

ORALITY AND SUBLIMATION OF REPRESSED DESIRES: THE RENAMING OF EVERYDAY PHENOMENA BY THE LUO WOMEN OF KENYA

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Abstract

The psychoanalytic theory of sublimation within Freudian conceptualizations involves the channeling of socially unacceptable behaviours into approved ones for social cohesion. The human mind, in this context, is capable of protecting itself from painful experiences by repressing unpleasant experiences into the unconscious and sublimating the same safely onto socially correct overt expressions. For Freud, the repressed desires can be unearthed from dreams. Like dreams, myths, legends and other folklore material as works of the human imagination can help unearth the repressed desires of a people. Although repression and its attendant sublimation act as an institution of social propriety and harmony, understanding its underlying presence is important in the interrogation and possible explanations of conflicting undercurrents that may be perceived in society. This paper looks at the renaming of varying objects and ideas among the contemporary women in rural Luo Nyanza as subversions of western feminism. The argument is that the renaming of obvious objects and ideas within the woman's area of socio-cultural operation is a code that she uses to sublimate her desired expression of sexuality. The phrases used to rename phenomena are analyzed within Freudian theorizations of sublimation as society valuation acts, but which nevertheless exhibit underlying contestations of western feminism by the modern Luo woman. The study focusses on one ethnic group as the issues raised can be interpreted within their conceptualizations of gender relations that subvert the woman's occupation of power roles and covert suppression of the same. The phrases analyzed are in constant use among the rural Luo women, but some have been appropriated by both men and children. The analysis points to these as creative constructions which belie psychological symbolisms and which can be read as contemporary strategies to resist popular expectations by feminist liberality.

Key Terms: Patriarchy, Orality, Sublimation, Subversion, Feminism

Introduction

The larger Luo are a community found in the Eastern parts of Uganda, the Western regions of Kenya, the North-eastern parts of Tanzania and spread across the Southern regions of Sudan. This study is however focused on the Luo of western Kenya, and specifically the

communities around central Nyanza. This paper will treat the Luo ethnic community here within the postulations of anthropologist Fredrik Barth who looks at ‘ethnic group’ as one based on ‘a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order...that classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background’ Barth, (quoted in Atkinson, 1994, p. 14). This is important to this study because it views ethnic boundaries as resulting from social interactions, rather than isolation - fluid social interactions that nevertheless exhibit a distinguishable general trend. One such trend for the Luo is their rich and versatile oral culture. Further, the Luo are traditionally a patriarchal society where gender prescribed roles are clear cut. Chief among these are the provisional roles of the man in the home.

Culture being a way of life is transmitted through interactionist codes among members of the cultural group. Orality plays a significant vehicular role in this transmission. Oral cultures are symbolism rich creative texts that have an inherent literariness. Oral cultures are dynamic and many evolve as fast as the emerging experiences owing to culture growth, associations and borrowing. This necessitates consistent and constant studies and appreciations of emerging and evolving cultures to understand the participants’ motivations through creative modes of interaction. The importance of studies in oral cultures as interactive media is perhaps underscored by the sociological theories of symbolic interaction(ism.) Influenced by the philosopher George Herbert Mead, symbolic interaction(ism) places importance on a peoples’ creation and maintenance of society through interaction. It argues that individuals use language and symbols in their communication with others and emphasis should be placed not on the objective structures of this communication, but on its subjective meanings. Oral cultures are thus symbolic interactions as they are imbued with underlying codes that can be interpreted for meaning, a literary critical enterprise. This paper is focused on the referential oral cultures where every day phenomena are renamed with inherent underlying communicative intent. This author undertakes to read these texts as constructed subversions of underlying psychological conditions. The oral constructions are studied as revelations of repression from the perspective of psychoanalysis.

Orality and Psychoanalysis

Oral productions are both cultural and social constructions which make them textual in nature. As such, they can be read for meaning and framing of both individual and communal re-constructions of reality. Oral discourses involve dynamic use and re-use of linguistic material to construct and re-construct meanings. This makes it a very dynamic space where words are fluid and highly contextual. Oral texts in this context, can offer spaces for examining dynamic and fluid mindsets as informed by highly changing realities. This paper looks at the oral re-naming of things and concepts in the Luo social culture as artistic re-constructions of meaning, thus works of art.

