



Context and Symbolism in African Orature: A Case Study of Abagusii of Western Kenya

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Abstract: *In the present paper, we aim at examining how the dynamic circumstances of the Abagusii community have influenced conception and deployment of symbols in oral texts emanating from the community. We specifically look at the nature and role of symbolism in what we recognise as contemporary texts of Gusii Oral literature: popular music. Specifically, we wish to examine what has become of the old representations in the face of new realities: have they fallen out of use and got discarded? Are they still in use, and with what impact or import? How have the old representations changed, if at all? Are they bearing the same old meanings that came from the traditional context or acquired new meanings and fresh usages inspired by the new realities? We are cognizant of the possibility that just as is true with societal issues, the content and structure of the traditional oral genres may have evolved too, shifting their boundaries and reinventing their mode of delivery and even reception. Yet we also know that the shift may not have been entirely drastic. In the present task, we draw our method from the theory of semiotics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this work we seek to demonstrate that language use among contemporary Gusii musicians is not only aesthetically rich but also capable of expressing the community's social concerns and dynamics. Research has documented the relationship between the traditional African milieu and the traditional oral literature. Individual perspectives notwithstanding—whether literary, anthropological or even in-between—there is general agreement on the link between economic and social political order and oral art. A noteworthy development, but which leads to significant questions pertaining to the aesthetics of the oral texts: In the context of changing social milieus, what happens to the traditional forms of expression? Do they become extraneous or do they turn into vestiges performed for own sake?

In addressing the above questions, we draw our method from theory of semiotics as advanced by Daniel Chandler. *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1987)* defines semiotics as a “study of patterned human communication behaviour including auditory and facial expression, body talk, touch, signs and symbolics”. Daniel Chandler (1995), in *Semiotics for Beginners*, traces the term 'Semiosis', to Charles Sanders Peirce, and Eco, his follower, who used it to designate the process by which a culture produces signs and/or attributes meaning to signs “a study of signs generally; their use in language and reasoning, and their relationship to the world, to the agents who use them, and to each other” (Chandler, 2005, 11). Simply put, then, semiotics deals with the production and processing of meaning within a specific social context. Chandler further captures the significance of semiotics thus:

Semiotics is important because it can help us not to take 'reality' for granted as something having a purely objective existence which is independent of human interpretation. It teaches us that reality is a system of signs.... It can help us to realize that information or meaning is not 'contained' in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not 'transmitted' to us - we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware. (2005, 36)

The above argument and definitions are particularly relevant in verbal arts where meaning is transmitted through action and linguistic portrayals that resonate with the world the artist is depicting. Indeed, the audience's response is, to a larger extent, dependent on their ability to decipher and visualise the world the artist has painted for them.

To begin with, we identify the following modern aspects as defining the Abagusii community's contemporary existence: modern education, modern religion, modern politics as well as the modern money economy. Austin Emielu, in *Foreign Culture and African Music*, concurs thus: "By far the most far reaching influence on African music both in the colonial and modern times is Africa's contact with Europe. This European legacy has come through trade, Christianity, colonialism and western education" (2008, 5). The said modern forces may have indeed hastened the reengineering of the stringent traditional social, economic and cultural order to bring about a modern social system which, much as it may not be totally free of traditional influences, is founded on socioeconomic class differences (Steve Biko 1978, 46). It is in the background of such propositions that we purpose to bring into question the complex relationship that exists between emerging social forces and symbols that abound in Gusii oral art.

Jenifer Muchiri, in *What Culture and Art are Kenyans celebrating at 50*, has observed that, as a genre of art, "music, in various African languages, has proven to be a versatile form of communication; a powerful call to unity and, sometimes, a vehicle for propaganda (The Standard on Sunday Magazine, August 4, 2013, 10). With views such as Muchiri's, we may then need to consider modern music among Abagusii as one of the latest additions to the oral art fabric of Abagusii. In the community, the genre has manifestly been enriched by modern technology to meet the taste of an increasingly modernised audience, while at the same time continuing to exploit the rich literary heritage of the local dialect. An examination of how language has been employed in the genre (popular music) could therefore be of value to the present study.

Transience in oral literature has attracted the attention of notable cultural and literary scholars. One such scholar is Njogu Waita who, in his MA thesis, *The Significance of Literary Devices in Ndia Oral Narratives*, has pointed out a gap in the study of stylistic devices in oral literature. He recommends:

There is need to investigate how far social change has affected technique in oral literature. This way I may be able to learn whether the literary devices change and develop with society. I will then be able to know the place and future of oral narratives. (Waita, 147)

In many ways, Waita's proposal echoes the character and intent of the current study. Specifically, however, our interest is mainly motivated by the need to establish whether earlier worldviews meet the subsequent ones in the oral artist's symbolic expressions and portrayals.

Maxamed Daahir Afrax (2005) has given the analogy of putting "old shoes on new feet" to indicate the probable malleability of traditional oral literature to shifting conditions and realities. He says, "...the skilful use of certain elements ... could be useful in terms of linking the past to the present, especially in the case of a society experiencing the transition from a traditional to a modern way(s) of life" (4). Abagusii, just like most other modern African communities, are gradually transforming from the traditional order to modern lifestyles and ways of doing things. We, envisage that whatever transformation Abagusii are going through may impact on their oral literature, especially in the use of linguistic symbols to result in alteration either within existing structures/forms of expression.

Evans Nyamwaka, in his unpublished PhD dissertation (2008) avers that much as popular/modern music and its performance are accompanied by foreign musical instruments—such as the guitar, accordion, piano, and the like—it "was apparently a mixture of foreign and traditional cultures" (138). Likewise, Mavis Mpola, (2007) in his PhD dissertation, *An Analysis of Oral Literary Music in IsiXhosa*, concurs that both genres—the traditional and the Westernised—"employ elements of poetry and language to portray the dynamic culture of amaXhosa" (235). It is important to establish whether the elements of language mentioned by such scholars as Mpola are in any way reflective of the modifications on the traditional culture due to coming into contact with alien cultures and rising lifestyles. The present task is tackled at two different levels: first, the possibility of there being hybrid symbols that reflect both the old and the new contexts is interrogated. Secondly, linguistic elements that may have resulted from the subversion of both the traditional and new patterns to result in new representations will also be examined.

