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# The Bukusu of Kenya

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*Folktales, Culture and Social Identities*

Namulundah Florence

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS  

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*To my parents, Benjamin George Lyambila (d. 2004) and Victoria Namaemba Muhindi Lyambila (d. 2007). During my father's lifetime, my mother's stories were low-keyed and few. Only after his death did my mother reveal more about her public role. Now, it is our turn to tell the(ir) stories.*



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# Series Editor's Preface

The *Carolina Academic Press African World Series*, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve both as reference works and as readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies will address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series intends to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

Toyin Falola  
University of Texas at Austin



# Preface

Folktales serve a descriptive as well as prescriptive role: they mirror life by reflecting what people do, how they think, live and have lived as well as their aspirations. Folktales also reinforce the status quo by consistently depicting societal and cultural norms as the analysis of tales *From Our Mothers' Hearths: Bukusu Folktales and Proverbs* (Florence, 2005) demonstrates. Bukusu folktales offer a glimpse into the society's structural process—communal arrangements as well as the social and material environment. *The Bukusu of Kenya: Folktales, Culture and Social Identities* acknowledges the value and pressures brought on by folktales on behavior particularly when social structures act in additive and complementary ways. However, the range in tales and depicted social roles, as well as the variability among narrators, testify to the creative power of individuals and communities in defining and transforming social structures.

There is no past, present or future without human imaginings and memory. In day-to-day dealings, we ask the living for information on the past. These imaginings provide a framework for immediate as much as future decisions (Tonkins, 1995). Although ahistorical, folktales reflect the context of origin and philosophies or values of groups in consistently depicting particular norms. Individual struggle and achievement reflect the state of the whole community and various social roles; resolutions to threats restore the social or natural order. In Bukusu folktales, humans have power to create and control the universe with the omission of a deity. Explanatory tales justify rifts between animals or differences in body shapes and residences. Folktales are both perennial and universal in application, portraying the vice and virtue of all ages. They foster altruism but also belligerence, hierarchical gender and class relations, as well as repressive and authoritarian methods of childrearing (Rohrich, 1990). In their analysis of the link between history and ethnicity, Tonkin, McDonald and Chapman (1989) highlight the inextricability of the past and present, as much as change and stability in social institutions. The present creates a past in as much as the past shapes a present, although the tendency of historians and anthropologists is to view history as a coherent past of occurrences, what eventually passes for tradition. Thus, each generation has the responsibility of

reviewing cultural “exclusions mystified by hierarchies of wrongly ascribed significance, worth, reality” (Minnich, 2005, p. 110). Combining description and analysis, *The Bukusu of Kenya: Folktales, Culture and Social Identities* acknowledges the value and pressures on behavior reflected in Bukusu folktales. Appeals to a coherent past ignore the selectivity and appropriation of cultural mores. Namulunda the rainmaker raises questions about the “men only” ritualized role in communities. Is her art an aberration or a reminder of existing practices?

A year into this project I encountered the Dutch anthropologist Jan de Wolf’s (1995) Bukusu folktales collected in 1936 by Dr. Gunter Wagner’s (1908–1952) research assistants. de Wolf published Wagner’s collection posthumously, following his own fieldwork among the Bukusu in 1968 and 1969. In comparison to the thirty-one folktales collected by Dr. Wagner’s research assistants in the early 20th century, *From Our Mothers’ Hearths: Bukusu Folktales and Proverbs* (2005) illustrates the recurrence of certain plots despite the passage of time. The differences may arise from a diffusionary process as well as illustrate the repertoire of folktales among the Bukusu; indeed, similarities and differences exist within and across ethnic groups in Kenya. de Wolf recognized the significance of an indigenous cultural heritage to ethnographers, cultural anthropologists, sociologists, historians and graduate students within the fields, but also to the wider public. The resurgence of nationalism and threat of dominance by world superpowers create a demand for knowledge of Africa’s past and oral history (Dundes, 1989; Gomme, 1890; Okpewho, 1999). Furniss (1995) roots recent cultural movements in an emerging threat of the English language and Western culture: “In this sense, then, the move to bring in a particular genre from the ‘cultural cold’ is part of a broader move to prevent the cultural marginalization of the language and culture as a whole in relation to competing languages and cultural forms within [African communities]” (Okpewho, 1992, p. 144).

