
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE ARTS AND COMMERCE

The manifestation of Nationalism in Bukusu funeral oratory

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Abstract

Khuswala kumuse (funeral oratory) is a central rite among the Babukusu. It is a significant ritual that defines their worldview and how they relate with their cosmology and themselves. Given its centrality in the Bukusu cosmology, it is important to examine how the orator puts to use language to construct meanings that enable this society to understand itself. This paper is an investigation of how Nationalism is constructed in the Bukusu funeral oratory. Data was collected from pre- recorded cassette tapes of speeches of Manguliechi (a renowned Bukusu orator) and video tapes of the performance of khuswala kumuse ritual for the late Vice-president of the Republic of Kenya Michael Kijana Wamalwa (purchased from Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation, marketing department). These were transcribed and translated into English and generalizations made on how different aspects of the Bukusu nation are constructed. It was for example noted that the ritual is laden with social, ethical, political and economic aspects that constitute the Babukusu nationhood. Bukusu legends are exalted in the ritual and the people's identity is portrayed as unique with aspects such as circumcision setting them apart from non-Bukusu. At the same time, Bukusu nationhood is set in the overall Kenyan nation highlighting a sense of unity. Nevertheless, the oratory is still highly valued by Babukusu even if they no longer live in traditional set up since it acts as a mark of identity, a means of social differentiation.

Key Words: Funeral Oratory, Nationalism, Culture, Oral Literature

1. Introduction

The khuswala kumuse (funeral oratory) ritual is of immense importance to Babukusu (Bantu, Western Kenya). It does not just celebrate the achievements of an individual but more importantly it encapsulates the philosophy, culture and history of the Bukusu society. This ritual therefore becomes important because in its performance, issues like identity and nationhood of the community are highlighted. In this paper the ritual is characterized as an important vehicle for recording the history of Babukusu nation as viewed by oswala kumuse (the orator). This is in tandem with Homi Bhabha's (1990:312) assertion that a nation is itself a narration, similarly that

a narration is a nation, and that a nation is formed by “textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative stratagems.”

2. Characterizing the Bukusu Legendary Heroes

In highlighting the traditions of origin, the oswala kumuse also narrates the stories of the heroes of the Babukusu. These historical accounts deal with origins, migrations, descent, war (over land, cattle and other wealth), and natural catastrophes. It is noted that these accounts of origin and community heroes highlighted by oswala kumuse are so crucial in raising historical consciousness of the Bukusu society. This is so because the society’s identity is fed and renewed by the fame of individual members who derive glory from the inherited, collective fame of the tribe to which they belong. Such narrations stir the memories of the members of the society and in a way provide emotional gratification. The narratives also serve to strengthen the community’s spirit of unity in the sense that the members of the community feel proud of their history. Indeed Khuswala kumuse may be seen as a kind of ‘biography’ since the performer is in some way providing the audience with a chronicle of prominent personalities whose lives and actions had great impact on the historical and socio-cultural sphere of the Babukusu. For example, in the oration, the performer recounts great men such as diviners, seers and political leaders whom the Babukusu held in great esteem. Among renowned seers and diviners that the performer refers to is Maina wa Nalukhale, who was Omutukwiika Omukwangwa by clan. He prophesied that Babukusu would make three migration trips around Mt. Elgon before finally settling in their present homeland. Khakula Omumeme by clan, was another great prophet in the late eighteenth century. He prophesied about the coming of wars and calamities which would force Babukusu to migrate to the north (the area north of Mt. Elgon).

The ritual performer also mentions Mutonyi wa Bukelembe and Wachie wa Naumbwa. Mutonyi wa Bukelembe foresaw the coming of colonialists and their harsh conquest and rule in Bukusu land. He advised his people to form alliances with others in order to fight invaders. He also predicted that the black man will eventually win the war against those invaders whom he saw in his dreams as “a red bull.” Mutonyi died in Nandi around 1890 just before the invasion of Bukusu land. This view is also documented by Simiyu (1997:36). Mwanda wa Kibonge foresaw the establishment of Bungoma town. In a vision he saw; “chinchu chimbesemu, lola chinchu chimali, ali lola chinchu chiwanga...” (Red houses, see black houses, see white houses...). Muniolo foresaw the coming of formal education that is the establishment of Chesamisi and Kamusinga Secondary Schools. “Ali bona chinchu chembesemu, ali bona bikulu bimali, ali bona bikulu biwanga.” (See red houses, see black hills, he said see white hills).