2. SYMBOLS DEPICTING HYBRIDISM

Henry "Man Pepe" Sagero's song *Omoika bw'omosiki* (The Spirit of Music), whose live performance we attended at the Bridge-Waters Hotel, Kisii Kenya on the night of 15th March 2015, embodies a split identity typical of a transient society. In the song, the musician declares that artistic inspiration is

not determined by external circumstances but talent. In the song, Sagero uses various symbolic images to underscore the significance of art. The expressions are, however, clearly reflective of the modern realities that he shares with his audience. He, for instance, alludes to loyalty points (*Bonga Points*) subscribers to a local telecommunications operator garner whenever they make calls:

<i>“Mbwachete omosiki eee</i>	<i>Do you love music, eee</i>
<i>Mbwachete omosiki aaa</i>	<i>Do you love music, aaa</i>
<i>Rirorio tokogota bwango.</i>	<i>Then you’ll remain strong</i>
<i>Omoika bwomosiki minto</i>	<i>The spirit of music, my people</i>
<i>Nechibonga point chiomobere</i>	<i>Music is Bonga points for your body</i>
<i>Ase eraha nekerage baito</i>	<i>It has magical pleasure</i>

The artist’s ingenuity is highlighted when he draws from such recent phenomena as advertisement gimmicks and slogans that are decipherable among members of the audience. It is a clear attempt on the part of the artist to remain relevant using artistic expressions his audience identifies with. They are happy to hear their favourite musician confirm to them the benefits they could reap for simply being lovers of music and entertainment: they would grow healthier and become physically fit, perhaps, out of dancing and also be of good cheer. A warning is, however, issued to individuals who are not sufficiently possessed by the spirit of music.

<i>Emeika eye etato tata</i>	<i>The spirit comes in three forms</i>
<i>Ekobwatia esiko yomomto</i>	<i>All linked to one’s reputation</i>
<i>Omoika Omotang’ani okogera</i>	<i>The first type is for the insane</i>
<i>Chibarimo Chiatenga echiro</i>	<i>They dance openly at market places</i>
<i>Oyokabere otoka emeyega</i>	<i>The second type is found at feasts</i>
<i>Ebiiririato naboigo ebichuri</i>	<i>Ululations and whistles abound</i>
<i>Oyogatato noro inyangete</i>	<i>The last, which I hate,</i>
<i>Omorebi agotenga redio etaiyo</i>	<i>For the drunk who dance to no music</i>

The principal idea in the excerpt above is that, just as it was in olden days, music/art is prone to abuse and misuse by feigning artistes and fans. Decorum, faithfulness and loyalty are thus advocated. In the lines that follow, the modern realisations of the artistic music spirit are enumerated:

<i>Chidalili chiomonto bw’omoika</i>	<i>signs of a man possessed by the spirit</i>
<i>Rahisi sana komanyekana</i>	<i>Are easily known</i>
<i>Mwaye goika atware chiredio ibere</i>	<i>He owns several music systems</i>
<i>Esimi lazima etware ememori</i>	<i>His phones have music memory cards</i>
<i>Gari yaye mosiki tokomocha</i>	<i>His car has loud music</i>
<i>Nase ‘edansi ere tokomocha</i>	<i>He graces most dancing parties</i>
<i>Ogotenga origamora saana</i>	<i>Sweats on dance floors</i>
<i>Omosiki otenene araite omonto</i>	<i>He curses if the music is interrupted</i>
<i>Ekanisa ochengera chikorasi</i>	<i>Jubilant to choruses at church</i>
<i>Amarandia kagochaka orara</i>	<i>But doses off when the sermon starts</i>
<i>Naya namang’ana akabeireo</i>	<i>It used to be like that</i>
<i>Are rero nankio nabeo</i>	<i>It is the same today as will be tomorrow</i>

The intended message is that whether in the olden days or in the contemporary society, art has always been part and parcel of life, albeit with varying degrees of indulgence. The modern gadgets/images itemised in the song help communicate the message that art remains the same; only modes of

conveyance change. Next, the commercial aspect in art/music is portrayed as having played a positive role in strengthening this important social institution:

<i>Ebahati ebe embe osianye mama omino</i>	<i>If by bad luck you catch your mother</i>
<i>Kagotenga nyomba ekemanching'i</i>	<i>Dancing the traditional sensual dance</i>
<i>Tari omwomani mosegete</i>	<i>Don't tell her off</i>
<i>Echio tari sambu oyio nomoika</i>	<i>It's no taboo, the spirit of music is at work</i>
<i>Iroka ochie komotimia ebesa</i>	<i>Put a coin in her hand</i>
<i>Goika omanyu rituko ere aiboretwe</i>	<i>And you will know the day she was born</i>

"*Ekemanching'i*" is a traditional dancing style in which participants, with their heads leaning forward slightly, thrust backwards with vigorous gyrations. The dance was deemed provocative and was only allowed at initiation and courtship ceremonies for coded messages (Monyenye, 1977, 56). The point is that music not only has power to entertain but also to rejuvenate one's youth. Revellers are, at this point, assured that ecstatic behaviour and vigorous dancing are condoned in the obtaining blissful circumstances. Equally, the commercial value of music is relayed in the expression "Put a coin in her hand/And then you will know the day she was born" which means that artistic talent ought to be appreciated in material terms as opposed to condemnation. Appreciating musicians is a way of paying homage to the artistic spirit. Finally, the poor workmanship in music is deplored as follows:

<i>Nekebiriti gaitete omware</i>	<i>The matchbox that made the initiate's fire</i>
<i>Tikeri gouterwa morero</i>	<i>Must not be used to light another fire</i>
<i>Notongia esigara esese enywe</i>	<i>Or even used to light a dog's cigarette</i>
<i>Igo gwaitire omoika bw'omware</i>	<i>That could kill the initiate's spirit</i>

A talented musician is here above compared with an initiate because he is "specially marked" to both entertain and teach. The fire that remained lit throughout the period the initiates stayed in their seclusion huts symbolised the emerging adult spirit. The fire, and everything associated with it, was, therefore, a sacred affair. On this account, therefore, talent becomes a personal affair, and those who try to imitate or pirate it simply weaken its potency. The image of the initiate's matchbox being used to light a dog's cigarette is a new representation that points to compromised standards of art. In the song, the traditional ways of making a fire have been replaced with a modern one: a matchbox. The matchbox is, therefore a new symbol of potency replacing the old method of making a fire. The warning is particularly important in modern times when music producers, unscrupulous businessmen and fans stand accused for engaging in music piracy. 'A smoking dog' also symbolises fashionable modern acts that have little value. It, then, becomes important for the musician to clarify that the kind of respect he is demanding is not spiritual but earthly. The move is in order given that a number of modern musicians have been accused of delivering their followers to satanic ways.

