



The Construction of the ‘Other’ through Oral Narrative Performance: A Case of the Bukusu Folktale

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Abstract

Kenya as a country has different communities. Over time, there have been cases of animosity and even fighting among different communities. Such differences obviously undermine the spirit of coexistence in a given society. Communities often live under fear and tension, raising the question why people shouldn't coexist peacefully. This necessitates a concerted effort to unearth why such animosity exists. One possible avenue of establishing the kind of relationship that exists between the people is by listening to what they say about each other through their literary performances. This paper takes interest in the Bukusu people who have also been affected by such communal hostilities. The paper specifically focuses on the Bukusu perception of “strangers.” It examines the references in Bukusu narratives with regard to strangers in order to examine how such references are likely to create or diffuse the tensions between the Bukusu and their neighbours.

Keywords: Strangers, Performance, Construction, Other, Bukus, Perception, Folktale.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

The paper focuses on Bukusu folktale because as a literary genre, the folktale is a product of the community and carries the norms and values of the community. The paper is predicated on the premise that the Bukusu folktale provides a sieve for some understanding of issues pertinent to the understanding of Bukusu perception. The overall purpose of this paper is to contribute towards the understanding of how the Bukusu perceive and construct the Other through folktale performance.

1. Review of Related Literature

It suffices that Bukusu narratives on strangers are basically motivated by the former's anxieties regarding the presence and influence of minority strangers. To validate this argument calls for a closer examination of Appadurai (2006) when he talks of predatory identities. He defines such identities as: "...those whose social construction and mobilisation require the extinction of other, proximate social categories, defined as threats to the very existence of some group, defined as a we." He argues that these groups emerge periodically out of pairs of identities, sometimes sets that are larger than two which have long histories of close contact, mixture and some degree of mutual stereotyping. According to Appadurai, one of the pairs of identities often turns predatory by mobilising an understanding of itself as a threatened majority. In many cases, they are claims about cultural majorities that seek to be exclusively or exhaustively linked with the identity of the nation. Appadurai's argument is that small numbers represent a tiny obstacle between majority and totality or total purity. In a sense, the smaller the number, the deeper the rage about its capacity to make the majority feel like a mere majority rather than like a whole and uncontested ethnos. Appadurai's views point to the existence of "small numbers" or social and political minorities in a nation-state which are often perceived as blights upon the landscape by those who wish to claim or believe in the purity or homogeneity of the majority.

It should however be noted that the way we perceive others only creates the platform upon which we are equally perceived by the others. This explains the existence of different perceptions held by different groups about "others" in the contemporary society. It can be rightly argued that the Bukusu who predominantly occupy Bungoma County consider themselves as the majority in this county hence the perception of other communities that neighbour them as strangers or minorities. This is clearly demonstrated in Bukusu narratives that comment on such perceived strangers. Through such narratives, the worldview of the Bukusu with regard to strangers is aptly articulated. The characters and actions in Bukusu narratives are plausible since they reflect what the Bukusu in general consciously or unconsciously do or might do in relation to their relationship with strangers. These narratives reflect the fears and hopes of the Bukusu. It is instructive to note that at the centre of these narratives is an audience hence the more dramatic the performance, the more readily the audience come to believe the values of the community as well as the attitudes of the Bukusu towards strangers. An understanding of the Bukusu perception towards strangers ultimately paves the way for the internalisation of the Bukusu worldview on communal coexistence.

Appiah (2007) clearly captures the concept of strangers when he poses: "what is not strange is that we will always treat people different from us as exactly what they are – strangers. This will happen regardless of the fact that they are humans like us and share some of the values we hold dear." In essence what Appiah implies in this assertion is that the ethos of differentiating societies, notwithstanding, there is more binding similarities in a united world. He is of the view that in the world full of strangers, cosmopolitanism is a universal trait of humankind. This is basically an ancient philosophy but one which still is in dire need of contemporary validation.

Appiah's unapologetic stance on the universality of the values that unite humanity therefore still remains a hard sell. Human beings will always continue defining themselves in relation with certain groups for identification purposes. Warner (2002) aptly summarises what unites a given group of people as: "to be a certain kind of person or inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media genres, to be motivated by certain normative horizon and to speak within a certain language ideology." Such generalisations about "us" and "others" still have their own shortcomings in the sense that they do not take care of the fact that they underestimate the differences that may still be witnessed among members of the same group. Such kind of stereotypes, especially negative ones, are likely to distort our perception of other groups hence ignite unnecessary friction among different groups.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper provides an analysis of narratives that comment on strangers and it is guided by hermeneutics theory. In its most general sense, hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. Its goal is how best to discover the meaning of the text. Essentially, hermeneutics seeks to construct reality by examining a wide range of evidence and situations that can lead to a better understanding of what was to be communicated. This theory has been used to probe the community's understanding and interpretation of communal co-existence through the narratives that comment on strangers. Patton (1990) defines hermeneutics as "...a theoretical and philosophical perspective aimed at the study of interpretive understanding of meaning with special attention to the context and original purpose." He posits that to meaningfully understand and interpret a text and any other work of art calls for an understanding of the author's intentions, intended meanings and to place documents in their historical and cultural context. This then calls for an earnest and concerted search for possible meanings of the text or the work under investigation. In this paper, an examination of Bukusu narratives on strangers essentially entails an understanding of meaning of the narratives in their context.

According to Patton (1990) "the term hermeneutics owes its origin to the Greek word "hermeneuin" which means to interpret or translate into one's idiom, to make clear and understandable or to give expression." In Greek mythology, Herms interprets the often cryptic messages of the gods to mortals. It is not surprising therefore that hermeneutics as a discipline began as a scriptural exogenesis and was closely allied to philosophy. Apart from being a philosophical mode of reflection, hermeneutics is also a methodology whose concern is with the nature of interpretation and understanding. As a philosophical perspective and analytical approach, hermeneutics has the

potential and flexibility to be applied in a wide range of disciplines especially oral literary studies where it is vital in the interpretation of oral texts.

