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Introduction

This paper focuses on *mbaka*, in Luo language, among motorbike *(bodaboda)* riders in a West Kenyan village at the shores of Lake Victoria called Nyakongo.[1] Culturally, *mbaka* refers to verbal games. Through *mbaka*, the *bodaboda* riders are teasing, joking and playing with words. Their verbal games focus particularly on women and sexuality. For this reason, the study attempts to highlight how femininity, masculinity, gender relations and heterosexuality are constructed in young men's *mbaka*. The riders' audience includes market women and men operating small scale businesses.

The *mbaka* verbal form does not follow the Aristotelian story model of beginning, middle and end. Rather, it consists of fragments of narratives and has no universal form and content. To analyze *mbaka*, I use a postmodern theoretical approach which assumes that there are no dominant or grand narratives and that every local and seeming micronarrative is grand in its own right. Conversations, interviews, and observations were the primary methods of data collection for the study whereas daily interaction with the motorbike

[1] Nyakongo village market is in Rarieda Sub-County in Siaya County of Western Kenya. The market lies about 3 kilometers from Lake Victoria's south western shores.

operators in Nyakongo village was the principle way of obtaining relevant material,[2] recorded in a notebook immediately or after. A handset was also used as a supplementary to the book. Relevant published and unpublished works provide a background and comparative material for the ongoing study.



Nyakongo *bodaboda* riders. Photo: author.

Background and Theoretical Framework

The dominant language in Nyakongo village and beyond is Dholuo (Luo Language). Kiswahili, English and other Kenyan and foreign languages are more often than not absorbed and modified to fit Dholuo. The *bodaboda* riders prefer the use of Dholuo to any other languages in expressing themselves because of pride and comfort in their mother tongue. Yet external influences need not be gainsaid and the bodaboda riders cannot resist code-switching. As Marjorie affirms: "Whenever languages co-exist in a society, they influence one another, both in ordinary speech and in art forms."[3]

Mbaka is loosely translated as conversation. Yet through the conversations and texts I recorded, I learnt that it was much more than mere everyday verbal exchanges: *mbaka* is a combination of fiction and history. In the same breath, the same genres were rolled into one word, ngero. When I searched written materials, I found Okoth Okombo's compelling

[2] I spent a total of about 4 months spread over some 9 months to fashion out the research proposal on oral literature from a preliminary survey of Nyakongo verbal culture. I picked on mbaka oral genre as studies about it are scarce.

[3] Senanu, Kwadzo and Drid Williams, Creative Use of Language in Kenya, Nairobi, Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, 1995, p. 46.

argument that the sigana category is the most apt because it covers all forms of narratives whether literary or oral.[4] From the outset, therefore, mbaka impresses as a member of an almost limitless intergeneric family with numerous alternating names, playing with one another. But back to ngero: this is the proverbial genre in Nyakongo's oral literature. This selfsame genre can be harnessed to summarize a story in one sentence or give the gist of *mbaka* most briefly. In short, there are numerous interrelated genres and encapsulations of knowledge that add up to oral literature in Dholuo. It is therefore feasible to study *mbaka* in its own right and as a microcosm of all the other genres and knowledge in Luo oral literature.

Sayings, allusions, anecdotes, histories and many more intersected in *mbaka* over the fieldwork period but most of them were full of issues pertaining to women, sexuality and the presumed supreme power of men in all spheres of life. Put differently, I read, in all this, how men imagined and constructed women. How men construct, imagine and accord women various attitudes, ideas and identities is explicit and implicit in the *mbaka* conversations I recorded. For instance, when *bodaboda* drivers quip that one needs not comment or complain that "rain is pounding the earth" *("koth go mbasne*"), they are saying that rain is making love to earth in the same way as a man is making love to a woman, the woman being cast as a passive participant in the man's game.

Gender and sexuality in Luo's *mbaka*

The following extract (see below) about an old grandmother reveals the ways in which men perceive and understand women and their change through life.

