

Reading the Silences of the Text: Illustrations from Contemporary Luo Ohangla and Benga Performance

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on the alternative readings that popular cultural and oral texts invite. Illustrations are drawn from the analysis of song texts of contemporary Luo Ohangla and Benga music. Considering Derrida's (1966) concept of 'presence, absence and play of meaning' Clifford Geertz's (1973) notion of 'Thick description', and Bakhtin's (1982) theory of the 'dialogic of the text', this study describes the relationship and significance of what the oral text 'says' and 'what it does not say'; and how this affects the kinds of data that we collect and how we read it. In interpreting these song texts, we included responses from several fans of the two musicians who were selected through snowball and purposive sampling. By engaging in focus group discussions with these readers we showed how oral texts invite us not only to read the obvious but also to interrogate the silences and the contradictory voices in the rendition. The aim of this paper is therefore to explain why in the study of oral texts we need to take into account, not only the aspects and issues explicitly expressed but also those elements that are merely implied or even denied.

Key Words: Ohangla, Benga, Music, Luo, Silence, Songs

Introduction

David Coplan (1997:29) has suggested, that established methodologies of data collection, including interviews may not be completely objective as they tend to involve

...unstable, opaque relationship between interviewer and subject, [creating] a framework of communication that must to some degree remain alien and undomesticated. (Coplan 1997:29)

By comparison, Coplan argues that oral literary texts may provide less intrusive (unhindered) accounts when he reminds us that

...both anthropology and history can benefit from examining forms which 'privileged actors' interpretations of their own conduct' (Rosaldo, 1986:97), in particular those which people themselves create upon their own experience. Of these, among the most potentially revealing are forms of oral literature, which provide symbolic statements about common experiences, reflect popular

consciousness, give us history from below' and ethnography from within... (Coplan 1997: 29).

Analysis of the texts of two popular Luo musicians illustrates a rich interplay of several voices, some of which are not overt, yet intrude and even contest the explicit meaning. The four songs under focus here, namely; Tony Nyadundo's *Isanda gi Hera* and *Dala gi Mama Nyiri Beyo* and Linet Aluoch Pamba's *Pamela* and *Rehema* are typical in portraying divergence between the apparent intended meaning and the deeper meaning that emanates from reading the silences, (the unsaid).

The Monologue: Tony Nyadundo's *Isanda gi Hera* (Loving You Torments Me)

This song consists of a vocal arrangement in which a single singer provides a long monologue without giving a chance to the accused, so to speak, to respond. The effectiveness of this form lies in our tending to believe the complainant, so that even if a denial came, we would not treat it with the seriousness it deserves. In fact, we see no reason for a man in such pain to lie, and it remains etched in our memory that the man is innocent; hence the woman doing the tormenting must be guilty. The Singer offers no possible reasons why the lover should be behaving the way she does: might he, for instance, cause such behaviour, and hence warrant such a treatment? All this is left silent, and the singer would most likely feel scandalized were you to make such a suggestion to him.

The entire album *Isanda gi Hera* (Loving you torments me) consists of songs, namely; *Isanda gi hera*, *Ndoa ya Machozi* (Marriage of Tears), and *Dala gi Mama Nyiri beyo* (In My Mothers' Home the Girls are Lovely) that all explore the wiles of love in a one sided way. The singer adopts the stance of a (male) protagonist tormented by romantic feelings for the female subject. The monologue style is apt in the sense it creates the feeling of the individual ('I') Persona expressing or lamenting his experiences of love and rejection. This stance is especially helped by Tony Nyadundo's baritone that phrases the lines in a vibrato which brings out the pathos of love. In the words of one informant one can keenly feel the pain and the passion of love through the timbre of the singer's voice. In the song *Isanda gi hera*, the protagonist repeatedly bemoans the agony of being in love and being betrayed by his lover in the lines:

*Isanda nang'o to ing'e ni aheri,
Wach love sanda Atieno
Ogwan'g
Nyar, Alego,
Kara neni wuonda gi hera
Ti na timi nade,
Isanda gi hera,
Nyar Alego iwuonda nang'o*

Why make me suffer and you know I love you?
This matter of love afflicts me Atieno the wild
Cat, the daughter of Alego people
Alas! You pretended to love me!
What do I do?
Loving you torments me
Daughter of Alego people, why did you betray
Me?

