

The Body as a Figurative Code in Luo Popular Culture, Vernacular Literature, and Systems of Thought.

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Introduction

Popular culture is commonly viewed as a process of producing meanings from social experience as well as the way such meanings are expressed by respective groups of people in their daily lives. Popular culture (as opposed to “high culture”) may be viewed as folk culture that is favored by many people. This notion of popular culture encompasses a people's systems of thought and also embraces the cultural meanings that are woven into their language.

Popular culture may also be conceptualized, in terms of Antonio Gramsci's concept of “hegemony”, as a site of struggle over the meanings of social experience. This position views popular culture as a site of struggle between the forces of resistance of subordinate groups and the forces of incorporation of hegemonic groups in society. In this regard, popular culture emerges as a culture of conflict that constructs oppositional meanings under conditions of social subordination.

Whatever definition employed, popular culture is always contrasted to something else. The notion of “otherness” is always present. But what happens when this “otherness” consists of oppositional cultural meanings of a group of people framed and “marginalized” as subordinate by the ideology of a hegemonic foreign political power? What kinds of meanings are produced when popular notions and texts (sources out of which they produce meanings) of such a subordinate group are en-coded into the “master narrative” of the dominant group? What kinds of conceptual problems and negotiations come into play when creative artists of such a subordinate group are caught between the need to capture the codes of their popular culture and the need to be understood by an audience outside their cultural and lingual contexts? These are some of the issues I wish to explore by examining and analyzing popular notions and representations of the body of the Luo people of Kenya.

I should hasten to observe that the Luo people, like all other Kenyan ethnic groups, endured the subordinating norms of British colonial domination. It is therefore in the wider sense of political domination and ideological subordination that I consider Luo systems of thought and representations as forms of popular culture, at least from the hegemonic western cultural/political point of view. Such an approach broadens our

appreciation of popular culture as a culture of conflict not only within conditions of social subordination but also within the conditions of political/ideological domination as well. There is a close relationship between popular culture and ideology. However, while popular culture often aims at producing meanings of social experience that are relevant to everyday life, ideological forms are often associated with and implicated in some form of political domination.

The premise of my argument is that according to Luo popular culture and systems of thought, the human body is deployed as a figurative code for modes of thought, feelings, and characteristics that do not coincide with English idiom. Dho-Luo (Luo language) “compels its speakers to integrate the moral and physical attributes of persons together within the matrix of the human body” (Lienhardt 150). The Luo people, like the Tallensi of Ghana (La Fontaine), the Dinka of Sudan (Lienhardt) and the Oromo of Ethiopia (Jackson and Karp), seem to link human physiology and psychology. The body as a unit emerges as a narrative text and “enjoys a very special place as a literary object in Luo oral art” (Amuka 8). Luo conception of “self” and “person-hood” is, therefore, quite different from western systems of thought. For example, according to mainstream western epistemology, “there has never existed a human being who has not been aware, not only of his body, but also at the same time of his individuality, both spiritual and physical” (Mauss 3). However, as I will argue and elaborate later, among the Luo people, when an individual is under the influence of “juogi” spirit possession, self-consciousness is temporarily suspended and the individual possessed has no subjective experience of the possession.

Cultural-linguistic codes

Since it is often on the basis of the languages they speak that people define themselves and the world in which they live, language is quite central to the process of transmitting cultural meanings of popular culture. It is in the realm of language that the struggle between the forces of incorporation and resistance over meanings is most profoundly contested. Learning a people's world-view and how they represent their thoughts in rhetorical and symbolic codes involve more than learning the grammatical rules of their language. It involves learning the people's shared institutionalized uses of language and language-like sign systems including the cultural-linguistic codes or generic forms derived from the practice of living communication. While the grammatical forms remain stable and compulsory for interlocutors, the generic forms tend to belong to the domain of popular culture and “are much more flexible, plastic and free” (Bakhtin 79). It is precisely due to their flexibility and plasticity that these generic forms of rhetoric and representation often resist translation into other languages. Speech genres belong to the domain of popular culture. They tend to vary in terms of the language used, the moral judgments made and the subject positions of respective interlocutors.

During British colonial rule, some Luo literary writers deployed popular vernacular speech codes as rhetorical modes to satirize the subordinating aspects of the colonial ideology. Others engaged the English language in a kind of “guerrilla warfare”. They appropriated it but invested it with “untranslatable” generic concepts and codes derived from the domain of popular culture. In both cases, the writers often succeeded in articulating subtle opposition to and resistance against the dominant “master narrative”. Let me illustrate this point by recounting the full text of a popular short story, “Dhaw e kind Karan gi Jawir range” (Strife between a clerk and a painter) written by Shadrack Malo. Here is my literal translation:

