The Power of Art in Cultivating Peaceful Communal Co-existence - A Case of Bukusu Aphorisms

By

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to examine the impact of art on the concept of communal coexistence with special attention to Bukusu aphorisms. The paper focuses on ten aphorisms from the Bukusu community. These aphorisms have been studied to uncover the meaning in relation to communal coexistence. The paper is guided by an eclectic model in which a number of theoretical approaches are employed. The main approaches are Publics and Nationhood Theories. This combination is basically grounded in modern folkloristic perspectives which call for viewing oral texts as representations of collective thinking. It has been established that Bukusu aphorisms form a spring board upon which the Bukusu relate with one another as well as the outside world. It has also emerged that Bukusu aphorisms can be instrumental in either promoting or undermining communal peaceful coexistence.

Key Words: Aphorisms, Communal coexistence, Community.

INTRODUCTION

This paper owes its background to the Bukusu community who presently occupy Bungoma County in Kenya which is bordered by Kakamega to the east, Busia to the south and Uganda to the west. A large number are also found in Kitale, Trans Nzoia County and Lugari in Kakamega County. The paper examines the study community with respect to the present location. It only gives relevant information necessary to introduce the community under research to the reader. The information provided is equally useful to the general appreciation of the entire paper. Longer write-ups on this community are beyond the scope of the present paper whose main focus is to capture the way the Bukusu construct their worldview on communal coexistence through the aphorisms.

The community has been practising agricultural and pastoral economies for as long as one can remember. This is authenticated in the vast amount of knowledge the members of the community have about farming practises and the rich pastoral vocabulary. Today, the Bukusu mainly grow Maize for subsistence and Sugarcane as a cash crop in Bungoma and Wheat in Kitale. Bungoma County experiences two rain seasons whereby the long rains come between March and July while the short rains are from August to October.

The religion of the Bukusu is characterized by belief in a Supreme Being, Wele, the creator of the Universe and human beings. This belief in one Supreme Being can be taken to be a result of the influence of Christianity on many African religions. In addition to Wele, who sits at the apex of a kind of hierarchy, there are other ancestral spirits who, like Wele himself, are the helpers and protectors of the living who are below them in the hierarchy. This belief in ancestral spirits is pegged on the concept that there is life after death and that physical death does not signal an end to life. The dead are still regarded as important to the community which explains the belief in the existence of the living dead and ancestors.

According to Were (1967) and Makila (1978), the Bukusu are part of the Abaluhya community who belong to the Bantu group. About two hundred clans are known to exist among the Bukusu. The Bukusu practised (and still practise) male circumcision. It is believed that they adopted the practice from contact with the Kalenjin neighbours at Mount Elgon. Other sources, however, argue that the existence of the practice in the other Luhya tribes indicates an earlier adoption, before the Bukusu settled in Bungoma. In ceremonies that are spaced about two years apart, young boys of a particular age (usually about 14 years of age), on getting the go-ahead from their parents, invite relatives and friends to their homes. This provides an opportunity for the guests to witness the initiates “face” the knife. The
initiation is a public event and the initiates are expected to go through the operation without showing any sign of pain. This is thought to be an indicator of bravery for the initiate. Once circumcised, an initiate becomes a member of an age-group. There are twelve age-groups, forming a cyclical system, with each age-group lasting for eight years. Once the last age-group has been reached, the first is restarted, and so on.

These and many other factors are likely to affect the nature of Bukusu aphorisms, in the sense that some aphorisms generally allude to some communal practices like marriage, religion, among others. Some aphorisms for example, invoke communal values like hard work, unity, generosity and hospitality while at the same time castigating vices like laziness, selfishness and cruelty. In some aphorisms, those who contravene communal values especially religious ones are likely to face the wrath of the supernatural.

