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THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN FACILITATING CULTURE: A CASE STUDY OF THE ISUKHA COMMUNITY, KAKAMEGA COUNTY IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the role of language specifically nouns in portraying masculinity in the Isukha culture during the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo*. Culture is the way of life of a people. A people's culture is encompassed in their language. Thus, it is not possible to delink the Isukha language from their culture especially through the praise poetry that is chanted by the artists during bullfighting. The Isukha community from Shinyalu Sub County of Kakamega County, Kenya, participates in bullfighting as a ritual known as *Shilembe*. This ritual involves two bulls fighting on the grave of a male hero who has died but while alive he killed either a wild animal or an enemy of the community. They also participate in bullfighting as an indigenous sport that is referred to as *Mayo*. However, the study discovered that the two games are not just done as a ritual and an indigenous sport respectively during bullfighting but rather the praise poems that are chanted possess language aspects that portray masculinity. The study used Hegemonic Masculinity and Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse the language used by the artists in the praise poems. The findings of this study will be helpful in understanding African communities like the Isukha, especially when it comes to male chauvinism.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of '*Shilembe*' and '*Mayo*' cannot be discussed in a vacuum without associating them with bullfighting. Bullfighting is a game that has been practiced by many communities since time immemorial. The initiators of this game associated it to the worship of gods. One of the myths about bullfighting narrates a story about Gilgamesh and Enkidu who fought and killed the bull of heaven. Bullfighting is also associated with the Greeks and the Romans where functions involving human

beings and bulls were organized, especially competitions. In Spain, 'Torerros' who was the fighting bull was associated with the fans of football who were supported and funded by well-wishers and shown in media (Hemingway, 1932 in Kibigo, 2019).

In France, during the 19th century, the community members started bullfighting as one of their own game. The game spread out to the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa during the time of the Romans' rule (Kabaji, 2005, & 2008).

In Tanzania, the Portuguese started bullfighting among the people of the Islands of Unguja and Pemba. During that time, bullfighting was known as 'the game of cows'. This game spread out and attracted many other tribes in Tanzania.

In Western Kenya this game involves a bull and another bull fighting by the use of horns. The Wanga people from Mumias call this game *Eshiremba* and it is done after burial where the bulls are brought on the grave. They fight and levelize the grave of a hero. The hero must be a man who has done a heroic deed like killing a wild animal like a python or killing an enemy of the community. The Maragoli people call this game *Ekeremba*, the Banyore call it *Eshilembe* while the Isukha community refer to it as *Shilembe* (Alembi 2002).

Wanjala (2011, 2015) explains the importance of praise poetry in portraying masculinity in various aspects of the community and uses the Bukusu community as an illustration during circumcision ceremony. In the same way, in the Isukha community, Shinyalu Sub County of Kakamega County in Western Kenya, praise poetry is considered a very high form of literary art as it is chanted by the artists during the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo* to portray masculinity.

Therefore, the research focused on examining the role of language in facilitating culture, this was accomplished by analyzing the language aspects specifically the nouns that are used in the Isukha praise poetry basing on the semantic approach.

The concept of praise poetry is ambiguous and complicated and that is why various scholars have come up with various definitions regarding the meaning.

According to Mwita (1997), praise poetry is an art of speech that involves performance. In this art, a person praises himself or herself with an aim of expressing or exposing his or her characteristics.

Matei (2011) explains that praise poetry involves a narrator who understands the in depth of what he/she is talking about by praising himself through chanting of praise words. She adds that the main function of praise poetry as to portray masculinity in the male gender in the community.

Wanjala (2011) says that praise poetry is a way in which a man can portray his manhood in various relationships that involve gender. He further explains that the gender roles in various communities depict aspects of masculinity from the initial stages of childhood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous literature on praise poetry portraying masculinity has acknowledged that indeed praise poetry play a pivotal role in ensuring that masculinity is portrayed in various communities with greater attention on the research done by various scholars, it is evident that feminism is given more emphasis than masculinity.

The Concept of Masculinity

The concept of masculinity has been defined differently by different scholars. This is because the concept is complex and ambiguous. Hoffman (1998) asserts that this is due to the fact that different people have different perspectives and philosophical ideas that affect their views.