Elijah Masinde is another legendary figure given a lot of prominence by the performer (Manguliechi). Manguliechi asserts that Masinde’s gift of prophesy was by inheritance from his mother’s side. Simiyu (1991:37) points out that Masinde’s followers fervently believed, and still do, that he was God’s last prophet sent on earth to unite people. That he was also sent by God to give every race its rightful share of the worlds’ resources. Indeed, Masinde as a freedom fighter

led Babukusu to rebel against the white man's domination. For instance, when a person slaughtered an animal, he was forced to take some of the meat to the colonial chiefs. The chiefs also used to confiscate peoples' animals. Masinde led protest against this and the practice was stopped henceforth. In fact, Masinde's campaign against colonialism is a living memory of how the Babukusu warriors had fought against the British colonizing forces especially the battles of Lumboka and Chetambe in 1895, Some of the culture heroes are credited with the creation of whole social systems. For instance, Mango is credited with the origin of circumcision rite in Babukusu society. When such heroes are mentioned, they, in a way inspire the society. The young people can use them as their role models. When villains are mentioned, they serve to warn people against some social ills. Thus, the society as a whole draws lessons from their history as a nation. In a way the ritual enhances ethnic solidarity and cohesion.

3. The Bukusu Nation as a Unique Entity

The ritual constructs the Bukusu nation as a unique autonomous entity. The oral artist attempts to construct the Bukusu- nation and assert the people's entity to themselves. He reveals histories and hidden aspects in the Bukusu society that would not otherwise be accessible. By attending to what the performer says, we learn how the Babukusu constitute their society. For that reason, in a way, the ritual leads us into the heart of Babukusu community's own conception of itself. In this ritual, we enter the society's own discourse about their social-political-economic world. It therefore offers either implicit or explicit commentary on society. The performer thus strives to create an ideal image of the nation to which members of the society must conform. The ideal is common to a whole community and often is preserved in it. Therefore the ritual acts as a mark of identity, a means of social differentiation. In this case, the Babukusu demarcate themselves as a people coming from a particular origin; with some beliefs, taboos and observances which distinguish the society from others, who come from other places. This is seen when at some point in his oration, the ritual performer explicitly addresses outsiders (non-Babukusu). He points out characteristics or habits and value which an outsider might be struck by, but which the Babukusu themselves take for granted. For example, he speaks of Babukusu having more than ten kimisambwa (spirits) while other tribes have far less. He says "I have asked other communities including the Luos, Kikuyus and they say they do not have as many as four spirits. What is more, the performer highlights other issues that differentiate the Babukusu from other communities. For instance, he says that Babukusu warriors never used to kill pregnant women and children while at war with other ethnic nations. On the other hand, he points out that warriors from other communities might kill pregnant women. Consequently, it is in opposition to other people's culture, values that the Babukusu make their definition and identity.

It is also noted that Babukusu identify themselves with an identity which was known to outsiders. For instance the name Babukusu was given to the community by other people who came into contact with them. The performer in his oration says that Babukusu used to barter with other ethnic nations. For example they traded with Samia people (a sub- nation of Luhya community living in Busia district in Western Kenya). So when the Samia people took their

goods to sell to Babukusu, they (Babukusu) used to inquire about the bukusi (price) of the goods. The Babukusu were then referred to as babandu be bukusi (the “price people”), till now they are called Babukusu.