DEFINITION OF OPERATIONAL TERMS

Aphorisms- they are sayings that express an experience that is considered to be apparent truth within a particular community. Aphorisms or proverbs were used and are still used in everyday life to summarise ancient wisdom in relation to universal observations. Aphorisms are sometimes used as bywords or in the media for communicating specific moral lessons. This paper focuses on aphorisms drawn from the Bukusu community and gives their English translation.

Community- It refers to a group of people identified with a particular region and sharing similar characteristics like a common ancestry and cultural background. In this study, the Bukusu community for example is mainly found in Western parts of Kenya and in particular Bungoma County. These people also have shared beliefs and customs like circumcision, marriage, funeral rites, among others.

Space- It refers to the aspects of culture with special attention on where, when and how they are produced. In this paper, we focus on Bukusu aphorisms by examining where, when and how these aphorisms are performed. This constitutes the space of performance.

Text- In this study, a text refers to the whole process of performing aphorisms to a given audience in a particular language. The language of performance in this study is Lubukusu, the native language of the Bukusu community. Our definition of text will also involve other factors like the content of the aphorisms as well as the verbal and non-verbal cues involved in the performance.

COMMUNAL COEXISTENCE

Communal coexistence implies mutual participation in determining the degree and quality of interaction. According to Kriesberg (2002), communal coexistence is commonly understood as relationships between persons or groups in which none of the parties is trying to destroy the other. He argues that communal coexistence comprises structural and subjective aspects of the relationship between individuals and groups. On a structural level, it is important to consider the extent to which parties are integrated with or separated from each other and the degree of equality or inequality between them. On the subjective level, it is important to consider how individuals and groups view each other. These are critical issues worth mentioning in relation to this paper, given that the Bukusu as a community live among other different communities. It is therefore prudent to examine the relationships that exist between them and their neighbours. At the same time, these people equally have a special kind of relationship among themselves which ranges from individuals, families or even clans that constitute the larger Bukusu community.

Appiah (2007:1), clearly captures the concept of coexistence when he introduces cosmopolitanism which he argues is predicated on the principles of the existence of different people bound by a simple nexus of common values and humanity. He poses: “even in our unquestionably variegated world of clashing ideas and norms, there is a great verisimilitude that transcends imaginary or real boundaries that we seem more inclined to prefer and promote.” In essence, what Appiah implies in this assertion is that the ethos of differentiating societies, notwithstanding, there is more binding similarities in a united world. He is of the view that in the world full of strangers, cosmopolitanism is a universal trait of humankind. This is basically an ancient philosophy but one which still is in dire need of contemporary validation. Appiah sets out to establish universality and shared values (good and bad) as a determinant or common denominator for cosmopolitanism. To achieve this, he draws a lot of parallels. Citing works by ethnographers, he stresses that people in far flung places are the same in that: “they have gods, food, language, dance, music, carvings, medicines, family lives, rituals, jokes and children’s tales…” (p.4). According to him, what we
take to be right or wrong is simply a matter of customs. Though Appiah tries to convince us on the concept of cosmopolitanism as a unifying factor, it is not strange that we will always treat people different from us as exactly what they are—Strangers. This will always happen regardless of the fact that they are humans just like us and share some of the values we hold dear.

Appiah’s unapologetic stance on the universality of the values that unite humanity therefore still remains a hard sell. Human beings will always continue defining themselves in relation with certain groups for identification purposes. Warner (2002: 10) aptly summarises what unites a given group of people as: “to be a certain kind of person or inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one’s disposal certain media genres, to be motivated by certain normative horizon and to speak within a certain language ideology.” Such generalizations about “us” and “others” still have their own shortcomings in the sense that they do not take care of the fact that they under-estimate the differences that may still be witnessed among members of the same group. Such kind of stereotypes, especially negative ones, are likely to distort our perception of other groups hence ignite unnecessary friction among different groups.

Since intergroup relations can cascade backward in the direction of intolerance and violence, coexistence requires nourishing values and capacities; people need to build respect, understanding and cooperation over time. The work of nourishing attitudes, values and capacities has to focus on restoring and enhancing individual and collective capacities for intellectual, social, emotional, creative and spiritual life. These capacities are crucial in sustaining both individual well being and intergroup coexistence over time.