Culler (2002) advances two accounts of hermeneutics thus: a hermeneutics of recovery and a hermeneutics of suspicion. Hermeneutics of recovery seeks to reconstruct the original context of production (the circumstances and intention of the author and the meaning a text might have had for its original readers). Hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to expose the unexamined assumption on which a text may rely (political, sexual, philosophical, and linguistic). Whereas hermeneutics of recovery celebrates the text and its author as it seeks to make an original message accessible to readers today, hermeneutics of suspicion deemphasises the authority of the text. Culler however, notes that these associations are not fixed and can well be reversed. Hermeneutics of recovery in restricting the text to some supposedly original meaning remote from our concerns may reduce its power, while hermeneutics of suspicion may value the text for the way in which it engages and helps us re-think issues of the moment. In doing so, it may sometimes subvert the assumptions of the performer.

The weaknesses of hermeneutics of suspicion lie in its stress on the deeper meaning. It neglects the specificity of the object and looks at it as a sign of something else. Whereas the symbolic meaning is crucial in literary works, it need not be overemphasised at the expense of the literal meaning. This way, its reliability in interpreting narratives is watered down. This paper circumvents this weakness by examining both the specific and literary meaning of the narratives under study. This is informed by the fact that some narratives are more direct and specific than symbolic in nature. Any attempt to analyse such narratives using hermeneutics of suspicion is likely to fail.

Nonetheless, the two accounts of hermeneutics of recovery and suspicion have been useful in this paper. The two complement and supplement each other in appraising the construction of Bukusu worldview on strangers. Whereas hermeneutics of recovery has been used to situate the Bukusu narratives in their original context of performance, hermeneutics of suspicion is vital in interpreting the world view of the community on strangers through a deeper analysis of these narratives. This is pegged on the assumption that many Bukusu oral narratives indeed have deeper meanings apart from their normal surface meaning. Hermeneutics of recovery is particularly useful in cases where the researcher has to attend the original contexts of narrative performances through fieldwork. This way, the researcher comes face to face with the narrative performances in their original state. Hermeneutics theory has therefore been used in this paper to locate the Bukusu construction of strangers. It has also been used to probe the community's understanding and interpretation of strangers through oral narratives.

3. Major Findings

3.1. *Perceptions of Strangers as Deceptive and Treacherous*

In examining Bukusu perceptions of other people, the paper is guided by the view that in oral performances, the elements and values most vividly remembered are the images and ideas stressed and emphasised by the narrator. These images are drawn from the socio-cultural environment that the narrator shares with his audience. The narrator makes good use of the context of performance to ensure that these images and ideas are not only seen to be taking place in the narratives but also have an effect of permanence on his audience. Kabira (1986) argues that "the ideological standpoint of the performers determines the principles and ideas that she stresses in the process of performance." Kabira underscores the critical role of the narrator in oral narrative performances. In her opinion, the narrative process is entirely guided by the psychological and ideological disposition of the narrator.

Kabira's position is however is not fully convincing especially if one has to consider the performers as principal determinants of the course of performance especially with regard to their ideological standpoints. What should not be forgotten is the fact that the ideologies of the performers are more often than not dictated by the audience in a performance. The point that we need not belabour in this sense is that the performers and the audience have a lot of information in common such that the images and ideas that the former stresses are not anything new to the audience. This common understanding is however no guarantee to the total acceptance of the performance by the audience. The narrative performance still calls for a pleasant narrator who is able to articulate the shared experiences with the audience in an artistically acceptable manner. This is the literariness that accounts for the differences in oral performances.

Among the Bukusu, just like in many other oral performances from different communities, the narrator is a creative ideologue creating from a clear ideological framework. The primary purpose of the narrative is therefore to persuade the audience to accept a particular way of thinking. In these narrative performances, it can be argued that the narrator merely acts as the mouth piece of the community by articulating the values and issues so dearly held by the community through narration. This explains why he/she is directly answerable to the audience in the entire narrative session. Nonetheless, the fact that the narrator is entrusted with the responsibility of performing the narrative is in itself an elevation of his/her status in the community. This is validated by the significant role that narrators perform in shaping the communal perception especially with regard to strangers.

A close look at Bukusu narratives reveals the communal perception of some strangers as exhibiting deceptive tendencies. The narratives which have depicted strangers in the negative sense as being deceptive and treacherous stem from deep-rooted attitudes nourished over a long period of time. It can be argued that such attitudes emanate from cultural, economic and even political dynamics of the Bukusu. These are the necessary pillars in constructing the Bukusu worldview on communal coexistence. These narratives comment on the two vices as potential barriers to peaceful communal coexistence. Some of the narratives analysed point out the damage occasioned by such vices in the Bukusu community in particular and the society in general.

In N1 (pp 24), Apelu provides a typical example where the audience comes face to face with communal relationships with regard to the Bukusu and strangers. In this narrative, the Bukusu community willingly allow a stranger, whom they know little of, to live in their midst and conducts himself in a deceitful and exploitative manner. Apelu, the deceitful stranger, is not ready to allow his daughter get married to Hare. Having lived among the Bukusu for some time and taking advantage of their hospitality, he cunningly dupes them into believing that one of them can marry his daughter. However, when this hour comes and that person to marry his daughter turns out to be Hare, he decides to escape with his family to heaven from where he had come so as to avoid the embarrassment of marrying off his only daughter to Hare.

In the morning when Hare is expected to officially pick his bride, he comes to the house and to his utter shock, the house is empty. After searching the house, Hare comes across a beautiful tobacco pipe which he decides to carry home as a source of consolation. His friends ridicule his action of “marrying” a tobacco pipe instead of a woman. Hare’s mother laments her son’s fate and equally castigates what he does in bringing home a worthless object. This does not deter Hare from pursuing his course. The following morning, however, Namikasa, the beautiful maiden, appears and pleads with Hare to marry her while apologising on behalf of her father, Apelu. The weakest and despised Hare has therefore won the beautiful maiden. Apelu’s treachery has been defeated as is the case with other suitors who thought themselves more worthwhile than Hare. His bitterest critics and rivals most of whom are well to do personalities in the community cannot help but burn with jealousy as they come to terms with their future. To them, Namikasa should have been married to a more worthwhile person than Hare. Their jealousy notwithstanding, they are left with no option rather than accepting the turn of events. Hare emerges the hero of our story. In this narrative, the narrator brings forth the presence of deceit and betrayal in the society. Through the presentation of characters in this narrative, it emerges that the narrator advocates for shunning of vices that can pose a threat to peaceful communal coexistence. This perhaps explains why Hare miraculously escapes the suffering occasioned by these vices. It can be inferred that through such narratives, the communal perception of strangers is aptly captured.

