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Nostalgia, Estrangement and Belonging: Logooli Wedding Songs by Jean Kidula, University of Georgia

Abstract

For the Logooli of Western Kenya, marriage establishes the girl as a woman. While a girl can get marriage by elopement otherwise referred to as 'going through the banana plantation' it is more reputable to have a wedding. In precolonial times wedding procedures lasted up to 6 months including dowry negotiations. A unique practice was that of night 'sings' that commenced least a month before the wedding praising or despising the virtues of the prospective bride and groom relative to the singers. These song sessions known as "kuhihiza keselelo" in the manner of caroling before Christmas celebration also served to advertise the upcoming event. The singing continued until the day of the wedding. These songs continue to be performed today but for much less time and in different formats with traditional and contemporary texts and tunes. New pieces are also composed to reflect current musical, social and relationship trends.

In my analysis of the texts of these songs, the groom was lauded for his physical appearance while the bride was commended or presented for her behavior, virtues and hard work. In this presentation, I will explore the themes and notions of estrangement and nostalgia in texts and tunes related to the bride who was to leave her parent's home in this patrilineal patrilocal society. I seek to demonstrate how these texts and tunes shape femininity and feminine roles, expectations and cosmologies in Logooli society.¹

Introduction

The Logooli people resident mostly in Western Kenya are a patrilineal, patrilocal culture group. Classified generally as Bantu linguistically, Avalogooli have since 1948 been grouped under the Luyia nation alongside a cluster of other Bantus such as the Bukusu, Wanga, Tiriki, Kisa, Marama, Hanga, Tsotso, Samia, Nyala, Khayo, Marachi, Isukha, Idakho, Kabras, Nyore etc.²

Kinship amongst the Logooli and other Luyia is first and foremost established by clan with agnatic ties and exogamous marriage. Origins and continuity are therefore situated in the male whose primary initiation rite is circumcision. An ambivalent relationship with the female is inevitable because she is both an insider as a daughter, but also an outsider as a wife. A daughter embraces her unique insider clan identity due to the agnatic relationship but anticipates her outsider position that will be realized through exogamous marriage. Men by tradition are the owners and keepers of the land. She will move elsewhere to become a wife and mother – Her clan represents her omnipresent past, and marriage represents her elusive future domicile. For marriage without motherhood means is not considered a woman. In the past one really became settled after bearing three living children – that is when she was officially granted permission to cook meals in her own house. I first thought that these ideas were abandoned with the onset of 19th century European colonialism and Euro-American Christianity but my interviews with women and men, confirmed continuity in the form of a variety of mutations to these views.

¹ The author is of Logooli descent, grew up within this culture and researched the language/people group. For more historical and cultural information information, see Akaranga (1996), Mulindi (1983), Osogo (1966), Wagner (1949/70), and Were (1967)

² Each of these names is prefixed by Ba – to read, Babukusu, Bawanga etc. Essential Ba denotes, people of that descent, thus, Babukusu denotes people of Bukusu descent by heritage and land ownership.

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Thesis

I therefore posit that continuity and change as cultural functions are facilitated, reinforced and excused through the practice of exogamous marriages. Often parents encourage their children to marry other Logooli or other Luyia but one can choose to marry from a neighboring or other group, The perception, views, feelings and ideas about gender role and place particularly that of the female; daughter or wife and their varieties; can possibly be expressed through song about girls and women at play but more particularly at the primary legitimate rite of passage where the female is showcased, that is the wedding.

I will not dwell on the marriage talks and negotiation in this paper. I will focus specifically on the period that usually started at least three weeks from the actual wedding for this is when much music was performed.

Wedding event

Luyia weddings are very interesting affairs. They take place in villages and in the city. Most of them take place in the church. Many ideas associated with Euro-American wedding cultures have been adopted in the name of Christianity but the wedding has achieved greater significance in recent years due to Kenyan national laws of inheritance so one can actually have a wedding of people who have been living together for a long time, who may even have grandchildren but are not allowed to hold key positions in their church because they did not have a “Christian” wedding.

I focus on weddings that have assimilated Christian ideals because a large percent of Logooli say they are Christian rather than Muslim or ascribing to indigenous beliefs. In reality, these weddings represent an amalgamation of ideas from Christianity – that is most weddings will include prayers or a mass, or singing of hymns or some kind of church service. But events before and after the service are rooted in indigenous beliefs, and practices – as well as behaviors that have been assimilated from East and West Asians and from secular contemporary popular culture. Such practices include garlanding of the bride and groom, or singing taarab or popular Swahili songs and dances associated with weddings.

In the case of the village weddings for most Logooli, two wedding ceremonies take place. The first happens at the bride’s home, which is really the official introduction of the man to the village. It is a day long ceremony with all the behaviors associated with the ‘real’ wedding which later takes place at the groom’s home. The only difference is that the bride may not wear a white dress and no vows are exchanged.

