in Kenya according to the will of Kenya, love Kenya according to the will of Kenya, and defend Kenya according to the will of God. Wamalwa defend Kenya according to the Will of God, Mukhisa defend Kenya according to the Will of God, Munyasia defend Kenya according to the Will of God. Look, God wants you to protect Kenya, look God wants you to protect, why don't you defend the country).

It is also noted that the internal relationships of the performance are indeterminate. There is no overall formal pattern to which units are subordinated and which assigns them a particular place in relation to the others. The performer enjoys considerable freedom limited by habit rather than by rules of the genre – to string them together in whatever order and combination he wishes. Every performance of a particular performance will seem similar, but the content units will be to a greater or lesser degree differently selected and ordered, and sometimes differently worded.

The performer of the ritual has scope to recast his materials, recombine them and add new elements by borrowing. He can borrow biblical material, adopting and sometimes creating fresh composition. For instance the performer asserts that the biblical Ten Commandments are engraved on people's palms. When two individuals shake hands in greetings, their fingers add up to ten, signifying God's Ten Commandments.

3.2.3 Stylized Ending

The oral artist ends his performances in a stylized form. He will eventually stop, because he is tired, or because the occasion does not require further performance, or he has exhausted his repertoire. He will then signal his intention to stop by deploying a formula that says so, or by shifting from a chanting mode into a song. For example, he sings, thus:

Luyali Iwa Wamalwa x2	the goodness of Wamalwa x2
kumoyo kwa Wamalwa	the soul of Wamalwa
kumoyo kwa Michael	the soul of Michael
kuronye wa papa Wele	let it drop before God the father
wa okhwa Nakhombe	son of Nakhombe
aronye wa papa Wele	let it drop before God the father
okhwa Natulo	son of Natulo
aronye wa papa Wele	let him drop before God the father
Wamalwa Kijana oyu	this Wamalwa Kijana
aronye wa papa Wele	let him drop before God the father

He may also use a saying or simply utter a statement such as: ‘*onabona engokho etima nende kamala ke eyasie, yosi balitima nende kamala kayo*’ (when you see a hen running around carrying the intestines of its own kind, know very well that very soon someone else run with its own intestines)

Indeed the ending of the performance is quite dramatic. The people will stand up at once. The Babukusu believe that any person left sitting will die. This echoes Turner (1969) when he speaks of “grey area” in performance. In a way the ritual oratory is performed in a transcendental space. It is a transition moment where the performer transports the audience into this estranged space. And so at the end of the performance, he has to “snap” them back to the world of reality. Just like in oral narratives, the narrator would say “*lukano lufwe ,ese njooe*” (let my tale die, as I grow).

Again the performer exits from the arena in a dramatic way. He does not announce his departure; he simply drops hints to that effect. He then walks away very fast without looking behind. This act points to mystery of death; it strikes unnoticed taking away its victim without much ado.

3.3 The Language of the Ritual

Since language is part of ritual, the performer’s use of language takes a central position in this study. A number of scholars have noted that language may be viewed as a symbolic system based upon arbitrary rules in the same way as ritual may be viewed as a symbolic system of acts based on arbitrary rules. This implies that both language and non-verbal ritual communicate at a symbolic level.

3.3.1 The Performative nature of language

A key aspect that can be noted concerning language and ritual is the performative nature of both. Indeed ritual behaviour involves established actions which have no rational means. In this respect ritual is performative because it does not communicate at the ordinary level but at a symbolic one. The language that accompanies ritual act is like the non-verbal ritual act, especially fashioned for this purpose. It is set apart from ordinary usage to specialized usage thus making it performative.

In this case, an utterance elicits a response which involves action. For instance, the performer’s words and pronouncements are taken so seriously because they have religious implications and people who do not adhere to them feel a sense of guilt and seek ritual restoration. In essence, the performance of the ritual therefore does something; uttering the words of the ritual makes something happen, they are performative utterances, illocutionary acts. These performative utterances achieve certain ends, for instance, they console, encourage, strengthen the listener(s) and influence their attitudes. It is also a communitarian activity since the whole community is involved in its performance.