Although plots vary in location or historic period, names of folktales consistently reflect particular plots and social roles, as well as cultural stereotypes of the alien. Relationships and role expectations as much as narrative portrayals depict how everyday processes of living form individual and cultural identities. These structures suggest an element of cultural stability. Human characters appear in distinctly identified types, rather than in abstract philosophical terms (Okpewho, 1992, 1999). Recurring motifs in Bukusu folktales include jealous stepmothers, human and non-human interactions, neglected wives, the plight of orphaned stepchildren, contests of wits and physical stamina, ecological disasters, a threatening environment, human resilience, domesticated animals, domestic chores, community life and the scarification

(beautification) of young girls. Explanatory tales account for differences between animal body shapes, residences or estrangement (Bascom, 1992). *The Dog and the Sheep*, as well as *The Leopard and the Goat*, explain why dogs chase after sheep and the goat's mistrust of leopards, respectively. In Rohrich's (1991) view, aetiological closings to narratives are amendments that have become closing formulas.

Okpewho (1992) identifies four major classifications of folktales: dilemma; trickster; historical; and origin folktales. Absent among the Bukusu are dilemma folktales with inconclusive endings. Trickster folktales involve a breach of faith leading to dissolution of a relationship between parties. In Florence (2005), the squirrel (proper translation is hare) tricks fellow animals, as well as humans, to appropriate their possessions. There are what Finnegan (1970) terms "thriller" folktales that depict human endurance and triumph over ogres and the laws of nature. *Nyaranga the Ironsmith; The Story of Nasio, The Ogres and the Infant, etc.*, fit the category. Adult males bring heroes back to life in *Kasaawa and the Garden of Pumpkins*, as well as *The Girl Nalubanga and a Boy Called Tuhila*.

African folktales depict dramatic experiences involving human and non-human elements. By humanizing non-human phenomena (birds, ogres, trees, water, stones, etc.), folktales highlight the interdependence of living and non-living elements as well as the inherent value in either one. Further, by integrating the real and transcendent, folktales make miraculous events believable and routine (Rohrich, 1991). Birds talk and humans survive otherwise murderous ordeals to emerge whole or at least curable. The birds in *Kasaawa and the Garden of Pumpkins*, *Po khamilee*, and *A Girl Called Milo*, witness and expose crimes, as well as the criminals. Events occur within and around homes, and ogres are an on-going threat to human existence (de Wolf, 1995; Florence, 2005). Community life and relational tensions reflect contests between humans, ogres and among animals (Rohrich, 1991). Yet, Bukusu folktales omit references to non-Bukusu groups. Further, in contrast to recorded African folktales (Mbiti, 1966; Finnegan, 1975; Liyong, 1972; Kipury, 1993; Mwangi, 1983), there is an absence of Bukusu folktales explaining the origins of natural phenomena such as moon, death, fire, etc. However, in the early 20th century, de Wolf (1995) recorded a Bukusu tale attributing the origin of death to human oversight. Rarely do heroes rely on a divinity.