The message in this narrative according to our respondents, is the need for the society to learn to appreciate all people irrespective of their social status. What matters in life is not how much material wealth one has acquired but the ability to live and coexist peacefully with others. The proud Apelu cannot conceive of his beautiful daughter getting married to Hare despite the fact that Apelu is a stranger in this land and his survival largely depends on the hospitality of his neighbours. The despised Hare is symbolic of the wisdom that the Bukusu community prides in. It should be noted that Bukusu narratives, just like many other East African narratives, symbolically use Hare to represent wisdom and intelligence. He is also renowned for using dishonest means to succeed where others have failed. His triumph in this narrative, symbolises the triumph of the community in the face of strangers. Our informants argue that it would be inconceivable for a stranger to not only deceive but also suppress the Bukusu in their land.

These views however, are mainly subjective in the sense that they lift the Bukusu community above the rest by presenting them as flawless and victims of circumstances. This can prove a hard sell given in the contemporary society where the Bukusu live and mingle with people from different cultural backgrounds in the native Bungoma County. It is therefore possible that both the Bukusu and strangers share certain characteristics in common given that they live within the same environment. It is therefore unconvincing to wholesomely condemn strangers as being deceptive and treacherous.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the Bukusu community generally co-exists with strangers. This explains why they do not shun the seemingly arrogant Apelu from the very onset. These worries can only find answers in the saying that the Bukusu pride themselves in as: “*lirango lie enjofu*” or “the elephant’s thigh.” This brings us back to the power of images in Bukusu narratives. These images are at the core of narrative performances in that through them, the narrator is able to achieve his goal of creating the desired emotions in the audience. According to [Harold \(1978\)](#) “images are felt actions evoked in the imagination of the members of the audience by verbal elements arranged and controlled by the performer.” It is important to note that despite the performer having the power to control and arrange the images in oral performances, the audience is generally privy to what is going on since they share the norms and conventions of these performances with the performer.

In Bukusu narratives, the image of the elephant’s thigh for instance presupposes shared knowledge between the narrator and the audience with regard to communal perception of the elephant as an animal. Our informants contend that this is an animal that is associated with strength and steadfastness. It is instructive at this point to note that reference of the Bukusu as “elephant’s thigh” fits in the myths which are invoked to imagine the essence of being Bukusu. It accords members of the Bukusu community some sense of belonging and the pride that goes with such belonging. The elephant’s thigh is also a symbol of mental strength as well as responsibility. This line of thought serves to present the Bukusu as a group that boasts of mental superiority over strangers or non Bukusu people. On a similar note, the image depicts the Bukusu as a people who are not only accommodating but also much ready to assimilate other people especially from non Bukusu communities. The ability to accommodate others stems from the high sense of responsibility associated with the elephant. This certain show of tolerance is quite laudable in the present society, especially Kenya, where peaceful coexistence has at times proven to be an elusive endeavour. That the Bukusu tolerates a seemingly arrogant and deceitful stranger like Apelu reveals their endeavour to coexist peacefully with other communities.

This story of Apelu finds a semblance to N4 (pp 28) where a scabrous stranger hears of a beautiful, proud maiden, ready to get married but whose overreaching ambition has made her set an absurd price on her head: the man to marry her must be able to thread a complete waistband of beads using his teeth rather than his hands. This makes her father’s home a beehive of activities as suitors from all walks of life flock there to try their luck. One by one, different men come, try and fail. It is however quite ironical that the man who finally wins is not only a stranger but also one whom the proud young lady could not have accepted under normal circumstances. He is quite unsightly. He is given the opportunity just because no one expects him to succeed after all since his hands are ever busy scratching his scabies infested body. When he succeeds, the young woman is shocked but she has to comply though she sets another dangerous task that requires the young man to go down the lake and bring home a single feather guarded by the lake monster. The young man does so and gets cleansed in the process so that when he appears next, there are no signs of scabies on him. The two get married.

According to our respondents, the journey down the lake is symbolic of the transformation that this stranger is set to undergo. The lake is part of the universe that is not inhabited by human beings and those who visit it must have compelling reasons. In his study of Maragoli narratives, [Kabaji \(2006\)](#) points out the existence of three domains in Maragoli folktales: “the home, the environment just outside the home and the world beyond the forest.” He argues that in Maragoli narratives, the world beyond the forest is meant for the brave and courageous. Kabaji argues that this is a no go zone for girls and women. This brings out the question of gender in Maragoli narratives in that women are considered as weak and cannot fulfill certain tasks without relying on the support of men. This view has however, been overtaken by events especially in the modern world where political correctness demands for equal

representation of gender in almost all aspects. Taking cue from Kabaji however, it can be rightly argued that the journey that our hero in N4 makes is in essence a journey toward maturity and purification. All the symbolic projections point to the fact that the stranger is being transformed into a man of substance and by extension a husband.

The argument advanced in this narrative is that the stranger has to undergo this purification exercise in order to be allowed to marry a Bukusu woman. The implication in this narrative is that the Bukusu are ready to coexist with other communities as long as those communities are ready to embrace the Bukusu way of life. The fact that this stranger undertakes to accomplish all the demands placed on him is a pointer to the willingness and readiness of other communities to coexist with the Bukusu. The position adopted by the Bukusu is likely to jeopardise the much yearned for communal coexistence due to its subjectivity. The view that it is only strangers to submit to Bukusu way of life is quite parochial and a barrier to communal coexistence.

It also emerges from this narrative that the Bukusu community use women's bodies to affirm their nationhood. A young audience listening to this narrative is quick to visualise the triumph of the young man before a supposedly proud maiden. This view can be validated by a close reading of McClintock (1995) though in a different setting when she poses: "women were constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but without having an historical and national agency." She further argues that women became both representatives of the inert, atavistic body of national tradition, embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men by contrast represented the progressive agent of national modernity, embodying nationalism's progressive principle of discontinuity. Even though it is possible to argue against such a strict demarcation between men and women in terms of the roles attached to them during the formation of nations, McClintock also stresses the differences between different groups of men and women and acknowledges that nationalisms do not follow a universal blueprint. It can be argued that the Bukusu community present women as people without any history and their history can only be realised when they are overpowered by men.