Coexistence as a paradigm relates to both intra- and inter-communal relations. It refers to learning to live together, to accept diversity and implies a positive relationship to the other. When relationships are affirmative and equal, it enhances dignity, freedom and independence. However, when they are negative and destructive, they undermine human dignity and self worth. According to Kriesberg (2002), communal coexistence can be fostered by promoting equitable relationships, creating conditions for inter communal interaction and facilitating interpersonal healing. In the same vein, this coexistence can be undermined by those with vested interests in struggles against their ethnic groups’ especially political leaders who mobilize ethnic or other communal bases for support. One of the greatest challenges in the 21st Century is the question of coexistence between different peoples, races, religious groups, clans and tribes within a spectrum of identities. Ethnic identity poses a grave challenge to the existing state system in most African countries. There is a continuum of struggles for recognition of new identities and of contestation and challenges to the unitary state system in many of these states. In his comments on the dangers of communal rivalry, Achebe (1986) observes that nothing in Nigeria’s history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than tribalism. Though Achebe’s argument is taken from a different geographical and political background, the situation is more or less the same in Kenya where ethnicity has greatly undermined national unity. This forms a crucial background for this paper which examines the role of Bukusu aphorisms in promoting or undermining peaceful coexistence within the Bukusu as a community as well as how this shapes their relationship with the outside world. This is predicated on the fact that Bukusu aphorisms are not just limited to talking about the Bukusu as a community but they also talk about other people especially those communities that neighbour the Bukusu.

BUKUSU APHORISMS AND THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

For many years, human beings have created binaries, devising images of themselves as opposites of others. They have embedded such images in stories, songs and other forms of artistic expression. Culler (2002:112), rightly posits that “Literature has always been concerned with questions about identity and literary works sketch answers implicitly or explicitly to these questions.” The narrative subgenres for instance, follow the fortunes of characters as they define themselves and are equally defined by the various combinations of their past, the choices they make and the social forces that act upon them. In a nutshell, the characters in these narratives do not exist in isolation. Their actions have an impact on the society which to a large extent influences their actions. In many cases, the identity in literary works arises more from the differences rather than the similarities among different groups. According to Mineke (1999:2), for example, “Western scholarship has classified its others according to physical appearance, behaviour, language and customs. Thus, packaged, they are presented: this is how they look, this is their reality.” Eddy (2003:16), equally captures the question of identity when he poses that, “identities serve both as the insignia that clothe us in uniform to others’ eyes, either as a friend or enemy, or as the fortresses that protect our most crucial first premises about our hopes, fears and needs.” Eddy’s views signal the great significance attached to group identities. People will always withdraw into their various groups in the event of a perceived common enemy or threat to their existence. He equally elaborates a concept of collective identity of a group where he highlights a cultural point of view as;
1. Experienced subjectivity and confirmed by members of a group.

2. Derived from the consciousness of belonging to the group.

3. Determined by boundaries excluding the other in general and marking out the differences with certain groups in particular.

4. Boundaries and differences based on a system relatively intuitive images (of self as well as of the other), determined by a set of negative aspects and a set of positive ones. The positive aspects (presented by the group as an ideal model) constitute a kind of defensive ethnocentrism.

5. A relatively coherent ideology established on the basis of these characteristics and attitudes found in the discourse of the group as expressed in all kinds of texts.

The above characteristics apply to all collective identities in the sense that subjectivity is always a determining factor in human behaviour. People will always have a particular way of regarding themselves, as that makes them different from others. Such views about “us” and “them” are basically environmental or cultural and are nurtured from childhood.