At a certain school, there were two employees, a painter and a store-manager who managed the school's storeroom. Although the two lived together under one roof, they so detested each other that they even had separate hearths. Both were bachelors. One day, the two had a quarrel and exchanged bitter words on their way until they arrived at their place of work. The source of their difference was that the store-manager suspected the painter of stealing some paint since the paint was depleting fast, incommensurate with the amount of painting done. When the painter heard about the store-manager's suspicions from other people, he approached him in order to verify the validity of the allegations. The store-manager inquired whether he also admitted that he was indeed a thief. When the painter heard that question, he began to shout vehemently. He was accusing the store-manager of slander, “Ok inyal ketho nyinga kamano, ng'at matin tinni” (You should not destroy my name like that, you small person). Presently, their employer, a white man, overheard the commotion and summoned them to his office. He inquired about their differences. The painter belched out his complaint: “Bwana, ng'at matin tinni, keth iye rach” (“Bwana, this small person, the bile of his stomach is bad”). However, the white man, who also spoke the Luo language, could not comprehend such expression. Hence, he suggested that he provide the store-manager with a sick-sheet so that he (store-manager) could go and consult with a doctor about his bad bile. However, the store-manager declined, insisting that he was not ill. The painter also confirmed that the store-manager indeed was not ill but only “the bile of his stomach was bad” (Keth iye ema rach). Now, the white man could not understand their complaint and so he dismissed them to resume their respective duty warning them to cease quarreling forthwith since none was ill and that their quarrels were baseless. (Malo, 2-3)

The breakdown in communication is quite evident. Why should the two Luo workers on the one hand and their employer on the other fail to understand each other when they speak the same language? How do we interpret or understand the apparent referential aberration, “the bile of his stomach is bad”? The narrative demonstrates the extent to which Malo deploys codes of the human body both as a mode of thought and as a rhetorical strategy for satirizing the excesses and insensitivity of British colonial rule.

Speech Genres

The narrative demonstrates the extent to which speech genres are dependent upon both the practices of living communication and grammatical systems of language. The white man comprehends “keth iye rach” (the bile of his stomach is bad) in the literal referential sense. Whereas he correctly comprehends the stock epithet at the level of mimesis, both the store-keeper (clerk) and the painter comprehend it in figurative terms. Riffatere explains that such stock epithets are “regulated by tradition, by a historically definable esthetic system; that same system dictates the words’ interrelationships (especially their perception as signs of values)” (27). Not only does Malo demonstrate the displacement and distortion of the stock epithet at the mimesis level, he also shows its appropriate deployment within a Dho-Luo semiotic grid as well. In this way, he subtly satirizes the white man's limited comprehension of the local people's narrative environment. Narrative environment basically refers to the way people of a linguistic community talk to each other. The writer has also demonstrated the consequent disillusionment of the subordinated people under colonial domination.

When the painter and the store-manager insist that the latter is not sick but only “the bile of his stomach is bad”, they are quite comprehensible to each other. Clearly their “semantic field” is derived from Luo popular culture and dependent upon the culture-bearer's point of view. The white man's comprehension of the stock phrase is based on his competent fluency in Dho-Luo and knowledge of its grammar. The two employees on the one hand and the white man on the other regard their respective semantic fields as accurate, sensible and appropriate. Any other meanings beyond the structural plane are senseless or “mere noise making” as the white man soon observes. The failure in communication is therefore caused by the interpretation of a popular Dho-Luo generic mode of speech.

Bakhtin draws a distinction between forms of language and utterances or speech genres. He argues that these genres are quite diverse since they differ depending on the situation, social position and personal interrelationships of the interlocutors. Bakhtin further observes that, “a speaker is given not only mandatory forms of the national language (lexical composition and grammatical structure) but also forms of utterances that are mandatory” (80). Unlike the utterance, he argues, the sentence as a unit of language “lacks the capability of determining the directly active responsive position of the speaker. Only after becoming a complete utterance does the individual sentence acquire this capability” (82). Consequently, any sentence, being a signifying unit of language, is comprehensible, that is, “we understand its language meaning, its possible role in an utterance. But in no way can we assume a responsive position with respect to this individual sentence unless we know that with this sentence the speaker has said everything he wishes to say” (Bakhtin 82). In other words, the sentence must reflect an extra-verbal reality

(situation or code), hence becoming an utterance. The utterance is dependent upon both the preceding and subsequent links in the chain of speech communion.

Utterances, ultimately, reflect specific spheres of communication. Hence, according to the painter and the store-manager in Malo's story, "keth iye rach" (the bile of his stomach is bad) has normative significance as comprehended within the context of Luo popular culture. As individual speakers of the language, they have not created such normative values. The generic codes are given as typical popular utterances. Significantly, people neither speak in individual words nor individual sentences but in utterances. The forms of language and the typical forms of utterances "enter our experience and our consciousness together, and in close connection with one another" (Bakhtin 78). Hence, to learn to speak also implies to learn to construct utterances. According to Luo popular thought, the expression, "keth iye rach" (the bile of his stomach is bad), does not refer to a person's physical ailment. It implies that a person is malicious. Before exploring such figurative codes of the body in detail, I would like to briefly examine some popular Luo notions and understandings of self-identity.

