

also be exploited or parodied for a generation, or many generations, by entertainers of genius like Lele Gbomba, but they will truly flourish as a living art form only so long as they are recreated anew, stretched, pointed, heated and bent into new shapes and purposes in the emotion of the narrative performing session. How long conditions will persist to allow this full flowering of the most accomplished level of oral narrative performance is impossible to say, though I expect that the double assault of the electronic media, and spreading literacy, has already cut the oral narrative tradition at its root. But for as long as the tradition does continue, the charge to the scholar in the field is clear: know the teller as you know the tale, and if possible, contract with Harry Bailey, register at the Tabard Inn, and ride along on the pilgrimage.

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Ivan Karp

Laughter at Marriage: Subversion in Performance

All acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people. Without hearing the chorus we cannot understand the drama as a whole.

M. M. Bakhtin

Ritual processes are distinguished by an attitude of solemnity, or are they? At the very least we expect the emotional tone displayed within ritual and ceremonial to be consistent within each phase of the process. Among all the different complexes of custom in the societies of the West, marriage is a rite of passage that commands attention and respect. The social process of marriage rites has as its consequence transformations in status for the protagonists; it alters the relationships among the kin of each party, expresses a sense of commitment both to the relationship created in the rite and the other party to it. Finally, marriage acknowledges that the jural status of the protagonists has changed as a result of participation in the rite. It is little wonder that such a significant and encompassing change in life should often be characterized by the sense of awe which Durkheim asserts lies at the emotional core of all religious rituals.

The difficulty with this characterization of marriage rites and their consequences is that it could equally well be applied to marriage rituals among the Iteso of Kenya in all respects but one. The attitudes displayed at Iteso marriage ceremonies and no doubt by many other African peoples are not as consistent as we might expect to find associated with such significant social consequences. While an individual participant such as the bride can display anxiety and tension, which is normal for an event that has such important consequences for her, other participants, all women, treat this exclusively female rite as an occasion for laughter, joking, and ribald commentary.

*This is a slightly amended version of a paper appearing under the same title in *Transformations of African Marriage*, edited by David Parkin and David Nyamwaya. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987.

This essay addresses the problem of contradictions between what Gregory Bateson called *ethos*, the emotional attitude or tone displayed by participants toward an event, and the meanings that can be extracted from an analysis of the complex of custom that composes the practices associated with the event.

My special concern will be with forms of communicative action that are not amenable to description in linear terms. These aspects of discourse, as Anthony Giddens points out, "are often simply discounted" because they are "refractory to being rendered as statements of propositional belief or which, like humor or irony, derive their meaning not so much from the content of what is said as from the style, mode of expression or context of utterance" (1984: xxx). Giddens himself goes on to argue that even these are less important than the skills embedded in what he calls "practical consciousness." I think Giddens underestimates the importance of performance-oriented forms as means of self-expression. That these are "refractory to being rendered as statements of propositional belief" is a significant aspect of their meaning to the actors who perform them. Humor and irony are subtle and powerful means of expression available to people whose communicative options are otherwise constrained by the social conditions in which they act.

In any case, anthropologists have tended to ignore irony, satire and humor in social settings that are fundamentally serious. This failing may be the product of two related assumptions. First, there is a tendency to attribute consistency to the actions and utterances of members of other cultures, a tendency Gellner refers to as the principle of "contextual charity" (1970). It is likely that the types of experience that tend to be eliminated in order to create consistency will be the more ephemeral aspects of action.

The second reason for ignoring the performance of irony is that anthropological discourse has tended to exhibit a bias towards order. Those aspects of communicative action that tend to celebrate disorder and subversion are not only difficult to describe but often contradict the analyses that anthropologists make of ritual processes. The few instances of descriptions of laughter at marriage I have found in the ethnographic literature explain them as instances of tension release. The analysis of ritual requires a greater appreciation of contradictions internal to the process.

The general problem of how to understand contradictory definitions manifested in social behavior has attracted considerable attention of late. Perhaps as anthropologists have increasingly turned to more actor-oriented accounts of social life and forms, they have found, as did Bateson, that a significant aspect of variation across societies may reside

not in custom but in performance. Indeed the different interpretations of what is customary facilitate this. Some researchers now recognize that performance is capable of sustaining more subtle shades of meaning than are conventionally examined in the anthropology of ritual forms.