However, the views by the above scholars ought to be taken with caution because the boundaries between our own and foreign are mobile and constantly redefined and manipulated to meet the changing times. New situations are always followed by new interpretations which make people redefine their earlier views or assumptions. Again, it is worth noting that besides the views of us and of others, there are others’ views of themselves and of us. Appiah (1992: 178) poses that “identities are complex and multiple and grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political and cultural forces almost always in opposition to other identities.” These views aptly capture the existence of myriad identities. It is a reality; the existence of one identity simply presupposes that of other identities. These identities are therefore bound to have similarities and differences. This explains the reason why “them” and “us” still abound in the present society. It reveals why people still define others as friends or enemies or “them” and “us” in the present society. These differences which are captured in some cultural practices like morality, are likely to influence the way people relate with one another in the wider society. It is against this backdrop that the present paper settles on the Bukusu community of Bungoma County. A deeper insight into their way of life as evidenced in aphorisms is quite significant in unraveling their perception of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Like many other African communities, the Bukusu boast of a rich literary world revealed through various forms. The aphorisms provide one such form. These aphorisms form the heart of the Bukusu way of life. They can be likened to the very soul of their culture. Many issues and the concerns of the community are revealed in these aphorisms. It is through this subgenre that the community communicates its virtues and vices, likes and dislikes as well as its strength and weaknesses. In other words, the way of life of the Bukusu and the way they relate to other people are clearly captured in the aphorisms. It can be argued that the Bukusu aphorisms act as a reservoir of the Bukusu values, through which the community expresses its worldview and gives the people a spring board from which their day to day existence is propelled. Through this subgenre, the Bukusu communicate a variety of issues touching on the community in particular and the larger society in general. It is through these aphorisms that the community constructs its worldview on issues like communal coexistence. The Bukusu worldview refers to the communal perception of reality. It is about the way people live, act, think, work and relate. Generally, it maps out the community’s cultural, religious, economic and political views and relationships. These relationships affect not only the Bukusu but also other neighbouring communities.

The Bukusu aphorisms provide one of the communication systems through which the community interacts within and without its borders. They are like a mirror of life through which the Bukusu reflect on what they do, what they think and how they live as well as the aspirations they hold. The structures and values in Bukusu aphorisms affirm their cultural identity drawing on familiar words and expressions. This paper elucidates what the Bukusu think and understand about communal coexistence. It maps out and structures communal coexistence as revealed in oral narratives. The ultimate purpose of this paper is to contribute towards the construction of Bukusu worldview on communal coexistence through the aphorisms.

After experiencing two world wars and the countless wars of destruction and genocide, the promotion of coexistence at all levels remains an issue of concern in the 21st Century. Kenya as a country has over forty two different communities. Over time there have been cases of animosity and even fighting among communities, popularly referred to as “ethnic clashes.” This necessitates a concerted effort to unearth why such animosity exists. Through the oral literature of a people, it is possible to learn about some of the factors that could possibly cause misunderstanding among communities. This paper seeks to establish the extent to which Bukusu aphorisms can
reveal their views on neighboring communities. The paper examines the aphorisms to establish the role they play in the conceptualisation of the relationship that exists between the Bukusu and their neighbouring communities. Specifically, the paper seeks to establish how the oral literature of a particular group can be used to understand inter communal relations. At the base of these relations is the concept of identity which makes one group different from the other.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The paper draws heavily from Publics and Nationhood theories in its endeavor to explain important aspects of the research. Warner (2002), defines a public as a concrete audience which has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space. In its actual sense, a public refers to the people in general. These people, according to Warner, can be an organized nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state or some other community. He sums up his views on a public thus: “to address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person or to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one’s disposal certain media genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon and to speak within a certain language ideology.” Warner (2002: 10).

This paper examines the Bukusu as a community or a public who speak a common language and share certain core values. However, these people are not necessarily living within the same social setting. It has already been alluded too that the Bukusu, just like many other communities have had to move and spread in different parts of the country due to changing economic times. The Bukusu found themselves in places where they are accommodated by other people just as much as they are equally accommodating others. In spite of these movements, members of this community still share a lot in common.

