

African Systems of Thought

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**AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY
AS CULTURAL INQUIRY**

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Introduction to Part 2

Knowledge and Discourse

The chapters in this section of the book analyze local forms of discourse to show how different media of expression, such as the use of proverbs and metaphor, are primary aspects of vernacular idioms for understanding and managing misfortune and for effecting social and personal transformations as well as for developing ways of knowing the world. These essays share a goal of narrowing the gap between linguists and social scientists with respect to the study of language use. They confirm that the social nature of language and linguistically conditioned social phenomena are related in such a way that they bring closer together sociolinguists and other social scientists; they do so by revealing how language not only depicts but also constitutes social hierarchies and differences among its speakers, their identities, and their relations to one another. These essays center on the questions of who speaks what language form to whom, on what occasion, and for what purpose? But these essays are also concerned with the contributions that the analysis of speech can offer to other disciplinary areas through the examination of such face-to-face interactions as marriage negotiations. They also reveal the role of language as an artistic tool in social processes (i.e., praise-naming games) or as part of wider categories (i.e., the sociology of knowledge and social change).

In Peter Amuka's essay, we see how the Luo people, using the genres of *pakruok* and *ngero*, assert their status as individuals by relating themselves to other persons. *Pakruok* is a genre of speech in which an individual identifies him or herself by affiliating his or her identity with a significant other. In praising an other, one praises oneself. *Ngero* is a subgenre of *pakruok* in which one praises oneself by taking the name of a significant status. Here the play of words is complex and ambiguous, referring to numerous attributes of the person holding that status. Audiences revel in the multilayered complexity of *pakruok* and *ngero* performances. At one and the same time, these performances invoke shared attitudes and beliefs and assert the achievement and distinctiveness of individuals. What is at stake is not the truth value of these assertions but rather the skill with which they are performed. Individuals recount familiar virtues by describing other people or statuses that possess them. By recounting the attributes of others and the relationships of friendship or kinship between self and other, individuals can assert virtues and achievements not directly but rather through associations they have made with other persons and roles. Thus,

they raise their own social or moral standing to the same level as that of the others that they praise in their speech. Either these individuals are already known and admired for the qualities attributed to them or the person engaging in *pakruok* creates such status for them through his language art.

Through skilled and playful performances, important persons and characters are defined and presented to any number of audiences as these performances are repeated again and again. In the process, a community that shares a set of verbal devices, that delights in the skill of the performances—which are extremely competitive—and that is composed of marked and differentiated individuals is created and expressed in *pakruok* and *ngero* performance events. In *pakruok* and *ngero* performances, Luo show and tell themselves both to their community and to themselves. The acts of self-fashioning manifested in performance are simultaneously occasions for the construction of a moral community of shared values and references. Social ideals are invoked by assertive individuals who verbally create and place themselves above others by heightening their filiation—real or fictitious—with ideal forms of personhood and moral and social virtues and values. This is why *pakruok* is sometimes translated into English as “virtue boasting.” David Parkin refers to this process of *pakruok* when describing the social dynamics of Luo Union meetings in Nairobi in the 1960s. He writes:

At these meetings, whatever the manifest issue under discussion, the underlying assumptions of socio-economic status are expressed as initially lavish displays of prestige competition through cash donations known variously as *gisungore* (literally “they are being proud or boasting”) or *gichamo nyadhi* (“they are eating *nyadhi*” . . .) or *pakruok* (“praising,” usually by giving money to a traditional lyre-player who sings songs in praise of the donor’s family, lineage or sub-tribe). This kind of pot-latching . . . is nevertheless channeled through the “traditional” units of “sub-tribe” and lineage, for it is in the name of such units that the generous donor makes his contribution. (1978: 213)

The relation of *pakruok* to Luo assertions of self-worth makes it simultaneously a process of social integration and fission. Through *pakruok*, individuals define themselves as members of lineage groups, but *pakruok* also sets them apart from such groups in order to form or join new ones defined on the basis of either friendship or similarity to others in terms of esteemed social and personal values and achievements; through this interaction, Luo thus create sets of “emic dualisms” in their relations (Parkin 1978: 215). It is in this respect that both Amuka and Parkin depict *pakruok* as reflective of shifting parameters in Luo senses of social position and identity of individuals in a communal setting. *Pakruok*, then, is a genre of Luo speech events, a sort of public display of

the features of individualism, such as artistry of speech, strength in wrestling, virility, and even other, more “modern” features that are manifested in socio-economic achievements and positions in society. *Pakruok* and *ngero* are part of the Luo sociology of knowledge (Blount 1975).

