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Masculinity and Ritual Violence: A Study of Bullfighting among the Luhya of Western Kenya

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Gender relations are constructed in terms of the relations of power and dominance that determine the opportunities and circumstances of both men and women. Nevertheless, gender research in Africa has tended to focus only on women. This skewed attention has given rise to the popular but fallacious attitude that gender issues are synonymous with women's issues. This study demonstrates a shift in focus and discusses the images and symbols of masculinity in bullfighting contests among the Luhya of Western Kenya. It seeks to present a critical analysis of the game in order to uncover its overt and covert features that point to the hidden masculine desires, values, ideals and aspirations of the Luhya. This study further directs inquiry into the construction of masculine metaphors that define standards of masculinity and maleness in the Luhya society.

The Luhya type of bullfighting is different from the kind of bullfighting exhibited in other parts of the world, especially in terms of its structure and form and the personae involved. In Spain, Portugal and Mexico, for example, protagonists in bullfighting are human beings and bulls. The Spanish version pairs off the bull and the matador, with the matador obliged to demonstrate his bravery in risky and daring acts. Luhya bullfighting is a matter of an animal-to-animal fight. I argue here that the bulls are symbolic male proxies that outdo one another in a violent contest as the owners watch in self-fulfilling gratification.

Bullfighting contests are very popular among the Luhya of Western Kenya. They are performed on Saturdays to the excitement of multitudes of spectators from within and outside the community. As early as five in the morning, spectators

begin to pour into the village arenas and stadiums to participate in this popular game. Many Luhya men breed prized bulls that they present during these contests. My respondents revealed that lack of a bull is a mark of extreme poverty and unmanliness only expected perhaps from men 'castrated' and feminized by the teachings of some Christian sects. In fact, it signals some degree of social and sexual redundancy (Beynon 2002: 79).

The bulls are nourished both physically and psychologically in preparation for the contests. Undue excitement and a sense of expectation grip the audience on these occasions. Traffic on the major roads leading to the venues of the contests is temporarily interrupted as the animals are led by their owners and fans dance to the venues. The celebration continues into the evening when a drinking spree ensues in specific homesteads, the famed drink being the locally brewed beer. Bullfighting contests are also staged on burial occasions of warriors to celebrate their lives.

This discussion is focused on bullfighting contests that are staged during weekends for pure entertainment. I examine bullfighting in terms of its structural and psychological significance within the Luhya culture by first offering an empirical ethnographic description of the game and secondly by presenting a psychoanalytic reading of the game as a signifying cultural text I directly inquire into the salient features of the contests and the motives they seek to fulfil among the participants. Central to this study is the folklore generated and performed during bullfights and how this defines masculinity and gender relations in this society. I argue here that there are basic benchmarks within which the masculinities of its male members function. Failure to fall within these defined parameters makes one unmasculine. Through bullfighting, these masculine values are generated and disseminated to members of this society. The folklore produced is largely misogynistic and seems to suggest that being peaceable and uninterested in sexual conquest is a demonstration of unmasculine behaviour. Masculinity does not, however, exist except in contrast to femininity (Connell 2004). I therefore find it necessary also to direct inquiry into images of femininity. The Luhya, through bullfighting rituals, set standards, a marking scheme of sorts, on which Luhya men aspire to score highest. At the bottom of this structure is femininity and at the apex is ideal masculinity. In an attempt to reach these standards, men arrive at various degrees of masculinity, and this is what convinces me that even within a neat cultural entity it is safe and in order only to talk about masculinities. Bullfighting is therefore a male contest that tests the degree to which one has achieved the masculine ideal. This is appreciated through examination of symbolic frames of masculine qualities exhibited within the polarity of ideal masculinity and femininity. In this semiotic opposition of masculinity and femininity, the phallus appears to be the master signifier, and femininity is symbolically defined by lack of a phallus (Connell 2004). Though indulged in by adults, the bullfighting game is a psychological

replay of childhood boys' contests. It offers nothing but imperatives dictated by male rivalry: the 'strongest' being the one who has the best 'hard-on', the longest, the biggest, the stiffest penis or even the one who pees the farthest (Irigaray 1995:1 21).