In *Naven*, for instance, Bateson (1958) found that the same ritual could have opposed meanings that depend on the relationship of context to the *ethos* displayed. This single complex of custom is called the Naven ceremony; its central act is the rubbing of the buttocks on the shin, done by a mother's brother to his sister's son. Performed with a proper amount of solemnity, the act marked the sister's son's achievements. It is an act of acknowledgment and pride. The Iatmul think of their mothers' brothers as "male mothers." The action is associated with aspects of sexuality found in procreative activity. In Naven, mothers' brothers are asserting their pride in and association with descendants.

The Naven ritual can emerge in a contrary frame, however. Men dressed in "widow's weeds" can capture their sisters' children and perform the Naven with satirical intent. The same action can be defined as a deliberate denigration of the pretensions of the unhappy victim of the performance. Celebration in this case is turned into satire and ironic commentary. In the context of the relations between the performer and his victim, it becomes a potent instrument of social control. Bateson develops his analysis in precisely this way. The invocation of different *metamessages* as he calls them, embodied in the more labile aspects of performance, is interpreted as acting as a control mechanism that can be used to restore balance in social relations that are undergoing change, where one individual is seeking to redefine his relationship with other members of the community.

From Bateson's account of the Naven complex, it is difficult to distinguish between two aspects of performance that are now important to anthropologists and folklorists concerned with such matters. The first is the *performance event*, the frame that is invoked to define the situation, and the second is the more ephemeral dimension of performance that Bauman refers to as the *artistry* (1977). This second can refer to elements of style, attitude, and reaction on the part of performers and audience that are expository of how they experience and make the event meaningful to them. Participants undoubtedly bring to such events expectations about how they will experience them, expectations based on participation in similar events. These expectations are not institutionalized in any meaningful sense, however. They are not rules governing either the definition of the situation or the behavior manifested in it. Instead they are ways through which we make the rules that define an event such as ritual meaningful and relevant to us. To the anthropologist familiar with the

ethnography of New Guinea, this statement has a familiar ring. Social and political life is often played out in public drama among the peoples of the Sepik River, where the Iatmul live. Their political systems are oriented to what have been called "big men," builders of highly unstable coalitions who are skilled in the political game of claim and counter-claim. In the political world, satire and irony are valuable tools.

The Africanist social anthropologist may find resonances as well. In a sense, Bateson's account bears considerable resemblance to Evans-Pritchard's account of the role of the leopard-skin chief in resolving conflict among the Nuer of the Southern Sudan (1940). At first sight this appears to be a curious assertion. The Nuer are not known for the dramatic and playful character of their political life. The tropes of irony and satire have not been described as mechanisms of political assertion and control. Yet the leopard-skin chief operated in much the same way as the Naven ritual among the Iatmul. Not an act, but a person, he provides the setting in which social relations can be redefined. Thus, the leopard-skin chief is equally a mechanism for the emergence of equilibrium. If the parties are of unequal power, he may even be a means to assert control. Furthermore his actions provide a setting in which the authenticity of assertions about self, power, and autonomy can be affirmed or denied—where the authenticity of claims about social reality is either validated or denied. Perhaps it is not surprising that two anthropologists of the same period should produce analyses so readily comparable in spite of the differences in the social formations they research.

We are no longer so interested as we once were in how social institutions restore equilibrium. Nor are we so convinced that they achieve it so easily. The moment of reproduction is after all the moment of change. If a seeming contradiction can be used to restore social relations to an earlier state, then it is not so difficult to bring that contradiction to bear on change. In the marriage rites I will describe for the Iteso, the contradictions displayed in the rituals can easily be shown to have implications for social control. They are explicitly interpreted this way by the Iteso themselves. I am convinced, however, that a description that is content to interpret marriage rites as a mechanism for controlling others or establishing solidary social relationships trivializes the meanings with which the actors fill their performances.

For all its limitations, Bateson's work shows how subtle a vehicle for the creativity of message-making performance can be, in spite of the misleading cybernetic assumptions of his thinking. What is often missing in descriptions oriented to equilibrium or cyclical change are two related aspects of performance. First, it must be remembered that both performer and audience bring prior expectations to the event, and

second, the successful achievement of a performance that attempts to create a complex message such as irony is a difficult matter. It entails the creating of implicit commentary through the contradictory juxtaposition of such aspects of performance as custom and emphasis or utterance and action, between what Stephen Tyler aptly calls "the said and the unsaid" (1978).¹