The theory of Nationhood was equally instrumental in defining “self” and “other” or the Bukusu and other communities respectively. According to Fitch (2010: 112), “wherever a language is found, there a separate nation exists which has the right to take independent charge of its own affairs and to govern itself.” He argues that national communities are constituted by belief and a nationality exists if its members believe that it does. Nations are therefore collective products that deal with identity or simply how one identifies oneself and how one is defined by others. Many people in the world have appeared to constitute nations. The Bukusu are one of such group that constitutes a nation. Identity or nationalism is related to the question of the difference between us and others. Mineke (1999: 5), highlights some of the issues that make us different from others as: “culture, social class, sex, religion, age, nationality, and living area.” It is from these different combined identities that views are developed of self and other. As soon as people feel threatened as a group, they attach great importance to their identity. This in itself may imply that the whole question of identity is self defeating and in many cases does not champion the course of the majority. It is therefore a misconception to talk of belonging to a particular group and not the other. Nonetheless, there is always a difference between how people view themselves and their group and how this shapes their perception of others.

APHORISMS AND COMMUNAL COEXISTENCE

This study examines ten Bukusu aphorisms and their impact on communal coexistence. This is because these aphorisms are not exclusively meant for the Bukusu community. Inasmuch as their language of delivery is the native Bukusu, these aphorisms generally talk about issues cutting across the society. The following are the aphorisms:

6.1 Akhukangulula kwemurwe nawe wamukangulula kwebikele- he loosens what constricts your head and you untie what shackles his legs. This aphorism can be translated to underscore the need of helping those in need since they may equally help one in future. In this case, the community at large is called upon to exercise good neighbourliness and shun vices like selfishness and greed. This is a sure way of living harmoniously. The entire community is called upon to extend a helping hand whenever a situation demands so. In the present society, there are many situations that call for one another’s support and are therefore beyond individual accomplishment.

6.2 Batu babili sebasikhana ta- two corpses cannot bury each other. It is common sense that two dead bodies cannot do anything to each. At a symbolic level, this aphorism can be taken to imply the helplessness of two or more needy people. Such persons do not have the material wealth to support one another. Consequently, this calls for the community and other well wishers to come in and support such less privileged groups. This way, the fruits of communal coexistence are realised. The communal value of unity is achieved in this aphorism. We all have to unite in order to overcome the many challenges that we are faced with in the society.
6.3 **Bakhulu barisianilanga chimoni**- adults express mutual respect through exchange of knowing glances or simply, elders solve their disputes discreetly. This aphorism points to the possible disagreements not only among the Bukusu as a community but also the entire humanity. However, there is need to amicably reach solutions to such disagreements whenever they arise. This is the only sure way of ensuring a cohesive society. Again, the question of elders is invoked in this aphorism. Among the Bukusu, age is very vital, in the sense that elderly members of the community are naturally expected to be accorded all the respect from their youthful counterparts. However, it is significant to note that age has to come with responsibilities. This explains why elders are not expected to feud in public as this is tantamount to degrading their social standing in the community.

6.4 **Busaale bukhila lituuli**- friendship is better than a crowd. This aphorism underscores the significance of cultivating lasting friendship in the society. It is a reality that one may interact with a legion contacts but crucial support will only come from a bosom friend. This aphorism is therefore crucial in enlightening the community on the need to coexist peacefully since at one given time, we all need the support of our neighbours. This aphorism should not be misconstrued to imply that we do not need to relate well with many people. The point to stress is the need to embrace honesty in our dealings with those we relate with not because we anticipate some form of assistance but because it is a virtue worth emulating.

6.5 **Chukunwe khalumila khufwa**- the small black-ant bites to death. Symbolically, this aphorism points out to the fact that in a fight, the weaker side just like the black-ant will apply maximum force to the mightier enemy. What emerges from this aphorism is the existence of different groups of people: those who are endowed with resources and those who lack. This is an ideal situation that is not unique to the Bukusu community. The point that should not be belaboured in this aphorism is that those with resources should not use them to intimidate the weak. This is basically because at one time, those who were thought of as weak may emerge stronger later in life - there is therefore need for all people to be treated with the respect that they deserve irrespective of their social standing in the community.