This Bukusu perception of strangers in the negative sense also emanates from their desire to paint a picture of a unique group that can only be corrupted through interaction with suspicious strangers. This feeling can be taken to be a universal perception held by many cultural communities across the divide. This is exemplified in Eddy (2003) when he posits that: "often discussions that deal with the personal identity issues whether about race, gender, religion, or nation, descend quickly into an 'us' and 'them' opposition that ceases to do productive work and poisons the hopes of any participant for a satisfying resolution of conflict."

Eddy's argument points to the existing differences in the society where different communities struggle to identify themselves as distinct from others. Such differences are varied and range from gender, religion, race, nation or even language. Such differences are quite instrumental in reflecting the kind of relationships that exist among these groups of people. Although Eddy pleads for peace between different groups, such peace should not come at the expense of losing a healthy sense of nationalism and cultural pride. This peace can however be nourished by the different groups accepting and appreciating the existence of the peculiarities that differentiate them from others and put such peculiarities to good use for a peaceful communal coexistence. The perception of the Bukusu to some strangers as being deceptive and treacherous can be likened to a double edged sword given that inasmuch as the target is to depict their strangers in the negative sense, this perception inadvertently compels the Bukusu to deal fairly with others. They too are not expected to condone any deceptive and treacherous tendencies.

A close examination of Bukusu narratives reveals the existence of group divisions through the narratives that comment on strangers. A number of these narratives are metaphorically tailored to comment on strangers hence they call for the unraveling of the literary meaning in order to appreciate the Bukusu perception of strangers. In his comments on the use of symbolic language in narratives, Okpewho (1983) poses:

How indeed does one treat the evidence that people's ancestors descended from the sky? In the absence of any proof of early astronomic technology, such a statement must be seen as having a primarily poetic interest. Whatever may be the real historical foundations of the claim, it is evident that the people who tell such a tale have decided to consecrate that history to poetic resource of symbolism.

Okpewho's position is significant in elucidating the significance of symbolism in oral literary performances. It can be argued that many oral literary subgenres among them Bukusu narratives heavily rely on symbolism in their performances. As such, our attempt to glean something of the original meaning in most narratives demands that we work our way through that medium of suggestive fancy employed by the performers to describe their most cherished experiences, that oblique language of symbols, by which they identify the familiar elements of their cultural universe. It has already been mentioned that, the images and symbols employed in narrative performances need to have a bearing to the socio-cultural and historical environment for them to communicate to the audience and the narrator alike.

3.2. Perceptions of Strangers as Untrustworthy and Ungrateful

An examination of some Bukusu narratives reveals the extent to which some strangers are perceived as being untrustworthy and ungrateful. N3 (pp 27) is perhaps one of those narratives that warn the community to be wary of strangers who may pose a serious threat to the otherwise peaceful coexistence. In this narrative, a woman is digging up sweet potatoes in a garden when a hyena comes by running and approaches her with pleas for help. He is panting and sweating profusely. The woman is startled and almost takes to flight but the hyena begs her not to run away since he is only running away from hunters who want to kill him. He therefore requests the woman to protect him from his adversaries. Without saying a word, the frightened woman takes up a large basket and covers the hyena thereby concealing him completely. Shortly afterwards, hunters arrive and enquire from her if she has seen the hyena pass by to which the woman denies seeing any hyena.

So the hunters go their way warning her that it would be foolhardy to conceal a dangerous creature like the hyena from the hunters since it could easily turn against the same woman and eat her up. When the hunters have gone, the woman lifts the basket on one side and asks the hyena whether it is true that it could eat her up. The hyena replies callously that any person who ignores sound advice like her indeed deserves to be eaten up. The woman is

shocked. Soon after the hyena is sure that the hunters have gone far out of sight, he throws off the basket, seizes the woman and starts eating her up despite her screams and pleas for mercy.

This narrative has been told repeatedly in the Bukusu community to enlighten the audience on embracing openness and shunning evil practices that can be detrimental to the existing social order in the society. [Miruka \(1999\)](#) notes that the hyena in many East African narratives is regarded as a symbol of greed and foolishness. These are some of the vices that the Bukusu community and the rest of the society are likely to avoid at all costs. It is therefore ironic if a member of the community can willingly propagate such vices. Our respondents observe that this narrative warns the audience and the Bukusu community to desist from condoning evil and come out openly to condemn such practices at both individual and communal levels. The narrative equally warns the community to not only be wary of strangers with unknown background but also desist from wholly embracing issues and ideologies that are remotely related to them. This will guard them from falling victims of deceit and betrayal. To date, individuals who engage in suspicious deals with unknown people are always reminded of this narrative. Those who willingly go against the dictates of the community are regarded as social misfits and whenever calamity strikes, they are held personally responsible for their actions. This is the ideal society that this narrative and many others advocate for. It is however ironic that this narrative narrows its perception of evil to be emanating from strangers. This is an unacceptable position largely fostered by general ethnocentric tendencies and social psychological mechanisms individual members of the Bukusu community subscribe to.

N7 (pp 30) reveals the extent to which the Bukusu were wary of their perceived “enemies” especially the Sabaots. It is instructive to note that this narrative has some historical bearing as evidenced in [Were \(1967\)](#) when he highlights the major external “enemies” of the Abaluhya in general and the Bukusu in particular as; “Luo, Nandi, Teso and Uasin Gishu Maasai.” The Nandi and Teso in particular were frequently fighting with the Bukusu over land and livestock. This eroded the relationship between these communities that the Bukusu would perform a narrative aimed at warning young women ready for marriage against endearing themselves to strangers. The narrative which is in form of a song goes thus:

Nabwile, Nabwile	Nabwile, Nabwile
Khasinja olikona nying'inyi	Khasinja you should not sleep deeply.
Nabwile, Nabwile	Nabwile, Nabwile
Khasinga olikona nying'inyi	Khasinja you should not sleep deeply.