Research in ritual and theatricality suggests that the complex messages and mixing of tropes characteristic of performance are parasitic on a less complicated stratum of meaning, that they refer to a different framework for interpretation, one associated with everyday life in which relatively uncontroversial meanings are attributed to events. Before a Naven ritual, for example, can be performed with ironic intent, the participants must recognize a pre-existing stratum of meaning that defines the Naven as a ceremonial gesture celebrating achievement. The complex metmessage is then achieved through the artful transformation of a relatively simple ritual gesture into a more complex theatrical one. This transformation suggests to me a tentative hypothesis about the layering of meaning in performance. The power of the gesture often resides in the quality of the performance. The efficacy of symbols is not simply a matter of something inherent in custom. It is created and recreated in what people do and often in the ephemeral embellishments through which they enhance their actions. These embellishments are not referentially empty, however. They both assume and refer to what is known and shared between audience and performer. They do this in complex ways. As ritual they refer back to the contexts of everyday life and as performance they can be used to comment on the very process of referring itself. This complex process may go on simultaneously within a single event.²

It is important to note that performances are often judged on the quality of transformation of that which is known into that which is performed. This judgment is aesthetic. What is evaluated is not so much the content of the performance as the skill with which the performance is achieved, how well the everyday is enhanced and transformed into something more than everyday.

I do not want to appear to be advocating either morally empty formalism or a socialist realist approach to ritual performances. As I hope to show below with respect to the Iteso data, a transformation need not simply entail a change of form or content. The transformation can act back against and serve as commentary upon that which has been transformed. It is related, as Handelman notes, to the formation of social identity (1979). The relationship between the extraordinary that is manifested in performance and the ordinary that is transformed may be one of conflict and tension. It is precisely this point that Maurice Bloch

has failed to realize in his various attempts to assert that such extraordinary moments as ritual and performance are less real, in some sense, than the ordinary.³ Bloch takes a kind of Stalinist position to the ritual and the arts, that they are the very embodiment of false consciousness, that they impose authority on the flux of what is universal and everyday. He fails to recognize that the everyday itself changes from social formation to social formation. He also denies the possibility that the creative elements in social life can be tied to cultural and social criticism. He has missed the entire development of recent Marxist thought from Gramsci to Raymond Williams. The alternative position has been explored by David Parkin, who has shown for a variety of settings that creativity is embodied in the transformations that agents work upon contexts (1980a, 1982).

The idea of transformation of the simple into the complex has its own implications. As I have argued, the notion of transformation assumes that the meanings that can be conveyed through performance are parasitic upon other meanings. I use the idea of a parasitic relationship here in a non-evaluative sense. What I am trying to convey is a relationship of non-reversible dependence, in which an emotional inflection such as irony depends upon the acknowledgment of the possibility of a non-inflected performance. I want to state as firmly as I can, however, that to acknowledge does not mean either to accept or deny the claims entailed by performance.

In fact, as I will argue for Iteso women, the potential for complexity inherent in performance allows the performers and their audience to "speak" with more than one voice at the same time. The different voices may contradict one another. If the result is confusion, such is the essence of social life.

My inspiration for this perspective is not so much Bateson but the Soviet literary theorist and philosopher M. M. Bakhtin. For a complicated set of reasons, much of Bakhtin's work was published under other names. As Bakhtin he developed a theory of carnival frame, with its emphasis on bodily presentation, emphasized folk against official culture, bodily knowledge over rational processes, power against authority. In his brilliant book on Freud, published under the name of his friend Voloshinov, Bakhtin argues that utterances can simultaneously convey what he called "official and unofficial" ideologies. Through the use of such mechanisms as intonation, complex and often conflicting messages manifest themselves. For Bakhtin a conflict of messages and interpretation is contained in one voice (Bakhtin 1965, 1981; Voloshinov 1973a, 1973b; Clark and Holquist 1984).

Bakhtin's writings suggest that accounts of ritual performances have been simplified. Performance can be used to assert differing messages of

authenticity and inauthenticity either at different phases of the same performance or even in performances that refer to one another. This much we know from the studies of Victor Turner and his students.⁴ It is also possible, however, that the elaboration of unadorned meaning may assert contradictory messages simultaneously.⁵ This effect can be achieved through the manner and style of performance. Hence one action differently performed can transform content in a variety of ways. Because of its performative nature, ritual can be used to indicate more than the nature of the social structure of which it is a part. The complexities of ritual performance can be made expository of the contrarities of experience itself.

If experience can be full of contradictions, so can the comments made upon it in performance. This perspective has been a central theme in Bakhtin's writings. His special concern has been to examine how what he calls "unofficial ideology" has been expressed not so much through discursive form as manifested through the use of body and emotion in performance, and then to show its capacity to subvert "official" ideology (Voloshinov 1973a; Clark and Holquist 1984: 171-86). By ideology Bakhtin refers to the definitions of self and person exhibited in a social formation. Hence Bakhtin has been drawn to such seeming ephemera as carnival and privileged obscenity. In his *Rabelais* book, for instance, he argues that bodily processes continually betray the existence of life process, living stuff, beneath the uniform imposed by official culture (Bakhtin 1965; Clark and Holquist 1984: 295-321). It may very well be that laughter at marriage among the Iteso tends to subvert, or at least to comment on, the reproductive purposes for which marriage rituals are performed.