Self and person

The Luo notion of "self" and "other" appears as a social structure whereby the structure is fairly consistent with normative pattern of personal responsibilities and social loyalties. Significantly, the individual's corporeal body emerges as a metaphor for selfhood in terms of "chuny" (heart), "wich" (head) and "ich" (stomach). However, since each individual is born into a descent group or clan, the Luo people also conceptualize self-identity in terms of collective identity. "Juogi" (ancestral or spiritual) names symbolize this "collectivity" since the people regard ancestors as reincarnated in newborn individuals. Towards this end, the individual's self-awareness could come under the influence of ancestral spirits, particularly in spirit possessions whereby the self temporarily loses his/her agency. Since ancestral spirit names reflect the collectivity of the clan, each individual has a "collective alter ego". Luo notions of identity and representation can shed light on African people's systems of thought.

It is instructive to point out that many scholars have written about African ideas of the self that rightly emphasize the importance of a person's group and status (the public self). However, this emphasis "can deflect interest" from African concerns that also regard individuals' selves in terms of their awareness of their unique identities (Lienhardt 143). The "self" in the African world-view, and particularly within the Luo cognition, is labile. It is both private (marked by respective individual's self-awareness of his/her unique identity), and public (marked by society's confirmation of that identity as of social significance) (La Fontaine 124). On the one hand, the metaphysical and epistemological analysis of the

“self” as the “conscious possession of experience” is a crucial criterion of identity (Rorty 314). On the other hand, analysis of the “self” also closely links it to the notion of “person” – a “unified center of choice and action, the unit of legal and theological responsibility” (Rorty 309). In this respect, the “ego-centric” (experiential) and “socio-centric” (cultural and ethical) notions of selfhood and personhood are not in opposition but subsist on one another (Jacobson-Widding, 33-34).

Ontological symbols of selfhood

As I have observed, the Luo people deploy the physical human body as a metaphor for modes of thought. There are three significant sets of “ontological” symbols that, invariably, constitute selfhood: “chuny” (heart or liver), “wich” (head) and “ich” (stomach).

Heart

Dho-Luo unlike English makes a lexical distinction between the physical and moral content of “chuny” (heart). “Chuny” refers to the physical organ, the liver, but it is also “the site of the intellect and ethical emotions and wisdom of a person” (Ocholla-Ayayo 52). For example, when a person says, “Ahero chamo chuny” (I like to eat the liver), he or she refers to the physical organ and deploys “chuny” without any suggestions of moral or mental condition. On the other hand, when one says, “Chunye ler” (practically, “his or her heart or liver is clean”) one refers to the moral idea of kindness. The expression, “Dhano jakwadh chunye” (A person is the shepherd of his or her heart) refers to an individual as a private entity. The Luo, therefore, deploy the “heart,” as do the Yaka of Zaire, as “the seat of intuition, comprehension and growing innerness” (Devisch 126). Other related popular expressions include, “Chunye ariyo” (He or she has two hearts). This means the person is undecided. “Chunye chuok” (He or she has a short heart) refers to a quarrelsome person. “Chunye gondalo” (His or her heart is calculating) means he or she is in deep thought. “Chunye gwa-gwa” (His or her heart is hoarse) means he or she is apprehensive.

Luo literary writers, such as Malo, often deploy these metaphors of the body in their works for various effects. Apparently, when one casts the metaphors into a “foreign language” such as English, by way of translation, they lose their contextual and aesthetic values. Such generic codes could best be understood as “ideologems” that express hidden judgments. They simultaneously indicate the subject (denotation) and evaluate it (connotation). Their “contextual potential is included in their meaning, which is stable and pre-supposes a definite attitude of the speaker to the signified object” (Epstein 107). For example, in his novel, *Otieno Achach* (Otieno, the Misguided), Alloo Konjra refers to the mental attributes of “chuny” when he writes that “E kor yo, chunye ne pod thagore kod mirima To ahinya, chunye nosingore mana wang’o od ja-sike cha mana ei odhiambono” (“On the way, his heart was struggling

with anger. . . . But even more, his heart was bent on setting the house of that enemy of his on fire”). The literal translation does not even come close to capturing the full impact of the expression. When describing Otieno’s regret, Alloo explains, “Chuny Otieno koro nene ong’awore mokalo” (The heart of Otieno was extremely suspended) (87).