First and foremost, old women are venerated by virtue of age and the privilege of sharing a house with grandchildren. This, in turn, means that an old woman cannot have sex and is called *pim*, that is, a wife who has retired from sexual intercourse with her husband and any other man. Noteworthy here is her new title through which men discard her because she can no longer produce children. Yet, in *mbaka* jokes, the grandmother's usual social status and respect as a *pim* can be so distorted by the *bodaboda* operator: she remains a sex object. That is why, during a *mbaka* verbal exchange about the grandmother of one Ochok that was full of sexual claims, an angry man remarked: *Koro pile anyamo ga da Ochok?* (Do I have daily sex with Ochok's grandmother?). Here, the grandmother represents the two extremes of sexuality: On the one hand, she is revered as the producer of children and, equally, as a "pot of sex", as one *bodaboda* rider remarked in English, but she is eventually dismissed and renamed when fertility disappears. Sex with her becomes an abomination. Her two identities have been generated and stamped on her by "the male power house". I am saying "power" because language and culture are largely controlled and wielded by the Luo man. I have also deliberately used the word "house" to denote or connote (or both) the cultural architecture of the society as a product of male hegemony. Thus, the woman's being, identity and purpose are all part of the building. Put differently, the cultural history and transformation of the woman is embedded in the uses to which the man puts her womanhood.

[4] Okombo, Okoth, Masira Ki Ndaki, Nairobi, Mawazo Publications, 1983, p. 20.

It is instructive that the conversations are over-concentrated on actions related to the woman's genitalia. Female identity is as biological as it is social and cultural, and therefore belief-based. One other way of putting it is that it is quasi-religious. An operator called Samsung Galaxy caused prolonged laughter when he said: *"An wembe, ng'ani lielo okang"* (I am a razor blade and can easily shave and cut through hard fallow land). It is all about the male member conquering and slicing through a woman's body, even virginity, in a brutal way. His power emanates from his manhood, cast as aggressive and violent, and the woman's body is the platform on which it proves itself. (In a way this so-called platform has its own power that I hope to write on later).

Without delving into clinical details, the *bodaboda* operators are obsessed with sexual power. Kiteng' remarked: *"Donge Ideye"* (She is normally strangled (*ideye*) in order for her genitalia to open because it is naturally narrow). Masculine insertion into the woman's body is regarded as an act of triumph and conquest by the man. In his own psyche, he is on top of the human world as it should be and must be. This representation of gendered sexual relations is imagined and constructed by culture and turned into a powerfully ingrained belief for purposes of justification and perpetuation as argued by Judith Butler.[5] If a postmodernist reading is brought into play here, notably in reference to Lyotard's assertion that grand narratives no longer rule, one can characterize these *bodaboda* stories as just but part of the many other possible narratives on what man-woman relations are. (The woman's complicity in or the belittling or rejection of this relationship constitute part of the on-going study that this brief paper cannot accommodate).

Easily the most outstanding aspect of *mbaka* per se is not only the numerous allusions to women and sex but the fact that, in nearly all of them, the woman is thoroughly underrated. A fitting parallel is in Chimundu's study of language of the Shona in which a woman is "The pot that boils from the fire of one stick."[6] The 'stick' is an obvious allusion to the man's genitalia while the pot that boils is the woman's sex organ. The tales the *bodaboda* operators regale their passengers with such sayings, most of which I recorded, nearly all revolve around sex. Yet as a genre, *mbaka* does not limit itself to the valorization of the male only. The woman is acutely aware of the man's attitude and can react, but without necessarily putting it in words. The silent side of *mbaka* is in women. This, of necessity, implies that the genre is a capsule of many more subjects than itself.

Mbaka as a rhizomatic genre

Fieldwork and the *mbaka* gathered from *bodaboda* operators raised more questions than answers. However hard I tried to grasp the Aristotelian narrative model with a beginning, middle and an end in *mbaka,* I could not come by any. I found the riders operating in a highly technologized environment. My experience of the *bodaboda* operators' performance is that transportation of clients breaks the flow of *mbaka.* None of the *bodaboda* operators could tell me a complete *mbaka.* Most of what I got in my preliminary research were

[5] Butler, Judith, "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory and Psychoanalytic Discourse," in Linda J. Nicholson, Feminism/Postmodernism, London, Routledge, 1990.

[6] Furniss, Graham and Liz Gunner, Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1995.

fragments or allusive pieces. The reason for this is the rush to ferry customers to different destinations. This therefore breaks the rhythm of their story-telling or *mbaka*. As they converse, one realizes that their *mbaka* is unstructured and there is no formula on who should speak first and which event is superior to the other. Any member who has something to contribute in their *mbaka* is free to do so at will, that is, participation is democratic and each participant has a chance to narrate and listen.