I turn, now, to the fieldwork portion of this essay, marriage among the Iteso. For this analysis it will be necessary to describe the marriage process as it is punctuated by ritual over time, the predominant emphases expressed in symbol and rite in those rituals, and the performance of the first phase of the marriage, the one most distinguished by the laughter of women.

The Southern Iteso are a para-Nilotic speaking people who live across the Kenya-Uganda border. Within Kenya they comprise a linguistic minority among the Bantu-speaking Abaluyia with whom they have had substantial contact and intermarriage, as they have with the JoPaDhola in the Uganda side of the territory they occupy (Karp 1978). Their ritual system has been characterized by a high degree of flexibility and change, making it a virtual historical record of their experience of contact and change. Many Iteso recognize the dynamic quality of ritual processes among them and are able to distinguish between recent adoptions and

elements that have had a longer-term residence among them. Despite the considerable changes in ritual custom that the Iteso have experienced, my fieldwork indicates that throughout the region they occupy marriage rituals have retained a core of customary practices that can distinguish the Iteso from their neighbors. While anthropologists have generally underestimated the degree to which cultural borrowing and exchange occur throughout Africa, it is a good principle to assume that where an area of cultural conservatism does appear, the elements involved are essential for the preservation of some sense of identity or purpose.⁶

Marriage rites among the Iteso compose part of an essential cultural sphere dedicated to physical and social reproduction. The rituals are performed entirely by women. The men who do attend act entirely in the role of audience and interested spectator. They are unessential for the ritual process and are often absent when it is performed. I am unaware of any other African society in which marriage rituals are so much the exclusive domain of women. This fact may seem even more puzzling when it is associated with the social organization of the Iteso, a patrilineal society whose enduring units are non-localized agnatic categories and groupings.⁷ The women who perform the rituals on behalf of Iteso lineages and clans are the wives and mothers of the male members of agnatically constituted groups. Hence rituals of incorporation and procreation are performed by persons who are neither born into nor consanguineally related to the groups they perpetuate.

A great deal has been made in social anthropology of the *matrilineal puzzle*, that paradox that arises out of the contradictions between the matrilineal mode of descent and various residence patterns that separate heirs and their benefactors (Richards 1950). Lévi-Strauss, for example, refers to this type of social system as a *dysharmonic regime*, in contrast with patrilineal societies, which are supposed to be harmonic. In the harmonic regime of the patrilineal society no contradictions arise between residence and descent (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 197-221). This distinction ignores at least two critical points. First, there is far more variation in residence in so-called patrilineal societies than Lévi-Strauss appears to note. The Iteso, for example, are almost entirely neo-local in residence and they have moved considerable distances from their natal homes in the recent past. Second, the harmonic-dysharmonic distinction is articulated from the perspective of one sector of men's lives. Matrilineal societies probably do pose problems for men who have to choose between "father love" and "mother right," as Malinowski described it, but women are often torn between conflicting interests and loyalties as well.

Turner's studies of the social aspects of "drums" of affliction among the Ndembu show this very well (Turner 1969).

Hence, the question of disharmony is more a question of perspective and social position than type of social system. My own view is that all social structures pose problems and difficulties for the agents who compose them. These difficulties differ with respect to such factors as position and history. Yet the idea that particular modes of affiliation pose seemingly irresolvable problems for the people who practice them has merit, if it is not used in a simple-minded fashion. Iteso women experience contradictions in the conditions of their existence that could be termed a *patrilineal puzzle*. Patrilineal societies are composed of groups and categories that are reproduced by aliens, non-members who have married into them. Some of the literature on witchcraft accusations in patrilineal African societies shows that the alien status of women is a vital concern.⁸

Among the Iteso the contradictions of the patrilineal puzzle are manifested through their patterns of inheritance. The Iteso have what has been called *the house-property complex*, a complex of inheritance rules whereby the children of one mother form a single inheritance unit. The Iteso have a substantial number of households with plural marriages. In the Amukura area fully 33 percent of households contain more than one wife. Hence, at one point in time more than half of the married women are living in a polygynous setting.

Movable property, in the form of cattle, is inherited by sets of full siblings. Cattle brought in through the marriage of a full sister will ideally be used for the marriage of a male full sibling. On the other hand household heads control access to and distribution of the cattle. This complex of inheritance rules and the possibility of manipulating it often has the consequence of dividing households into competing groups of full siblings, each striving for a share of the family estate.