In her novel, *Miaha*, Grace Ogot also refers to “chuny” in a figurative sense when she explains, “To kara wach ma nene Were Ochak owacho kaka ngerano nene ochwanyo chuny Lwak” (However, that remark that Were Ochak meant as a joke struck the heart of Lwak) (35). This implies that Lwak became angry. However, the heart is deployed differently by Leo Odera Omolo in his short story, “Ng’at Mane Kia Somo” (The Man who Could not Read). He states that “Kata kamano nene ok en kod chuny mar nywomo nyako mokia somo” (However, he did not have the heart for wedding a bride who could not read) (*Kia Somo* 21). The heart is deployed in this instance to mean reluctance. In other words, the man was reluctant to marry the girl. The spiritual heart of a human being, as Ocholla-Ayayo observes, is “situated somewhere beneath the end of the central cartilage, a spot believed to be occupied by the physical heart, adundo” (52). “Chuny” is also deployed as the pivotal center in such expressions as “chuny nam” (the heart of the lake) and “oboke mayom mag chuny yien” (tender leaves at the heart of trees) (Lansdown 24).

Head

Self-hood is not only defined in terms of “chuny” but also in terms of “wich” (head). The world of “chuny” and “wich” are closely related. However, as Ocholla-Ayayo points out, “sometimes it would appear as if the heart does a lot of work for the brain, since decision and great thoughts are the works of heart and not the brain” (54).

“Wich” (head) is associated with knowledge, memory, perception and skill. The popular Luo saying, “Wich e dhano” (the head is the person), means that presence of mind defines a person. The head endows the individual person with self-perception. Hence, the Luo cautionary remark, “Nene okuny dhano to owe biero” (Was the human being buried instead of the after-birth), draws a parallel between a living, conscious person and a “dead” organ discarded at birth. The saying is often deployed in circumstances when somebody has made serious errors of judgment. Ogot delves deeper into her character’s consciousness when she writes, “To gimoro nene osige ni kik onyis Nyawir paro ma nene thageno. Nyawir nene wiye ringo matek” (But something cautioned him not to tell Nyawir whatever was troubling him. Nyawir had a head that raced very fast) (*Miaha* 111). To have a “head that races fast” in Luo popular discourse implies to be imprudent. However, the English lexicon, being relatively abstract, cannot fully capture the concrete expressive metaphor of Dho-Luo.

The head is responsible when a person has been misled. In his novel, *Otieno Achach*, Alloo comments that “Kinde mathoth Otieno noyudo wach ni min dware, to dhakono nowilo wiye chuth” (On many occasions,

Otieno was informed that his mother summoned him, but that woman completely twisted his head) (124). In other words, he procrastinated having fallen to the enchantments of the woman. Whereas the expression, “wiye obiro marach” (his or her head has become bad) refers to a mental state of insanity, “wiye otimo pi” (his or her head contains water) refers to a stupid person. In his short story, Omolo comments about the stubbornness of a character in his story, “Ng’at menene oromo gi makolwer” (The person who encountered the un-primed). He writes, “Wuon Agulu kaka pile nene en jago-no ma wiye tek en to nene ok owinj weche jotelogi” (The son of Agulu, as usual, was a person with a hard head, he never heeded the words of these overseers) (Makolwer 16). To have a “hard head” in Luo popular thought means to be obstinate. In fact, even the lexeme, “makolwer,” is a motivated sign that is both descriptive and evaluative. Its English equivalent, “the un-primed”, only captures its descriptive but not evaluative values. Significantly, “Wuon Agulu” at the referential level, translates as “father of Agulu” but when trans-coded into the process of meta-lingual semiosis, it shifts the borders of semantic field to mean “son of Agulu.” In another short story, Omolo narrates, “Luoro kende gi wich kuot notamo Ojwang’ dhi waro dhoge dala gi Akech” (Fear alone and a swollen head prevented Ojwang’ from going to reclaim his head of cattle from the homestead of Akech) (*Kia Somo* 23). In other words, Ojwang’ was embarrassed.

Stomach

According to Luo systems of thought, “ich” (stomach) is a metaphor for transgressive and anti-social feelings. “Ich” (stomach) is “like the black box of perturbed and anti-social feelings” (Devisch 129). Anger, selfishness, and greed are all located within the stomach. Ocholla-Ayayo aptly explains that the “function of the stomach, according to the Luo, goes beyond that of digesting food alone” (55). A telling example of this deployment in a literary text is when Alloo describes a character’s anger. He explains, “Iye nene owang’ ahinya ka noneno ka chotneni dhialo wuoth ei pacho ka” (His stomach was extremely aflame on seeing his lover treading about within this compound) (87). In other words, he became very angry. Related examples include the expression, “Iye kwar” (He or she has a red stomach) that refers to selfishness. “Iye lit” (He or she has a sore stomach) refers to a stingy person. “Iye bor” (He or she has a long stomach) refers to a greedy person.