Preparation for a wedding must take at least 3 weeks by national law – to allow for banns to be read. But individual couples can spread out the groundwork for as long as a year – often using the time to raise funds for the wedding. On average, the most intensive period is at least 3 months to the day of the wedding.

Wedding announcements used to be done by song. This preparation singing sessions– known as kuhihiza. typically began about 2-3 weeks before the wedding in the villages of both the bride and groom. These evening sessions typically lasted an hour. The song lyrics were not just about the couple – whose names were substituted in known lyrics and melodies. The texts could be about life in general, even gossip (e.g. who tried to get the girl and failed, how long the groom had taken to persuade the girl, where the groom/bride was from etc). It was also a place to learn new songs to be used to escort the bride to her new abode, or to contest the bride’s party’s allegations or boasts.

Although these sessions might continue in a few villages, most have been abandoned not just because people now issue wedding invitation cards, but it has also become less safe to allow young unmarried people and children to roam around villages than in the past.

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What has not changed is the singing that escorts the bridal parties to the venue where the wedding is held and continues until the party files into church, then resumes as the couple moves to the reception and continues during and after the reception.

Originally these singings were in the form of contests but especially in the urban area, it becomes one big sing on behalf of the couple though the bride's group might arrive singing and be met by the groom's party. Often at the end of the ceremony, the groom's group takes over the singing.

Music in Weddings

The practice of music celebration is so valued that in the absence of many relatives to put together a singing group, the couple might hire choirs in the city who are well known for performances at weddings to provide both entertainment and stimulate the crowd to sing and dance. Or else they can buy recordings of these songs to play during the reception.

After the bridal party has arrived at the church, in the past, the couple would meet outside the door and process into the sanctuary. Today, the groom walks to the front of the church with his best man, and the rest of the male entourage, becomes a part of the bride's procession. This procession called "marching" can last at least an hour for a distance of about 50 meters because it is not just made up of a leisurely stroll to the front with a bridal party. Often, particularly in the village, there are choreographed steps that result in moving as slowly as possible. This marching is accompanied by music. In city churches with a piano or organ, Mendelsohn's "Wedding March" has been appropriated. But sometimes a live choir marches behind the brides party, other times there is a cassette player carried by a member of the entourage, or playing on the pa system somewhere. When prerecorded music is used, often the song has been recorded several times and each time it ends, the procession stops and resumes when the song starts again. The idea of moving as slowly as possible is rooted in the notion that the girl should not appear eager to start this journey to a strange homestead. In fact in the past, the girl was not supposed to smile or laugh at all. She was expected to sulk and even cry if she could manage it. Often someone would pinch her to ensure that she looked unhappy. This behavior was called "kugonga."

Once the bride arrives at the front of the church the wedding service takes place. The couple afterwards processions out of church to music. Once outside, traditional Logooli and luyia wedding singing recommences. In the past, that would be another contest. Today, both groups might merge into one and sing together while escorting the entourage to the venue for the reception, or while the couple is greeted and congratulated by the public or takes photos by which to remember the event. During the reception, there is eating, speeches, and more singing. In the village, a group of people will escort the couple to the grooms home and lead the party into the groom's house and more ceremony will take place then people will leave. The singing will come to a close at this point.

Given that there were usually competing singing groups with music from their respective clans, language groups etc, the wedding was a venue for learning new music. The bride with her people brought some new repertoire into the village. The contest also implied competition in terms of musical style – whether music, lyrics or dance – and boasting about the virtues of each respective person while exaggerating the vices of the other. With the introduction of European education, dress, language etc, new words were added into the vocabulary e.g. Sore, lori, suti, neti (veil) etc. Fashion etc. It is possible to trace the origins of some songs by determining what fashions were current when – what musical styles were popular when etc. For example the song "Elori Yambila mulukali" (see next section), can be translated to mean I did not come on foot as in days gone by, I traveled to my wedding by lorry. It was a common practice in the

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late 50s-60s for women whose men had to means to rent lorries to pick the bridal party. The girl was in effect saying that the man realized her worth enough to send the best available transport.

Lyrics

Typical texts were on “praise and endearment, teasing and mockery, encouragement and advice as well as the meaning of marriage. The songs also ponder the sorrow of leaving one’s parental home, the parting from old friends, and the difficulty of ‘calling another your mother.’” (Mulindi 129). Many lyrics contained double entendre, so a contesting group could join their opponents and it was understood that the lyrics meanings could be convoluted. It therefore behooved the soloist to make up verses that emphasized his/her group’s position. Songs were in the forms of straight speech, parables, allegories, insults, puns etc.