This cultural ritual game is characterized by violence, which is apparently a masculine virtue associated with the ideal masculine man. It manifests itself in two ways: physical and verbal. This public display of violence can best be understood in the Freudian perspective that sees cultural practices as a form of expressing what cannot be articulated in direct ways. Bullfighting as a cultural ritual game is partly a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of taboo and anxiety-provoking behaviour (Dundes 1997). There are very many icons that disguise the seriousness of this theme. Luhya men, for instance, sing the following song:

Haa hooyi
 Haa hooyi
 Haa haa hoyo
 Sere Vuzwa

English

Haa hooyi
 Haa hooyi
 Haa hooyi
 It is just a game

In psychoanalytic term, disguising it as a harmless game makes it easy to explore anxieties without feeling a sense of guilt. We may say that through this game the community indulges in things otherwise proscribed in everyday life. Thus, bullfighting is a projection of what is actually within the minds of participants: their obsession with sex. The theoretical postulations in this inquiry pay attention to various frames of signification within the Luhya cultural imperatives. The contest is visualized as a text. As a literary and cultural text, bullfighting is interrogated to reveal the micro-structures of power in the society and their intersection with ideology. The gendered structure of bullfighting and the misogynistic frames of masculine hegemony show a kind of violence approved and appropriated as manly in this society.

The primary data for this research was collected from Western Province of Kenya. This is the traditional Luhya country. The data was collected through oral interviews, observation and participation in bullfighting.

Men, Their Bulls, Cows and Women

The intimate relationship between bulls and their male owners in Luhyia land is unmistakable. This is discernible not only in Luhyia idioms and proverbs, but also in all that the bull symbolizes. In reference to live earthly possessions, the Luhyia men use the word *Imirugo*, which includes cows, chickens wives and children as symbolizing one's wealth. But Luhyia men demonstrate a deep psychological identification with bulls, which define their sense of masculinity. Bulls are to a large extent symbolic of the men. It may be argued that among the Luhyia, bulls – like cocks in Balinese culture – are viewed as detachable, self-operating penises, ambulant genitals with a life of their own (Geertz 2002: 81).

As masculine symbols *par excellence*, the bulls provide the Luhyia language with raw materials for metaphoric postulations on the nature of life and how it should be lived. A man who is referred to as *Ijirichi* or a bull is perceived as virile, powerful, tough and a womanizer (a highly positive virtue). Some women will be heard boasting: *Ndavahira ku Ijirichi*, I am married to a bull. A man fondly referred to as a bull is not only feared but also revered. The Luhyia say one can only talk ill of such a man out of his earshot. Luhyia politicians vying for positions of leadership struggle to get the bull or any other masculine icon as their symbol. A politician recognized as a bull is accorded respect and is always given an opportunity to address people in any gathering he attends. A sick man on the verge of death will be told; 'a bull dies with grass in its mouth'. Through this statement, the sick man is asked to have sex with his wife even if he is sick in order to prove that sickness has not feminized him. If the men want to establish if the sick man will die, they ask his wife: 'does the bull ever taste porridge?' This is a euphemistic reference to sex. In this respect, masculinity is therefore a function of sexual activity.

The intimacy of the men with their cows and bulls is also visible in the bulls' feeding and grooming. A Luhyia man treats the bull as his pal and will spend time observing his animal eat. Even in modern times when land sizes are diminishing, most homes with less than an acre of land have at least a cow tethered in the homestead. Cows are a mark of wealth and affluence. A Luhyia marriage is made legal through payment of cattle in the form of dowry. Many of my respondents announced that they have no marriage certificate and that they do not need them because bridewealth in the form of cattle was paid, and this is a better certificate than writings on a piece of paper. Dowry negotiations centre on how many cows one should pay. In some Luhyia communities the number to be paid is already predetermined. Thirteen cows are prescribed for a virgin but a woman with a child out of wedlock or a divorcee will attract less. This requirement of virginity does not however apply to the men in equal measure. A man with a child out of wedlock is at best praised as a bull that 'started early'. Out of all the cattle paid for dowry, the most important is the last one. This has to be a bull. The

bull presented as the last instalment of dowry is a symbolic prayer for the woman to produce male children who will one by one obtain bulls from their maternal uncles once they get circumcised.