3.3.2 Poetic Language

It is also noted that specialized language use gives the language a sense of musicality and rhythm which is achieved in the oratory through repetition. It lends to the oratory a certain musical quality which reflects the rhythmic basis of the poetry tradition. This specialized mode of expression is mastered only by the initiated performer. The style is full of archaisms, obscure language and highly figurative forms of expression. This figurative language is used in the oratory to convey abstract ideas in a vivid and imaginative way. It also adds colour and solemnity to the oratory just like Homeric epithet in Greek epic do. Thus the performer’s use of language can be compared to modern poets who use written words to create powerful mental pictures in their work.

Nevertheless, oswala kumuse's poetry may sometime use ribald language otherwise unacceptable in public. Indeed his terminology may sound offensive to some people hence the performer sometimes conceals them beneath a cloak of euphemism. In fact the oral artist at times censors himself. For instance he would remark:

Khaboola, khemboola bali khendoma ndio baboola bali khendoma chilomo chikhwe ta Namwe khendoma chikhwe? Ta! Esese ndi khengaambila.

(when I speak, when I speak like this, they will say that I am being obscene, Am I being obscene? No! (the audience answers back). I'm just giving my counsel)

The oratory is quite poetic, for instance, it is vocal and tonal. In the oratory, the performer adopts high tone, sometimes sad, sombre, forceful and sarcastic. The effect, of which, are to provide the right pace and highlight the mood prevailing in the oratory. Furthermore, the effective poetic use of vocal music is possible because Lubukusu is highly tonal; a quality that works to the advantage of the oral poet in performance. However, it is noted that the poetic language used in the oratory is not necessarily used in the conventional way that it is understood in poetry. The oswala kumuse's poetry resonates the form of Okot (1972) 'Song of Lawino' – a poem which draws a lot of its material from traditional songs. Just as the African writers of novels are using traditional material as a source for their writings, the performer also finds inspiration from the traditional folklore. As Okot (1973) says, "a poem is a poem, whether sung, recited or written." Hence the oswala kumuse as a literary virtuoso uses different tones ranging from the ordinary to the highly specialized.

3.3.3 Non-Verbal Features of language

The performance of the ritual can in a way be described as a one man show. The performer takes the stage that is marked out for his performance. He cannot walk outside the marked perimeter. He does not only utter words, he also employs dramatic elements of oral delivery. He conveys his message through expressions on his face or grace of gesture as if on stage acting. He also employs movements, abrupt breaks, poignant pauses, gestures, facial expression and rhetorical questions as he watches the audience's reactions and exploits his freedom to choose his words as well as his mode of delivery, designed to move the audience. He even works himself into ecstatic transport of inspiration.

3.4. Audience and Performance

The ceremony involves not only members of the lineage but also all members of the clan living in the neighborhood and the general public. It is noted that clan solidarity is a vital element among the Babukusu, binding a man to his living relatives as belief in spirit world binds him to the dead. The ritual is performed before a public audience in the open space, a distance away from the compound of the deceased person. Unlike other performances, for example telling of tales, here the audience sits in silence as a sign of veneration for the sacred performance – quite religious. The mood that prevails during the performance can, in a way, be compared to the solemn mood that prevails in modern churches during worship. However, the audience does not just sit and watch. The performer engages the audience in his performance. There is constant, dynamic interaction between the audience and the performer. He provokes this interaction by asking questions, real or rhetorical. For example the performer asks:

mayi ewe, oli omwana we mungo muno? Nawe papa? Ewe wabonakho Wele? (Laughter from the audience). Ewe papa wabonakho Wele. Luno tare sina! (tare tisa – audience responds). Tare tisa? (yee – Audience responds)Luno khemweksha Wele mumubone. Mufukilila mubone Wele (yee – audience responds).Mukhalomanga busa muli mumanyile Wele mala mukhamubonakho tawe.