6.6 **Khupa omumia akhulindile kamamela**- hit the Teso soundly so that he can mind your elusive sprouts. Among the Bukusu community, the role of minding elusive sprouts was assigned to the children and weak in body. Since the Teso posed a constant threat on Bukusu frontiers, it was more desirable to render them harmless. This then necessitated the application of this adage on an enemy in view. It is worth at this point to note that this aphorism is a clear testimony that the Bukusu live and interact with other communities in their day to day activities. Consequently, there are high chances of communal feuds emerging at any given time. This then calls for communal unity in the event of external aggression. The emerging value in this aphorism is communal unity which surpasses individualism. One is called upon to be ready to sacrifice for the sake of the community especially in the event of some external forces that threaten the very fabric of peaceful coexistence.

6.7 **Kimikhono kisabisiana**- hands wash each other. This aphorism underscores the importance of kinship in the community. Kinship is depicted as a two-way traffic or reciprocal endeavour that is mutually beneficial. Relatives and members of the community are called upon to exercise kind gestures to one another in their daily activities. Vices like exploitation, laziness among others are frowned at. This is a sure way of cultivating a peaceful society since kind gestures are more likely to be reciprocated by similar gestures.

6.8 **Kimichikhi kiosiana**- burning logs torch each other. This aphorism is perhaps the opposite of “hands wash each other” in the sense that it castigates the folly of undermining one another in the community. Those who stoop to this level can only be likened to burning logs or fools who cannot help one another in the hour of need. Through this aphorism, some bad habits like gossiping for instance are discouraged since those who indulge in such unrewarding endeavours are bound to ruin one another.

6.9 **Kumulembe kukhila busuma**- a greeting is better than *ugali*- a common meal made from Maize flour. One derives great pleasure in warm greetings than in a meal given with a cold shoulder. This aphorism points to the significance of hospitality as a virtue worth emulating in the Bukusu community. The community in particular and society at large are reminded of the need to exercise regard and selfless love and kindness for one another. It calls on the community to be ready and willing to support one another at all times.

6.10 **Namiinda ali ese mbula likobi**- Namiinda, the introvert, claimed he had no debts whatsoever. This man whose wealth thrived on basketry publicly boasted that he had no debts with anyone at all. By design, three women duped him to mind their baby whom they deposited in a corner of his house. Without bothering to ascertain the facts, Namiinda granted the consent. But the sleeping baby was actually a corpse! Shortly afterwards, the women returned
and startled Namiinda by screaming that he had smothered their child in sleep. Namiinda looked into their faces and tried to argue his innocence but to no avail. He had at once become indebted. This aphorism is specifically used to warn those people who tend to talk big and look down upon others. Such people are reminded of the need to exercise sobriety in dealing with others. As a community, people are reminded of the interdependence that cannot be wished away. All of us need one another for cohesiveness and tranquility.

CONCLUSION

It can be deduced from the foregoing discussion that Bukusu aphorisms are sophisticated practices that impart the ideological inclinations of the society to the community. The Bukusu construct the cosmic consciousness of the community with regard to their worldview on communal coexistence. The paper has revealed that Bukusu aphorisms define what the community regards as right. Through these aphorisms, the perception of the Bukusu on themselves and their neighbours is clearly revealed. These aphorisms can therefore be vital in promoting peaceful communal coexistence. However, if left unchecked, they can equally be used to plant seeds of discord not only among the Bukusu but also their neighbouring communities. It has also emerged that character in Bukusu aphorisms ranges from human beings, animals and birds as well as physical features. All these characters are however used to represent human beings in the real world.

As African societies and the world at large grapple with the effects of peaceful coexistence, I strongly suggest the urgency of redirecting inquiry into ways through which peace can be realised in the society. This will help us redefine our methods in dealing with communal and societal conflicts.

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