There are instances when the bulls act as cleansers who fight dark forces of destruction. As noted earlier, bullfights are staged for two reasons: to celebrate the life of a hero and for entertainment. Although the focus in this study is on the entertainment aspect, it is important to note that bullfights are sometimes staged in a ceremony known as *eshiremba*, which marks the life of a warrior. It is held on the day of the burial of the warrior and is done within his compound. To be a hero worthy of the ritual of *eshiremba*, one must have fought in a war and killed a man in a war situation. It is important to define a man here. A man is a mature circumcised male. Killing an uncircumcised man, woman or a child is not considered a heroic deed. In a war situation in traditional Luhya land, this was in fact an abomination, an unmanly and cowardly act. It was a stupid act of blind rage attributed to demented males. During the *eshiremba*, bulls fight at the graveside and spread the soil from the grave all over the compound. Essentially, this is to help the spirit of the warrior fight the spirits of the men he killed in order to enter the world of the ancestors. It is this power appropriated to the bull that the Luhya men aspire to possess.

Preparation for the Contest

To have full knowledge of this masculine ritual, we have to look at the etymology of the word 'contest' itself. The Luhya talk of the bullfight as *kburwanya tsi Jirichi*. The verb *kurwanya* is the equivalent of contest, competition or fight. 'Contest' in English means, literally, *con* (with) *testis* (testicle) (Ong 1989). It is therefore an activity for those with testicles, and it involves male ego at its best in an attempt to conquer and subdue the opponent. This combat necessitates elaborate preparation. Events prior to the fight attest to this. Although the fight itself may take as little as five minutes, the highly structured and detailed pattern of events point to a gendered cosmic perception of reality. The physical and psychological conditioning of the bull is extraneous though culturally sanctioned. The bull reared specifically for fighting lives a life of isolation throughout its fighting life, being completely separated from other cows in the homestead. This separation serves a number of purposes. First, it makes it easy for the owner of the bull to condition and socialize his animal to imbibe extreme aggressiveness towards other bulls. There is also no competition for food with less prized animals. This is another masculine ideal that Luhya men aspire to. An ideal Luhya man does not struggle for food. He eats alone while his wife eats together with the children. This fact convinces me to look at the bull as a form of surrogate man. The bull does not get the opportunity to mate for it is believed that this would diminish its power to fight. It is a common belief among the Luhya that one preparing for any form of

competition or contest should abstain from sex. In essence contact with the vagina is believed to weaken a man. Hence, in Kenya, footballers are asked to abstain from sex when preparing for a match.

Nothing exemplifies the violent nature of this game than the act of sharpening of the bull's horns three days before the day of the contest. The owner undertakes this exercise as he talks to the bull in an ironic monologue that goes on for a long time. If it were just a mere game as the song quoted above says, why then endanger the life of the bulls through this act? The fact that the owners find it necessary to sharpen the horns signifies a masculine virtue inspired by the sublimation of sexual desires. In this culture, what is dangerous is masculine. It also ricochets with elements of the ritual of circumcision that are meant to make a man virile, dangerous and lethal. It is my contention that the game is meant to make one male demonstrate his virility against another. The victory will entail a form of penetration. In these opposing polarities, the one who penetrates feminizes the one penetrated and makes him less of a man.

Once the professional matchmakers announce the day and venue of the contest, preparations start in earnest. Matchmakers organize contests by considering the weight and experience of the contesting bulls. There may be only one main fight, but other fights between lightweight bulls serve as curtain-raisers. The night before the fight witnesses a celebration of songs and dances. The bull's fans arrive in the home in the evening and dance around the bull for some time before dispersing to go and sleep. They wake up very early around 3am to start dancing and psyching the bull once again. The bull responds to these efforts by bellowing repeatedly. This is interpreted as a sign that it is accepting the instructions being given to it.

Something has to be said about bellowing among the Luhya. *Khukumula* – to bellow – is a masculine activity. In official gatherings, respectable people are not asked to talk but to bellow. Bellowing is an act of authority, force, relevance and power. The bull may, however, refuse to bellow if certain imperatives, such as sexual abstinence are not observed. Because of this, on the pre-contest night, the owner of the bull and all its fans abstain from sex. It is believed that if the owner indulges in sex, the bull may be defeated or it may turn against the owner. Indeed, my respondents cited cases where bulls had attacked their owners and killed them. A case in point involved a man called Mabonga from Shikoti village in Kakamega District who was stamped to death by a bull in 2003.