Wagner's (1949) seminal ethnographic study of the Bukusu found no coherent belief system. He acknowledged the impact of Christianity on circulating legends among the locals. Bukusu appeals to a Supreme Being, Wele, parallel similar claims among neighboring ethnic groups, Gishu, Wanga, Kakalewa and Kabras. Cultural similarities and differences are understandable: "Shared and

distinctive language, religion, customs, are the product, not of generations of isolation from others but of processes of assimilation, negotiation, accommodation, and social construction, in a context of power relations with the state and with competing groups.” (Tapper, 1989, pp. 237–238). The contradiction in Bukusu origins extends to the ancestral figure among Bukusu. Wagner (1949) identifies Umugoma wa Nasioka and his woman, Malava. In contrast, conventional legends, including folktales, name Sela and Mwambu. Sela is male in some tales and female in others. Further, in some folktales, Sela and Mwambu are siblings rather than a couple. In one tale, Sela and Mwambu are friends: no mention of blood relations. Typical of folktales, contradictory portrayals of divinities, characters, beliefs, and practices reflect regional differences as much as the creativity of narrators.

In his work on *Folktales and Reality*, Lutz Rohrich (1991) illustrates how the authenticity of folktales arises from their foundation in real life and ordinary situations. Further, the consistency of tale types reflects the “likelihood and reasonableness” of prevailing accounts suggesting an element of cultural stability (Tonkin, 1992). The heroes are ordinary farmers, shepherds, stepmothers, husbands and orphans, all of whom represent familiar social roles. In Florence (2005), the reader meets Nyaranga, the ironsmith, Namunguba and Sitati, the hunters, Namulunda, the neglected wife, Lukela and Lutomia, the malicious step-mothers, the barren women, Mukoya and Namuyemba, Manyonge, the hunter, Khayonga, with the unique scarifications, Kulundu the shepherd, etc. Animals and ogres also have names: Khole, the unique bull, Menumenu, Muangaki ekulu and Wacheche, the ogres. As cultural and moral ideals, characters legitimate modes of social existence. *Namunguba and His Brother-in-Law Sitati* portrays an occupation, kinship alliances, relational tensions, greed, revenge, etc. Mukoya, the *Barren Woman*, illustrates the community’s ambivalence towards infertility; while some sympathize with such women, others attribute barrenness to personal moral failure. The selectivity and retelling of folktales reflect individual constructions of the past, in view of existing realities, as well as ongoing reconstitutions of social norms. In this light, a lack of consensus in prevailing norms explains variations in tales types as much as cultural changes.

Folktales depict social life and the surrounding challenges as well as individual and communal aspirations and challenges (Okpewho, 1999). In *Khangaliba, the Boy and the Ogre*, Khangaliba, the bride, is abducted by an ogre, stuffed into a tree opening (an unnatural occurrence), but finally restored to the community. Marital communities resist incorporating women and for many, acceptance comes after a trial period during which she proves herself (the birth of a son) or through a feat that confirms her membership. Stories of raids, male bar-

becue feasts and contentious marital unions reflect objective reality (Rohrich, 1991). Conceptions of happiness are often modest and full of social inhibitions. Happiness, notes Okpewho (1999), is inseparable from established social arrangements. Folktales discourage materialism and individualism in depicting predicaments and resolutions within the material limitations of the group.

Folktale tellers enjoy ending a narrative by describing the extraordinary wealth that the hero has gained, but happiness is not necessarily the result of becoming royalty or acquiring immeasurable wealth. Having modest material possessions without having to work and owning one's own property are often enough (Rohrich, 1991, p. 192).

Although folktales venture into fantasy, events are rooted in reality, ordinary human interactions and achievements (Okpewho, 1999; Rohrich, 1991). The community constructs "livable" quarters for the neglected wives, Namulunda and Naliwa's mother, following their exoneration. Other members of the family rescue and nurse back to health victimized stepchildren like Nabatakwa and Kalimonya, who are then married off, as custom decrees. Bukusu folktales omit a chronological progression depicting a hero's life; these simply emerge in adulthood and rarely rely on divine intervention to achieve otherwise impossible tasks. The hero marries, an individual or community overcomes formidable challenges and the community returns to normality. Similarly, individuals or family members penalize social "deviants" without recourse to an organized judicial system. The focus on social order and communal arrangements reflects a yearning for cohesion given prevailing perils—the fear of attacks from warriors with a score to settle, ferocious beasts, and natural calamities.