<i>Tari sanamu 'nkobasasimia</i>	<i>I am not asking you to worship effigies</i>
<i>Morore buya inche timondama</i>	<i>Beware not to insult me</i>
<i>Mokore inwe buna nkobatebia</i>	<i>Do as I tell you</i>
<i>Kogicha timokora buna ngokora</i>	<i>Not as I do</i>

The above proclamation goes to further capture the musician's modern consciousness. Nevertheless, he thinks that religion must not be forced upon individuals. He advises preachers to, if possible, stay away from such people and only preach to the more receptive ones.

<i>Pastor, ee gokorora 'ekanisa</i>	<i>Pastor, if you see at church</i>
<i>Omonto okona gosundoka</i>	<i>A member dose off</i>
<i>Oyio nabwate omoika bwomosiki</i>	<i>That one has the spirit of music</i>
<i>Pastor Naphtali Ondieki Osebe</i>	<i>Pastor Naphtal Ondieki Osebe</i>
<i>Randia abanto igoro yomoia bwekanisa</i>	<i>Preach to people about the church's spirit</i>

The end of the text is as supple as the earlier part of it. There is, however, a palpable conciliatory tone with the pastor being encouraged to continue filling followers with the “spirit of church”.

It may have become clear from the above analysis that the artist is determined to communicate through “word pictures” as opposed to plain language. The images he uses are drawn from both the contemporary and traditional settings, but still capable of communicating to the modern audience who, in turn, decode them using their experiences. The artist’s ability to juxtapose old and new symbolic images and still manage to communicate discernible messages confirms that the old and the new epochs can intersect, especially in the hands of an innovative artist. Old contexts can therefore be recovered without necessarily diminishing the artist’s ability to communicate effectively and resourcefully with their contemporary audiences.

3. TRADITIONAL SYMBOLS IN MODERN CONTEXTS

The use of traditional symbolic images to express modern concerns is evident in two selected songs by another modern musician, Andrew Matara Aganda. The two songs are thematically preoccupied with matters religion predominantly expressed in traditional symbols. In the song *Ekenagwa* (Mauritius thorns), the artist equates Christian life to the local thorny plant which is a symbol of growth in the traditional context. The Biblical reference of Jesus as the saviour of the world and the giver of life blends well with the image of a healthy Mauritius thorn that is reduced to nothing due to lack of a stronger plant to scale on. There is a clear attempt to make use of the audience’s knowledge of the Mauritius thorn by identifying its features as follows:

<i>Ekenagwa negento kiogokumia</i>	<i>The Mauritius thorn is indeed wonderful</i>
<i>Gekere atobu nigo gekoranda</i>	<i>On a fertile ground it spreads</i>
<i>Gochia moino na moino</i>	<i>Further and further sideways</i>
<i>Gochia maate na Rogoro</i>	<i>Upwards and downwards</i>
<i>Gochia igoro aro tigoranda</i>	<i>But it can’t stand upright</i>
<i>Getabwati ase gekoranderera</i>	<i>Without some support</i>

The musician then applies the features he has mentioned to the present context:

<i>Bono ebinagwa nigo bire mbali mbali</i>	<i>Mauritius thorns are of many types</i>
<i>Ekenagwa mwanyabanto</i>	<i>Some are human</i>
<i>Abanto mbare bagotarera abande</i>	<i>Some people cling on others</i>
<i>Yesu Kristu nere omote togotarera</i>	<i>Jesus Christ is the only tree to cling to</i>
<i>Erinde togende igoro</i>	<i>So as to go to heaven</i>
<i>Onye mote toiyo igoro teiyo</i>	<i>without a support, there is no heaven for us</i>

The appropriation of the traditional imagery assists the audience to appreciate the Jesus’ important role as both the saviour of humanity and the head of the Christian church. Without Jesus there could not be a single Christian standing.

Nevertheless, it is in the song *Chinderia* (Heredity), where the artist is more effective in juxtaposing traditional and modern images. The song begins with four traditional proverbs with significant symbolic import. The proverbs are followed up by a reference to a Biblical story of Abel and Cain from Genesis chapter four.

<i>Buna moigwete ngoteba</i>	<i>As you’ve heard me say</i>
<i>Nigo iminetie goteba</i>	<i>I mean to say</i>
<i>Chinderia chiechimbu chimbe</i>	<i>We have evil lineages</i>
<i>Abana benda eyemo nabo bakorwana</i>	<i>Brothers can fight</i>
<i>Omoerio bang’ entane</i>	<i>Or even kill each other</i>
<i>Ekeru togotuka nigo tokonyora ing’a</i>	<i>This could be historical</i>

<i>Ororeria nigo rwarenge orwogoita</i>	<i>It flows from the forefathers</i>
<i>Bono ekero ogoita oyomino</i>	<i>When you kill a relative</i>
<i>Aye kwaragererigwe obogima bwao bwensi</i>	<i>You fall under a curse</i>
<i>Naboigo egesaku kiao kiarageregwe</i>	<i>Your offspring is also cursed</i>
<i>Ekero togosoma egetabu kiomochakano</i>	<i>When we read Genesis</i>
<i>Igoro ya Abel na Cain</i>	<i>About Abel and Cain</i>
<i>Cain agaita Abel omwabo</i>	<i>Cain killed Abel</i>
<i>Baiboretwe kowa enda eyemo</i>	<i>They were brothers</i>

By merely placing traditional and modern images side by side, a strong feeling of permanence is evoked in the audience. The images symbolize the unchanging nature of God; His love and even vengeance for evil doers. The structure also implies a degree of conservatism in handling moral issues: curses, jealousy, vengeance or murder result from evil acts whether in traditional or in Christian environments.