Departure from the shed to the arena follows a well-defined pattern of patriarchal hegemonic values. The bull has to leave its shed to the arena amid dances and songs by its fans, like a great man leaving or arriving home. Except for the bull owner's wife, no other woman should cross its path at this moment. Having avoided sex that night, she is considered a step above femininity and therefore could contribute to the preparation of the bull. In this case, she assumes some degree of masculinity by association. If she is the one who feeds it, then she

is under an obligation to wake up very early in the morning, take off her underpants and beat the back of the bull with them while urging it to be brave, saying: 'go and put up a good fight and win. I do not like being let down.' The symbolic relevance of this act can best be understood as a projective impulse. Removal of the panties is a symbolic invitation to a penetrative act. Through this act, the bull is conditioned to go and penetrate the opponent in order to feminize it with the 'erect horns'. It is only after this that the entourage departs to the venue, which could be as far as five kilometres away. Some bull owners confessed to me that they visit the grave of a warrior with their bulls prior to the contests and give instructions to the beasts while standing on the grave. This reinforces the belief that the bulls have supernatural powers not derived from this world.

The journey to the venue is even more eventful and action-packed. Whistles rend the air as enthusiastic fans release shouts reminiscent of war cries amid vows to crush and destroy the opponents. Traffic on the main highways in this part of Kenya is considerably slowed down on these occasions. Motorists are warned not to overtake the bull and its fans lest the fans stone them. As they travel to the venue, the sticks and clubs of the fans remain raised. This in Freudian terms is a phallic symbol imitating an erect penis. This reading makes sense in the Freudian perspective when we consider the assertion that anything vertical is symbolically phallic. Freud extended this contention to more mundane images such as the tie. He argued that a tie, being an object that hangs down and is not worn by women, is clearly a male symbol (Dundes 1997: ix). The raised sticks and clubs, it is said, encourage the bull to fight hard and not 'withdraw.' But as the team approaches the venue, sometimes they consider it necessary to take a detour from the main entrance to avoid being tricked by opponents who may bewitch the bull through charms buried on its way.

The Bull

As a human male surrogate, the bull is conditioned to behave in a certain way throughout its life. To produce hatred towards other bulls, this surrogate is isolated from other animals. It is a fact of life that hate between men comes from cutting ourselves off from each other (Wittgenstein 1980). This conditioning can best be understood from the power relations in Luhya society. The main axis of power in Luhya land is the subordination of what is considered feminine. Masculinity is infused within a collection of practices, symbols, discourses and ideologies associated with the category 'man'. In the same way that the Luhya expect of a 'real man', the bull is reserved, reticent and uncommunicative, especially in regard to showing emotions unless they are those of anger. The fighting bull spends most of its time alone since it is separated from other animals in the homestead, and it is never tethered for fear of being contaminated with femininity. It is only the owner, his wife or any other special person drawn from the same basket of

taboo and imperatives of tradition that may attend it. If it is the owner's wife who feeds it, she needs to observe a wide range of taboos – for instance, she should not feed it during her menses. This, it is believed, would weaken the bull. The same is applicable to Luhya men who are asked to keep away from women at such times. The bull should never be castrated. To castrate it is to weaken it so that it can never fight. These are other pointers indicating that the bull is a surrogate male human being. Luhya men look down on a castrated man and consider him a woman. The bull is bred solely for the purpose of fighting and serves no other purpose. Using it as an ox is not allowed, and would in fact be an abuse of its integrity. This range of taboos requires explanation.

Freud once observed that whenever man sets up a taboo, he fears some danger. It cannot be disputed that a generalized dread of women is expressed in all these rules of avoidance associated with the bull. Men create taboos because they are afraid of being weakened by a woman and thereby tainted with femininity (Kabaji 2002). The best way man found to express his fears was through myths and rituals highly infused with rules of avoidance. I suggest that bullfighting rituals project psychological inner realities of the masculine mind. Carl Jung (1963) recognized the power of myth when he observed that myths represent fantasies of the group and that this material may be interpreted psychologically to yield information related to hidden psychological realities (Kabaji 2002). It is therefore possible to construe taboos related to women and menstruation as a twin product of dread and as a protective device for hegemonic masculinity.

Combat as a Contest of Masculinities

Crowds of predominantly males pour into the arena, as drumbeats grow louder. Fans appropriate ownership of the bulls so it becomes 'our phalluses versus theirs'. Each owner of a bull begs his animal to 'open up'. To open up in the language of Luhya bullfighting is to urinate. A bull is only ready for combat after urinating, which means accepting the challenge. The Luhya also observe other instances when a cow has to urinate for a ritual to be complete. So, in the case of dowry, when the cows are taken to the bride's home, the ceremony can only begin after the cows urinate. This, it is believed, is a sign that the bride will be fertile and give birth to male children. It is only after a contesting bull has urinated that its owner can urge it to charge forward and fight. In response to the activities around them, the bulls snort, sway their heads from side to side and dig their hooves into the ground, signs that they are spoiling for the fight. Meanwhile, the owners of the bulls tirelessly continue to praise them by reminding them of past victories and conquests.