Folktales portray humanity in its own integral circumstances, expressing success and failure in terms of individual courage or moral shortcomings (Rohrich, 1991). *Namulunda the Neglected Wife* depicts the plight of some women in polygynous unions. Legally or culturally bound to husbands who neither care nor provide for them, many subsist on the margins. Following years of living on the margins, justice is attained when the community recognizes Namulunda as a rainmaker, symbolized by her acquisition of newer and better living quarters in the homestead. In real life, only men have the ability to make rain. The outcast wife is rehabilitated, and the marriage continues in happiness (Thompson, 1946). Reprieve for the disenfranchised is a collective achievement; the community constructs a house for Namulunda away from the margins. On the other hand, these folktales demonstrate the cultural pressure on behaviors (Jordan, 1985). Despite consistently scorning suitors, *A Girl Called Sisiwe* and *The Girl Who Rejected Suitors* are lured into marriage. Youths are be-

holden to elders in *Kalisanga and Kalisanga*, as well as in *The Story of Nasio*. Wives fare no better under husbands. Mukoya's wife is circumscribed by the husband's mandates in *Kasaawa and his Garden of Pumpkins*. Kulundu's wife and his children lose their lives because he doubts their claim to the return of a herd of goats, a fact he does not verify until after the killings. There is no penalty for the murders.

In contrast to folktales, legends are historical or pseudo-historical accounts of events or even origins of natural phenomena. Largely, men recount heroic legends and tribal myths, targeting younger boys and adult gatherings (Rohrich, 1991). Typical of ego-driven male gatherings, these "narratives are inevitably marked by a tone of self-projection of a more or less combative kind ... which partially, at least, explains the self-serving hyperbolism of heroic lore" (Okpewho, 1999, p. 138). These tales narrate the rise and/or fall of a personality, development of a practice or trace, the genealogy of a lineage such as Luo Luanda Magere, Gikuyu and Mumbi of the Gikuyu, as well as the Bukusu Maina wa Nalukale and Mango who symbolized the strength, dignity and courage of a group (Jordan & Kalcik, 1985; Rohrich, 1991; Okpewho, 1992, 1999; Thompson, 1946). Bukusu resistance to Colonial rule culminated in the bloodshed at Chetambe. Harman (1971) reconstructs a history encompassing Bukusu and other Luyia sub-ethnic groups, as well as neighboring Nandi, Maasai, Luo and Kisii (Gusii), centered on the personalities of Libina, Maina, Namunguba, Kisache and Malo. In response to years of fending off hostile neighbors, Bukusu communities bought and embezzled armor from travelers and traders. The Colonial Administration sent in Swahili administrative police, *askaris*, to retrieve the rifles, as government property and to eliminate future threats. Unsuccessful and angry at the loss of soldiers, the Administration marshaled an offensive on Bukusu, culminating at the Chetambe fort in Webuye in 1895 (Makila, 1978; Wipper, 1977).

Florence (2005) includes folktales of how Bukusu learned to make beer, the myth of the superiority of northern over southern Bukusu and a legendary Namuyemba's miraculous cure of barrenness. Pender-Cudlip (1972) argues that legends are based on historical truth over and above their social function and symbolic meaning. One underpinning aspect in legends is their acceptance as truthful accounts (Bascom, 1965a; Kipury, 1993). Jordan and Kalcik (1985) attribute the prominence of legends to the fact that folklorists have, for the most part been males who tend to focus on male narrators, a choice that marginalizes women and their cultural role. Women narrate folktales in "domestic spheres or as part of ordinary conversation" (Jordan & Kalcik, 1985, p. ix).