It is also evident that, in some texts, traditional symbols are modified before being suited to modern contexts. Traditional ideals are carried over to new audiences by fusing them with contemporary issues and through a medium that is recognizable to the target audience—modern music. The music of the late Christopher Monyoncho Araka “Riyo Riebasweti” and Christopher “Embarambamba” Mosioma fittingly exemplify this category. In the song *Nyaboke* (a lady’s name), Monyoncho derides the culture of materialism which has eaten into the moral fabric of the community and of the nation as a whole. Monyoncho uses the traditional motif of an unmarried and unrestrained woman (prominent in the indigenous verbal art) to comment on negative capitalist/materialistic tendencies in the society.

<i>Ngachicha oboko Nyaboke</i>	<i>I came to your parents’ home</i>
<i>Ngachicha seino</i>	<i>Intending to marry you</i>
<i>Okaimoka okanga Nyaboke</i>	<i>You totally rejected me</i>
<i>Tindi na amali</i>	<i>Saying I had no money</i>
<i>Ogachaka korigia Nyaboke</i>	<i>Your interest, Nyaboke,</i>
<i>Oyobwate amali</i>	<i>Was in the rich</i>
<i>Toramonyora Nyaboke noore seino</i>	<i>Today, you are still single, having failed</i>
<i>Omomura oyomo akaigwa namari otagete</i>	<i>One man heard about your desires</i>
<i>Akareta etebe Nyaboke agaichoria amaroba</i>	<i>He filled a container with soil</i>
<i>Akabuncha chibese akabeka korwa etebe igoro</i>	<i>And then covered the soil with a few coins</i>
<i>Ogakaga nechibese chiichire etebe, gento!</i>	<i>You thought it was money, but nothing!</i>

The portrayal of *Nyaboke* as beautiful but gullible is common in traditional oral narratives where beautiful women are disparaged. The traditional motif of an uncontrolled impulsive beautiful woman is infused in a contemporary context. Monyoncho, a self-confessed crusader against consumerism, was here launching a scathing attack on the rampant greed that characterised the independence government’s ideology of choice: free enterprise/capitalism. The symbol suits the message it conveys. The motherland had taken the wrong course with her leaders engaging their Western development partners in ways that would harm the young nation and affect the morals of her people by pushing them into an unsustainable culture of self centred gratification.

<i>Agacha agakong’aina inche ninde nechibesa</i>	<i>He lied to you saying I’ve a lot of money</i>
<i>Chiichire etebe nechinde chire ebengi</i>	<i>Kept in a container also in the bank</i>
<i>Inchwo togende orarora echire etebe</i>	<i>Come and see the money in the container</i>
<i>Inche nomonda Nyaboke ninde nechibesa, gento!</i>	<i>I am rich, with lots of money, nothing!</i>
<i>Ogaika sobo Nyaboke agakoorkia</i>	<i>When you reached his house</i>

<i>Etebe eichire amaroba</i>	<i>You saw a container full of soil</i>
<i>Chibese chibekire igoto</i>	<i>And a few coins on top</i>
<i>Ogakaga nechibese chioka chiichire etebe</i>	<i>You thought it was just money</i>

By indicating that he was enjoying life with his not-so-beautiful wife, Monyoncho seems to emphasise the difference between reality and appearance. Real beauty is associated with one's ability to remain loyal and fully committed to social values as opposed to greed.

<i>Ingacha nkanywoma omoiseke otari kieni</i>	<i>Later, I got married to an ugly woman</i>
<i>Omomwamu ti orakage negekondo</i>	<i>She is as black as a monkey</i>
<i>Toigwanaine nebinto togosenyenta</i>	<i>We live happily, eating together</i>
<i>Aye Nyaboke bono toranyora bwoo</i>	<i>Nyaboke, you are yet to marry</i>
<i>Na Nyasae agacha akaba omuya igo</i>	<i>God has been kind on us</i>
<i>Akang'a eng'ombe egokamwa</i>	<i>He gave me a dairy cow</i>
<i>Ebibere mbiroo abana bakonyora basiberia</i>	<i>My children can enjoy a little milk</i>

In the above song, *Nyaboke* is walking on a winding tarmac that does not seem to bring her to a destination she desires. Such a portrayal could indeed strike a chord with a contemporary audience who in their time identify with the image of a person walking on a tarmac—a symbol of modern intrigues, distress and struggles—more like chasing a mirage.

<i>Nyaboke ere nerami akona goita kogenda</i>	<i>Nyaboke is still hitting the tarmac</i>
<i>Akorigia oyore n'amali, gento!</i>	<i>Looking for a wealthy man</i>
<i>Monyoncho namange orarore</i>	<i>Monyoncho, wonders never cease</i>

From the above last stanza, capitalism/the culture of materialism is likened to a beautiful temptress bent on trapping unsuspecting suitors. Similarly, the images demonstrate an evolution from the traditional ways of getting a spouse to the modern requirements. In the traditional setting the man only needed to get hold of the girl he had admired and simply elope with her. In modern times, however, ladies like *Nyaboke* seem to be more attracted to money than anything else. The new freedom seems to be leading them astray.

Monyoncho's political messages are sustained and even more incisive in his second song, *Keemba* (also lady's name). It is on record that the song earned him a stint in detention after the government of the day charged him with incitement and hate speech. In the song, the members of the national assembly, among other representatives are depicted as corrupt, greedy and self centred.

<i>Ngachika abageni bane bachiche gonkwani</i>	<i>I invited my guests to my home</i>
<i>John Sitora, Isaka Otwori, Sammy</i>	<i>John Sitora, Isaac Otwori, Sammy</i>
<i>Mokaya nainche Monyoncho noonare</i>	<i>Mokaya and myself</i>
<i>Obosoku obonene rituko erio Keemba kwang'ete</i>	<i>On that day, you embarrassed me, Keemba</i>
<i>Ekeru abageni bachete</i>	<i>When the guests arrived</i>
<i>Omorugi one Jane</i>	<i>My wife Jane</i>
<i>Akogenda roche kwoyia amache</i>	<i>Went to fetch water</i>
<i>Arugere abageni baito baragere lunch</i>	<i>to cook lunch for our guests</i>
<i>Keemba okagenda echikoni</i>	<i>Keemba, you took over in the kitchen</i>
<i>Ochie koigereria engoko eyie bwango</i>	<i>You went there to fan the fire so that</i>
<i>Abageni bane baragere</i>	<i>Guests could have their meal on time</i>
<i>Okayesorora okaboa ekerebi kwabwate</i>	<i>You wrapped the juiciest parts of chicken</i>
<i>Machani kabichi</i>	<i>In your green head dress</i>