As contending bulls close on each another, the spectators' clubs and sticks remain raised while they cheer their bull to victory. The clubs also protect the spectators who use them to ward off charging bulls. And indeed there are moments

when the bulls charge towards the crowds before continuing with the contest. At such times, the spectators are forced to scamper to safety until the beasts retreat.

Fights can last just five minutes and sometimes, they may take up to twenty minutes. The victor is determined when the defeated bull takes to its feet, running away from the opponent. At this juncture, the owners of the victorious bull guide it out of the arena with songs and dances. The defeated bull is also driven out of the arena by its fans with a subdued fanfare as they sing to console it. The victorious bull is returned home where the owner and its fans celebrate the victory by eating and drinking beer. It is also important that the fans are given some little money, say about 10 shillings (US\$ 2 cents), and it is believed that the bull would know if the fans are not treated well and may not perform well in the next contest.

Naming Contests

As noted earlier, the bulls are proxy male human beings. They are further personified by being given names that describe their best qualities or at least the expectations of their owners. Every fighting bull has a name. The names given are determined by the characteristics of the bull, expectations of the owner, circumstances of its birth or in tribute to a bull that won many battles. This pattern of bull-naming is also used in naming children among the Luhya. I would like to look more closely at the names of five bulls whose fights I witnessed. These were: Osama bin Laden, Mike Tyson, NARC, *Nyati* and *Eminyi*.

From the outset, I have to say that the names given epitomize what the Luhya consider masculine values. The fact that Osama bin Laden's name is given to a bull signals an intimate relationship between the Luhya perception of power and Osama bin Laden's ideals and exercise of power. As al-Qaeda's chief ideologue, Osama, more than anyone else, is considered the most dangerous international terrorist because of his jihad strategy. He is reputed to have masterminded the terrorist bombing of the twin towers in New York City, the American Embassy in Nairobi and Paradise Hotel in Mombasa, Kenya. The fact that Osama is recognized as a hero in these villages, even after leaving a trail of destruction in Kenya, is worth our curiosity in the context of the sense of power and influence in Luhya. Osama is lethal, unsympathetic, anti-American and committed to his cause. The fact that he pulls unimaginable stunts against the mighty USA makes him an object of admiration by the poor members of the society whose pleasure come through a psychological process of identification. What seems to attract these people to Osama is not the logical understanding of what he stands for, but his power to destroy and to defend his position. It is with such fervour that they fight to preserve their hegemony.

Mike Tyson is considered by some to be one of the greatest heavyweight boxers of our time. Tyson's story has been heard in these villages through the

radio to which the people have an almost romantic attachment as the conveyer of 'truth'. Tyson, in his prime, routinely defeated prominent opponents in a devastating manner and was once one of the most dreaded fighters. The bull owners give his name to the bulls because of the prowess that Tyson displayed during his heyday as the king of the ring. His punches were powerful and most often sent opponents out of the ring within minutes. But there is another side of Tyson with which the Luhya identify. Like most of them, Tyson received minimal formal education. As a youth, he was expelled from high school and spent some time in juvenile detention centres. In addition, he has had serious problems in his marriages and has served jail terms for rape and assault. The identification with Tyson is partly a function of these attributes, which to the Luhya are masculine. To them he is a hero, a man whom they would like to emulate.

Nyati is a Kiswahili word for buffalo. The admiration of the buffalo can perhaps be linked to its fearlessness and scary appearance.

But even more intriguing is the name NARC, which is an acronym for National Rainbow Coalition. This is the party that won the elections in Kenya in 2002 and brought to an end the forty years' rule of the Kenya African National Union (KANU). KANU's defeat in the elections was effected through a coalition of parties that fielded one presidential candidate, Mwai Kibaki. In psychoanalytic terms, the coalition, in a way, gang-raped KANU and feminized it, hence the admiration for it.

Eminy is a type of bird found in this part of Kenya. Known for its bravery and cunning nature, *Eminy* is difficult to trap. It flies high in a zigzag way. Luhya mythology holds birds in high esteem, taking them as emissaries to the supernatural world. When they appear in folktales, they have uncanny male-like behaviour. *Eminy* exhibits behaviour that the Luhya consider masculine.