Evidently, the lover, Atieno, is a wild cat, (Mongoose might be a better term) a betrayer and a tormentor, and the entire people of Alego, from where she comes, presumably

agree with such sentiments. So does the audience listening and nodding in sympathetic tempo to the music. And she is, above all, a liar and a deceiver.

The elusive and evil nature of this lover is further expressed in the metaphor of her running off and in the riddle surrounding the phrase '*kidi oba e toke*' (A stone is thrown at her back):

<i>Nyako ringa ringa bolingo,</i>	(The girl takes off, bolingo,
<i>Kidi oba e toke,</i>	A stone is thrown at her back,
<i>Kidi oba e toke,</i>	A stone is thrown at her back,
<i>Kidi oba e toke</i>	A stone is thrown at her back)

The riddle is emphasized and can be interpreted in several ways. It may be a suggestion that perhaps the lady abandons her lover out of fear of some danger (one which the protagonist cannot really tell). On the other hand, the throwing of the stone at her can be an expression of exasperation on the part of the protagonist who feels jilted when 'she turns her back on him' and thus symbolically hurls a stone at her (in frustration). What then is the 'stone'? That is the power of the song. That the musician leaves it to the audience to surmise on what it can be. In a sense, the stone may symbolize the song itself, which is the one means the protagonist has to get back at the lady for frustrating his efforts to win her. And he does that in all pent up anger, as anyone who has experienced such emotions can attest.

As observed earlier, the complaint is coming only from one party; the man. What would the lady say if given a chance? The first option is 'I don't love you, so stop bothering me'. The second option is the lady is ready to receive his advances but cannot do it just yet for the fear of being labelled easy or cheap. The paradox is, would the man be happy if the lady was to say yes immediately? The man is complaining but he wants the woman to be difficult, the unwritten rule being that what is achieved after much difficulty is more precious.

In this context we might ask what constitutes being tormented by love ... pretence? How does an accepted social etiquette become a torment? Or is it deception? How does he arrive at the conclusion that he has been deceived? Atieno lied to him in the sense that she loves him but she is not completely accepting his advances i.e. she has denied him sex.

What is causing Atieno's reluctance? Threat of aids, especially in the case of musicians who are perceived to be high risk? And who are also thought of as having a play boy nature? They don't settle in one place, i.e. its hard for them to marry and settle down with a woman, but instead keep changing women like the songs they sing, like the clothes they wear.

The phrase '*Kidi oba e toke*' raises more questions than answers. The issue is who throws the stone and why? What does the throwing of the stone achieve/symbolize?

In *Dala gi Mama Nyiri beyo* (In My Mothers' Home the Girls Are Lovely), the attraction of the beautiful woman that makes her irresistible to men is expressed. At the same time the danger of getting caught in the trap of physical beauty, especially in the contemporary period with the looming danger of being infected with the AIDS virus is also expressed. In the song, the singer adopts the stance of a narrator reflecting on the

past and relating it to present circumstances. He begins by giving us a flashback of his childhood seated next to his grandfather and being advised on life:

<i>Chon gi lala, kwara nopuonja, Oko na ni, 'Nyakwara ka pod i ngima Ibo neno madongo'</i>	Long time ago, my grandfather warned me He told me, 'My Grandson, while you live You will see all kinds of things'
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He then relates this warning to contemporary experience and confirms that life involves many situations, among them, beautiful (irresistible) women:

<i>Miyo aneno madongo, Dala gi Mama Nyiri beyo beyo</i>	And yes I now see the unimaginable In my mothers' home, the ladies are lovely
---	--

Here my "Mother" is ambiguous. Is it anyone old enough to be mother, or mother in law? And if in these circumstances one's body responds to the attraction despite the looming danger of letting oneself 'go wild' by engaging in uncontrolled love relationships, then might these include cousins, aunts and nieces?