(Hey you my daughter, are you a child to this home? What about you son?

Have you ever seen God? (the audience responds in the negative)

You son, have you ever seen God...? (the audience responds in the negative)

What is the date today? (9th... audience answers)

Do you wish to see God today? (audience answers in the affirmative)

Don't always say that you know God yet you've never seen him).

Thus, the performer and audience are creating the performance together in the sense that the audience answers the questions asked. They at times nod in approval and even smile in admiration of the oratory skills of the performance. By so doing, the performer connects well with his audience.

Oswala kumuse also expects murmurs of support and agreement and even laughter when he purposely brings up something amusing or exaggerated. For instance in the text, when the oral artist castigates some of Bukusu political leaders for engaging in self destructive and useless rivalry for tribal political supremacy, the audience supports and encourages him on by saying, "*babolele!...toboa!...toboa!*" (tell them!...tell it!...tell it!).

Though the audience is always active in the performance, it is noted that there is no “competition for the appropriation of the performance space” (Odhiambo’s (2006:124)). Furthermore, Soyinka (1976:38 - 9) has noted:

Any individual within the ‘audience’ knows better than to add his voice arbitrarily even to the most seductive passages of an invocatory song, or to contribute a refrain to the familiar sequence of liturgical exchanges among the protagonists. The moment for choric participation is well defined, but this does not imply that until such a moment, participation ceases.

Accordingly, the performer remains unchallenged during the session. In case he is challenged, he may retort and try to defend himself by pleading his own knowledge, or suggesting that others should respect his integrity. He can also give, in a subtle way, a warning to those who may be critical of his pronouncements during the performance.

IV. The Performer as a Teacher: The Content Of the Ritual

The performer of the ritual utilizes different aspects of the community’s folklore to educate the community. For example the ritual performer is a chronicler of Babukusu history. Makila (1978) refers to him as “a public historian and comforter.” He is a man of great memory, he relies on memorization as he re-enacts significant historical events that have shaped the destiny of his community. As Nangendo (1994:102) aptly puts it:

As a major custodian of Babukusu history and traditional culture, he narrates at length about the coming of Babukusu from their cradle land, how and when Babukusu adopted livestock keeping, subsistence farming, trading activities, circumcision, metal working, and the traditional concept of the metaphysics, the meaning of death and reincarnation, interethnic battles and many others.

He further notes that Babukusu keep track of their genealogies through three social institutions, namely a process called *khuswala kumuse*, circumcision age sets, and origin traditions (Nangendo 1994:85). Indeed Vansina (1985) highlights the importance of oral traditions in accounting for the history of a people as historical sources. For instance, most of *baswala Kimise* trace the origin of Babukusu community in *misri* (Egypt) and also trace the migration of the people to their present settlement. They also mention prominent men of the past. For that reason, the oratory then can be viewed as a window simultaneously onto the past and present. It is one of the principle means by which a living relationship with the past is apprehended and reconstituted in the present.

The orator also refers to issues and experiences whose impact has been relatively recent. This is because Babukusu society has not remained static over the years. For instance, the performer captures the imposition of colonial rule and Babukusu resistance, of the independence and new forms of administration. The performer refers to the chain of command in Kenya’s administration-from the village headman up to the Provincial Commissioner and then to the President of the country.

He also highlights the introduction and spread of western education accompanied with increasing reliance on written forms of communication. For example the performer talks about use of written form of communication during dowry negotiations. The number of animals and other items demanded by the bride’s people are written on a piece of paper to form the basis of negotiations.

4.1 Didactic Significance

Babukusu used their art as a vehicle of traditional education. Thus during the performance of the ritual, the oral artist plays a role of a teacher. He gives instructions to the community especially the youth, through tales, songs, riddles and proverbs. Through these genres of oral literature, the youths were taught moral and social, historical as well as cultural aspects about their community. He teaches the virtues of hard work; being honest in their dealings; upholding moral values and shunning laziness, lies, theft, and waywardness. He counsels, thus:

Okhacha wekhala muchamu ye khukhwiiba bibiindu biabeene ta. ...Mukhacha kamataala kabeene ta. Okhakhakila omwana wowasio niko akhakholile ta, okhachekha batambi, okhachekha bamanani, okhachekha bayiia, okhachekha bafuubi.