According to (John Wafula, Appendix 18 pp 29) this narrative underscores the kind of relationship between the Bukusu and their neighbours. It presents the Bukusu community as having been victims of aggression from some aggressive neighbours and is therefore not ready to allow its members to freely mingle with such strangers. This is more specifically in marriage where sometimes young people look beyond their respective communities in choosing a partner. The perception of the Bukusu as mere victims of aggression is a hard sell given that quite often different groups have different interests in any given society. It is justifiable to infer that the Bukusu, just like their neighbours, greatly contributed to the kind of relationship that existed among them. In the above narrative, our narrator argues against intermarriages especially with regard to those communities perceived as “enemies.” It is however, instructive to observe that the perception of the Bukusu towards their Sabaot neighbours is subjective in the sense that the former are keen on painting their counterparts as the aggressors out to harm the Bukusu. Such a biased presentation of history is questionable given the fact that the Bukusu equally engaged in several wars on their way to settle in western parts of Kenya. This is clearly captured in [Were \(1967\)](#) when he posits: “in the early years of the raids, the Teso seem to have come off best. At one time for example, they defeated the Babukusu and forced many of them to flee. However, from the accounts of people, the situation was never static.” The fact that the Bukusu engaged in a series of wars with other non Bukusu communities can only be taken to imply that they had group interests which they fought for. It would therefore be imprudent for the Bukusu to perceive of other communities as aggressors and assume innocence all the time.

This narrative is closely related to N5 (pp 29) where the Sabaots are depicted as despising their Bukusu neighbours who hitherto have not been practicing circumcision the way the Sabaots do. It takes the courage of Mango, a Bukusu man, who kills the python that had defeated valiant warriors among the Sabaots for the Sabaots to accept the Bukusu among their fold. The act of killing a python is in itself symbolic of the ability to protect the community from external aggression. This daring act can only be accomplished by the privileged few who are normally brave like Mango. His transformation into a heroic character in this narrative symbolises the communal achievements in the face of the perceived enemy community. Forthwith, the Sabaots will no longer despise their Bukusu counterparts. The acceptance of the Bukusu by the Sabaots is however conditional – the Bukusu have to embrace circumcision which had long been forgotten in the community. To this extent, it can be argued that inasmuch as the Bukusu regard the Sabaots as an enemy community, they equally feel indebted to them for the reemergence of the practice of circumcision which they now take a lot of pride in. This boils down to the interrelationship that characterise not only the Bukusu and the Sabaots but also many other world communities.

The relationship between the Bukusu and their neighbouring Teso community is aptly captured in N5 (pp 29). This reveals the perception which was earlier held by the Bukusu to their neighbours as ungrateful. This, according to (John Wafula, one of our key respondents pp 27) was occasioned by the frequent wars between the two communities. The climax was the defeat of the Teso by the Bukusu and the subsequent humiliation of the former when they sought peace. The history of frequent feuds between the two communities is aptly captured by [Were \(1967\)](#) when he observes that in order to defeat the Teso, the Bukusu had to “...adopt a new kind of warfare. This consisted of night raids and battles.” This helped the Bukusu to defeat and subdue their aggressive neighbours. The Bukusu saying of “*Bamia balia embwa*” or simply “the Teso who ate a dog” is used in reference to the humiliation that the Teso suffered at the hands of the Bukusu. This was in form of the Bukusu forcing them into eating a young heifer’s meat after one Teso man being forced to lie in the intestines of the slaughtered animal. This was a humbling exercise that the Teso took without faltering. The act of “eating a dog” is metaphorically used to reveal the suing for peace between the two communities.

The other metaphor that the Bukusu have consistently employed with reference to the Teso is the infamous “*Khupa omumia akhulindile kamamela*” translated as “hit the Teso soundly so that he can mind your elusive sprouts.” Among the Bukusu community, the role of minding elusive sprouts was assigned to the children and weak in body.

Since the Teso posed a constant threat on Bukusu frontiers, it was more desirable to render them harmless. This then necessitated the application of this adage on an enemy in view. Given that the Bukusu live and interact with other communities in their day to day activities, there are high chances of communal feuds emerging at any given time. This then calls for communal unity in the event of external aggression. The emerging value in this metaphor is communal unity which surpasses individualism. Individual members of the community are called upon to be ready to sacrifice for the sake of the community especially in the event of some external forces that threaten the very fabric of peaceful coexistence.

It is important to observe that N5, N6 and N7 above all border on historical events that indeed happened in the history of the Bukusu community. Such historical events are significant in authenticating the narrative process and make it appeal to both the audience and the narrator. In his comments on African myths and narratives, Okpewho (1983) notes: “the relationship between history/fact on one hand and ‘poetry’ and fiction/fancy on the other helps us to determine the true sense of the mythic. The closer a tale gets to historical reality; the less capable it is of being an illustration or vehicle, of larger, timeless, abstract details.”

Okpewho’s position is laudable in situating the place of oral narratives in their historical and cultural set up. The relationship between oral performances and historical and cultural setups has already been exemplified in the earlier chapters.

Perhaps the narrative of the Bukusu and Teso is closely related to yet another common metaphor among the Bukusu “*oteremaka acha ebunyolo*” translated as “a coward person should migrate and live at the lakeside.” This clearly points to the obvious Bukusu disdain to those communities that live at the lake shores. One of our respondents opines that this metaphor specifically targets the Luos who live near Lake Victoria. The seemingly open dislike for the Luos in this case can only be linked to the wars that the two communities underwent. This metaphor is mainly employed with reference to the young boys who are about to be initiated into adulthood through circumcision. Our respondents observe that due to constant migrations and feuds with neighbours as the Teso mentioned above, the practice of circumcision was disrupted for some time until Mango of *Neala*, revived it after killing the ferocious python that had caused untold suffering to both the Bukusu and their neighbours.

It is however interesting to note that the Sabaots, who used to boast of valiant warriors, had not been able to kill this python which was posing a great challenge to their very existence. When Mango therefore vows to avenge his daughter’s death, the Sabaot warriors ridicule him because they could not conceive of an uncircumcised man killing a python that has defeated the most reputable warriors of the time. Mango was however not dissuaded from his resolution. He spends days and nights sharpening his sword in readiness for the impending showdown with the python. The news of his killing of the python spread like wild fire in the bush. The Sabaot elders who previously held their Bukusu neighbours in disrepute because of circumcision decide to circumcise Mango and crown him the status of an elder. This then marks the onset of circumcision among the Bukusu.