Ayuago denda Ja Nyahera

(I cry for my body, I from Nyahera)

At this point the musician returns to the past, reflecting on his grandfather's warning:

<i>'Nyakwara kiyude Kiki rang sura ne, In'giyo tim, Wuod g'Adundo</i>	'My Grandson, when you meet her Do not trust her appearance Look at her character Son of Adundo'
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Thus the embodiment of the appropriate woman lies not only in her physical appearance (for appearances can deceive). Her character also matters. The musician relates this warning to an experience, later in his past:

<i>Kinde moko adhi buore We akonu, Aromo gi moro majaber, Wachako dak, Aya ban'ge aneno kara En nyako mabayo</i>	One time I went to Nairobi Let me tell you, I met a beautiful lady, We began to cohabit I later realized She was a loose woman
<i>Joma sero, Seruru a sera, Tho tinde nego ji Aneno madongo ka pod angima</i>	Those who seek love Beware, People die nowadays I now see all kinds of things while I live

The ideal woman here is she who combines both physical beauty and good socio-moral character. But the world is not populated by ideal women, and men are always attracted by the physical first, and only much, much later by character. Ultimately the grand is saying what he is not saying: Date many beautiful women but only marry the best of

character. The monologue form in this song then befits that of the 'preacher' or 'teacher' who teaches his audience to be careful especially in matters of love and courtship. In essence 'things are not what they appear' to be, or used to be. Behind the mask of beauty there may hide great danger or death itself. This stance of the teacher is reflected upon when the singer bemoans the fact that the musician is often despised by others:

*Jathum ji ochayo,
Wuod g'Adundo e*

The musician is despised
The son of Adundo! Alas!

In these lines the implication is that the role of a musician includes being a commentator on life, but that they are treated essentially as entertainers, as clowns whose sole role is to make people happy – but should you want something serious, try the priest.

It is therefore possible to argue that the monologue (one singer) style employed by the musician in these two songs is appropriate in relation to the subject (love) which is usually a personal and intensely emotional experience. In effect the musician embodies the passionate and agonizing nature of romance through this personal style.

In *Dala gi Mama Nyiri beyo* (In My Mothers' Home the Girls are Lovely), for instance, the exclamation 'E e e!' begins each verse several times, for example:

*E e e wuod gi Mama
Dala gi Baba to nyiri beyo...*

E e e! Son of my Mother
At the home of my father the girls are
lovely...

This exclamation creates the sense of wonder that the protagonist feels at the overwhelming (irresistible) beauty of the women he comes across.

PAMELA by Linnet Aluoch Pamba

*Aiyeee! I weya gi ng'a
Akwayi Pamela winj duonda nya Jaduong'
Piny lichna mami yo, nyathi Jo Seme
Nachopo Kombewa ayudi ongee...
Mudho bende olil bi romna alewo e' thim
Gi nyingi Pamela ondiegi no chama
Koth bende ochwe gi pe malich
Ka goya goya ka rito jahera na Pamela nya Josi
Chunyi gi chunya anyisi e no chweye machal
Nipare ngi'yo wa kaka ne wa herore
Juma ka juma nyaka a leki Pamela jabber
Ilala gi hera ang'o makoso ni
Chieng'cha nwa mako hwetwa kwa sungo hera wa
Ji duto ng'io wa mor dwa nego wa
Jaber obwogo nyiri ponda ponda
Gi twech maber nochweyi maber onge ma pimi go*

(Pamela who do you leave me with

I beg you Pamela, listen to my voice, Daughter of the Old one
 Things are bad for me daughter of Some People
 I arrive in Kombewa and you are no longer there
 The night is dark and am lonely in this dense forest
 A storm is pouring with heavy hailstones
 In the middle of this storm I await my lover
 Am rained on as I wait for Pamela daughter of Josi
 Your soul and mine I tell you, were created the same
 Please remember those days past
 The way we were always together
 The way we loved each other then
 Every week I dream of you, beautiful Pamela
 Am lost in love Pamela, tell me how I've wronged you
 Remember the way we used to hold our hands
 Proudly parading our love for all to see
 Everybody envied the way we loved each other
 You were so beautiful other girls hid in your presence
 With your perfect creation in your designer clothes
 Pamela you have no equal in the entire world

This is also a love gone sour; Pamela is no longer with the Persona who is still searching for her. Why did Pamela leave him? The singer does not present this side of the story, but wants us to believe that he has been greatly wronged, though once she was quite a good girl. Linnet is female, so by adopting the male Persona is there a possibility of reading lesbian perspectives from the song? Lovers never know why their loved ones have left. Either they have refused to acknowledge (denial) or maybe they don't want to accept those reasons. Often the excuse is given rather than the real reason: Might she simply have found a better person than you, one who appreciates her more and whose chemistry rhyme more with her?