For example the song **Elori Yambila mulukali** – another interpretation can be made on the same song. Elori was also the name of a male hairstyle that was fashionable in the late 50s, early 60s. Women also had their version but the male one was called Elori. So if the man had styled his hair that way and it was a known fact, the song could also be claimed by the groom’s party that the girl was attracted to the man because of his hairstyle. That is lame. The text of the song reads:

Lori Elori Elori
Lori iqinji aviha Elori Yambila Mlukali

For the rest of this paper I will focus on lyrics as they apply to the notion of estrangement and nostalgia on the part of the female. This first song, **Ni vudinyu (A)**, was also sung by girls at play,

Ni vudinyu		aha (Hallo)
Ni vudinyu kutula winyu kutsia handi	aha hallo	
Ni vudinyu		Hallo
Ni vudinyu kulanga undi mama/baba wovo		
Ni gusiongo		aha
Nu gusiongo gwa mwana’a mama nagingage		
Semberera		Hallo
Semberera matunda ga mama gadase kwama	hallo	
Ni kisudi		aha
Ni kisudi chio mwana wa mama ni astizange		

It is a pity/shame/misfortune to leave your home and go elsewhere
It is a pity to call someone else your mom/dad
It is a huge pot that my mother’s child will be carrying (this is a heavy load)
It is a seed that my mother’s child will be grinding (it is a hard task)

It is possible to still extract double entendre in this text. The girl is unhappy that she is leaving home, but she will also be showing off that she is a hard worker – that her parents brought her up well, and she will also have the pleasure of having a child although that also will be a painful affair. The song is performed usually in medium to slow tempo in Phrygian mode – old scale, typically one of narrative, especially sad ballads about lost love etc. It is built on phrase extension – in a proverbial allegoric style where the person begins the phrase and people encourage the person to complete it so they can be relieved, sort of like when one is crying or sighing and they begin to talk and are overtaken by the emotions they feel so they have to stop, to be encouraged to continue. Can easily be performed to swaying as when one is comforting or soothing a child – to stop hiccupping. Music is used to express alienation but

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also to soothe the distress or the perplexity not just in text but also in style and performance practice.

Some songs, like **Long'oli long'oli**, directly or allegorically referenced ideas of bridewealth and the perception, world view or understanding that for a few cows, a girl will agree to leave her home, or for a few cows, a father will agree to part with his daughter. As in these two examples

Long'oli long'oli, Longoli long'oli mulina wanje wagota
Ing'ombe yana Mboo,
Kandi yana Siyali yo mulina wanje mbo

Longoli my friend is lost
A cow mooded , and it mooded again
It was not for my friend moo

There are several ways one can read this song. My friend got lost depressed because no one brought cows on her behalf. Or she eloped – could not, would not wait for a wedding and just followed a guy before be delivered any bridewealth. Or someone delivered bridewealth in the form of cows for my friend but he did not get her. Some one else got her, or she eloped rather than having a wedding.

Woi Vakhana ing'ombe yajemera vakhana bangava bangava
Oh Dear, poor girls. Cows have caused girls to be a liability

Such songs bemoaned the relative little worth or functional worth ascribed women. The term *bangava* is the sound of coins, rather than paper money. Coins have less value than paper money, and bridewealth equates a girl to the cheapest and least valuable coin – one that can just fall on the road and anyone picks it and uses it for a while or gives it away to children to buy sweets. Girls are easy to get, they can be as plentiful as flowers – so really men have the choice, beautiful to look at (objects of contemplation) and can be disposable – that is one can look and touch and even extract from the main plant and deflower and abandon – yet in order for a flower to maintain its beauty, it must be nurtured and treated tenderly.³

Weddings were also the place where there was expectation for “uninhibited giving and receiving” (Mulindi, 132) – songs like **mango'ndo dola** – a song that invited the bride and groom to give generously to those who were celebrating them – a song that posited the idea that the couple were expected to be generous. At the same time a man who was thoroughly satisfied with his choice for a wife expressed this joy by giving generously – at the same time the giving demonstrated that the man (and his kin) had the wherewithal to support/nurture his bride.

Some songs expressed sympathy for the girl e.g. **Soree mwana (F)**:

Sore mwana wa mma sore Munda
Gwali gwang'aha munda
Lore gokomeye munda

Sorry Oh mother's child, sorry – better translated as;
What a pity/misfortune for my mother's child – from the seat of emotions (munda – belly)
That person (derogatory prefix) was thin-bellied before, but now they have become fat-bellied

³ For more on Bridewealth and women's place – Uvukwi- see Abwunza 1988, 1997, Gwako 1998.

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When sung by the bride's party, the song would be one of sorrow for the girl. The man used to be thin but he knows he is going to be fat because the girl is a good cook. When sung by the groom's party, they would be slighting the girl – she was thin before but she is now fat. It might be interpreted to mean, we feel sorry for the guy because the girl is pregnant. Typically weddings were conducted for virgin girls so this was not a compliment. It was a slight on the girl's integrity.