<i>Keemba ogatama okagenda</i>	<i>And escaped with them</i>
<i>Egento kiogokumia Keemba</i>	<i>To my surprise, keemba</i>
<i>Ogachora chinyama chiria</i>	<i>You picked the parts</i>
<i>Abageni banchete</i>	<i>Guests love most</i>
<i>Okaira omotwe, okaira omogo ngo,</i>	<i>You took the head, the back</i>
<i>Amo nechimbaba ogasang'ania emondo</i>	<i>The wings and the gizzard</i>
<i>Ogatama okagenda</i>	<i>Then you ran away</i>

From the above images, it is clear that Monyoncho is condemning the act of corruption and misappropriating public funds. The image of a greedy and impulsive woman who shamelessly steals and wraps pieces of meat in her head dress mirrors the reality of modern-day leaders who fleece the very masses whose interests they should safeguard. Traditionally, a thief of vegetables and food was such contemptible. The song becomes satirical when listeners are made to laugh at Keemba's humiliating manoeuvres such as wrapping cooked food in a dirty headdress before dashing off. In a humorous turn of events, the headdress seems to be Keemba's most valuable ornament, since she wears it all the time and people can recognise her by it. Incidentally, petty thieves like *Keemba* never seem to improve their lot despite their unseemly ways and greed.

It may be observed from the above texts that the four popular artists are, without doubt, responding to the modern realities in their immediate environment, and even expressing similar values, through veiled references. Nevertheless, the impact of the traditional context and representations on their current representations is varied. Monyoncho, who is the oldest of the three, has representations that resonate quite strongly with the traditional philosophies of the indigenous Abagusii, such as on the value of inner beauty. Conversely, the younger musicians seem to have enjoyed greater liberties while redeploying the old representations, or even creating new ones. They have synthesised the representations and given them a much practical orientation within the contemporary situation, such as when Sagero talks about the old '*ekemanching'i*' dance to mean being carried away by music. We could then categorise modern artists into two main categories: the early modern artists who still rely significantly on old representations and philosophies and the latter modern artists who are operating further away, and with much greater freedom from the traditional patterns and ideologies.

4. INNOVATIVE SYMBOLS FOR EMERGING REALITIES

There exists another category of symbols that have been inspired almost exclusively by the modern realities. They come from artists who are not only operating from contemporary historical realities but who also seem to have much less contact with traditional contexts. A case in point is Jared Mombinya's song *Amaya Mbosiare* (Better Things lie ahead). Being only twenty five years old, Mombinya is a whole generation younger than some early contemporary musicians. Mildly populist, his expressions are both ingenuous and entertaining. He uses images such as men with protruding bellies to educate audiences about HIV/Aids, poverty as well as urge young people to remain in school and seek knowledge:

<i>Aye tata ominto nkieke kwarire</i>	<i>You, my friend, what did you eat</i>
<i>osendete ebitore</i>	<i>to make your tummy look so big</i>
<i>Abande tokorera enchara</i>	<i>When the rest of us are crying about hunger?</i>
<i>Buna namasomo ao okoria</i>	<i>Did you say you are eating your education?</i>
.....	
<i>Abana Besukuru Motagwanacha</i>	<i>You, school children</i>
<i>Motige chitaro</i>	<i>Stop loitering</i>
<i>Goeta aamkori</i>	<i>In hidden paths</i>
.....	
<i>Oborwaire bwachire</i>	<i>A disease has come</i>
<i>Takong'aina Mokaya</i>	<i>Stop cheating me Mokaya</i>

<i>Tiga twensi torende</i>	<i>Let us all be careful</i>
<i>Nyaboke ondereire</i>	<i>Nyaboke is now crying to me</i>
<i>Ekeru are konywa echa</i>	<i>When she was being bought tea</i>
<i>Tinarengi aroro</i>	<i>I was not there</i>
<i>Agwetontia You</i>	<i>When smearing herself with "You"</i>
<i>Tinarengi aroro</i>	<i>I was not there</i>
<i>Ninki rende akondera?</i>	<i>Why then does she cry to me?</i>

Through carefully selected images, Mombinya contrasts the fleeting pleasures of life outside school and the wisdom of staying through the difficulties of schooling. "You", a trade name for a modern perfume with a strong fragrance which, according to common myth, makes it useful in mortuaries to conceal the overpowering stench, symbolises the temptations that lead pupils and students astray. It has therefore come to symbolise stealth death.

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that in some instances the traditional representations are recovered and carried over in expressions that are not only appreciable in the contemporary realities but which are inspired by the traditional values and conventions. Similarly, some representations are unambiguously modern and are representative of emerging realities and values, such as education and urban life. In the following last section, we turn our attention to an emerging trend of radical representation that defies the mainstream representation that we have dealt with so far. Perhaps unable or indisposed to follow the stringent rationalistic mainstream codes, the modern generation of artists, who are progressively more fascinated with the urban environment, have resorted to operating from codes that almost exclude those from earlier situations. They have either assigned subverted meanings to old symbols or created new ones that reflect and perpetuate their contemporary urban liberties.

5. SYMBOLS FROM A POPULAR SUBVERSIVE SUBCULTURE

Most cultural historians concur that a lasting European legacy in Africa has to do with the modern money economy which has precipitated a "materialistic/commodity" culture. In an article, *Popular and Highbrow Literature: A Comparative View*, Peter Swirsky (2007) observes that one of the defining features of modern art is a tendency by artists to be overly concerned about "ticket sales...maximizing audiences and turning a profit". We equate "ticket sales" with populist tendencies in a majority of modern musicians who want draw huge crowds by all means possible. Swirsky further opines that the aim has mostly been to "gratify the base tastes of the paying audience" at the expense of "pollinating a culture with commendable ideas and attitudes" (8). On a similar stroke of thought, Kevin Motaroki, in an article *Social Apathy or Social Evolution?*, describes the modern society as "aloof and detached". He bases his argument on a PhD dissertation by Johan Galtung (1995), *On the Social Costs of Modernisation, Atomie/Anomie and Social Development* where the latter argues thus:

Many human societies are in a state of advanced disintegration that tends towards destruction and deculturation heading for structurelessness and culturelessness. (Sunday Lifestyle, March 2, 2013)

It is indeed our considered thought that Abagusii, being part of the modern society, may not have been left behind in the unfolding Cultural evolutions. In *Don't Blame the FM Radio Hosts, Kenyans just Love the Mundane Stuff*, Nzau Musau observes that topics discussed in leading FM radio stations in Kenya are more and more hypersexual and have literally turned such hosts as Ciku Muiruri, Maina Kageni, Jalang'o, Mwalimu King'ang'i into celebrities with an "enviable following" (Standard on Sunday, 4th August 2014).