On the contrary, oswala kumuse defines Babukusu differently from the description given by other people. He defines Babukusu people to the outside world as “Babaayi”, meaning people who have ability to lead others. They are shepherds of people. Wanjala (1985:89) concurs with the above sentiments when he says that Babukusu are traditionally referred to as “Babaayi” (shepherds) because of their ability to look after each other as a community. In essence, the ritual is a recognizable sign of identity of Babukusu to outsiders. The aforementioned concept referred to in a different context is highlighted by Nyairo and Ogude (2003:339) when they argue that:

Since individual identity is, in part, created through differentiating oneself from others. In the same way communities-ethnic groups, nations and races understand themselves in part by starting differences between them and other communities. Among Babukusu, for instance the circumcision ritual forms an important segment in the Babukusu cultural identity. Even in the funeral ceremonies, this ritual of rite of passage is revisited. For example a case where if a dead person (who is beyond circumcision age), was not circumcised, such a person shall be circumcised in his grave before he is buried. For this reason, this rite of passage is quite central to the identity of the community. It is a ritual that brings Babukusu together.

Besides, the naming system of circumcision age-sets is also highlighted during the performance of khuswala kumuse. This naming system is of special importance to members of the community since they are the names by which community men reaffirm their identity and distinguish themselves from other people. This mark of identity makes them regard and recognize themselves as kin and hence assert their unity against outside forces. The ritual performer also mentions food crops important in Babukusu culture. He states that there are ten types of foodstuffs associated with the community. Among the foodstuffs he mentions are millet, sorghum, maize, beans and groundnuts. Oswala kumuse also mentions animals such as cows, goats, sheep and chicken as part of the Babukusu nationhood since the community has emotional attachment to, especially cows because they are used in paying bride wealth and in rituals involving sacrifices. Indeed a young man without cows would not be able to marry. He would raid to raise the required number of animals or would be assisted by relatives, if he was an orphan, in order to get a wife. Daughters were also valued by their community because they would fetch bride wealth when they got married.

Oswala kumuse depicts Babukusu as quite courageous people who fought hard to protect their sovereignty and dignity. The performer talks of the coming of white people and the Babukusu leaders who protected Bukusu land against colonial intrusion at the end of 19th century. He speaks with pride about the Babukusu resistance against white man’s invasion that culminated in a deadly and fierce battle at Chetambe. The battle at Chetambe was one of the bloodiest encounters between Babukusu and the white man’s colonial rule. Many Babukusu were

massacred owing to their inferior weapons as opposed to superior and sophisticated weaponry of the colonizers. The Babukusu lost the battle but they had registered a moral victory for being able to stand against the white man's aggression. The severity of the battle at Lumboka and Chetambe is reflected in the following song.

Indeed the song depicts a revolutionary mood of that time, the political and ideological fight against British occupation of the African continent in general and Kenya in particular in the mid nineteenth century. The song conveys a sense of urgency of the struggle and rallied the young Babukusu men to fight to liberate their land; it was a great call for liberation and freedom. It highlights peoples' desire for freedom and political independence. The oratory therefore yields some useful information on the Babukusu society's history. Thus by recounting the history of Babukusu resistance, *oswala kumuse* instills a sense of pride in his society. It makes them proud of their history and their ancestors who died fighting to defend the honour of their community. The ritual provides chance to the youth to learn about the history of their society and as a result contributes to identity formation and a sense of Bukusu nationalism. As Simiyu (1991:9) notes, "the British occupation of Babukusu land was therefore a strenuous one and instead of killing the nationalistic spirit of Babukusu, it fuelled it and sort of ushered it into the complexities of the 20th century." Furthermore, taking cognisance of the importance of folk songs, Fabian (1998: 34) asserts: Individuals who live when key historical events are unfolding often describe them on paper in form of poetry, particularly songs. Although some folk songs may be simple, they provide a rich source of information for the historian since they form a record of how people felt and illustrate how they documented their feelings and positions and opinions.

4. The Kenyan Nation in the Oratory

In the oration, *oswala kumuse* also recounts, in part, the history of the Kenyan nation, since her independence in 1963 under Mzee Jomo Kenyatta as the prime Minister. The performer also mentions the independence of other Kenya's neighbouring countries such as Uganda and Tanzania, hence drawing a close relationship between the East African sister states for the purpose of harmonious co-existence and establishing better trade ties. In addition, the performer shows keen interest in some of the political events in the post- independent Kenya. For example, he draws the people's attention to the death of Kenyatta on 22 August 1978, and the subsequent succession by Daniel Arap Moi as the second president of the Republic of Kenya. The performer further refers to the failed coup on the 1st day of August, 1982 aimed at ousting Moi's regime. The coup attempt was staged by a few junior officers of the Kenya Air Force during which hundreds of people were killed and property worth millions of shillings was destroyed. The coup attempt shook Moi's rule marking a turning point in his leadership style. As Lumumba (2008:3) puts it, "...the hitherto avuncular Moi changed style and demeanour overnight. The new Moi became paranoid and brooked no opposition." Indeed after the loyal forces crushed the mutiny, there was systematic repression and clamp down on the perpetrators of the unrest and even those, remotely, perceived to hold views that were at variance with those in power at the time.