Bullfighting Songs

A lot of singing is done in connection with bullfighting. Most of the songs despise and feminize opponents while others are infused with sexual symbols, glorifying the virility of the bull and his owner. In some songs, it is difficult to distinguish references to either the bull or its owner, for they are treated as one and the same. The songs reinforce idealized images of masculinity in relation to images of femininity. They epitomize the Luhya understanding of the role of a man in the society and carry sexual innuendos. The hegemonic ideal of masculinity in Luhya land projects men as risk-takers, aggressive, heterosexual, rational and powerful personalities. The songs uphold these ideals, reminding participants of them. The songs perpetuate images of toughness and endurance of hardships. This, clearly, is not peculiar to the Luhya. In his study of the hegemonic masculinity of the US Navy, for example, Barrett (2004) found similar traits.

Let me direct the spotlight on some of the songs sung and the sex imagery and metaphorical insinuations of masculine attributes. The active participant is the reputed winner who performs the prestigious male role of ‘penetrating’ the loser. On the other hand, the passive participant is the loser who assumes the non-prestigious ‘female’ role as the penetrated (Dundes 1997: 31).

Song 1

Fala Ekondomu (Wear a Condom)

Mama Mama Mama

Fala ekondomu

Nomyola Mukana fala ekondomu

Fala ekondomu

Fala ekondomu

Gushere gwu mundu fala ekondomu

Sisa sisa ku madamu

Sisa sisa ku madamu

Nomyola ling’ang’ule fala

Nomyola ling’ang’ule fala

Sisa sisa lingangule

Fala ekondomu

English

Mother mother mother

Wear a condom

When you get a lady wear a condom

Wear a condom

Wear a condom

When you get someone’s wife wear a condom

Massage it on a madam

Massage it on a madam

If you get a prostitute wear a condom

If you get a prostitute wear a condom

Massage it on prostitute

Wear a condom

Wear a condom

The song begins by invoking the title mother, which reflects what happens when one is in trouble. Usually, the natural reaction for many in such situations is to call out to their mother. 'Mother, mother, mother' in the first line suggests the seriousness of the message to come. The song then implores men to always wear a condom. This line is repeated for emphasis. This song asks men to massage it (penis) on a variety of categories of women: madam (school teacher), other people's wives and prostitutes, but concludes that this has to be done while one is wearing a condom. In general, the song glorifies extra-marital sexual relationships only if it is safe for the man.

It should be noted that there are moments when the drums are played without vocal accompaniment. After the singers have finished the last line, the soloist steps in front of the group, raises his hands in an apparently excited but controlled gesture, to signal to the instrumentalists to play the male drum while the playing of the female drum (small drum) is suspended. At this juncture, the soloist shouts the praises of various men amid employing vocal gymnastics that make up the repertoire of performers' tricks. The mood of controlled frenzy is given form by the shouts loaded with phallic signals, insinuations of sexuality and almost pervasive body jerks. This affords the soloist the opportunity to exalt men, within the crowd, known for their sexual prowess. By the use of sexual imagery, he likens such men to bulls that never tire, among other superlatives. He plays on the vanity and emotions of these men, indirectly castigating women, playing out men's anxieties and exalting masculinity by repeating percussive phrases.

Images abound in all songs extolling male sexuality. Let us consider another song:

Song 2

A Club to Seduce

Mbe ShikongoShanje

Vakoji mbe shikongo shange

Nzie kuserere Shinyalu

Utasera dave

Urasira kumtego

English

Give me my club

My Vakoji [partner during circumcision] give me my club

Give me my club

So that I go and seduce in Shinyalu

Do not get excited

You will be trapped

In this song, the soloist asks for a club (an obvious phallic symbol) from his friend with whom he was circumcised. For better understanding of this song, we have noted that among the Luhya, circumcised boys are kept apart for a month before they emerge from the seclusion area. One of the items a boy is asked to make for himself is a club, which he is expected to keep until old age. Elders can still be seen carrying these clubs. This culture is not restricted to the Luhya. The Masai and Kalenjin of Kenya also carry clubs as cultural icons of masculinity and authority. In the Luhya culture this signifies virility, authority and power. The former president of Kenya, Daniel Arap Moi, carried his club about while in power and still carries it anywhere he goes.

The symbolic significance of the club in this song cannot be gainsaid. When the singer implores his mate to give him a club in order to go to Shinyalu and seduce women, we realize that he is out for sexual exploits. Shinyalu is a market centre that boasts of beautiful girls in the Western Province of Kenya. But the singer goes ahead to warn the men not to be excited because they can be trapped. This is a direct reference to marriage. The singer is therefore castigating men who were trapped in marriage before enjoying free sexual exploits as proof of their masculinity.