(Do not sit in the council of evil doers, who plan evil against other people, do not break into other people’s kraals, do not accuse falsely, do not despise the poor, do not laugh at orphans)

He counsels the youth to shun violence. He uses the metaphor of two young strong elephants that ventured into the forest. One that was careless and reckless hit its delicate tusk on every tree it came across. In the end, it broke and destroyed the tusk. The other was careful and cautious and thus kept its tusk safe. The reckless young elephant stands for a violent youth, who after taking some beer, would fight others for no apparent reason and would end up in court and finally land in jail. On the other hand, the careful and cautious elephant stands for calm and peaceful youth who shuns violence and hence is able to co-exist with others hence prosper. He says that an elephant that is violent cannot nurture its tusk to maturity.

The youths are also taught to respect each other and to respect their elders especially one's father, mother, grandparents, uncles, aunts and rulers of the land because they have the power to pronounce a curse on ill-behaved children. The ritual performer also acknowledges the need for the community to change and embrace formal education and the emerging new technology. He exhorts not only members of his community to take their children to school, but also all other communities that inhabit the nation of Kenya. He says:

Universiti chili khusibala, secondari chili khusibala, primari chili khusibala. Bakhaloma bali babukusu sebasomia ta, bakhaloma bali bajaluo sebasomia ta, bakikuyu, bakamba, bameru, sebasomia ta.

(We have many universities, many secondary schools in the country and many primary schools in the country. Let it not be said that Babukusu did not sent their children to school, let it not be said the Luos, the Kikuyus, Kambas, Merus, did not sent their children to school)

He correctly argues that in olden days, young men used to raid other communities, so as to amass wealth. He however points out that in contemporary society, a pen and a book are the effective and efficient tools to stage a successful raid, be it economic, social or political.

The performer also uses an image of a hunting dog that can sniff its prey and pounce on it. He argues that a teacher should act as a hunter's dog which is endowed with strong scent. For example if one teaches geography, mathematics, he should 'sniff' deeply into the subject, likewise the students should do the same hence be able to perform well in their examinations. Oswala kumuse also advocates for girl-child education. He argues that girls should be educated up to university level to choose careers and participate in the development of the country and also be able to attract the "best suitors". Thus like Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *The River Between* and Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Oswala kumuse demonstrates to the young generation the importance of embracing modernity while retaining the ethical values of traditional Bukusu community.

The oratory also does engage with social and moral issues of the day that touch on their interests, for instance the prevalence of HIV/AIDS pandemic. He warns that HIV/AIDS is real and he advises people to stop engaging in irresponsible sexual behaviour.

4.2 Myths

The ritual oratory addresses a number of mythical phenomena among the babukusu. For example the mythical origin of babukusu circumcision ritual which is attributed to a man called mango. The myth has it that khururwe-yabebe was a deadly monstrous serpent that devoured people and their animals. A man called mango swore to kill the serpent. He sharpened his sword (embalu) and spear (wamachari) until they were razor sharp. He then took his shield and headed for the serpent's abode in the cave.

Mango hid in the darkness of the cave, and when the serpent came back from its day's hunt, mango lashed out a mighty blow and cut off its head. The head flew out and fell against a tree, biting it. It is said that due to its deadly venom, the tree died up instantly. The people were overwhelmed with joy and gratefulness to mango. They carried him on their shoulders. Then mango demanded to be circumcised. Mango was circumcised and started the kolongolo age set. Other men in the community took cue and that is how circumcision began in the bukusu community.