The government intelligence and police agencies were used as instruments of oppression, suppression and exploitation of the masses leading to coerced allegiance. It would be important to point out that several other Kenyans were detained without trial, others put in prison on trumped up charges, yet others were brutally murdered in cold blood. In the words of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2004:62), "the flood gates of repression of intellectuals broke free after 1982 when many academics, and students, were jailed, others forced into exile, and others killed." In the same vein, Oswala Kumuse says, "akhaba luno luri, wema khusibala khuno wabola oli serikali elinda yino, ya Moi yino, Moi ache, ne bakhupa okwa" which means; if at all today you stood up and said that the present government, the Moi's government must go, you will be beaten to the ground.

So that without being seen to be critical of the state and its inept and intolerant leadership, the performer cautions members of his society to be wary of the political intolerance of then, Moi's regime. He advises them to obey and respect the government in power. The foregoing argument echoes the tone of betrayal voiced by the post-colonial writers here in Kenya as well as on African continent in general. After the attainment of independence, anti-colonial message became irrelevant. The political elite quickly abandoned the ideals of freedom, liberty and nationhood. They soon transformed themselves into new masters and new lords lording over their fellow countrymen. This ruling class manipulated institutions and the gullible citizenry to entrench their rule and influence at the same time making sure their rule remained unchallenged. They consequently exploited the masses and enjoyed most of the fruits of economic development while the common man continued to toil for a pittance and wallow in abject poverty. This political class cleverly rallied their tribes to their support making them (tribesmen) believe that they had a big share in the political and economic development of the nation. Nevertheless, this was cunningly done to put the political elites in a position to maximize their opportunities for access to resources and power. This greed for power is constantly played out in, more often than not, the sham national elections held from time to time in many countries across the continent. The winning side in such elections takes all, while the losing side is totally excluded from power. As a result, there is constant antagonism between these two groups at times exploding into open confrontations and civil wars. Indeed Fanon (1961) in his master piece, *The Wretched of the Earth*, levels scathing attack on the abuses of the post-colonial Independence Nationalist Party. He argues against the politics of mimicry and separatism which produced the Amins and Mobutus; tyrants, obstructing democratic freedoms in many countries of The Third World. Commenting on Kibera's work "Voices in The Dark" Simatei (2005:15) asserts that, "Voices in the Dark" "demonstrates the failure of the nationalist history to be all inclusive because it becomes instead an ideology of neo-colonial capitalism. In other words, nationalist history as a grand narrative that interpolates the people in the myths of a nation in order to capture their allegiance turns into empty gesture on the nation – neo-colonial status becomes apparent".

Oswala Kumuse also captures the wind of change that swept the political scene not only in Kenya but many other countries of the world starting with the fall of communist regimes in the

East. In Kenya this new era has variously been referred to as the “second independence”. This wind introduced multiparty politics which had existed between 1961-1964 but disappeared in 1964 when KADU the opposition party was merged with KANU. Thereafter, Kenya became a de facto one party state. In 1978, Kenya became a “de jure” one party state until 1990 when section 2A of the constitution was repealed and other parties were then registered. The issue of multiparty democracy and the idea of opposition politics were born. In the oration, the performer refers to the elevation of Wamalwa Kijana (who commanded total respect from his Bukusu community) as the Chairman of Ford Kenya party and leader of the Opposition in Kenyan parliament following the demise of the doyen of Kenyan opposition politics, Jaramogi Odinga Oginga in 1992. The ritual performer also refers to the death of Joseph Masinde Muliro, a prominent son of Babukusu and a Kenyan statesman, shortly after his arrival at the Jomo Kenyatta International airport on 14th August 1992. Yet, it is noted that the idea of nation is quite dynamic. A nation is not a stagnant entity. The nation is always in a process of being formed. It is perpetually in a process of being created. This is so because the idea of the nation has to be celebrated lest it dies. The performance is therefore a microcosmic representation of not only the Kenyan nation but also the Bukusu nation building.