In some respects, anticipating Freudian theories, particularly related to the unconscious and dream 'texts', the work of Plato and Aristotle look specifically at the psychological impact and implications of art. For both classical philosophers, art is mimetic, but whereas for Plato, it is a dangerous precept that may lead to delusions and is thus counterproductive, for Aristotle, art expands reality for us. The underlying acknowledgement by both is that art can express the workings of the mind particularly with respect to the communication of emotions and desires. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, credited with being the first to use the term 'unconscious' in literary circles, notes that 'in every work of art there is a reconciliation of the external with the internal, the conscious is so impressed on the unconscious as to appear in it' in Pope (2005, p.70). The creative process therefore always contains both conscious and unconscious work. Oral exchanges as creative texts are validated by their endowment with symbolism outside the literal comprehension of the object phenomenon. The re-naming studies here bear no outright denotation(al) relations with the objects, attracting an interrogation of possible expressive associations that can be derived from theory based analysis.

For Freud and subsequent psychoanalysts, the unconscious is 'a repository of repressed desires, feelings, memories, and instinctual drives, many of which have to do with sexuality and violence' (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004). The unconscious is thus an irreducible part of the conscious self. We cannot disregard the unconscious in the understanding of human behavior. As such, psychoanalytical precepts afford interrogations of human interactional behavior, which can then be explained in plausible terms.

In literary studies, psychoanalysis considers texts as constructions which simultaneously embody and influence motivations behind interpretations and interactions. Literary texts act as windows into the unconscious, more or less like the Freudian conceptualization of dreams which do the same. Rivkin and Ryan (2004) point out that literary texts (constructions) are not direct translations of the unconscious into symbols that stand for the unconscious meanings, 'rather, literature displaces unconscious desires, drives, and motives into imagery that might bear no resemblance to its origin but that nonetheless permit them to achieve release or expression' (p.413). Pointing to the importance of psychoanalysis in the study of the folktale, Das (2014) notes that 'such kind of analysis is essential to understand society and its people' (p.14). This paper treats creative oral interactions, just like the folktale, as metaphorical fantasies of a society and which can reveal underlying tensions and motivations.

Repression in psychoanalysis is a major framework for the understanding of the unconscious and its machinations. According to Freud, the unconscious is not the absence of consciousness but a different space altogether that is occupied by violent and mostly chaotic and uninhibited urges. The urges and desires in the unconscious fueled by sexual and violent passions would be detrimental to societal order and so are mediated by the conscious. This is through the process of repression. The repressed urges however need to find 'safe' outlets to

safeguard the neurosis levels of humans in social interactions. For Freud repression concerns the subject's denial to self and others, of the existence of the 'dark' contents of the mind which should be left there in the dark. One of the major ways of achieving this is through sublimation.

In psychology, sublimation is defined as 'the diversion of the energy of a sexual or other biological impulse from its immediate goal to one of a more acceptable social, moral, or aesthetic nature or use' (*Random House Dictionary*, 2016). In his essay 'On Narcissism' Freud postulates that 'Sublimation is a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from that of sexual satisfaction; in this process the accent falls upon deflection from sexuality' S.F. (14, p.94). From this, we infer that sublimation is an instinctual redirection of libido from potentially harmful sexual expressions to aims which are remote from sexual notions and labels. For Freud, at the core of sublimation is social valuation where the individual desires and urges are sacrificed for the common good. It is then a necessity for social harmony. Drawing from the case of Leonardo da Vinci, Freud surmises that the former sublimates his repressed homosexual urges onto his art and scientific exploits in his adult life. This paper therefore looks at the creative renaming processes as acts of sublimation of repressed sexual urges onto interactional speech by women.

Women in most African cultures today struggle against patriarchal social and cultural practices, beliefs, and structures. However, the woman's positions in African cultures vary across cultures that are built upon different cultural conceptualizations of gender identities. For example, to Yoruba culture, the exclusive binary oppositions of male-female, where male implies privileges and the female implies subordination is largely a western concept based on biological dimorphism but which does not accommodate divergent gender constructions among ethnic cultures as noted by Oyewumi (1997). Women across African cultures have resorted to different strategies like the linguistic one studied herein, to struggle, consciously or unconsciously, to express themselves.