Another myth associated with circumcision that the performer refers to is *sioyaye* chant. This song is sung when the initiate is being escorted from the river (sietosi) to the circumcision ground in front of his father's house. The song is sung to signify to the initiate the imminence of the circumcision ceremony. In the song, those who might fear to face the knife are ridiculed and told they should go to ebunyolo where circumcision is not practised. The words of this song are said to have been picked from a hyena. It is believed by babukusu that the song was first sung by a hyena.

Indeed it is argued that many practices are hedged about the myths in order to give them some validity and universal acceptance amongst the people.

4.3 Politics

Oswala kumuse holds a central role in the politics of his community since his position can be viewed as a symbol of ethnic unity; his power stems from mystical sources. As such, key personalities especially politicians seek his blessings before venturing into major enterprises: Such as seeking higher political offices in the land.

Again, the ritual performer enjoys the venerated role of a seer, prophet, and religious icon; he interprets the unfolding political scenario and can also prophesize the political future of the community. For instance, when performing for the late Vice President of Kenya, Kijana Wamalwa, who was also the chairman of FORD Kenya Party, Manguliech had the following to say:

Luno luri sisiana sia FORD KENYA siarama busa, enja omundu abele nga Wamalwa ache abe Chairman wa FORD KENYA. Mala omundu oyo nali omulayi, mukhabone busa bamukhola Chairman wa NARC. Musikari Kombo khekhubolela ewe.

(As for now, FORD Kenya is orphaned. Look for a person, a good person, a person as good as the late Wamalwa to be the Chairman of Ford Kenya, if that person will be able enough, he will be made the Chairman of NARC. I am alluding to you Musikari Kombo).

Indeed it came to pass that Musikari Kombo was elected to be the chairman of FORD Kenya party. Oswala kumuse also enjoys the license to criticize subtly or openly persons in positions of power who pervert the laws and customs of the nation and laments their abuse of power and neglect of their responsibilities and obligations to the people. Wanjala (1985:89) captures this aspect when he says, “they bemoan the loss of the true sense of leadership in the present society, and challenge the community not to vote selfish leaders into parliament”.

He challenges members of parliament from his community to represent the interests of their people well, to serve and help their constituents. He posits:

Ewe Munyasia soyeta	You Munyasia why can't you help.
Ewe Wamalwa Kijana soyeta	You Wamalwa Kijana why can't you help.
Ewe Kaptan soyeta	You Kaptan why can't you help.
Ewe Kituyi soyeta,	You Kituyi why can't you help.

In fulfilling this political function, oswala kumuse bears a striking resemblance to community poets of other cultures of Africa, ancient Israel, ancient Greece, or medieval Europe.

In fact the Babukusu always feel that oswala kumuse's words are representative or reflective of their interests and aspirations – he represents the opinion of those ruled. He interprets, moulds and shapes public opinion, and he can easily urge them to get warmed up to supporting a certain political stand. Indeed they do influence voting patterns in their community. He tactfully does not impose his will on the community, but offers a wise counsel. In criticizing those in authority, the performer serves as a check against abuse of power and excesses in the community.

Similarly, the oral artist serves as the moral police of the people. He is at liberty to say whatever he pleases in favour of or against anybody in the community. Indeed, one of the most useful duties performed by oswala kumuse is to comment sensitively on the evils prevailing in the social or political life of his people. Just like what modern artists (especially writers) do. A case in point is Soyinka who uses Yoruba mythology as the basis of his creative work. As Okpewho (1985) notes:

Soyinka himself has done more than any other African writer to make the symbols of traditional African mythology the basis of his creative work: in various plays, novels and poems, especially his poem *Idanre*, he had made the Yoruba god of iron, Ogun, his ideal of the revolutionary artist constantly involved in the struggle to correct the society.

Consequently, oswala kumuse is sort of the voice of conscience in his community. As a community poet, he sees the welfare of his people as his own concern and therefore he speaks the truth as he sees it since his concern is the well-being of the society. He upholds the values of societies in praise and condemns individualism.