It is along similar lines that we should interpret “keth iye rach” (the bile of his stomach is bad) in Malo’s short story. When the painter accuses the store-manager, “Bwana, ng’at matin tinni, keth iye rach” (Bwana, this small person, the bile of his stomach is bad), he evokes an organ of the stomach that is associated with bitterness. The lexical choices in the story convey the tensions about social status and re-enforce the narrative’s aesthetic flavor. “Bwana” is a loan word from Kiswahili that, in the context of the story, is deployed as a title of honor. It is a title of respect that conveys the respect the painter has for their white employer.

However, to refer to somebody as “ng’at matin tinni” in Dho-Luo vernacular discourse communicates an attitude of disrespect and detestation. In Luo popular thought, the expression is loaded with stereotypical connotations meant to belittle the social and moral standing of the addressee. The painter presumably knows the proper name of his housemate but chooses to refer to him stereotypically as a foreigner thereby seeking to erase his mate’s social status. “Ng’ato” (somebody), as in the expression, “ng’at matin tinni,” erases one's identity. It also denies and erases a person's network of affective relations and casts him or her among strangers. Indeed, it is “synonymous with the stranger, an alien, possibly even an enemy” (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 26). An individual is not only perceived in terms of personal identity but also in terms of social identity.

The concept of “juogi” and social identity

Naming systems within the context of personal and socio-cultural identity identifies and describes a person directly but also in terms of culturally defined aspects. As I have argued, the Luo popular culture tends to regard selfhood in terms of “chuny” (heart), “wich” (head) and “ich” (stomach). When a person has died, the Luo people refer to the state as “chunye ochot” (figuratively, his or her heart has snapped). “Chuny” is regarded as the vital force that “snaps” from the physical body at the time of death. According to Luo systems of thought, when “chuny” has snapped or left the physical body, it becomes “tipo” (shadow). The unanimated physical body, which is soon buried, is referred to as “ringre” (body without consciousness). Ongong'a notes that in observing how the Luo people “treat a dead man's body and how they speak about him afterwards, one would have no occasion for doubt that they believe there is a part of man that survives death and one that goes to the grave” (20). “Tipo” (the spiritual entity of a person) survives the dead body and joins the constellation of ancestral spirits collectively referred to as “juogi”. Juogi or Jok is “the force behind every being, the essence that makes a being what it is” (Ongong’a 20).

In Luo popular thought, growth to adulthood that starts with the physical birth and naming ceremony through puberty and marriage ends in the death of the physical body but not extinction. Death is merely a process that removes a person gradually from the present to a future identified with the ancestral period. Ongong’a aptly explains how the Luo people view death:

It is a gateway, a bridge, a line of demarcation which divides the world of human beings and the world of spirits. . . . Each time it occurs, it breaks the normal course of life and shakes the moral foundations of society to such an extent that religious rites must be performed to neutralize its effects and bring the society back to normal. (22)

Such popular beliefs in personal immortality are evident in many Luo funeral rites. For instance, the Luo traditional patriarchal culture requires

that when a young un-married woman dies, her body must be buried outside the fenced hedge of her parents' homestead. This must be observed lest her spirit "returns" to haunt her female age-mates within the compound (Mboya 129). The Dho-Luo saying, "Ng'a motho neno" (A dead person sees everything), is a tautological statement that emphasizes personal immortality.

I mentioned at the beginning of this discussion that some Luo literary writers, writing in English, sometimes engage the language in a kind of "guerrilla warfare". This refers to instances when they figuratively appropriate and deploy untranslatable codes of body in their works. For example, Ogot makes references to popular Luo beliefs about the dead when she describes a scene in her short story, *The Green Leaves*. She explains, "Omor raised his voice, 'Let not the enemy die in your hands. His spirit would rest upon our village. Let him give up the ghost when we have returned to our huts'" (*Green Leaves* 91). To "give up the ghost" refers to the process when separation occurs between the "tipo" and "ringre". Such representations convey the deep-seated popular Luo cosmological belief that death does not end life but is merely a change of a person's level of existence. Non-Luo readers of Ogot's narrative would, most probably, fail to comprehend such generic codes although the writer writes in English.

Anyumba acknowledges that "juogi" spirits played a very important part in the life of Luo people and that once a person died he or she entered another abode of mysterious existence (1). The spirit of the dead was not expected to be visible to the naked eye. Hence, if such a spirit appeared to a living person as "naked or with wildly grown hair or as a corpse, it was invariably a 'jachien'" (Anyumba 1) or as Ocholla-Ayayo observes, a malevolent "evil juogi" (174). Anyumba identifies two types of "juogi" spirits: "yamo" (the unknown spirits) that manifest themselves in body rashes, swellings and chest discomfort and "the known spirits" or spirits of dead relatives (1). The "known spirits" manifest themselves in spirit-possessions and whoever is under such possession becomes wild, trembles and wildly jabbars (dhum) or speaks in tongues (Anyumba 1). In this respect, an individual temporarily loses his or her self-agency and awareness and submits to vital forces beyond the realm of self-consciousness. In Luo popular thought, spirit possession (juogi) is conceptualized not in terms of a supreme god but as Ocholla-Ayayo explains, traceable to the departed ancestors in the "underworld" (173).