5. The Oratory as a Celebration of Socio-Cultural Heritage and Unity

During the occasion of the ritual performance, the whole society come together to celebrate their historical, social-cultural heritage, since the nation is build on celebrations. In addition, the rendition of the ritual is not just about death, it is much. The occasion of the ceremony just provides space for narrating wider issues. This socio-cultural space is utilized for other purposes. The performer talks of political, social, economic and historical issues that are not directly linked to the death or the dead person. In so doing, the society celebrates her nationhood. It is also noted that in the process of celebrating nationhood, the nation is modified sometimes. Oswala kumuse incorporates new ideas, new practices, and attitudes in his performances. The artist has scope to cast his materials, recombine them and add new elements by borrowing, adapting and sometimes forming fresh composition. For instance Manguliechi, in his oratory shows that there should be no conflict between the old and the new practices in the Babukusu social and economic life. He challenges the Babukusu to embrace education and to a larger extent new technology. Manguliechi can rightly be regarded as a progressive performer. As Nangendo (1994:103) notes, “whilst in the past he (oswala kumuse) could extol the virtues of past warriors among the Babukusu, today he also has to preach about formal education, health care, Christianity and the cash economy”. The performance of nationhood is quite interactive as it is not performed by one person, it is an associated celebration. Every member of the Babukusu witnesses and participates in recreating the nation. This is evident in the way many people gather during the occasion of the ritual, to keep alive the collective memories, performing what they are, celebrating their identity, and their uniqueness. Art is quite important for this purpose. As such, the performer is just a voice of the community. He speaks out the aspirations, hopes, expectations and even fears of the nation. As Okot (1986:39) asserts: I believe that a thought system of a people is created by the

most powerful, sensitive, imaginative minds that the society has produced: these are few men and women, the supreme artists, the imaginative creators of their time, who form the consciousness of their time. They respond deeply and intuitively to what is happening, what has happened and what will happen. Their response is expressed, not in form of abstract philosophical treatises, not in the form of legislations or decrees or the law as laid down by judges. Again in the performance of nationhood, there is an aspect of continuity. The performance does not cut off the past nor leave the past to die away. Indeed the past informs the present. The past roots itself and relates it to the present. For example in the olden days, a spear and a shield were weapons of defence and offence in Babukusu society. One would use these weapons for defence to protect one's own community against intruders at the same time use them to raid other communities to get wealth. However, Oswala Kumuse tells the youth that today's spear and shield is a pen and a book. A pen stands for a spear while a book stands for a shield meaning that education is key to one's survival in the present times. He thus makes his presentation relate with the past in a new way.

In a polyglot, a multi-ethnic state such as Kenya, ethnicity is one of the many sources of national character. In fact the ritual significantly dramatizes this sense of ethnicity as interwoven with national and even continental sensibilities. The performer does not, in his oration, antagonize any community or race that shares the boundaries of the Kenyan nation just to trumpet the qualities of the Babukusu nationalism, he faults them where necessary. He exhibits a lot of respect towards other ethnic nations other than Babukusu and Kenyan neighbouring countries such as Uganda and Tanzania. Since Kenya is a conglomeration of different ethnic groups, Oswala Kumuse advocates for unity in diversity, to counter ethnic rivalry and conflicts especially in post-colonial Kenya. This position echoes Mbiti (1969: 222) when he observes, "the immediate historical phase after colonial rule is the birth of African nations. These nations are composed of peoples of many cultures, histories, languages and traditions. Sometimes the points of unity on the national level weigh less heavily than points of disunity." Indeed the prevalence of ethnicity to denote ethnic hatred and bias, and politics of exclusivity in many African countries, has been accused of being behind some of the worst atrocities on the continent. Some of these include the Rwanda and Burundi massacres, Biafran war, and the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya. As Okpewho (1979:85) observes, "to start with, most African nations are made up of communities separated by ethnic and religious differences. Before independence these communities joined hands in fighting colonialism; but after independence the rivalries between them became emphasized and in some cases led to cruel civil wars."