The Luo women in rural Kenya are presented here as a case study of subversion of popular western feminist tendencies through operative linguistic coinages within their own spheres of operation, commonly in the home and in the market place. This paper looks at these women's initiatives in the renaming process of those things found in these spaces of interactions. The objects renamed already have commonly acceptable functional names. This means that the renaming, more often than not phrasal and connotative, is a deliberate distortion of the existing name. The focus is then on these phrases as connotative constructions and the subsequent attempts at understanding their constructions as discourses of contestations of gender identities within psychoanalytic presumptions.

In the chapter on 'Cognitive Anthropology in Rethinking Psychological Anthropology', Bock (1988) acknowledges that 'Even the simple task of 'getting names for things' turned

out to be much more complicated...” (p. 170) pointing to the complexity of naming phenomena in any culture. Herein, naming, and specifically renaming is treated as a psychological process that points to an underlying unconscious.

The widespread use of these phrases is perhaps underscored by the attention given to them in ethnic Luo social media group sites. Two Facebook accounts, namely, *KajuluKendgiPublicGroup* and The Kisumu National Polytechnic Politics and 411, consistently raise issues on these phrases and others with metaphoric overtones and the back and forth posts point to awareness of these naming and vibrant discussion of the same. However, their usage is concentrated in specific locales, the rural environs. In one post, a lady who resides in Nairobi writes: “wat r theze: *oloriyo*, *chuoraochaya*, *chamkendi*, some I translate in more understandable terms.” (Facebook post, September, 14, 2013 with 20 comments and five likes).

Contesting the Woman’s Marginalization in Patriarchal Economy

The cultural sentiment amongst the Luo is that in marriage men must take care of their wives, especially economically. The prevalent patriarchal notion that men provide for their family is enforced by cultural as well as biblical teachings that many women subscribe to. This can be explained within Freud’s aphorism or biological determinism which bequeaths the man the protective role on account of his penis, and the woman’s subservience owing to lack of the same. The man is therefore bequeathed masculine roles whereas the woman has to fit into culturally ascribed roles like the protected, the voiceless and the reproducer.

Lived experiences however indicate that most women have to engage in small scale trades, pooling resources with fellow women, and getting lump sums on rotational basis (commonly known as *chama/bura* or *nyoluoro*) to either augment or take up the significant burden of feeding the family. Cultural expectations, though, do not accept that a woman can walk out on her husband because he cannot adequately provide for her. The inherent conflict arises from a situation where the expected provider does not fulfill his duties and the actual provider, though of limited resources, is not acknowledged as such by culture. To this end, there is quiet dissatisfaction and this is inherent in the women’s speech in their interaction circles as examined below.

Chuoraochaya

Translation: My husband has no regard for me

This is used to refer to a measurement of cooking oil wrapped in polythene paper and is commonly used at the market place or in the home among women and children in conversations on purchases for the home. The measurement is less than an eighth of a kilogramme. This is often bought in the rural areas by those who are economically challenged and who happen to be the majority. It is bought as a quick fix to the cooking need at hand, leaving the next cooking to providence. Due to its size, it is evident that a well

off woman will not buy such quantities. It is for the poor woman who still has to cook for her family. The implication therefore is the woman who purchases such quantities of an essential in the kitchen has a husband who cannot take care of her. The husband, for whatever reason, cannot provide adequately for the woman, hence her ridicule in public, so, 'her husband has no regard for her'.

This phrase is in very common usage and not everyone is aware of its metaphoric value. In a conversation on Facebook, a man asked "why is it that some women are always complaining that 'my husband looks down upon me', what have their husbands done to them?" (FB post, March, 10, 2015 with 21 likes). In an apparent reaction to hearing this phrase over and over in reference, of course to the measurement of cooking fat, its insinuation does not escape this commentator.