Baldwin (1985) attributes differences between male and female tales to exposure. Male perspectives "can be informed with a distance not usually possi-



ble for the women” who spend more time on domestic and childrearing responsibilities (p. 154). In Bukusu tales, male experiences reflect “outside” activities—mining, armory, extended journeys, beer feasts, hunting animals and ogres, constructing homes—what Baldwin terms “patterns of hierarchy and skill specialties.” Legends reflect these aspects in recounting sequenced activities, familiar to a select few, like the Chetambe legend. Men recount tales in public forums, with set schedules; in Bukusu communities, these occur during community rituals such as funeral eulogies, male post-circumcision ceremonies or marital events. The Chetambe carnage is replete with male imagery. Bukusu warriors congregate at a fort as a last stand against European imperialism. Although the Chetambe forts were in a Tachoni region, they did not participate in the war. Tachoni residents escaped in the wee hours of the night, abandoning the Bukusu to a seemingly foregone fate. The tale centers on events at the fort, omitting the experiences of families left behind in villages, but who probably played a role in the episode. A public and novel event overshadows domestic albeit regular occurrences. Bukusu sayings depict Tachoni as cowards.

When people fled Lumboka after the defeat of the resistance, everybody left—men, women and children. The British forces only pushed the main column towards Chetambe’s fort. River Kuywa had burst its banks and many fugitives drowned as they scrambled to cross the raging waters. Stories about the war do not single out individuals, except for men like Chief Namachanja who later claimed the fugitives. The omission of women in later recounts raises questions of selectivity. Mayi Sarai Omukituika/omutukuika recounted how she and the others, including men and women, narrowly escaped death and the fallout on captives who landed at the Mumias post. Similarly, Namuyemba’s miraculous cure of barrenness focuses on males—husbands, brothers, fathers and the male heirs. In this light, Tonkin (1995) distinguishes history as “imaginings of the past” from “history-as-recorded,” in terms of memory and cognition. While literacy favors documentation over oracy, both draw upon similar occurrences. In her view, while myth is discounted as an unrealistic representation of the past, “it can sometimes be shown that mythic structures encode history, that is they register actual happenings or significant changes” (p. 8). Backed by empiricism including personal accounts, oral narratives offer material evidence for past occurrences. However, conventional beliefs consistently reinforce the validity and authority of documents.

Socialization patterns shape the narrator’s ease with material; as heads of households, males learn early to command a public presence. Many African communities value rhetorical skills in the public sphere where issues are debated and settled, a skill that is more central to social interactions in a predominantly

oral culture. In patriarchal societies where “public authority and therefore the public voice is male; it follows that skilled speechmakers would be male too” (Tonkin, 1995, 27). Male accounts depict struggle, destruction and victory; they can afford to be “openly aggressive and hostile” in myth and reality (Jordan & Kalcik, 1985, p. 173). Okpewho (1999) contrasts such tales to women’s narratives, “marked essentially by patient attentiveness and an interactive, collaborative, nonexclusive and non-individualistic conversational style” (p. 138). Like Isabelle Bertaux’s findings in French stories, Tonkin (1992) links differences between female and male narratives to social standing: men structured their accounts as a quest for goals, in which “I” was the main subject of action while women, on the other hand, talked of a network of relationships in which “I” was but one pole of the role of a relation and *nous* or *on* were often used as subject pronoun instead of “*je*” (p. 135).

Acknowledging the diversity in women’s location and social power, Mills (2003) cites the work of feminist linguist Deborah Tannen (1991) to explain differences in gender expressions and communication styles. Tannen asserts that, “women are concerned, in the main, to establish rapport between members of a group and to ensure that conversations go smoothly (rapport talk, whilst men are concerned to establish their place in the pecking order and use the production of information as a tool to move up the hierarchy (report talk)” (Mills, 2003, p. 135). These patterns of speech operate at the institutional level and at “the level of the individual.” Among women, differences arise due to women’s access to education, public position, personality, career, etc. For instance, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the ex-American Secretaries of State Madeline Albright and Condoleezza Rice, including the Nobel Peace Prize Winner (2004) Professor Wangari Mata Maathai, command authority denied most women for a range of reasons. Overall, the absence of women’s voices in mainstream cultural heritages suggests their complicity as much as the selectivity of narrators.

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