Sore mdendi wa mama mwigendinyama
Eh eh sore mwana wa mama atsizanga mwigendinyama (All sing this line together)

I'm so sorry my mom's precious one Into the wilderness
Oh so sad that mom's child is going to the wilderness

Wilderness is a place with no life, no food, a desolate place. That is where my mom's child is going. Notice they do not say my father's child. At this point, it is as if the main identity is with the mother who understands because she has been there.

Songs were sourced from funereal ideas or places of deep emotion, e.g. **Vakana mbe mbonere (B&C)**:

Vakana mbe mbohele	Mbe
Vakana mbe mbohele	Mbe mugoye mbohele amala munda
Elija lijamba liamutama	He
Elija lijamba liamutama	Lero yavugula lya vakele
Elija guda	Guda
Elija guda	Guda gwataga maganda gamera

Girl's give me something to tie with Give me
Give me a belt/rope to tie the innards in my belly
Elijah is unable to buy a trouser (He cant afford it)
Now he has taken the long johns that belong to old women
He has such a big belly
That belly can plant beans and they grow.

Belly is also seen as the seat of deep strong distress/emotion – a belt to help contain my grief, or a belt to help me not to die of laughter. The song therefore calls for someone to share genuinely in the joy or the pain of separation, joy, embarrassment etc.

Songs also called attention to directly or metaphorically to sexual acts or to demeaning women really, to the extent that often if it was only boys out, it was not unusual to hear them singing songs like **Nngole ndi (D)**

Ni ngole ndi ibuti yo mukeya Awendende
Umwene manyi
Umwene manyi kuli lwa ndinginga Awendende
What shall I do with the boot of the man of KAR (Kenya African Rifles) - This is a major problem
Only I know how I will deal or cope with it (Mulindi translation p. 37, Mutongi 1998)

Song was referencing the time when army recruits in WW2, came home and married girls (Mutongi 1998). The girls were desolate because the guys would come home for a weekend and then be gone. They knew they would be left alone with their mother's in law and that can be a fate worse than death. The song could also be very sexual – I have no idea what to expect from this army man or what he expects of me because he is wise in the ways of the world – so

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I have to figure out how to behave etc so I don't disappoint him etc. The song continues to be sung given that most men are expected to be experienced, well traveled, or knowledgeable about matters of the bedroom while girls are meant to be innocent in that area – at least girls who are being wedded.

Observations.

Wedding songs are therefore a place for expression of the thoughts, expectations, fears of a woman. The songs contain themes of estrangement and nostalgia women who came from elsewhere into a new homestead as wives and potential mothers. Paradox of a wedding is that it is a happy idea – one is finally becoming a real woman, a respectable woman in Logooli cosmology, a female with a husband and the potential for recreation – for the continuity of life, agnatic ties and Logooli culture.

Ironically, it is women who though not owners of the land will be keepers of the land, birthing those who will bring continuity while perceived as bearers of change and estranged from their comfort zones. It is these strangers who physically and morally embody the continuity of the culture. Women who are responsible for bearing the future progeny for the continuity of the group – so it does not really matter if she is the first born or not – She give birth to a first born that ensures that there will be continuity. Most famous song that has become a national song – **Mwana wa mberi (E)** best describes this conflict.

It is daughters who will grow up and provide the bridewealth for their brothers – so they are to be treated with tender care – like flowers – delicate but dispensable.

Girls are brought up to feel both wanted and unwanted. They are potentially disposable, except for the possible returns from investment in terms of bridewealth, posterity, increased relationships and alliances.

The wife or woman is an outsider always. She thinks of herself as another, as from another place and references her identity from her agnatic ties.

The wedding is an arena for incorporation of foreign ideas – not unusual given that it is an exogamous community with agnatic ties – bring new songs, and provoke their groom's entourage to invest in or invent new ideas to contest the bride's ensemble.

The wedding has facilitated the incorporation of songs from other Luyia communities as well as from other cultures and resources. By studying new songs, one might trace when they were composed relative to who they were sung to, and what other kinds of styles were current locally and globally. It is therefore possible and it happens that current popular ideas and songs are incorporated. The wedding therefore is a place to exchange or learn new ideas and songs. The wedding is a place for the negotiation of ideas about the nature of the community, and for legally embracing foreign or other ideas into Logooli world-view.

Postscript.

Until the 1970s, only unmarried girls and preferably those who had not “known” a man did or had weddings. Gradually, anyone woman who could afford to and was able to pay for the ceremony in church, or was a church member could be wed even if they were pregnant or had children. In time, some married couples people “wedded” in church for social and political mobility, and to legitimize their union for reasons of inheritance. Therefore today, weddings are more than just the beginning of a marriage. They also serve legal, political and inheritance functions.

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