Indeed, a look at contemporary art among Abagusii reveals a preoccupation with themes arising from urbanized environments, such as sex, women, partying, Aids, drugs, and so forth. Comments on the said issues are made in highly suggestive and exclusive language that is out of mainstream language use, out of reach for older generations, and only for the uninitiated contemporary generation. According to Nathan Oyori Ogechi (2009), in *Sheng as a Youth Identity Marker: Reality or Misconception*, the increasingly influential mass culture that is powerfully sweeping across Kenya was sparked off by a younger generation of artists in the 90s, such as Nonini, Abbas Kubuff, Flex,

Juacali, Kleptomaniacs and, especially, Circute and Joel of the revolutionary sex-themed song *Manyake* (meat) which not only presented sex as a commodity, but did so in highly imaginative and coded language (15). It is evident that most modern artists have followed cue and have either invented new codes of expression that target specific audiences or carried over the traditional codes, corrupted them and given them interesting new impressions in a process Wiseman Chijere Chirwa (2010), in *Dancing Towards Dictatorship: Political Songs and Popular Culture in Malawi*, refers to as the “subversion of tradition and culture” (10).

Henry Sagero’s song *Eng’ombe Nengima* (The Cow is whole) subverts tradition both in terms of the subject matter the artist is preoccupied with and also how meaning is created. Released in the year 2013, the song generated interest and controversy in equal measure. The highly suggestive language in the song generated a lot of hullabaloo. An interview of the musician by Evans Makori of Minto FM, a radio station that broadcasts in the Gusii vernacular, on 10th March 2014 never helped matters as it failed to yield a convincing interpretation of the coded images listeners wanted the musician to interpret for them.

During a charged call-in session, most listeners accused the widely esteemed musician of breaking taboo and expressing sexual fantasies through his music. The musician defended himself saying the song had nothing to do with sex and that he was being genuinely creative. Nevertheless, our interview with the musician on the night of 15th March 2014 at Bridge-Waters Hotel, Kisii, coupled with the artist’s pronouncements during the live performance, aided us to not only decipher the codes that underlie the song, but also informed our subsequent decision to place the song under the popular art trend in the present study. Above all, it also became clear to us that one needed to have some degree of competence in the mass culture in the Kenyan music landscape in order to meaningfully interact with most of the songs we have categorised under the mass culture movement.

The expression, *Eng’ombe Nengima* (The Cow is whole), for instance, is borrowed from the butchery register, where it is used to re-assure potential buyers that there is still plenty of beef left for whoever wants to buy. Intriguingly, though said in Ekegusii, Sagero’s expression is remarkably similar to Circute’s and Joel’s Sheng expression “*Manyake all sizes*” which effectively treats sex as a commodity that can be bought over the counter much the same way as meat at the butchery. Below is how Sagero has arranged images in the song:

<i>Moiranerie Nyasae buya</i>	<i>Give praise to God</i>
<i>Onye Atatotongerete omokungu</i>	<i>Had He not created a woman</i>
<i>Kango ning’o ogotera mwanchi</i>	<i>Who could sing about love?</i>
.....	
<i>Togotera chingencho chiabasacha</i>	<i>We sing the ways of men</i>

In above, the artist has made it clear to his audience that his subject is women; matters affection. Further, the artist seems to be interrogating the role of women in the modern society, where upon he concludes that women are important because they form the corporeal and emotional part of life which men cannot do without. His leaning toward the popular world where freedom of expression is key is indicated to the listener in the following images:

<i>(Timanyeti gose nigo indatere</i>	<i>I don’t know if after my singing</i>
<i>Intige mokong’ung’ura</i>	<i>I’ll leave you grumbling</i>
<i>Korende erieta riane Sagero</i>	<i>But my name is Sagero)</i>
<i>Abasacha, enyama yachire rino</i>	<i>Men, a piece of meat stuck in your teeth</i>
<i>Tari okorusia omere</i>	<i>Should not be swallowed after being freed</i>
<i>Nyetige eserie ebirecha</i>	<i>It should be left to guard against evil spirit</i>

“A piece of meat stuck in your teeth” is a traditional symbol for situations deemed inconveniencing. The joke behind the analogy of a stuck piece of meat is that the piece did not want to accompany the rest into oblivion, hence it held tightly onto the teeth. It should, therefore be spared lest the partaker becomes a haunted man. In relation to sex, the images signify that the only thing that should stop a

man from engaging in coitus with the next available woman is taboo. By viewing women as an unavoidable inconvenience on men, Sagero is upholding the traditional symbol of women as objects of temptation and seduction against whom men should be constantly on the lookout.

In the contemporary context, however, the stuck piece of meat refers to the close relatives of the man (including his daughters) with whom men should not have sexual intercourse. Incest and rape have, in recent times, become a real social threat with more and more cases being reported every day. A reveller that gave the above interpretation, amid excited cheers from the rest of the patrons, earned a Sh. 500 token from the musician himself. We interpreted the artist's gesture to mean he shared in the interpretation. Amid the laughter, the audience got the message that to engage in incest is indeed an act of raw greed. The next string of images turns the listener's attention to how a couple needs to relate.