Personal identity and "juogi" names

One significant representation of the individual person is personal name. Ocholla-Ayayo points out that according to Luo popular culture, "an individual did not hold his personal identity with the physical body alone. Personal identity was traced through characters, personal spirits and social identity of parents. The clan identity was traced through the clan founder" (55). Personal identity is, therefore, not conceptualized as a

private center of narrative gravity as in most Western modes of thought but in terms of “a network of affective relations with brother, uncle, grand-father, in-law. . . . The individual’s identity is crucial in terms of the structuring of communication, civility and co-operation” (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 26).

I have mentioned that personal identity is also traced in terms of personal spirits (*juogi*). Personal immortality is enhanced by friends and relatives of the deceased through certain symbolic communions and rites including naming newly born babies after dead people. Such names are collectively referred to as “*nyinge juogi*” (spirit names). “*Juogi*” names are not arbitrarily assigned. In Luo popular thought, when an ancestor wants a child to be named after him or her, the child will cry incessantly, refusing food and sleep, until the name of the dead ancestor is invoked (Kawango 90). The name could be revealed in a dream or through divination by seers (*jolek*) or fortune-tellers (*jobilo*). According to Adhiambo-Oduol, the value attached to the exact naming “was the need to give the particular child protection by invoking the real name of the deceased person: such a child would be protected by the spirit of the person it is named after. The name was referred to as ‘*nying juogi*’ - spiritual name” (23). However, children named after departed relatives had other names based on events or times of birth. Such names were preferred in day-to-day interactions unlike “*juogi*” names that were held in high esteem (Adhiambo-Oduol 23).

According to Luo popular beliefs, there is no fixed maximum number of names given to a particular child. It is instructive, therefore, to stress Ocholla-Ayayo’s observation that to a “great extent, Luo names are based on the principle of the sun’s position during the day and its corresponding positions by night” (182). Such names are not “*juogi*” names although some of them could become “*juogi*” names. *Juogi* names of departed relatives are given to newly born children only if the deceased bore children of his or her own. *Juogi* names are sometimes given domestic and pet animals in order to invoke particular spirits and endow the animal so named with characteristics of the respective departed person. “*Juogi*” is also called upon during the launching of a fishing vessel or boat. As Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo explain, “there is the rebirth of the ‘*jok*,’ the controlling spirit force, after whom the boat has been named; there is an appeal to the *jok* and to the spirits of the lake to accept the boat as worthy” (100).

Juogi names are particularly treasured among the Luo. They locate respective individuals’ identity in a given genealogy and symbolically identify them within family and clan networks. Ocholla-Ayayo observes that among the Luo people, not only was the name a part of a person’s being as the soul and the body but also “a man’s name as an essential part of him, so that the blotting out of the name of an individual was synonymous with his destruction” (184). “*Rito nying*” (name preservation) is a crucial obligation for the individual. Conversely, “*ketho nying*” (name destruction) or talking ill of someone is an unforgivable offense. In Malo’s short story, it is therefore, no wonder that the painter complains bitterly,

“Ok inyal ketho nyinga kamano, ng’at matin tinni” (You should not destroy my name like that, you small man) (2). Ocholla-Ayayo also states:

Being as a value is related to many other concepts such as individual growth, protection of personal being, and includes those related to self-individualization, and self-actualization. This is clear when a person’s name is questioned, when his honor and prestige or dignity, which represent his being, are polluted or contaminated by non-valued actions or language symbolizing them. (40)

It is in this respect that the painter in Malo’s story feels that his actual being, his character, his name, has been “polluted.”

Due to the normative significance of utterances, translation of the Luo figurative body’s coding into Western languages often leads to a loss of their referential niceties and aesthetic. I have argued that some Luo writers writing in English at times take for granted that their readers would be able to comprehend the motivated and evaluative generic concepts they use. For instance, Grace Ogot narrates a story about Achieng’, one of chief Mboga’s spouses, who has delivered twins (The Bamboo Hut 29). Since the Chief desires a son, the spouse decides to abandon the female twin by the well, where she went to draw water, and takes home only the male twin. The mother names her abandoned girl-child, “Apiyo”. Ogot does not explain the choice for this particular generic name. One can assume that in any case, the mother abandons her baby hence nobody would address her by that name anyway! An elderly woman later retrieves the abandoned baby and takes her to her home and brings her up to maturity as a foster child. Within her adopted family space, the girl-child is named “Awiti”. Once again Ogot offers no explanation for preferring this name.