From the above, it suffices that the Bukusu and the Sabaots both had frosty relationships that can only be attributed to the question of identity formations and the “us” and “them” concepts. The Sabaots who view themselves as superior to the Bukusu only allow the latter to be circumcised after this act of bravery from Mango. It is imperative to note that what Mango achieves does not only bring peace to the Bukusu families but also the entire neighbourhood. This is a significant pointer to the need for peaceful coexistence given that different communities living in a similar environment are faced with similar challenges.

Henceforth, circumcision has been used as a mark of transition from childhood to adulthood. The narratives around this practice have been used to inculcate; morality, behaviour and responsibilities. These narratives equally pave the way for the initiate to receive a more serious form of traditional education. Such symbolic maturity is preceded, accompanied and followed by tuition in all areas of life including sex education. Boys who delay undergoing this rite are jeered and ridiculed by the public, especially by their age mates who are already circumcised as well as by girls who consider them as cowards. Circumcision is thus a mark of courage since the initiates are encouraged to “face the knife” without flinching. Any slight show of fear is highly disapproved. In his comments on Bukusu circumcision, Bulimo (2013) observes: “in Bukusu, double-bladed knives are used with each knife cutting four initiates – one side chopping two older boys while the other side cuts the young ones.” Bulimo argues that this serves to bond candidates further and assume symbolic meaning of brotherhood later in life when the initiates refer to each other as being of one blade. It is however imperative to note that the practice of using one blade on different initiates has forthwith changed due to biomedical reasons.

It is vital at this point to observe that regardless of ethnic group, male circumcision has several related dimensions which range from social, religious, philosophical and even biomedical. Niang and Boiro (2007) argues that among the Balante of Guinea Bissau, for example, “the image of a circumcised man is that of a wise man who understands and respects what is socially prohibited and social mores. Circumcision makes a man more human and less dissolute and transforms the status of words and acts.” This standpoint seems to over glorify circumcision by elevating the status of a circumcised man above the rest. The argument that such a person becomes less dissolute is equally contestable in the sense that cases of overindulgence cannot have a one to one relationship with circumcision. Nevertheless, what emerges from this argument is the fact that circumcision is highly valued among the Balante ethnic group. This is a practice that comes with a high sense of responsibility and accountability to the community.

Niang and Boiro further postulate that among the Wolof of Senegal still, “a circumcised man is one who prays and who meets the conditions of spiritual purity required for an act of religious communion.” This position introduces a different dimension of religiosity in circumcision. This is an attempt to purify circumcision and make those who partake of it feel better in the eyes of those who do not. Such views are not very different from the Bukusu where circumcision is perceived of as a source of new social relations. According to (Joseph Nangendo Appendix 15 pp 29), those who are circumcised in the same group are considered to be bound by undying closeness, even stronger than that with a parent. Forthwith, any violence among them is highly prohibited. These are the codes that guarantee peaceful coexistence among those circumcised at the same time and the Bukusu in general while at the same time presenting the community as a unique group.

This paper provides an elaborate description of circumcision among the Bukusu because this is one of the most elaborate cultural practices that binds the Bukusu as a community. It equally singles them out as brave people who are ready to defend the community from any external aggression all the time. This explains why the tag “coward” is

considered an insult to a Bukusu young man just about to be circumcised. He therefore has to prove his bravery by withstanding the pain that go with circumcision. In doing so, the young man is partaking in a communal bond that identifies the Bukusu as a distinct entity. This boils down to the concept of identities and how various communities consider themselves as different from others. When terms that contain any derivatives of it such as community are used, it often evokes profound feelings in people. After all, how can one not be proud of one's community, common bond with one's fellow members of the community or the unquestionable loyalty to the community that has nurtured and imparted the sense of commonness? In his comments on imagined communities, Anderson (1991) posits that: "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." According to Anderson, language is the main ingredient in the mixture that glues a "nation" together and creates group consciousness. It is language that tells history, evokes images and produces social cohesion. However, the same language tool can be used to draw distinct lines between those who "historically" belong to the nations and those who are outsiders and intruders. Anderson rightly captures the significance of language in communal identities. It is true that language plays a major role in disseminating ideas and unifying people with imaginary links.

At this point, it is instructive to observe that reflection on whether and how to provide male circumcision has taken a particular importance in the recent past. This has been occasioned by the clinical trials in countries like South Africa, Kenya and Rwanda which have revealed that male circumcision reduces the risk of HIV infection by more than 50% in heterosexual men. These trials have somewhat altered the perception of circumcision as a mere mark of transition from childhood to adulthood.

The fact that the Bukusu refer to their Luo neighbours as cowards stems more from politics than negative stereotypes in the sense that the Tesos who equally do not practise circumcision are not considered as cowards in Bukusu narratives. Circumcision is regarded as a measure of maturity and bravery hence readiness to serve the community including defending it from external aggression. It is worth to reiterate that to date circumcision is still symbolically used to imply maturity among the Bukusu. However, age is no longer a factor in circumcision as many families circumcise their male children at very tender ages. Again, the Bukusu are no longer at war with their neighbours. Nonetheless, the tag of cowardice especially those who fail to live according to communal expectations has consistently been used to bring out the negativity inherent among the Bukusu towards their Luo counterparts.