<i>Enchera omosacha aresitontie</i>	<i>Men have a way with pride</i>
<i>Ekeru are nabagisangio</i>	<i>When in the company of their age mates</i>
<i>Tokaga nabare mbaka nyomba</i>	<i>At home, he's totally different with</i>
<i>Emegoko eria okorora abwate</i>	<i>The usual jolliness gone</i>
<i>Ogoika geita kiaye</i>	<i>After stepping through the gate</i>
<i>Agochenchia oba egentu ekeng'ao</i>	<i>He changes and becomes a different thing</i>
<i>Nyomba nogotogonya gwoka</i>	<i>At home, he raves all the time</i>
<i>Chinsa chionsi aresaine orakage</i>	<i>He looks like a bloated man at all times</i>
<i>Aanyagora eriogo</i>	<i>You could think he stepped over a spell</i>

In the above excerpt, Sagero chides men who show off their power over women with feigned sense of importance. Sagero portrays this as outdated, saying the real power lies in love and mutual respect. The resulting message is that men and women need each other and should strive to satisfy their legitimate partners. The message is enhanced further by the following words:

<i>Esiri yomosacha neyemo bono</i>	<i>Men have but one secret</i>
<i>Inse yerioba</i>	<i>Under the sky</i>
<i>Mosacha taiyo motindi nonye</i>	<i>There is not a single fierce man</i>
<i>Oria mokagete omotindi</i>	<i>The one you consider fierce</i>
<i>Nyomba mwaye omokungu aamogamberete</i>	<i>He is henpecked at home</i>
<i>Kwanyora onde okogambagamba</i>	<i>Some are quite talkative</i>
<i>Orakage nebarimo</i>	<i>Just like a mad man</i>
<i>Ko' nyomba mwaye nerimama</i>	<i>But in his house he is dumb</i>

The message that accrues from above is that, often, man's show of bravado is a cover-up for their deficiencies. Sagero seems keen to subvert long standing stereotypes on women's inferiority and subservience to men. Patriarchy is portrayed as a relic of the past and a weakness. His view is that both men and women should be content with their unique roles. He is equally quick to condemn women who are bent on humiliating men.

<i>Ebirecha biomokungu nomware</i>	<i>The initiate is the woman's devil</i>
<i>Mosacha naba ekiarabe</i>	<i>A man whether big or small</i>
<i>Nigo okomoita arere</i>	<i>Can be beaten by a woman</i>

Traditionally, a woman that came face to face with a male initiate that had just come from seclusion fell under a spell (King'oina, 1988, 47). In the context of the song, however, an initiate portends one more man that has come of age, and, by extension, one more dominated woman. Women respect men who are old enough to be their husbands, yet the same men pester women for sexual favours. Women too have made intercourse a new ground for grumbling. The complaints, it emerges, are aimed at justifying the secret lovers the woman entertains. Sagero says:

<i>Ninki gekogera inwe abakungu</i>	<i>Why do, you, women</i>
<i>Mokweroka ogasori</i>	<i>Pretend to be good</i>
<i>Ekeru omogeni are nyomba mwao</i>	<i>When entertaining guests but</i>
<i>Engaki eria omogeni atakaiyo</i>	<i>When alone with your husband</i>
<i>Nigo mobiteranete</i>	<i>You can't even talk</i>
<i>Okoing' onyerana gwoka</i>	<i>Always complaining</i>

In a clear break from tradition, the images are consistently presented in a manner that refrains from placing one gender above the other. Primarily, there is a veiled challenge to men not to be content with the title “men” but instead work hard to earn the title through responsibility and appropriate conduct. With such an understanding, the partners would realise that they still have a lot to offer each other in their love and sex life (That the cows are still whole).

<i>Abasacha barore nechirongi</i>	<i>Men are made by their trousers</i>
<i>Nechinegita igoti</i>	<i>And by their neck ties</i>
<i>Abakungu nigo babagamberete</i>	<i>Most are henpecked</i>

The message is that men should stop behaving as if they are special by birthright. Sagero’s approach is clearly aimed at both dismantling stereotypes and pushing his audience to drop their pretences and, for once, look at life realistically and honestly. His approach is relevant at a time when people are more and more inquisitive. In continuation with his radical approach, Sagero advises women to stop complaining that their men no longer fit their imagination of a real man and instead help them to become effective spouses. His standpoint seems to be that any man or woman is as good as any other, all factors remaining the same; hence “the cow is whole”.

<i>Abakungu manya aiga</i>	<i>Women, here is something you need to know</i>
<i>Eng'ombe nigo ekorendwa ekorende</i>	<i>Take care of the cow and it will take of you</i>
<i>Yamanya koba eng'ombe nengima</i>	<i>And then the cow becomes whole</i>
<i>Eng'ombe nengima</i>	<i>The cow is whole</i>
<i>Nonyenyerwa eeri aye togokora</i>	<i>If you demand for a bull, you won't finish</i>
<i>Eng'ombe nengima</i>	<i>The cow is whole</i>

From the foregoing context, the image of an emaciated cow becomes a symbol of an emasculated and neglected spouse. The images in the above song may then be interpreted as aimed at promoting gender equality, as well as championing a new social order that stems from a desire to respond to human challenges and experiences naturally. It is true, however, that the meaning one gets from the text is negotiated and, therefore likely to change with the context. Sagero’s approach is typical in a trend in which artists have appropriated traditional representations and turned them into popular symbols that gain their relevance from the modern contexts.

Another set of popular symbolic images are manifest in Christopher Mosioma’s song *Chiabagoire* (The Bulls have Broken Loose). Once again the traditional image of a bull is given a more fashionable meaning. Bulls that have broken loose from their closets become fierce and dangerous, especially in the presence of cows. In *Chiabagoire* the image of an ensuing dangerous pandemonium is appropriated to capture the new danger the killer disease, HIV/Aids, poses to the community:

<i>Wewe! Inkai abarendi bagenda? Tataa!</i>	<i>Careful! Where have keepers gone? Ooh!</i>
<i>Yaya, yaya, baba omintoe, chenchia rikori</i>	<i>No, no! good mum! Change course</i>
<i>Omwana ominto, chiabagoire</i>	<i>People, the bulls have broken barriers.</i>
<i>Timorara, omwana ominto</i>	<i>Don't sleep, good people</i>
<i>Soka isiko chiabagoire</i>	<i>Come out, they are at large</i>

In the above song, both old and new symbols are used to communicate the callousness of the marauding plague. Without necessarily digging up their original references, traditional symbols are

assigned rather superficial meanings in new contexts. Images in the third and fourth stanzas are immensely satirical. They lead the audience to condemning reckless sexual behaviours albeit in a light hearted manner.