Onyango (2011) states that masculinity as a term began to be used even before the colonial period. He adds that various concepts of oral literature like riddles, tongue twisters and songs portrayed a man as a hero, who was highly valued and had more powers compared to a woman. He emphasizes that there's a close relationship between songs and heroic relationships. Therefore, in many communities in Kenya, songs were constructed to praise the man regarding his authority whereas those constructed for women portrayed them as weaker human beings.

According to Walsh (1997), in the African communities, masculinity is associated with authority of men and their being able to succeed and take care of the family. He adds that a man is never born with masculinity as part of his reproductive organs but rather, it is constructed and built in the tradition in which he grows.

Choti (1998) describes masculinity as a way in which a man is drawn or portrayed as having power that is different from a woman. He explains that a man is seen from a positive perspective whereas a woman is viewed from a negative perspective. The

research was based on the female gender. Wandera (1996) and Simala (2013) also took the same perspective. This work is different from the works of these scholars as it took the other dimension of masculinity.

Matinde (2006) in his work on how Kuria men are portrayed in initiation songs indicates how a community's views and takes up a fundamental role in programming the gender role and evaluating the quality of each gender. He has proved that the Abakuria community portrays a man in a positive way that is different from a woman, the way Choti (1998) puts it.

According to Matinde (2015), the male gender has more power and authority in various community disciplines like law, politics economy and authority on decision making and agreements in the society.

Wanjala (2007, 2011, 2015) and Khaemba (2013) narrate the way songs used by the initiates in the Bukusu community portray masculinity in a Bukusu man by giving him authority, power and characteristics of heroism. According to him, circumcision is very vital in this community as it is a symbol of authority and power to the male gender. This scholar further explains that the initiates are not allowed to enter the cooking area as this will deprive them of their acquired masculinity. On the same note, Simala (2013) explains about the sexist overtones on Kiswahili female metaphors. His research laid a good foundation for this research as the researcher was able to consider the other side of the coin basing on Masculinity and not feminism.

The Meaning of Praise Poetry

The concept of praise poetry is complex. This has made various scholars to come up with different definitions. Cope (1968) explains that a praise poem offers admiration or worship of a person or god. Praise poetry continues to be a familiar literary form in various South African cultures. He asserts that the genre of praise poetry, called 'Isibongo' from the Zulu culture offers imagery and storytelling related to a person and the history that surrounds him or her. In his research on the poetry of Zulu, he explains that the person who chants the praise poetry in the Zulu community is known as 'Imbongi'. This word refers to the narrator. These poems rotate on the general life of the Zulu people

in terms of the traditions and ideologies of their community (Kibigo, 2019).

In the Zulu praise poetry, cows are regarded as very fundamental in the life of the Zulu people. These praise poems were very vital as they laid a foundation for pointing out the praise poetry of the Isukha community and their traditions and ideologies as raw material to prove how language portrays masculinity in this community.

In the Abatsotso, praise poetry has the role of praising the acts of heroism, confidence, tricksters and bravery during wars. This came up as a result of the day to day wars that took place in the Abatsotso community. Other activities related to this included journeys of hunting, the encounters with wild animals and other potentially dangerous deeds (Kunene 1971).

The Shona people have different types of praise poetry in their community. For example the artists chant the clan praise poetry, personal praise poetry and the praise poetry that involves chanting words and being proud like a peacock. These praise poetry were analyzed phonologically and morphologically. In his work, he has explained that these praise poetry are part of the traditions and ideologies of the Shona people. His work related so well with this paper as it involved the aspects of linguistics like morphology, syntax and semantics.. His research assisted our research to analyze praise poetry basing on various clans of the Isukha community with respect to the language aspects used.

Praise poetry is a chant of praising oneself, thus it is done by a character himself or herself. The praise poetry is constructed using imagery, metaphors, hyperboles and repetition among others (Mulokozi, 1996). This work was vital to this research as it guided the researcher in analyzing the language aspects that portray masculinity like nouns, phrases and verbs in the Isukha praise poetry using the semantic approach.

All the above mentioned scholars agree that praise poetry is actually an art that involves the heroic acts in different African communities.