The transfer of the attitude from the husband to the measurement of cooking oil is telling. Firstly, is the communication of her standing with her husband - she is being looked down upon, she has no esteem among fellow women, but one that she cannot overtly express and so, this frustration finds its expression through a measurement that is associatively demeaning. Informatively, the actual relationship between the woman and her husband may not be acrimonious at all! Many of these are in fact, satisfactory consensual arrangements.

Alotabuka pier

Translation: Vegetables are the colouring for the buttocks

Among the Luo, the commonly available vegetables are those that are dark green in colour. The vegetables are the commonly available food for the low income earners as proteins like meat and milk are luxuries. The insinuation here is that eating too much of these vegetables makes the person evacuate dark matter, thus 'colouring the buttocks'. This phrase is often used between women themselves as it makes mention of a body part without the proper euphemism. However, it is not uncommon to hear a child using the expression, having learned it from their mothers and aunts.

The private body parts are often referred to using euphemisms for propriety in public speech. This phrase was used mainly when lamenting about the inability to vary the family's diet by the woman. In the following conversation recorded by the author, between two women who had met in the market, the context of use is that of a lament:

- Woman One: *Nyarwegi, ibiro e chiro* (Daughter of the owners, you have come to the market?)
 Woman Two: *Ee* (Yes)
 Woman One: *To kawuonoinyewoang'o?* (What have you come to buy today?)
 Woman Two: *Mana alotowada.* (Only vegetables)

Woman One: *Eehalotabuka pier monematiwanyieo!* (Yes, it is only vegetable, the colouring of the woman's buttocks, that we buy nowadays!)

This sounds like a flaunted vulgarity, especially used in the hearing of other people, like this author. However, the use of vulgar language in public can be seen as an escape from conscious censorship of the chaotic unconscious. It is a defiance of repression for the sake of propriety and can be considered as one of those slippages in Freudian psychoanalysis. The rejection of consistent consumption of vegetables as destroying the beauty of a woman which is curiously associated with the colour of her buttocks, a private area may (?) be a protest against the providing agency for abdicating his role and distorting the woman's image. The buttocks here can be read as the representation of what maybe considered the core of womanhood.

Herein, the attack seems to be on the man's symbolic disfiguring of the woman's physical and ideological aesthetics by his appropriated role and the attendant abdication of the same.

Kibritonyumore epi

Translation: The matchbox has fallen into water.

When the matchbox falls into water, it cannot light a fire, thus no cooking will take place. This phrase is used to refer to short periods of or prolonged hunger. The conversation between two women recorded by the author ran as follows:

Visitor: *Amosou* (I greet you all)

Host: *Wakao* (We accept your greetings)

Visitor: *Udhinade?* (How are you doing?)

Host: *Maber, kibritemaonyumore epi* (We are well, only that the matchbox has fallen into water)

Visitor: *Moskode* (My sympathies with the your situation)

Host: *Owadamano e ngima* (Yes that is life)

The conversation above means that there is hunger in the homestead at the moment. Noted in this exchange is the fact that it is stated early in the conversation, seemingly as a warning to the visitor not to expect an offer of anything to eat. Feeding visitors, even passers-by as they come into the homestead to greet you is an accepted and expected practice among the rural Luo folk. That the woman has nothing to offer her visitor is expressed with resignation which underlies frustration with her current status. It is imbedded in the women's psyche that when a woman is economically comfortable, her husband is responsible. A common phrase among women in referring to such women is '*chuoreorite*', literally meaning 'her husband safeguards her', implying that he provides for her well. For such a woman, her matchbox cannot 'fall into water' and be rendered useless.

In psychoanalysis repressed desires not only find their expressions in gaps and slippages but also in other referents. By referring to the wet matchbox as the cause of hunger in her home, the woman is associating a matchbox which when functional lights up and burns with a man who is economically disempowered and so symbolically castrated, and is now useless like a wet matchbox.

Noted in this expression is the woman does not take responsibility for dropping the matchbox in the water, accidentally or otherwise, the matchbox has 'just fallen in water'. This would justify the unconscious association of the matchbox with an unnamed responsible agency, lending plausible the interpretation of it representing the man, and this negative attitudes toward him driven deep into the unconscious.

Oloyoriyo

Translation: It is a better choice than staying without (the commodity) a whole day.