Other songs are misogynistic. They are used to despise opponents as persons not ready for sexual exploits. We see this from the following songs:

Song 3***Unanjiri shi go? (Why did you call me?)***

Unangirangi kii

Unangirangi kigu

Unangirashigo kastiri

Shinangangwa viswa

Shinanga vutswa

Unanjiri gabiri?

English

Why did you call me?

Why did you call me?

Why did you call me if you are not ready?

I am not called for nothing

What is the matter you called me for?

Song 4

Munyororo (Caged Males)

Yoo haa

Ve gavandu

Vasieveranga munyololo gwagumira

English

Yoo haa

These people

Those threatening me are caged.

Song 5

Mbeere Ngoteve (Let Me Ask You)

Mbere Ngoteve

Mbere ngoteve

Wava wadira kukindu cha mundu

English

I want to ask you

I want to ask you

Have you ever trespassed on someone's wife?

Song 6***Engo'mbe Niyananga (When a Cow Bellows)****Engombe ne niyananga**Yakwesa yakwesa**Engombe ne niyananga**Yakwesa yakwesa**Yakwesa yakwesa munyororo yonyene**Eeeh vane lelo luno**Saaaaaa**Engombe ne niyananga**Yakwesa yakwesa**Engombe ne niyananga**Yakwesa yakwesa**Yakwesa yakwesa munyororo yonyene**Waaa kutsie kutsie kutsie**English*

When a cow bellows

It pulls it pulls

When a cow bellows

It is pulling it is pulling

It pulls the rope alone without help

Eh my people

Today is the day

Cheers

When a cow bellows

It pulls, it pulls

When a cow bellows

It pulls the rope alone

Waaa let's go let's go

Song 7

Engo'mbe (A Cow)

*Engombee mama engombe
weeee*

Engombee mama engombe

Engombe ya mavere

Mama engombe

Engombe ya masingu

Mama engome

Engombe yo kukhywa

Mama engombe

Engombe ye nyama

Mama engombe

Engombe yo kulwana

Engombe mama engombe

Engombe yo mubucha

English

A cow mother a cow

Hey hey

A cow mother a cow

A cow for milk

Mother a cow

A cow for cow dung

Mother a cow

A cow for dowry

Mother a cow

A cow for meat

Mother a cow

A cow for bull fighting

A cow for the butchery

I agree with Dundes (1980) that whatever is contained in a song is meaningful, even if we do not have full insight into what the meanings may be. The projective impulse, that tendency to attribute to another person or to the environment what is actually within oneself, is at work in a number of the songs sung during Luhya bullfighting. What is attributed is usually some internal impulse or taboo or feeling, which may be painful or unacceptable. This ascription of feelings and qualities of one's own to an external source is accomplished without the individuals being consciously aware of that fact. The individual perceives the external object as possessing the taboo tendencies without recognizing their source in himself.

In song 3, for example, the singer wonders why he was called for the contest. He boasts that he is only called for a contest in which the rival is ready. Being ready in this case is having imbibed masculine qualities of toughness and aggression. He spits out at the opponent as not ready and therefore uncircumcised. The song indicates that not being tough and aggressive are reflections of femininity and therefore worthlessness. Song 4 continues with this theme and regards the opponent as caged. The metaphor draws from power relations of gender in the Luhya society. A man who is considered caged is not free from the control of his wife. He is perceived here as one who has been bewitched by his wife. Song 5 picks up the theme of adultery in an attempt to project on to another person what is inherent in the singers. The song asks those who have at any time trespassed on another man's wife to come out and be cleansed. This is in reference to a popular belief among the people that if such a person is in the crowd, the bull can turn against him and maul him to death. It is ironic that they sing this song after Song 1, which glorifies adultery and fornication. In essence, the crowd achieves a psychological cleansing through this song. Song 6 exalts the virtues of autonomy and freedom. A cow, in this case a bull, is said to work alone and does not seek help in accomplishing tasks. This becomes ideal masculine behaviour whereas to seek help is to be feminine. Song 7 enumerates the importance and usefulness of a cow. Among other things, it provides milk, it is used for paying dowry, it has a role in bullfighting and makes meat when sold to a butcher. All these are what a man needs to do and possess in order to be considered masculine.