Research on Semantics as a Branch of Linguistics.

As a branch of linguistics, semantics concerns meaning. Hence, language as a means of communication that is used by only human beings is analyzed by the discipline of linguistics. The other branches of linguistics include; Phonology, Morphology, Syntax and Pragmatics.

King'ori (2005) and Ambuyo (2007) explain that these branches of linguistics cannot be dealt with without involving semantics because it is the branch that involves meaning and which brings about communication that promotes development in the society. Therefore, in this context, meaning is very fundamental in any communication as it facilitates understanding hence making communication easier.

Kibigo (2015) explains the importance of proper usage of noun classes among the Maseno University Kiswahili students. The results of her research were that the linguistic aspects of grouping nouns include morphology, syntax and semantics with the latter being the umbrella of the first two. Simala (2012) states that semantics is very vital as it facilitates communication and promotes the development of a community. Therefore semantics is an important aspect of linguistics that this paper aimed at adopting in order to analyze the language aspects that portray masculinity in praise poetry of the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo* in the Isukha community in Kenya. Thus, this paper shows that without language, the culture of the community cannot be realized.

The Two Theories that Were Adopted in this Research

Oral literature research can be guided by either one or more than one theory depending on the objectives of the research in question (Wanjala, 2011; 2015). This paper therefore adopted two theories with an aim of merging two disciplines of linguistics and oral literature that are:

Hegemonic Masculinity theory (Izugbara, 2005) and the Critical Discourse Analysis theory (Wodak, 1996).

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

This theory was propounded by Robert Bly (Wells & Holland, 2001) and was continued by Izugbara in the year 2005. This theory shows how power and authority was possessed by the male gender, especially due to the traditions of the community in question. The theory states that the term 'manhood' has its roots in biology whereas masculinity depends on the ideologies, perspectives and the expectations of the traditions and depends on the particular community that is being referred to. In essence, masculinity is born, nurtured, raised and promoted depending on the community.

The etymology of this theory is associated with the penis and those who possess it in the society as a powerful resource as far as the male gender is concerned. This makes the male gender to be considered as being powerful, respectful and of high esteem in the society.

Walsh (1997) explains that masculinity is shown or viewed in terms of the freedom of gender, competition, authority to rule, control and also the power to order. According to Walsh (2001), in the African community, masculinity is associated with the power to rule, order and control. This theory has three main tenets.

- i. Ideologies of the community that guide the mind and perspectives of the community members. This tenet assisted this research as it assisted in evaluating the way the Isukha community programmes the gender relationships, in the performance of the gender relationships, in the performance of the ritual of *Shilembe* and the practice of *Mayo* and be able to portray masculinity through the praise poetry that is chanted by the artists.
- ii. Secondly, the other tenet is the traditional life of the community and the relationships and the expectations of the community in question. The traditions of the community are portrayed through language, ideologies and culture that show up in all the structure of the community as a whole.
- iii. Thirdly, there's this tenet that explains how the responsibilities are divided depending on the gender in the same way, responsibilities in the

Isukha community were divided in a way that implied how masculinity is portrayed at an early age. The praise poetry portrays this through the chants of the artists.

- iv. Fourth, there's the tenet that states that there are specific characteristics that show that men or the male gender has specific characteristics that are peculiar and give them authority over the female gender. These are the characteristics that a man ought to possess in order to build, maintain and portray masculinity. These characteristics include: patience, power, being courageous, being promiscuous, firm, daring, among other characteristics.

These tenets were very appropriate to this research as they guided it in the collection and the analysis of data so as to achieve the objective of this paper. The research further adopted the theory of Critical Discourse Analysis so as to analyze the Isukha praise poetry in depth using the various aspects of language with a semantic perspective.

Critical Discourse Analysis

This is the second theory that was used in this paper commonly known as CDA, this theory was propounded by Teun, Van Dijk, Fairclough and Wodak in the 1990s. It is grounded in different works of these proponents. It identifies the use of language in the society. Its main tenets are to examine power relations, history and ideology. Choge (2018) states that, this theory calls for the assessment of the discourse in a keen manner, with an eagle's eye, in order to come up with the best results.