This is the name given to a 250ml glass full of sugar. In measurement it is less than a quarter of a kilogramme. In an attitude of resignation, the woman will go for this measurement which is what she can afford at the time, since it is better to have the little than stay without completely. This term has been appropriated by both men and children, although primarily used by women.

Coming from a culture where the man is looked up to for providing for the woman and the family, this is an indictment of his failure to provide adequately. It points not only to resignation, but to frustration with the current economic status. The woman has to contend with the little that is available, rather than staying without this sweet luxury at all. It is at once resignation to the inevitable lack and an appropriation of a small slice of luxury. It is not uncommon to find women in these rural homesteads serving tea or porridge without sugar because it is completely unavailable to them.

The yearning for sweetness here may be beyond the sweetness of sugar. The sugar overtly represents the small sweetness she is able to afford herself but covertly the small space for self-actualization.

Achandoramalit

Translation: I am suffering bitterly

The name is given to the hyacinth plant that sometimes covers the lake, preventing fishing and even endangering the lives of fishermen. Fishing is a major economic activity among the Luo and sometimes the only source of livelihood for the Luo communities which live along the shores of Lake Victoria.

Typically, it is men who go fishing and upon their return, they find the women waiting for them at the shore to collect the fish for the home and the market in case of an overflow. This

practice has even led to sexual relationships where a woman gets fish from a particular fisherman in exchange for sexual favours in an arrangement that is purely commercial. These women depend solely on the fish brought in by the men and so when it does not come in, they 'suffer bitterly'.

The water hyacinth is a deterrent. It prevents fishing and other activities on the lake after any particularly heavy infestation. This name was curiously given to it by the fishing community women but seems to be the only name locals use to refer to it in the local language, commonly using its derivative '*achandora*' (I am suffering or I suffer). The author was unable to get any other name for the hyacinth in the local language.

A hyacinth infestation that would prevent the fish coming in, exposes the woman's vulnerability, not only to the natural elements but to her dependability on a man's activity for her sustenance. It is an uncanny moment of realizing her dual tragedy of victimization by both nature and culture. The proclamation of suffering however is projected onto the hyacinth to take away the unease with the man in an unconscious fragmentation of her victimizers and a choice to repress the expression of one section of these obstacles to self-realization - the man. That she suffers bitterly is a symbolic recognition of the depths of oppression meted on her body by both nature and culture. The conflicting desires of self-appropriation and external fulfillment find their expression in this lament and sublimation onto the naming of the hyacinth plant, an exogenous entity that is seemingly remote from the sexual tensions and subversive overt expressions.

Oromo mier

Translation: The homesteads have had enough! /the people in the homes are fed up with it!

This term is given to the bar soap sold in the rural areas and associated with the low income earners. The other name for the dark brown or deep green bar is '*otop*' meaning 'it is rotten'. The purchasing power of these women is predominantly low. The bar soap then is used for bathing, laundry and washing of utensils. These women are thus 'fed up' with the lack of variety.

The expression 'the homesteads have had enough' captures the woman's complaint, she has had enough of the bar soap. Laundry, washing of utensils and other washing needs are the preserve of the woman. Further, the woman associates herself with the home, hence, this expression becomes a subtle protest where the object of frustration is not really the soap but the one who cannot provide the means to obtain variety: the man. This displacement of emotions becomes necessary for cordial relations between the women and their husbands as the reproach is safely projected onto an inanimate object.

Osiemgimidunga

Translation: It has been pointed out by the man's walking stick

Women use this phrase to refer to a ready-made dress bought by the husband himself or by money that he has provided. Amongst the rural peasant class, buying a new dress is a luxury. The act of going to the shop and pointing out a dress, which is hung up, with 'midunga' (a man's cane), is not necessarily an esteeming phenomenon, as much as a demeaning one! Firstly, the dress is already made, meaning her personal taste is assumed, secondly, it is bought with a 'man's' money. This is the woman's desire. Interactive language that is seemingly harmless becomes a conducive channel for sublimation of repressed desires and subsequent harmonious co-existence of the men and women in this society.