This Luo sociology of knowledge is historically and ethnically extended to the northern Luo-speaking Acoli people of Uganda in Odoch Pido’s essay. Like Amuka, he too analyzes the everyday sayings, proverbs, and metaphors through which forms of social criticism and the knowledge of values are transmitted. This is not surprising, as the Ugandan Acoli and Kenyan Luo belong to the same cultural and language families. The influence of Okot p’Bitek’s well-known satiric poetry (see, for example, p’Bitek 1966, 1967) is powerfully present in Odoch Pido’s depiction of the impact of the growing urban lifestyles and values on the serenity of the traditional world. Like p’Bitek and several other critics of colonialism, Odoch Pido strongly argues that the colonial period brought a number of far-reaching social and cultural transformations in the Acoli communities of Gulu and Kitgum, including many changes in the very fabric of Acoli identity itself.

Of central concern to Acoli expression of crisis are the effects of crisis on the way in which Acoli are perceived in public. According to Odoch Pido, urban life has turned social interaction, especially that between men and women, into commercial transaction, producing a sex industry that is rife with disease and treated with scorn in the song he examines. But this scorn is not only a cultural satire against new values; it is also a cultural statement whose aim is to educate all those people who are exposed to the dangers of permissive urban life. These dangers, Odoch Pido tells us the Acoli people have concluded, deny people the opportunity to develop their personhood (*bedo dano*). The moral ontology of personhood, in Acoli, is constituted of a collection of culturally defined physical, social, moral, and spiritual capacities of an individual to influence and control his world. Loss of these capacities reduces an individual to the level of animality (*doko gwok*).

The emphasis here on creativity and use of language as key indicators of meaning and personhood is at the forefront of Corinne Kratz’s essay on Okiek marriage negotiations. She states that among the Okiek, important matters such as marriage negotiations must be conducted in a controlled, elaborate, and reasoned manner. Not only does this requirement lead to the recognition of different capacities of individuals and groups to produce diverse effects on their surroundings, it is also used to justify the uneven but patterned distribution of roles in society. Yet this patterned linguistic economy of cultural production easily escapes the strictures of structuralism as stated in Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the logic of practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Kratz 1994) or as

inflated by Henri Maurier (1976 [1985]; also Masolo 1995). Kratz's observation here is that collective agency cannot be considered separately from the individual capacities and agency which make it possible. Likewise, the privileged capacities identified with the male gender are always preceded, at least in the actions and decisions that relate and lead to marriage, by the leading roles of the female members of family and community. In other words, collective and individual agencies, societies, and individual persons are complementary and interactive categories in the understanding of how culture is produced (Taylor 1985). This theme relates Kratz's essay to those of Parkin and Shaw.

The ambivalence described by Kratz as being characteristic of Okiek marital roles and relations is not unique. The advice or address which the bride receives at marriage is key also to the Luba conduct of marriage ceremonies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and is part of a "master charter" which, according to Mudimbe (1991: 139ff.), "specifies and individualizes her major duties toward her spouse and his family and in so doing maintains the configuration of a patrilineal tradition." The bride becomes subjected to the interests of the patrilineal lineage, a means to its self-realization and fulfillment. But it is also through this instrumentality that the bride hopes to fulfill her own personhood, agency, and influence upon the dialectic of patrilineality. This too is shared by the Baluba in Mudimbe's text (1991: 142-43; and Theuws 1983). Gendered personhood subjugates, but it also liberates—and vice versa—actors related through different roles in the tangled game of the cultural ideology of everyday practice.

From a critical point of view, what this means for the victims of ideological oppression is "that those subject to oppression experience *even now* hopes and desires which could only be realistically fulfilled by a transformation of their [gendered] conditions" (Eagleton 1991: xiv). Kratz's position here is that the ideological reality of groups' interests is related to the phenomenal reality of social and economic roles through a linguistic reality—itsself an unevenly distributed resource of meanings and significations—by which the other two are proposed, negotiated, and even canonized as referential tradition for future generations. Language thus becomes a form of social action, "excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such 'mystification,' as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of creating or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions" (Eagleton 1991: 5-6). But mystification through manipulation of language also "suggest[s] that ideology is a matter of 'discourse' rather than 'language.' It concerns the actual uses of language between particular human subjects for the production of specific effects" (Eagleton 1991: 9).

Every community has its own lineage idioms and other linguistic techniques of containing the random element of internal discord or the individual desire to escape the ambivalence of collective norm versus perceived personal fate (Parkin 1978: 214-42, especially 228-37).

The authors in this section present an epistemologically interesting view: that meanings, together with their criteria, are intersubjectively created in the course of cultural performance. They argue that meanings are created and reworked in communal settings by people who share and use linguistic tools for defining and communicating these meanings to others. But what happens if those meanings are not easily conveyed, when the pattern of circulation and the context of reception exhibit radical differences from the context of production? This issue is discussed in Part 3, "African Discourses on Development."

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