From the above examples of narratives, it emerges that Bukusu narratives are vital in capturing the kind of perceptions that the community has about strangers. Such perceptions are geared towards depicting the Bukusu as an independent group surrounded by people from different social, economic and political backgrounds. It is also significant to note that through these narratives, communal relationships are clearly revealed.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, it emerges that Bukusu narratives can be construed as social levelers in the sense that during the performance, barriers that would otherwise separate the different groups of people in other social contexts have been broken. Consequently, one finds children, women, as well as people from all walks of life gathered together to share this ancient art form. A critical examination of the narratives in this paper reveals that communal coexistence is one of the determining factors in their construction and performance. The values that these narratives propound enforce a way of perception that is anchored on communal coexistence. Similarly, these narratives vividly capture the communal perception on strangers. The paper examines Bukusu narratives as a body of dynamic texts which reveal the corpus of beliefs and practices that govern communal relationships especially between the Bukusu and strangers. In doing so, the narratives are viewed not as domestic entertainment but as a site from which the narrators articulate a commentary upon communal relationships. Of great significance, the paper has interrogated these texts in order to show how they articulate and represent particular perceptions on strangers. Being works of art, it has emerged that Bukusu narratives, are presented in cultural images and symbolic representations that mirror social realities. The discussion in this paper was guided by the assumption that these narratives are created within a specific cultural set up context and that they articulate broader social values and ideologies that transcend the borders of Bukusu community.

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Appendices

Bukusu Oral Narratives Collected

This section provides the narratives that have been adduced to in this paper. These narratives were rendered in *Lubukusu*, the native language of the Bukusu. The English translation provided here was arrived at after transliteration and then translation by the research assistants in collaboration with the researcher. The Bukusu songs in the narratives have been translated into English.

Narrative 1

Apelu

Narrator: Rael Mukhwana

One day, in the quiet, peaceful village of Sibwani, across the meadowlands of *Wabutubile*, people woke up in the morning to find that there was a stranger among them. A picturesque house had come into existence where previously there had been no house. Next to the kitchen was a cattle kraal. The cattle and sheep of the stranger were so healthy and beautiful that people wondered how such good animals could have grazed within their vicinity without their notice.

A story went round about the strange happenings in Sibwani and out of curiosity many people flocked there to see things for themselves. Although the stranger communicated with the inhabitants in their language, people feared to come into close contact with him and simply contented themselves with feasting their eyes from a distance. Occasionally, a handful of village elders dropped in for a chat; but they likewise showed constraint in the presence of the stranger, and their talks were brief and casual. Soon, young men began to show interest in the stranger's only daughter. Several intending suitors started approaching the stranger seeking his daughter's hand in marriage. In view of the offers coming from numerous suitors, the stranger decided to do something unusual so as to abate growing anxiety on the part of his hosts. The stranger decided to invite villagers to his house entertaining them with plenty of beer and meat. In the midst of the entertainment, he asked them whether they knew him by name to which they all replied in the negative. He then declared that whoever was interested in his daughter must first tell him at a public gathering he was due to hold what his name was. This left the village elders dumbfounded. However, they went home and spread the news to their respective villages. Aspiring suitors could not sleep a wink. They sat up throughout the thin hours of the morning trying to unravel the riddle. One fellow who did not bother to crack his head over the riddle was Hare, who always used unconventional methods to solve new problems.

On the eve of the great occasion, Hare visited the stranger's homestead at night. Quite aware that there were fierce dogs which might attack him, he carried along with him some meat to placate the dogs in the event they barked and snarled at him. Thus, whenever a dog barked, he threw a piece of meat at it making the beast to settle down to feast. The commotion outside the stranger's house arose his wife from sleep and she frantically tried to awaken her husband who was too sleepy to bestir. She kept on listening keenly for some time but when the dogs stopped barking, she went back to sleep. However, before she could even sleep a wink, Hare hurled a large rock into the kraal causing the cattle to stampede round and round in the kraal creating such a disturbance that she woke up once more. One restless bull, charged at the other animals wildly causing a terrific stir, which seemed to break down the wooden enclosure. She shoke her husband vigorously calling loudly; "Apelu. Apelu, please wake up...enemies are breaking into the kraal! Apelu...Apelu...Apelu..." While the woman was calling her husband, Hare was standing at the door listening keenly. As soon as Apelu jumped out from sleep and heads for the door, Hare bolted and escaped.

Hare did not sleep a wink that night; he kept on singing the name Apelu repeatedly until the break of dawn. In the morning, a huge crowd of people gathered at Apelu's house for the purpose of unraveling the riddle. Apelu took his royal stool and went to sit atop a nearby mound while the audience spread itself on the flat ground below from where they gazed at him in awe. His mesmerizing personality convinced everyone present that he was either a prince or a king from unknown land. He was for the first time appearing in royal apparel in public, wearing, *ekutusi* and waving a flywhisk made from a buffalo's tail.

Prospective candidates therefore stood up in turns and one by one called him all sorts of conceivable names: names of animate and inanimate things; names of heroes and gods of the Bukusu and names of clan founders. Each time someone stood and shouted a name, the stranger shook his head in denial. Thus, the situation appeared completely hopeless. When the prospects of unraveling the riddle were completely dwindling, Hare the smallest fellow in the crowd, pushed his way to the mound where the stranger was sitting. Everyone broke down laughing at the sight of the slovenly dressed, diminutive fellow braving his way out. His first words were drowned in a peal of laughter. As soon as calm was restored, Hare shouted out the name of the stranger. The stranger's charming smile disappeared completely and the rest of the people were left in shock. The stranger rose and announced to the bewildered crowd that his name is Apelu. The diminutive fellow had therefore won the bet. The crowd dispersed and people went home gossiping among themselves about the triumphant little sloven. The deceitful stranger decided to escape with his family to heaven from where he had come from so as to avoid the embarrassment of marrying off his only daughter to such worthless fellow. In the morning, Hare came to the house and to his utter shock, the house was empty. After searching the house, he came across a beautiful tobacco pipe which he decided to carry home as a source of consolation. His friends ridiculed his action of "marrying" a tobacco pipe instead of a woman. Hare's mother lamented her son's fate and equally castigated what he did in bringing home a worthless object. This did not deter Hare. The following morning, however, Namikasa the beautiful maiden appeared and pleaded with Hare to marry him while apologizing on behalf of her father, Apelu.

Narrative 2

Three Men Meet a Strange Old Woman

Narrator: Martin Makhanu

A long time ago, some three men who had gone out to raid cattle from their enemies were returning home when they came upon an old woman who was stranded by the riverside. She was so weak that she could not cross the river by herself so when she saw them walking towards her, she was so grateful and begged them to carry her across the river. Two of the men flatly rejected her retorting that it was not their duty to carry old hags like her on their bags.