CDA in itself is not a single theory. It is perceived as a way that has different perspectives of analyzing the relationship between the use of language and the context of the community. The tenets that are commonly used are those of Van Dijk, Fairclough and Wodak (1996) Therefore, this theory focuses on the problems in the community. It does not just only focus on language but also looks at its usage and shades light on the linguistic characteristics of the community and traditions. This is especially the idea of the lack of gender equality and racial discrimination among other issues (Van Dijk, 1993). This theory assisted this work in analyzing

praise poetry discourse in-depth in order to portray masculinity in the Isukha community.

- i. The first tenet states that CDA focuses on the problems of the society. This was appropriate in this work as it helped the researcher to analyze the aspects of language in praise poetry in the Isukha community in order to identify how language aspects portray masculinity that brings about the problem of gender disparity.
- ii. Power relations that come from speech. This tenet was important as it assisted in showing how relations in the society are portrayed in speech. This was useful as it showed clearly poetry that is chanted during the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo* portrays masculinity. This theory clearly states that it is important to analyze any discourse in a deeper way in order to identify the characteristics of power that are within.
- iii. The third tenet indicates that CDA relates the society with tradition. It aims at encouraging analysts to put in consideration traditions and the society in question in their analysis. A person's language is actually his or her identity. Therefore, this theory shows that the use of language contributes to changes in the society and the traditions of that society including the power relations. This was vital in this paper as the praise poems in the Isukha community were analyzed on their clans – which includes the traditions and ideologies that were portrayed in the stylistic devices like metaphors, hyperboles and repetition.
- iv. The fourth tenet states that discourse is history. Therefore, interpreting the discourse context. According to the CDA theory, it is clear that it cuts across all areas like linguistics, traditions, society and ideology. This theory stresses that it is important to focus on the history of the society in question in order to analyze any discourse in an easier and simpler way. In this paper, the aspects of history according to the Isukha community have been evident especially in the praise poetry during the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo*. This has assisted the researcher to be able to identify and understand the Isukha man and the discourse that has a long history in this community.

Fairclough (1989, 1991, 1992, & 1995) explains that discourse is supposed to help an analyst to identify a certain action of the society depending on a particular perspective. Considering the history of the Isukha community, Were (1997) explains that the teaching of the cultural values from one generation to another was the responsibility of the whole community. These teachings involved the upbringing of children, responsibilities, expectations and ideologies among others. All these were done basing on gender. For instance, the boys were taught on the responsibilities of men while the girls were taught on the responsibilities of women. Therefore, if discourse is history, then it means that the praise poetry of the Isukha community is peculiar and different from that of any other community. This tenet was vital as it assisted the researcher to analyze masculinity in the Isukha praise poetry basing on their clans and the language used.

One of the scholars who has used this theory is Owala (2014) in his thesis “Analysis of Selected Discourses on National and International Terrorism in *Taifa Leo Newspaper* published in Kenya”. He explains that any analyst of discourse is supposed to take caution in the choice of language, news source and discourse access when reporting about terrorism. He adds that this can reduce biasness and negative effect on readers as a result of the biasness. In the same way, the CDA theory, helped this paper to identify the need of critically analyzing the praise poetry in order to identify the language aspects used basing on the semantic approach. Miruka (2014) also used citations while analyzing intertextuality in Kiswahili literature and her deep analysis assisted this research to get an in-depth perspective of analyzing the Isukha praise poetry.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To examine the role of language in facilitating culture in the Isukha community of Shinyalu Sub County, Kakamega County, this paper adopted the qualitative design. This type of design was historical and ethnographic in nature. Historical in the sense that the history of the Isukha community was considered in order to identify how the naming system was done in this community as a basis of our argument. Ethnographically due to the fact that the

researcher got an opportunity to stay with the Isukha community members in order to observe and participate in the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo*. The researcher adopted snow-ball sampling technique with purposive and simple random sampling techniques. This was very fundamental as the artists were able to guide the researcher to the next place where the performance was taking place so as to collect data. Tape recording was used as a tool of data collection because it helped the researcher to transcribe and analyze the praise poetry from sixteen Isukha clans (Were, 1976). Initially, the researcher aimed at collecting praise poems from the twenty seven Isukha clans, however, seven popular praise poetry were selected using purposive sampling technique while nine were selected using simple random sampling which gave a total of sixteen praise poetry that were used in this research.