<i>Abande baimokire basimegete ebituma</i>	<i>Some, despite being maize growers</i>
<i>Bire bwoye ebineene</i>	<i>With highly healthy cobs in their own garden</i>
<i>Ere omoika ogenda etaoni</i>	<i>Yet they still set off for the town</i>
<i>Ase bigasambeire</i>	<i>Where maize is roasted in the open</i>
<i>Oimoka ere ogora</i>	<i>And they choose to buy those ones</i>
<i>Obongorora omoerio oruta monwa</i>	<i>He plucks the corn and eats hurriedly</i>
<i>Kogochia komoboria oteba ekegwansa</i>	<i>When asked, he says they are tastier</i>
<i>Egesusanu, oteba ekegwansa</i>	<i>Drooped ones, he says they are tastier!</i>
<i>Twarorire buna abwo</i>	<i>We've seen many of such kind</i>
<i>Omoerio bachiire</i>	<i>At the end, they're departed</i>
<i>Dalili ya mvua ni mawingu</i>	<i>Clouds precede the rains</i>
<i>Ngoma ikipigwa kunajambo</i>	<i>The sound of a drum implies news</i>
<i>Ikipigwa saana upasuka</i>	<i>If it is beaten for long, it bursts</i>
<i>Ikipigwa sana uvunjka</i>	<i>If it is beaten for long, it breaks</i>
<i>Abande baimoka beroka chintereba</i>	<i>Others claim to be qualified drivers</i>
<i>Ing'a barabwo serious</i>	<i>That they are the serious type</i>
<i>Egari bakogendia</i>	<i>They really want to drive</i>
<i>Enisan rero</i>	<i>A Nissan (van) today</i>
<i>Mambia neturera</i>	<i>A trailer the following day</i>
<i>Egari ero yaimoka yamotwomeria</i>	<i>Then it knocks him against the wall</i>
<i>Twarorire buna abwo</i>	<i>We've seen many of such kind</i>
<i>Omoerio bachiire</i>	<i>At the end, they're departed</i>
<i>Babwate obwerori</i>	<i>Full of haughtiness</i>
<i>Omoerio bachiire</i>	<i>At the end, they're departed</i>
<i>Batari gotacha ebureki, obe!</i>	<i>They can't step on the brakes</i>
<i>Omoerio bachiire</i>	<i>At the end, they're departed</i>
<i>Bagosokia omotwe isiko</i>	<i>They stick their heads out distracted</i>

In a sharp departure from custom, men who sustain prostitution are rebuked more than their female counterparts. Such men are portrayed as foolish and plainly greedy. Unlike in olden times when men were famed for their sexual conquests, *Chiabagoire* (The Bulls have Broken Loose) views such behaviour as unnecessarily risky. Men no longer have the liberty to do what they want, since a more powerful enemy (The bull—HIV/Aids) is on the rampage. In this kind of situation, patriarchy is surely not fashionable, since it has become the bait that leads men astray and even unto death. It seems men have to trim their lust and ego if they are to survive.

The last stanza follows with a number of popular sayings that may not amount to much else than as an act of bravado and artistic experimentation by the artist. At a closer look, however, the source of the sayings seems to be the mundane excuses that people make to rationalize reckless sexual escapades, such as “condoms make sex less enjoyable,” “one sex partner is boring,” “sex keeps one refreshed”. The images appear as below:

<i>Mchezo wa meno ni njugu karanga</i>	<i>Nuts are a game of teeth</i>
<i>Gotakuna ebigichi ayio namadoido</i>	<i>To chew gum is haughtiness</i>

<i>Konyunyunta ekoo otioke omonu buya</i>	<i>Sucking a breath freshener</i>
<i>Something monotony itakuja kutubore</i>	<i>can be monotonous and boring</i>
<i>Oborabu nobuya bokonyete omotino</i>	<i>Light is of no help to the deaf</i>
<i>Bokogera okwane naye</i>	<i>It helps them to talk to you</i>
<i>Bomochani bobore tokonyara komokonya</i>	<i>Without light communication ceases</i>
<i>Obwansu bwokoigwa tibong'ana obwokorora</i>	<i>To hear is not as pleasant as to see</i>
<i>Obwansu bwogoncha tibonga'na obwokorora</i>	<i>To see is not as pleasant as to taste</i>
<i>Chaga oborwe omento ogokoenora</i>	<i>May you lack someone to enlighten you</i>

In spite of their structural weaknesses, Mosioma's improvised proverbs are sufficiently aesthetic, because they call for a degree of interpretive cleverness. The last line in the excerpt implies that the youth need to be enlightened if they are to escape the malevolent traps of modernity that have sprung up everywhere and are determined to devour them. The above expressions point to the artist's ingenuity. The sayings posit a structure that borrows profoundly from the traditional proverb, complete with the proposition and completion. Aesthetically, however, the proverbs are laced with more "shock images" than the intense reflection and thought that images in traditional proverbs are known to provoke. The "shock effect" is apparent in most contemporary music.

6. CONCLUSION

It may have become clear from the above discussion that the conception and deployment of symbols in the modern Gusii oral literature follows two main divergent styles. The first one involves the appropriation of symbols conceived in the traditional context into contemporary situations to convey messages with a contemporary bearing, as well as the old values that may have a contemporary relevance. In this approach the contemporary message conveyed through the traditional symbol is either independent from the original or complementary. In the second trend, we have symbols that have been conceived within the contemporary reality and they are therefore totally new and uniquely suited to the modern realities. In the same category there are traditional symbols that have been assigned new meanings in a process that is totally subversive as evident in the works of both Henry Sagero and Christopher Mosioma. Indeed, the modern Gusii oral artist is not hindered by lack of an in-depth understanding of the alien traditional context. Rather, he/she is determined to create relevance for himself by experimenting with old representations in new situations or even creating his own new ones. All in all, the various patterns of symbolism go to demonstrate that, contrary to common belief, symbolism in oral literature is not dormant but has taken up new trends that reflect the social dynamics. There, therefore, exists a clear relationship between past and successive contexts in the use of symbols in the oral literature of Abagusii. Equally, shifts in ideology and interpersonal relationships among the Abagusii, mostly due to exposure to modern values, have impacted on the nature of symbols used by Gusii oral artists.

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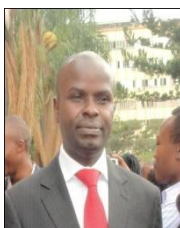
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