The Metaphor of the Female Underpants and the Vagina Curse

Before this discussion ends, it is important to discuss, albeit briefly, the metaphor of a woman's underpants in the bullfighting ritual in relation to a dreadful curse in Luhya land, the curse of the vagina. The underpants acquire potency from what they are meant to cover, the vagina. I noted above that the woman who feeds the bull has to abstain from feeding it when in her menses, and that when the bull is

leaving the animal house to go and fight, the woman has to bless it by beating it with already used underwear as she commands it to go and conquer. But there is another practice that is equally significant in understanding the symbolic nature of a woman's underpants. If a cow or bull is so tough and aggressive to members of the family, the wife of the owner (women do not own cows) has a way of making it docile. It is believed that what she needs to do is to wash her underwear and pour the dirty water on the bull's face. This makes the bull docile and easy to tame.

In all these instances, the panties seem to perform various functions. They can inspire courage and enable the bull to win a contest, but they can also make cows docile and inactive. It is my contention that the underpants are symbolic of the supposed negative feminine feared by Luhya men. The power that the underpants have is through its association with the vagina whose mysteries have never failed to astound Luhya men. Just as the vagina is feared, it is also revered as a life-giving organ, but one that can be used to destroy a man. This reminds us of Freud's assertions on penis envy. In this sense, the men fear that the vagina can swallow the penis, and these anxieties of its mysteries are discussed in symbolic terms in Luhya folklore. The meaning in this folkloristic fantasy is somewhat unclear, but it provides a socially sanctioned outlet for what cannot be directly articulated. It is in shouts, songs, proverbs, games and gestures that these anxieties are vented.

The ritual of the bullfight, therefore, mirrors the unconscious operation of the minds of Luhya men cast in an arena in which they have to aspire to a certain kind of masculinity. The folklore created is like other myths in raising issues of gender and contests for power. They discuss gender in the same fashion as myths and folklore from other cultures. The most well-known myths driven by misogynistic attitudes are actually found in holy books. In the Biblical story of creation, for instance, which draws from Jewish mythology and involves Adam and Eve, the gender question is raised and settled after the creation of the universe. Here, we are told that Yahweh created woman only as an afterthought, because Adam could not find a suitable helpmate among the animals. Yahweh decided to mould her from one of Adam's ribs. Logically, this is ridiculous. Rudimentary knowledge about human anatomy reveals that a single rib is superfluous, almost unneeded. The removal of one has very little effect on the health and muscular function of the individual. Had Yahweh fashioned woman out of man's genitals, the lung or heart or right hand, it would add weight to the position of the woman. Made out of an inconsequential rib, the woman's function in society and in life is to support man (Kabaji 2002). Bullfighting folklore presents the woman in similar ways: as subordinate, an object of pleasure, dangerous and mysterious with dark powers that can either destroy or make a man.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this study, I stated that I would present a critical analysis of bullfighting to uncover the covert and overt meaning of the Luhya game. In the words of Le Roux (2005: 19), I was going to study the *non-dit*, what is not said or what is said in a manner that conceals the meaning. It has become apparent that bullfighting is popular because it provides a psychological venue through which anxieties of violent sexual tendencies are vented. The bull, as a masculine symbol, is perceived as embodying the aggression and power associated with virility and conquest.

Although my respondents confided that they rear bulls for prestige, it comes out clearly from my analysis that the game is a masculine activity that reinforces what the Luhya consider masculine or feminine. It is also clear from the data that bullfighting is one avenue of exploring the anxieties and fears of men at a time when the very elements that made one masculine are being challenged and contested. It is also to some degree a way of connecting with the now ever-dwindling ideal of masculinity. It becomes clear that male aggressiveness is learned and acquired in a context in which men learn that it is both rewarding and expected to behave in an assertive way. Boys grow up in environments that encourage certain kinds of conduct instead of others. They learn to be 'men'. Aggression from this point of view is a response to specific kinds of experience. Men will only behave aggressively if they have learned that it is appropriate to do so (Brittan 1997: 114).

The Luhya argue that they participate in the game partly because *Msabwa*, the ancestors of the group, said they should. Again, it is noticeable that there is a way in which the Luhya yearn for togetherness with other men, the dead and their Gods. Many of my respondents argued that some churches are hostile to the game. They particularly cited the Friends Church (Quakers). Those who attend this church and many other modern churches are dissuaded from attending and participating in the bullfighting ritual. The ritual, however, gives us an avenue through which we observe the Luhya projecting anxieties over their masculinity.

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