I would like to argue that either Ogot took it for granted that her non-Luo readers would comprehend the normative significance of such Luo names or she was out to play the “guerrilla war” with the English language. The non-Luo reader would certainly miss the meta-lingual significance of such generic codes as “Apiyo” and “Awiti” since they are incomprehensible beyond Luo popular culture and systems of thought. According to Luo cosmic principles, “Apiyo” is the name given to the first-born twin if the baby is female. The second born is named “Adongo” if female. If male, the respective names given are “Opiyo” and “Odongo.” Awiti (female) or Owiti (male) are names given to abandoned babies by those who have retrieved them. However, without sufficient elucidation of this meta-lingual code, non-Luo readers would certainly not grasp the sub-textual codes. Perhaps a more complicated system of Luo social identity is the way virtue boasting names are deployed.

Virtue boasting names

David Parkin explains that “the recognition among the Luo that socio-economic status is most easily observed and measured through the achievements of an individual rather than a group is expressed in the concept ‘sunga’ (a proud person)” (215). However, let me point out that

“sunga” does not accurately translate as a “proud person” but simply “pride”. ”Pakruok” (virtue boasting) or “Chamo nyadhi” (self-laudation), as the genre is popularly known, is characterized by “sunga”. Virtue boasting is a popular symbolic name preservation performance that glorifies certain normative traits of one’s own family, lineage, or clan. For instance, a man may boast: “An Opiyo Ochwinjo okew g’Opondo Malwiny, oyieyo ma dak kodi gi thun kata idagi” (I am Opiyo Ochwinjo nephew of Opondo Malwiny, the rat that shares your living space by force whether you like it or not). In this instance, the man identifies himself with his maternal uncle. He regards himself as the rat which forces its way to reside in a hut against the owner’s wishes. In other words, not only does he boast about his incredible qualities but also locates his individual identity within a network of family relationships as well. In Ogot’s novel, *Miaha*, Lwak refers to her son as “Owiny, bade dongo” (Owiny, he who has big arms). This is a form of virtue boasting that expresses Lwak’s fondness for her son’s kindness and generosity. Owiny may physically have quite small arms.

The significance of virtue boasting names, as social identity markers, are perhaps best realized during traditional Luo nyatiti (lyre) popular performances. During such live performances, members of the audience do often profusely recite their many praise-names and chant their self-laudations with abandon. This is normally regarded as “moso jathum” (saluting the musician). During such live “nyatiti” performances, the harpist or musician usually composes and embellishes his songs by the praise-names of the members of his immediate audience. The popular Luo saying, “Thum wero mana ng’ama nitie” (A song is composed only for whoever is in attendance), indeed attests to this practice. Apart from certain formulaic renditions, subtle innuendoes, and pervasive comments, “nyatiti” musical performances are characterized by nothing more than excessive laudations and strings of virtue boasting names spiced with scurrilous asides.

Indexical representations of the body

There are also some popular indexical representations of the body that often defy translation. These include body attire such as clothing and sandals. For instance, a person’s agency can be arrested and manipulated by another person through certain ritualistic practices. Let me illustrate this by referring to a scene in Alloo’s novel, *Otieno Achach*. In the novel, Otieno decides to kill a malicious medicine man (jandagla). Alloo writes, “Koro paro nobirone kowacho ni ‘Jaduong’ni losruokne ema adwaro gajego’ nimar Otieno nong’eyo ni losruok mar ng’ato nyalo nege ka losruokno okingi kata oling’ e bur ogwe” (He soon resolved that ‘I want to betray this old man using his own excrement.’ This is because Otieno had known that a person could be killed if his own excrement was bewitched or cast inside the hole of a lizard) (120). However, securing the excrement of the old man was not an easy task. The old man was also well versed in

the popular generic discourse of witchcraft and so he used to help himself very early in the morning at a riverbank so that the offal was washed away. Otieno eventually succeeds in tricking Olambo, the old man, into casting lethal magical spells on his own bodily excreviae thereby condemning himself to death. By unknowingly casting his spells on his own excrement, Olambo succeeds in destroying his own potency, vitality and agency. This is an apt example of popular Luo beliefs in the potency of a person as extending to his or her bodily excretions.

The vital essence of a person also resides in his or her shadow. An individual can lose his or her vitality if his or her shadow falls on another person. The intruder is usually reprimanded, “We madho remba!” (Do not suck my blood!). In such instances, the vital essence of the subject is believed to be trickling and bolstering the intruder’s own self-potency. Certain religio-magico spells can also be concocted with the malicious intention of robbing a person of his or her self-agency. An apt illustration from Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo may shed light on this:

One day in 1957, in Ugenya, Miruka Jalam was beating a girl who was wailing loudly for help. . . . When the owner of the ‘dala’ intervened, Miruka shouted back that she had ‘tied’ (bewitched) him and that she had refused to co-operate in removing the spell. Peace was not restored until Miruka had found the cause under his pillow: three ears of still-green star grass. (*Siaya* 96)

In other words, the girl had used the star grass to render her lover temporarily sexually inactive. This is, therefore, one instance where an individual has lost his potency due to some ritualistic machinations on his body. Such secret codes belong to the domain of Luo popular culture and systems of thought.