Though Pamba shares with Nyadundo the nostalgic feelings of a romantic past, her emphasis is more on the envy of other women (not the jealousy of other men), on fashion and on designer clothes. Here she is talking as a male persona but thinking as a woman.

REHEMA by Linnet Aluoch Pamba

*Ayieeee! Mae Rehema mama,
 Ayieeee! You come darling,
 Mae Rehema lando nyangi ilal na kure
 Mae Rehema ndonge in yie yath ma thiedha
 Mae Rehema ndonge in yie pii ma modho ga
 Mae Rehema kendo in yie kech ma kaya
 Nyadundo in yie gek ma goya
 Mae Rehema kendo in yie love ma tura
 Nyangi Rehema mar gi Odoyo winja
 Ayieeee Rehema to kara en ang'o machandi nya Were
 Ayiee My love Anyangi,
 Ayiee My love I need you,*

*Nyangi Rehema mar gi Odoyo winja
 Kata awer to ionge batha
 Ayi Rehema koso ichal ng'a ma wuonda
 Ayi Rehema to kara dak iparie chieng' cha
 To picha mi oro nagi na tim nade
 Ayi Rehema to lepi mi oro na gi nater kure
 In e kende in ema anyalo kendi
 Weche mi winj gi chieng' no riti pacho.*

(This is Rehema my love,
 You come darling
 Aieeee Rehema Nyangi the Brown One
 Where have you gone, where can I find you?
 Oh Rehema don't you know you are the medicine that heals me
 Oh Rehema don't you know you are the water I drink
 Oh Rehema you are the hunger that ails me
 Oh Rehema you are the hiccups that assail me
 Oh Rehema you are the love that breaks me
 Rehema Nyangi sister of Odoyo please listen to me
 What is it daughter of Were, please tell me
 Please my love Nyangi, I need you
 I beseech you to remember the good days
 Even as I sing you are not beside me
 I implore you to remember the love we had together
 Or were you really not in love my Rehema
 What do I do with all the pictures you mailed me?
 Where will I take all these clothes you have sent me?
 You are the one I need; you are the only one I can marry
 All these words you hear; they await your arrival)

Rehema seems employed and therefore like the benefactor to the Persona (Reversed role). It's like the wife is working in town and the man is at home. While the communication lines are open; it is as if the man has to wait for the woman to come. She's sending pictures, clothes (material things) which imply affection. The Persona is not satisfied; he wants Rehema in person. What he is not saying is that love has to be physical (there has to be sex) and this cannot be replaced by material things. He is telling her that if she is really in love, she must suffer for him: She must miss him. How can you be content when you are not with your lover?

Conclusion

A close reading of the song texts demonstrates other alternative perspectives that seem to question the apparent meaning. The result is that certain underlying assumptions are not only revealed but are even questioned. To what extent are these alternative perspectives intended by the authorial voice of the musician? We might not obtain a conclusive answer to this but from a psychoanalytic perspective unconscious doubts, dilemmas, assumptions that are repressed will most probably intrude into the text. We can also consider Bakhtin's (1982) concept of the text as dialogic, thereby becoming the site for several competing voices. In the Derridian (1966) sense assertions in the

texts can only affirm their presence by repressing other meanings or nuances. But paradoxically such repressed meanings continue to assert their existence in the text. What does this imply in relation to the study of the oral literary text? As scholars this means that we must take cognizance not only of the apparent meanings and claims of the text but also the silences (the unsaid/implicit/alternative/contesting assertions) that lie beneath the surface of our readings. This provides us with the opportunity to come up with what Geertz (1973) has referred to as a thick description; a detailed analysis that takes into account the complex perspectives that underlie any cultural transaction: Such readings demonstrate that oral texts such as songs are rich texts that convey the complexity of human interactions/relationships in a culture.

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