The third man, however, overpowered by compassion for the old woman offered to help her cross the river. He asked her to jump on his back and managed to cross the river with her. On reaching the other side of the river, the old woman refused to disembark from the man's back. She remained clinging on the man's back despite his plea to be allowed to join his colleagues. This prompted the other two men to leave their friend behind and go look for an animal to come and slaughter. On coming back, they erected an arbour within which they roasted meat. When the meat was ready, they asked the woman to let go off their friend so that she could eat but she adamantly refused to come down and demanded to eat from his back. The men refused to share the meat with her. So they ate until they were satisfied.

When darkness set in, they slept by the fireside. No sooner did the old woman see them sleeping than she jumped down and started eating the meat greedily. But it did not take long before she too was overcome by sleep. While she was still thus sleeping, the man who had been carrying her all along woke up feeling very light. He then immediately woke his friends up and the trio stealthily walked out leaving the old woman still sleeping. Long after the men had gone a hyena which had scented meat came to the scene and started eating the remains. While it was thus busy gleaning the enclosure of every bone, the old woman woke up from her sleep and jumped on his back thinking that it was the young man who had helped her cross the river. The hyena got so frightened that it took off with great speed running aimlessly without stopping. When he eventually plunged into the sea where he drowned, the old woman was still firmly perched on his back. Thus the greedy hyena and the ungrateful woman both met their tragic end.

Narrative 3

A Hyena Ate His Protector

Narrator: Japheth Sipingili

Once upon a time, a woman was digging up sweet potatoes in a garden when a hyena came by running and approached her with pleas for help. He was panting and sweating profusely. The woman was startled and almost took to flight but the hyena begged her not to run away since he was only running away from hunters who wanted to kill him. He therefore requested the woman to protect him from his adversaries. Without saying a word, the frightened woman took up a large basket and covered it over the hyena thereby concealing him completely. Shortly afterwards, hunters arrived and enquired from her if she had seen the mischievous hyena pass by to which the woman denied.

So the hunters went their way warning her that it would be foolhardy to conceal a dangerous creature like the hyena from the hunters since it could easily turn against the same woman and eat her up. When the hunters had gone, the woman lifted the basket on one side and asked the hyena whether it is true that it could eat her up. The hyena replied callously that any person who ignored sound advice like her indeed deserved to be eaten up. The woman was shocked beyond words. Soon after the hyena had been assured that the hunters had gone far out of sight, he threw off the basket, seized the woman and started eating her up despite her screams and pleas for mercy.

Narrative 4

A Beautiful Proud Maiden

Narrator: David Nasong'o

Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful proud maiden who was ready to get married but whose overreaching ambition had made her set an absurd premium on her head: the man to marry her must be able to thread a complete waistband of beads using his teeth rather than his hands. This made her father's home a beehive of activities as suitors from all walks of life flock there to try their luck. One by one, different men came, tried and failed. It is however quite ironical that the man who finally won was the one that the proud young lady could not have accepted under normal circumstances. He was quite unsightly. He was given the opportunity just because no one expected him to succeed after all since his hands were ever busy scratching his scaly body. When he succeeded, the young woman was shocked out of her wits but she had to comply though she set another dangerous task that required the young man to go down the lake and bring home a single feather guarded by the lake monster. The young man did so and got cleansed in the process so that when he appeared next, there were no signs of scabies on him. The two got married.

Narrative 5

The Teso who ate a Dog

Narrator: John Wafula

Sometime back the Bukusu engaged in continuous fighting with their Teso neighbours over fertile land and grazing fields. This war went on for quite some time until it became apparent that there was need to make peace. The Bukusu were equipped with spears while their adversaries only had clubs which made the former a stronger and more formidable force. Consequently, the Teso sought to make peace. The Bukusu therefore slaughtered a young heifer and asked one Teso man to lie in the intestines of this slaughtered animal. The entire community was later asked to eat this beef as a mark of peace between the two communities. This was a humbling exercise that the Teso undertook without faltering. From this incidence, the Bukusu coined an aphorism: "Bamia balia embwa, and Khupa omumia akhulindile silundu," or simply the Teso ate the dog and beat up the Teso to take care of your garden respectively.

Narrative 6

The Bukusu Circumcision

Narrator: Joseph Nangendo

Once there was a giant python that threatened to completely annihilate the Bukusu community. It was said to have swallowed both animals and human beings indiscriminately. One day, this dreaded creature swallowed Mango's only daughter when she had gone to fetch water. This infuriated him so much that he swore to kill the python by all means. At this time, the Bukusu were freely intermingling with their Sabot neighbours who used to practice circumcision.

It is however interesting to note that the Sabots, who boast of valiant warriors, had not been able to kill this python which was posing a great challenge to their very existence. When Mango therefore vowed to avenge his daughter's death, the Sabot warriors ridiculed him because they could not conceive of an uncircumcised man killing a snake that had defeated the most reputable warriors of the time. Mango was however not dissuaded from his resolution. He spent days and nights sharpening his sword in readiness for the impending showdown with the python. On the fateful day, he strategically took cover next to the cave where the python always retired to at the end of the day. He placed a tree stamp at the entrance to the cave and held his sword at ready. It is said that the python was so huge that when it moved, trees could sway and some rocks could roll down the mountain. It is at this backdrop that one wonders the courage exhibited by the protagonist in this narrative. Eventually when the python arrived and rested its scaring head on the tree stamp, Mango swiftly raised his sword and chopped off the head marking the end of the misery that this creature had subjected people to. This news spread like wild fire in the bush. The Sabot elders who previously held their Bukusu neighbours in disrepute because of circumcision decide to circumcise Mango and crown him the status of an elder. This then marked the onset of circumcision among the Bukusu.

Narrative 7

Nabwile

Narrator: John Wafula

Long ago, the Bukusu who lived next to their Sabot neighbours did not approve of intermarriage between the two communities. To make sure that this never happened, they used to warn their daughters who had reached marriageable age in narratives. the narrative which was in form of a song went thus:

Nabwile, Nabwile	Nabwile, Nabwile
Khasinja olikona nying'inyi	Khasinja you should not sleep deeply.
Nabwile, Nabwile	Nabwile, Nabwile
Khasinga olikona nying'inyi	Khasinja you should not sleep deeply.