The fragmented or broken narration is their typical artistic mode which gives rise to different issues that relate closely to what Guattari and Deleuze call "rhizomatic" stories influenced by and consisting of multiple voices. The *bodaboda* verbal games are endless. In Dholuo, the endlessness in story telling is referred to as *mbaka jaramo*. It is a conversation that persists despite variations of the subject, the flagging or fluctuations of audential interest and interruptions. More than that, conversations have the tendency to dig into all sides of issues until eventually the participants agree to disagree or simply agree. Whatever happens, it is this tendency that *mbaka* (conversation) is praised and described as "jaramo."[7]

Experimentally, I have coalesced theory and method to arrive at the foregoing general descriptions of *mbaka* in the field and activities of *bodaboda*_riders. Without going into details, I encountered a closely-knit socio-economic entity that not only enjoyed their transport duties but rejoiced in allusions to the woman as the arena and human theatre of sex. I need not overstress that in conflating theory and method in language-based interaction, I was looking at "performance" in the Judith Butlerian and A.L. Austinian modes.[8] A pivotal aspect of *mbaka* or story-like conversation for that matter is its performance. Butler opines that categories of identity are cultural and social productions. This means that society imposes norms on its people to make them believe in the natural existence and differences of male and female identities by which they act. My reading of Butler is that what we call a woman or man is a social construction; what they "are" only come into existence when they perform their assigned identities. Austin, on the other hand, concentrates on language and action which he refers to as speech act or verbal drama.

Conclusion

According to the drift of Tzvetan Todorov's arguments and his critique of the origin of genres, there is no universal definition of any genre in general and therefore, in my case, of mbaka in particular.[9] In view of this, a major question to deal with is what form of the *bodaboda mbaka* is, and how this possibly relates to other genres in Luo oral culture. To answer, one needs to return to Todorov who argues that a study of a genre needs to be historicized. Yet, the cultural-historical environment of any study and how it relates to the current research is important for appreciating and understanding the possible transformation of the generic form, content and social purpose. Can one possibly say that

[7] Amuka, Peter, "Ngero as a Social Object," M.A. Thesis, University of Nairobi, 1978, p. 246.

[8] Culler, Jonathan, Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 94-97. We are borrowing largely from two theoreticians: J. L Austin and Judith Butler. For the purposes of this theoretical framework, we should regard mbaka as an item that comes into being when performed in agreement with the arguments of the two scholars. It is not natural and fixed.

[9] Todorov, Tzvetan, *Genres in Discourse*, New York, University of Cambridge, 1990, p. 11.

they found and established a fixed form and content of the literature? Todorov would say "no", and this is one answer whose veracity this study problematizes. In doing this, the study faces issues like the dividing lines, if any, between fiction, truth and the social role of art. The *mbaka* genre eventually serves as the meeting point for the disparate genres and the corpus of knowledge they portray and convey. The multiple strands of information and art-forms are best read with post-modernist lenses because this theory recognizes and gives weight and significance to all components without bias.

What gender and sex are in the riders' narratives and conversations amount to patriarchal perceptions and culturally assumed powers of control that are turned into beliefs and embedded in language. Perceptions are not natural but remain mental and ideological constructs. This in turn means that being labelled male or female is a human, thus cultural creation. My current and continuing arguable assumption in this research is that what men or women do by virtue of their gender does not constitute the ultimate definition of their identities but that other (identities) are possible.

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To understand postmodernism as used in this essay, the following is information essential: Klages, Mary, *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed,* New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006, p. 173, 176. Times have changed with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari weighing in to Aristotle with two highly influential essays: 'Anti-Oedipus' and 'A Thousand Plateaus'. Their argument revolves around the idea of 'arborescence' or the model of the tree as the primary model for how knowledge operates in modernist culture. The way this works is that knowledge is like a seed one plants. Then it germinates and grows into roots, stem, branches, and leaves. Knowledge in this humanist modernist culture can be traced to one single source, and is monolithic like the story with a beginning, middle and end. Guattari and Deleuze replaces this model with that of the rhizome, a fungus. A rhizome is a living organism with no central point like the tree. It lacks center of origin and does not start from anywhere. No part governs the other yet the parts are somehow interrelated without one dominating the other. There is, in brief, no center. This fuses very well with Lyotard's argument that, in a postmodern culture, there is no grand and minor narrative. We can extend this argument further and say that *mbaka* family is like a rhizome. One can also read a narrative independently and yet simultaneously relate it or find it relatable to another narrative issue, subject or matters outside it. This is what Lyotard means when he opines that narratives just game with one another.