RESULTS

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. It included the use of examples, pictures, tape recorder and video. The praise poems were tape recorded in Isukha dialect and then translated by the researcher into the English language. The video cameras were taken to show the performance of the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo*.

Van Dijk (2000) asserts that the words of those with power are usually taken to be true and of great value than those who are seen as powerless in the society. On this note, this paper found a basis of analyzing how different names or nouns in praise poetry can create, portray and maintain masculinity in the Isukha community basing on the semantics perspective.

Language is a very important aspect in the life of every human being. As language prospers, its literature also gets a gap for developing. In this regard, people's experiences are stored and developed. Indede (2012) argues that a person's language translates to his or her identity. She states that it is important to value each other's culture because it can help one to be associated with a certain language even if it does not belong to the person. Therefore, praise poetry as a genre of poetry is part of the traditions of a society. In this context,

the praise poetry that is chanted during the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo* is part and parcel of the Isukha culture.

Basing on the chanting of Isukha praise poetry, it is clear that there are some special discourses that are used. These discourses are used by the artists who are also part of the society and have experienced a lot from the society in question.

These are some of the things that motivate and give an artist the will to create a piece of art. The artist therefore selects specific words in order to portray the real life of the community members. In this context, various names like Osama, Spanner, 'Master key' *Eminyi*, NARC, Tsinziga, Owl, *Shikulume* among others (Refer in Kibigo, 2019 pp. 146-153) were used to portray masculinity in the

Isukha praise poetry. It should be noted that nouns are parts of speech that have been used in this paper to show how masculinity is depicted in the Isukha community.

Gibbe (1988) says that though the language that is used in poetry is usually difficult, the simpler language is the one that is normally selected by the artists due to their experience. This is due to the fact that it is the language that is found easily in the daily speech and also in their vicinity. Basing on Gibbe's argument, it is clear that the artists focus on nouns among other language aspects because nouns are among the basic parts of speech. Consider the following illustrations of the nouns that have been used to portray masculinity in the Isukha community:

Table 1 Language and masculinity portrayal in Isukha praise poetry

Praise poem number	Names in Isukha Dialect / English	Masculinity
1	<i>Osama</i> / Osama	Courageous/ fierce
5	<i>NARC</i> / NARC	Political power
6	<i>Tsinziga</i> / Horns	The act of erection
6	<i>Spana</i> / Spanner	Prostitution
7	<i>Master key</i> / Master key	Monopoly/ prostitution
9	<i>Eminyi</i> / Name of a brave bird	Wisdom, courage
11	<i>Mike Tyson</i> / Mike Tyson	Famous in Boxing
15	<i>Likhure</i> / an owl	Dangerous ideologically/ bad omen/fierce

Basing on the table above, the names were extracted from the praise poems that were chanted by the artists during the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo* in the Isukha community. As Choge (1997) suggests, Onomastics is a very important discipline that is derived from one's culture and it facilitates and eases communication. The views of these scholars on naming were a good basis for our analysis of data.

The two theories; hegemonic masculinities and critical discourse analysis assisted this work to identify the masculinity characteristics in Isukha praise poetry and critically analyze them to come up with the semantic linguistic aspect.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the role of language in facilitating culture in the Isukha praise poetry during the ritual of *Shilembe* and the indigenous sport of *Mayo*, using the semantic approach to portray masculinity. It has shown that the language aspects, that is, the nouns used in these two ceremonies portray masculinity in the Isukha community during bullfighting. Therefore, the two practices should not just be taken for leisure or entertainment. Basing on the specific selection of language aspects; nouns were used Onomastically like animonyms anthroponyms and toponyms (Kibigo, 2019; Choge, 1997). These nouns that were chanted artistically by the artists in the praise poems during the performance of the ritual of

Shilembe and the indigenous sport of *Mayo*, in the Isukha community, have shown that masculinity is still a key characteristic that can be used to decide gender relations in the society. Apart from this, it is also clear that praise poetry as a genre of oral literature can also act as a stage of discussing love issues, political issues, parental issues and clan issues.

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