Significantly, among the Luo people, when a person has drowned in the river or lake so that his or her body cannot be retrieved for burial, an aspect of the dead person’s clothing is, symbolically, taken as his or her representation and accorded full burial rites. In case nothing of the bodily margins is found, then a special fruit, “yago” (sausage-fruit), is appropriated symbolically as his or her body and consequently accorded full funeral rites as befitting his or her status within the community. All these types of symbolization of the body are deemed appropriate purification and pacification of a departed person’s spirit. They are meant to avert possible “chien” (ghostly vengeance).

Iconic representations of the body

There are instances when representations of the human body’s actual representations are visibly altered in a manner quite inconsistent with verisimilitude. The body’s coding in the popular Luo board game of “ajua” is an example of this form of representation. Such representations can only have meaning when understood within the popular Luo notions of person-hood. The human body is distorted in such a way that ridicules or subverts any approximation towards reality. In such instances, the body is “appropriated as a semiotically charged magnet of social and aesthetic

forces” (Ogembo 1). The “ajua” board-game resembles the game of chess. The “ajua” wooden board (wer) has eight adjacent depressions (udi) in which small pebbles (also called “ajua”) are dropped and removed in the process of the game. Examined closely, “ajua reveals sophisticated artistry in which imitation of what is real and what is unreal becomes apparent. It imitates human physiology. But a closer look reveals detailed deformities destroying the realism in it” (Ogembo 1). Each of the depressions is named according to organs or parts of the human body. There are sixteen depressions in total, eight on either side of the board. Symbolically, the eight depressions represent two human beings lying flat down adjacent to each other but facing opposite directions. It is as if one’s head faces the direction of the other’s toes. However, the body parts appear deformed in a way that conveys a sense of de-familiarization. For example, from the foot (tielo), the next depression is the buttocks (pier). This is followed by the thigh (bam), the eye (wang’), the waist (nungo), the chest (kor), the neck (ng’ut), and finally the head (wich) in that order.

“Ajua” is a complex game that represents what Ogembo refers to as “the syntactical co-ordination of symbols or syntagm” (2). The signs and symbols are not stagnant but their meanings accrue from their dynamic movement. Ogembo explains:

And when the symbols move, they change their aesthetic significance. For this reason, a player or spectator cannot appreciate the game unless he learns to see the signs and symbols as a network. The movement of one sign will transform the next and in turn the third or more and a player who is unable to keep track of the changes in syntax will be paralysed as he would most likely be caught contravening the rules. (2)

The game of “ajua” is also loaded with lewd images and symbolism that defy adequate translation. Curiously, the depressions have different “fertility” values that must be contested in order for one player to emerge the winner. For instance, the eye (wang’) is the most infertile depression while the buttocks (pier) the most highly productive. As Ogembo infers, “since ‘pier’ may also mean the female reproductive organs in Dho-Luo, it is not a wonder that it is the most prolific as far as reproduction in ajua goes” (11). During an “ajua” game, players are at liberty to deploy lewd and sarcastic remarks. For instance, one often hears such sexually suggestive expressions as “chuowo thuo” (spearing with the cock) and “turo tielo” (breaking the leg). The latter expression, figuratively, means also “to impregnate.” Other lewd expressions include “soko wang’” (poking the eyes) and “nindo e bam” (lying on the thighs). The sexually explicit verbal discourse is popularly viewed and accepted as part and parcel of any “ajua” performance. This type of distortion or rupture of the body communicates the Luo people’s attempts to come to terms with the human body both as a contingent and sacred text. It is an example of the rhetoric of representation whereby the Luo people attempt to influence or re-create the corporeal body by temporarily challenging its physical form. The body is deployed as a hypogrammatic derivation. Such figurative and

symbolic representations of the body are instances of generic coding that belong to the realm of Luo popular culture.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to shed some light on popular Luo notions and symbolic representations of the human body. I have argued that, according to Luo systems of thought, the human body is appropriated as a hypogram. The body's coding is deployed in representing personal and social identities. The physical body as an entity is both private and public. It is the locus of individual self-awareness and identity but this personal identity is also conceptualized in terms of socio-cultural identity. I have pointed out that within the Luo cognition and popular literary expression the moral and physical attributes of an individual person are integrated together within the matrix of the human body and, by extension, also within spiritual names, items of clothing, and other symbolic representations of the body. By making references to the popular Luo board game of "ajua", I have illustrated how the Luo people, sometimes, not only conceptualize the body as a symbolic code but also represent it in the terms of semantic indirection. According to Luo popular thought, the physical human body is not only deployed as a metaphor for modes of thought. The body's figurative coding is also deployed in popular virtue boasting and by Luo literary writers. The body's coding and its symbolic representation belong to the domain of Luo popular culture. They invariably lose their significance and aesthetic value when cast in "foreign" referential realms.

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