Appendix

(Laughter from the crowd)

KITENG': (Jokingly) Dak to odak gi dagi *(And he stays with his grandmother).*

ME: Aa, pok atemi *(I have not tried you).*

SAMSUNG GALAXY: An an wembe, ng'ani lielo okang' *(I am a razor blade and can dig a land that has not been tilled for long-fallow).*

(Prolonged laughter by the whole crowd)

OCHOK: Koro watim niya madam, mondo koro wang'e wuoyi ma oingo wadgi, ere ng'ama chako kinda gi bwanani? *(Madam, for us to be sure on who is perfect in making love between us, who shall start?)*

OTHERS: Ochok dhi om chips *(Ochok, go and get us chips).*

KITENG': Ochok koro okasore but madam ma *(Ochok is now stuck next to Madam).*

OCHOK: An wuoi wadwa ma piem ma wacho ni okanyal no, onego ketwa kode mondo madam koro oduog result *(That man who is competing me, who thinks better in making love than me, should come forth. Let us go and have sex with Madam so that she may come back to declare who is perfect between us).*

KITENG': *(Referring to miraa)* koro gima ichamo no koro teri speedy! *(So what you are chewing is driving you crazy!)*

OCHOK: Gini oktera speedy, mano to kotha *(It is not what you think, this is in my Genes).*

SAMSUNG GALAXY: Gini miyo ji morale *(That thing stimulates people).*

OMWANDA: Madam ng'ad bura, tang', nyathini nyalo kata gore e dhogi *(Madam, give judgement and take care. That man can even give you an unexpected kiss).*

KITENG': *(Referring to miraa)* Gino okmiji morale wich, omiyoji morale gi piny *(That miraa (qat) stimulates people sexually).*

KITENG': Donge ma otuo maber, ma kech ema ber. Chiewo leche! *(A dry miraa is ok because it hardens you!)*

OCHOK: Mano ema iyudo ma ochiek, mano ema kodonjo e brain mari ka donjo piny koro orange ler *(That one is better for as it enters your brain, you feel stiffened and good about it).*

OCHOK: Omera wiyi omoko ga, wiyi omoko mang'eny. Kare ichamo gimoro to ikia tij gimoro? Kech nyaka donj e obwongoni. Kech nyaka iwinje e dhogi *(It is stupid to ask such a question young man!)*

X: Ochok, ng'ama kelo chips? *(Ochok, who will bring chips for us?)*

OCHOK: Nyako ma chielo cha, chal gi… *(That other lady resembles…)*

OCHOK: Magret, Magret. Uchak kwecho chon yawa, ng'ama odenyo ema chiemo mogik *(Magret, Magret. You people have started asking her out at this very moment. That person who is hungry will be served last).*

OCHOK: Kik imiye, ibiro miyo bwanani dhi nyamo Nyamanyanda *(Don't give him a bite that will stimulate and force him to have sex with his grandmother, Nyamanyanda).*

Y: Koro pile anyamo ga da gi Ochok? *(Do I have sex daily with Ochok's grandmother?)*

OCHOK: (Shouting Maggy's name) Maggy, Maggy, Maggy, wewe! *(Maggy, Maggy, Maggy, you!)*

OMWANDA: *(Describing Maggy)* Maggy to wiye omoko ma! *(Maggy is not sharp).*

OCHOK: *(Shouting)* Maggy, itimri nade piny kanyo? Chung' malo! *(Maggy, what are you doing down there? Stand up!)*

X: Koka ng'onye bende diny ma! *(And her vagina is so small).*

KITENG': *(Alluding to how Maggy is dealt with during sexual intercourse)* Donge ideye *(She is held by the neck so that her genitalia can open).*

OCHOK: To ofuolo *(And she coughs).*

OMWANDA: Pod ideye adeya! *(She is still held by the neck!)*

KITENG': *(Repeating Ochok's words)* Pod ideye adeya *(She is still held by the neck).*