Again this position is consistent with African nationalists such as Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Patrice Lumumba of Congo, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and other Pan-Africanists who called not only for national cohesion, but also for continental unity. Without doubt, the Kenyan leadership should not dwell much on uniformity in the nation state, but encourage diversity without interfering or risking the unity of the state. Moreover, there is need to build democratic institutions which will ensure that neither the majority nor the minority are

threatened with exclusion from power and resources of the nation. Thus the performer attempts to break up ethnic cocoons and enables his community to think beyond their communal allegiance and generally participate in Kenyan nationhood. As Shorter (1998:19) notes, “nation-building demands the free and fair interaction of ethnic groups. Ethnocentrism or tribalism is the denial of this”. The above sentiment is underscored by Nyairo and Ogude (2003) when they remind us that nationhood is not limited to one’s community. The post-colonial experience participates in nationhood. The reconstruction and construction of one’s own ethnic group takes account of the other nationhood. Therefore, the Babukusu locate themselves vis-à-vis others. They do approximate nationhood not fixed to one pool, but appreciate the idea that a nation is composed of many different cultural groups and people who gradually accept other people’s cultures. This is in sync with Simatei (2005:54) when he notes, “in Kenyan context, ‘imagining’ the nation has also meant constructing a nationalist history that includes all Kenyans.”

By saying so, the performer is seeking to forge new identities and definitions of nationhood for all people of Kenya. The centrality of education as an agent of constructing new identities is founded in the performer’s desire that all communities should get access to education. The performer, as mentioned previously, uses an analogy of a book and a pen as shield and spear respectively. In the traditional set-up, a spear was a crucial weapon of offence while the shield was a weapon of defence. In the contemporary society, the pen and book are tools of offence and defence against poverty and ignorance. Education opens doors of opportunity to enable one to be able to be self-reliant. This symbolizes a fast socio-cultural and economic change that has taken place among the Babukusu. The performer therefore attempts to situate new cultures in their perspective. This is so because the cultural change in society created by the entry of the white people makes new demands on Babukusu’s identities. There is therefore need for them to accommodate the new functions within the larger definitions of nationhood which we can refer to as “negotiated” identity. The performer strives to objectify and mediate the new world. Indeed christianity and modern technology have been incorporated into the genre. He urges the Babukusu to benefit from the new culture of western education and economy.

6. The Bukusu Nation as a Gendered Site

The ritual defines the Bukusu nation through gender. It takes on a masculine image in the sense that men occupy central space within the ritual. For example, the ritual is performed by men for men. Women are pushed to the periphery. Deceased women cannot be performed for neither can women perform for men. At the same time, the sitting arrangement of the congregation during the ritual performance does underscore the social space of women in the community. While men sit on chairs, stools or benches, women must sit flat on the ground with their legs stretched. This clearly tells of the inferior position women occupy; they have no equal access to power. That is why among the Babukusu iconographies of power, nationalism may be characterized as a male drama –national desires, aspiration, achievement and meaning, the codification of that meaning is gendered. Without doubt, heroes in the Bukusu society are in most cases depicted either as a fatherly figure or as fraternal figure. Women as actors or equal participants are conspicuously

absent in the performance of this drama. Concerning the position of women in the Bukusu society, Nangendo (1994:129) notes that, “in the Bukusu society, for instance, when one meets a man and a woman one states that *omundu nende omukhasi* (“a person and a woman”). When a man dies, it is stated that “*omundu has died*” while for a woman, “*omukhasi has died*”. Nangendo thus observes that the person-hood of a woman is not acknowledged in and of itself without invoking her gender. That a woman is not *omundu* is socially accepted in society. This reflects the patriarchal nature of the Bukusu society. The ritual articulates a model of gender relations which is firmly based on male dominance. As Wagner, (1970:86) observes, “among the *abaluhya* of Western province, only men can own land, just as only men can own cattle.” Thus women’s participation in the nation building is quite limited. Yet women play an important role among the Babukusu. They are homemakers, they play an important role in economic production and socialize the young in the community thus act as repository of value in this patriarchal society. They are an important catalyst of economic social-cultural change in the society. This is so because gender relations in any society are the power relations and closely linked to relations of production. Nangendo (1994:155-156) asserts, “women played, and still play, a variety of religious (ritual, ceremonial) roles among the Babukusu. They were shamans, priestesses, mediums, diviners, and diviners of ritual regalia”.