4.4 Economics

Oswala kumuse places a lot of emphasis on the need for the Babukusu to work hard in order to create wealth for the present and future generations. It is noted that for any society to progress, people must work hard and use the wealth that they possess prudently. Besides, the traditional society knew this so well and thus the elders seemed to spend most of their time imparting virtues of hard work. Thus the performer uses proverbs, allegories and metaphors to pass this message across. A case in point is when he warns men who use their money and time chasing women. He asserts that one will be condemned to die a pauper once he ties the wealth of the family (kraal) on his genitals and teeth. He asserts:

Neweenya ofwe ne kumutaambo, obukula litaala wacha wombakha khumeeno, obukule litaala wombakhe khumakusi, kane ofwe ne kumutambo. Okhabukula litala wombakha Khumeno okhabukula litaala wombakha khumakusi.

(If you want to die poor, take your kraal and tie it on your teeth.

If you want to die poor, take your kraal and tie it on your genitals!

You will surely die a pauper. Never take your kraal and build it on your teeth, never take your kraal and build it on your genitals)

He challenges men to be responsible and prudent with the resources at their disposal. At the same time he warns extravagant women who scatter family wealth using both front and hind legs that they would land their families into depths of poverty. He says that a hard working woman will lift the social and economic status of her family.

He cautions the members of the community against selling ancestral land and challenges them to invest in real estate. For example, he exhorts them to invest and put up investment facilities in towns such as Bungoma and Nairobi. He says that one may travel to America and then boast to his host that Bungoma town or Nairobi city belongs to 'them' yet he has no share in it. That such would be an empty brocade in the sense that one cannot claim to have what he does not own! Again he correctly asserts that it would be foolish for one to claim ownership over his relative's herd of cattle when he does not own even a single animal. That one needs to have at least one's own to claim to have a share in it.

The performer acknowledges modern economic practices. He says that when the white man came he found the Babukusu with five "banks" in their keep. He argues that he (white man) introduced more powerful banks which could serve as banks for black man to fight against poverty. These Babukusu "banks" are, "engokho standati, likhese komasho, embusi paklesi, ekhafu eposita, biakhulia ushirika." (Chicken as the modern Standard Bank, sheep as the modern Commercial Bank, goat as the modern Barclays Bank, cow for Posta and food for Ushirika Bank).

Nasimiyu (1991:40) supports this view when she notes that cattle were the traditional bank, the main form of wealth recognized by Babukusu society as a measurement of wealth and as a status symbol.

4.5 Health

During the performance, oswala kumuse advocates for good health and healthy life styles among his people. For that reason, he exhorts his community to grow and consume indigenous foods such as millet, sorghum, cowpeas, namasaka, murere, beans, mureenda, chisaaka, and fish, and to consume less of sugary foods such as cakes, and bread, that are harmful to their health. He laments that people are dying young because of poor eating habits – consuming foods high in saturated fats and high in calories. Again it is a medical reality that diseases such as coronary heart disease (CHD), diabetes, stroke, hypertension and alcohol – induced liver cirrhosis are on increase due to poor eating habits.

In contemporary Bukusu society, like many other communities in Kenya and the world over, the issue of AIDS and HIV pandemic is of major concern. The Aids scourge has killed millions upon millions of people in the world, destroyed families and reversed economic gains in many communities of the world. Oswala kumuse in his oration uses the image of a tree called kumunandere to warn his audience to take care. He asserts that, an individual who gets involved in behavioral activities that can expose him to the risk of being infected is the one who is likely to contract the virus. He counsels the community to be careful because Aids is real. He says, "mwichunge, sibala engara" (be careful, the world is round). The performer also uses the image of a salt lick to illustrate the mode of transmission of HIV/AIDS virus. He rightly points out that he/she who "licks" gets infected.

V. Conclusion

In a nutshell the performer parades historical events of the Babukusu in terms of economic and social changes, wars conquests and rebellion. In so doing, he provides his community with a mirror for self examination. Moreover, the past is very important in shaping identities, in defining the present as well as charting the future.

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