Subverting Manhood through Orality

Tong (1993) observes that 'psychoanalytic feminists find the root of women's oppression embedded deep in her psyche' (p.5). The woman's sexuality in Freudian psychoanalysis has been used against her to exclude her from the core to the peripheries as the 'Other'. For Freud, the woman's failure to resolve the oedipal stage means she is stuck longer in her ambivalent relation to the mother and does not develop the power to rule over nature and the woman as the boy does. This translates in later life as sexual powerlessness. The argument here is that the woman, having realized her dispossession of sexual power over her own body, esteems the male body as the center of sexual power. Non-performance of this power is criticized through creative discourse.

The terminologies analyzed in this section present coinages that are imbued with innuendos of performances of male sexuality. Culturally, a man's manhood is a channel of oppressive physical and psychological force and which then attracts attacks within the context of subversion. In the analysis carried out in this section, the institution of manhood is ridiculed through the names given to various items and concepts.

Jodongotetnikaidhootanda

Translation: The old men tremble as they climb onto the bed

This phrase refers to large fish which are lacerated before being deep fried in oil, a specialty of the Luo woman. Fish is a major source of protein for the Luo who live along the shores of the lake. For those who live further in the hinterland, fish remains a coveted dish. One of the main ways of preparing fish after scaling is cutting across its belly and underside without completely severing the pieces to enable adequate deep frying. When the lacerated fish is held up, it gives the impression of a wobbly living thing and the way it is laid in the frying pan gives the impression of one being laid in bed, flat out. Curiously, this brings the image of a wobbly person climbing onto a bed.

Freud in his Interpretation of dreams, points to the common discrepancy between the dream object and its influence in real life. The women's association of this lacerated fish with a weak man who trembles when climbing onto the bed may be in fact interpreted as the woman's frustration with a sexually inadequate man. Expression of sexuality for the woman is largely culturally forbidden as she is to be the object of desire and not its subject. She is to be wanted and not to want. However, the woman also has expectations which she is not free to express and so this finds its outlet on the item that closely resembles weakness, disjointedness and lack of sexual virility, the lacerated fish!

Chuo mielkendgi

Translation: Men are dancing alone (without the company of women)

A man who cannot attract a woman, especially in the context of dance, exhibits having been rejected by women as unworthy of their attention. In a culture where the woman is considered trophy for the man, and the more women he attracts, the greater his prowess (the culture allows polygamy and condones the culture of concubines); 'dancing' alone is subject to ridicule. The insinuation here is that dance is a social activity involving both genders and so both should be represented. Further, dance as social entertainment incorporates the participation of men and women as couples on the dance floor. Dance is seen as a form of courtship and rejection to dancing alone by the man speaks of being seen as a failure in life.

The fish named thus are small in size and often looked down upon as the poor man's food. This could be an equation of 'small' men who are unable to attract female company. This deficiency in men is ridiculed in their lonely dance through life.

Wuoyiburu

Translation: A man is dust.

Dust is transient. This captures the notion of the transient nature of man as in male. He is not immortal. The man in this cultural community is a symbol of power, and more often than not, oppressive power. He is the sole custodian of power over the woman, attaining god-like symbolisms. His power symbols include his physical body which for the most part is associated with masculine strength that the woman does not possess. Noted is that it is not said '*dhanoburu*' which would mean that a human being is dust, but it specifies the man as in male, as being dust.

The rejection of man's assumed immortality is a subversion of his power which is immortalized in cultural practices and tendencies that subordinate the woman.

Conclusion

Expressive language, especially which is used in naming phenomenon around us can be windows into psychological dispositions and inclinations. This paper has treated the

renaming of various phenomena by women as creative oral constructions that provide a safe avenue for their subversion of western orientations of feminisms. These names are interpreted within psychoanalytic theorizations as sublimations of repressed sexual frustrations with the non-performance of maleness. The modern Luo woman treated in this paper still needs to experience the man's sexually performative power, and where it is lacking in expression through various social activities, she criticizes it, albeit through creative language.

Orality becomes a powerful medium for sublimation of repressions onto creative speech. The re-naming analyzed here point to the currency, fluidity and evolutions of oral cultures in contemporary society.

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