It is a fact that as long as women are pushed to the periphery of social economic and political progress, the country’s development will remain stifled. On the other hand, the active participation of women will result into betterment of social-cultural and technological take off.

7. Memory and the Project of the Nation

In Europe, during the nineteenth century, Benedict Anderson (1983:31) opines that the novel concretized the Nation by imagining its existence in homogenous time. He argues that the novel’s efficiency in moulding the nation is due to its capability to present, “simultaneity in homogeneous, empty time in order to perceive as one the otherwise varied and anonymous activities of a member in the same nation, performed at the same clocked, calendrical time... by actors who may be largely aware of one another”. On his part, Timothy Brennan (in Bhabha 1990:49) relates Anderson’s definition of the nation as, “an imagined political community to similar ideas that view nations as imaginary constructs or, in the case of Hobsbawm and Ranger, as inventions whose existence owes something to an apparatus of cultural fictions”. It is also noted that African novel participates in the formation of the nation by mapping out shared experiences and turning them into cornerstones to construct national if not continental consciousness (Simatei, 2005). The above paradigms can be transplanted to the Bukusu community. Oswala kumuse uses his oratory to serve the interest, of not only his society, but the whole country at large. In fact, the performer sees it as his duty to remind Babukusu of their identity as a nation in the larger Kenyan nation because of a number of factors. Among the reasons being the rapid dynamics in social, cultural, political and economic spheres of the lives of the members of the Kenyan Nation and the Babukusu in particular. These changes have greatly influenced her world-view. Since the ritual performer, a man in touch with the societal

reality has got important traditional information and knowledge to pass across to his community. By listening to him, the Babukusu come to understand themselves better and not just to ape foreign cultures. Traditional religious concepts and practices have been affected in the sense that Christian religious beliefs of the people have eroded the traditions on which folklores are based. For instance, Christianity has accelerated the death of traditional religious beliefs and practices. Taboos and totemic beliefs have been discarded or suppressed as heathen practices. Oswala kumuse exhorts Babukusu community not to forsake their traditions for Christianity. He argues that modern Christian beliefs are not in any way in conflict with the traditional beliefs and practices and that the two should exist in harmony. He reminds the community that the people knew God even before the coming of the white people. Moreover, elements of modernity and its attendant effects especially materialism and capitalistic system have ushered in elements of individualism where the main social trend is “survival” for the fittest. There is breakdown in family ties and relationships. The performer, therefore, reminds the members of his community of the dangers of individualism and urges them to remain united and assist each other.

The issue of materialism has invaded marriage in the sense that some parents demand costly gifts in view of the claim that they spend their wealth educating their daughters up to the university. The performer satirizes these practices and calls upon members of the community to have realistic evaluation of the position of dowry. He argues that it does not make sense for families to continue demanding, for instance the traditional figure of thirteen heads of cattle, when the reality is that due to present harsh economic conditions, for many people, such a figure is prohibitive. At the same time, marriage contracts are increasingly becoming individual affairs and the concern of two persons rather than the concern of families and communities. This has contributed to the high rate of marriage break-up. It is therefore noted that Oswala kumuse, like other artists, comments sensitively on the evils prevailing in the social or political life of his community.

8. Conclusion

The ritual does not only entertain and educate but it also preserves the identity of Babukusu society and fosters sustainable development. As Spear (1982:14) puts it, “tradition is at the core of a people’s identity.” Really, the ritual is crucial in highlighting social, ethical, political and economic aspects that constitute Babukusu nationhood. At the same time, it is still highly valued by Babukusu community even if they no longer live in traditional set up since it acts as a mark of identity, a means of social differentiation.

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