These social arrangements can have severe consequences for the autonomy of adult women. A striking feature of many patrilineal-based societies with the house-property complex is a low divorce rate (Barnes 1967; Mitchell 1967; Gluckman 1971). For the Iteso the result of their inheritance practices is to create an interest group centered on a woman and her children and to embed that group in a system of marriage exchanges. The consequence of divorce among the Iteso would be, first, that a woman's children would be placed at a disadvantage in the inheritance process, and second, that the marriage of the protector of the woman's children, her brother, their mother's brother, would be endangered because he

would have to return the bridewealth he received at her marriage and used to marry himself. Thus, no matter what the quality of marriage relationships among the Iteso, women are constrained by the interests of their children and prevented by their natal families from severing the marriage tie.

For an important segment of a woman's adult life, her fertile married period, her social life is severely constrained and lacking in options. Put another way, we might say that the controls that impinge upon her actions are at their most extreme during her fertile years. Iteso ritual and ideology justify this situation. Marriages are conceived of as entailing the transfer of women's productive and reproductive labor from her natal lineage into her marital lineage. A marriage is constituted through the exchange of one element in production, cattle, for another, women. The women = cattle equation has been often enough remarked upon in the literature on Nilotic-type societies but there is not as yet any account of how systematically it pervades ritual processes (Kronenberg 1972).

For the Iteso this symbolic equation is marked at all important points in their marriage process. A marriage itself is only the beginning of the process of household formation and inseparable from that in Iteso thought and practice. Marriages are constituted over a considerable period of time and occur in a number of stages, many of which, incidentally, have been omitted recently in the increasing number of Christian families. The first ritual stage, called *akiguan* (the smearing), establishes the marital relationship. Many other life-cycle rituals mark the birth and growth of children until the final ritual of incorporation into the husband's clan, which can only be performed after children and the viability of the household are seen as endangered. This ritual is called *egwasit* (the sprinkling), and involves an inversion of many of the relationships asserted at the smearing ritual.

In *akiguan* the bride is ritually associated with the cattle of bridewealth for which she has been exchanged. She is driven to her natal home with the stick that is used to drive the bridewealth cattle. This stick, called *apas*, is itself a sign of fertility and women who have grown children and have performed the *egwasit* ceremony are entitled to carry it. The object that moves the cattle in one direction causes the woman to return in exchange. In the final ceremony, *egwasit*, the wife/mother assimilates herself to the category of cattle in ritual process through the act of covering herself with the hide of a freshly sacrificed cow and returning to her natal home, accompanied by her co-wives of the lineage. Cattle symbolism pervades marriage ceremonies and establishes the equivalence of these two elements of production, women and cattle. Married women practice a series of ritual prohibitions, called *italia*, from *akitale*

(to be forbidden). Many of these have direct associations with cattle or their habits. Thus, women may not step over the rope that tethers cattle to a peg in the household. Women may not eat the thigh bone of a cow. Neither women nor cattle are allowed to go out at temporal margins such as dawn or dusk. These prohibitions often have direct fertility associations. The prohibition against stepping over a cattle-tethering rope, for example, is also found in beer parties, where women may not step over a beer straw (Karp 1980). In both instances the prohibition is against a female reproductive organ, the vagina, occupying the same space as a connector which is similar to an umbilicus. The parallel was even suggested by some Iteso informants and is a familiar theme in Nilotic symbolism. The prohibition against eating the thigh bone of a cow is interesting because the hind leg is reserved for either lineage or exogamous sub-clan at mortuary ceremonies. Once again the association with lineage identity and reproduction and women's reproductive powers is paramount. The connection here is that women are only forbidden to practice these prohibitions during their fertile married years. After *egwasit* the prohibitions are lifted.⁹

In the initial ceremony, *akiguan*, the bride sits on a cow's hide, which symbolizes the act of sexual intercourse, flanked on both sides by women who are her *akain* (co-wives), women married to members of their husband's lineage and generation. These women are clothed only from the waist down. The bride's back is smeared with cream that has been mixed in a gourd with seeds. (This is a frequent practice. Some clans may have variations of this custom.) The symbolic action is intended to represent the regularization of sexual intercourse within the confines of marriage, that is, intercourse whose purpose is procreation and reproduction. The women flanking the bride establish an equivalence among the married women of the same generation within a lineage; in fact, they call each other co-wife. The smearing is performed by a co-wife of the bride's future mother-in-law. Thus, two generations assert themselves at the ritual—the generation of established mothers and the generation that will succeed them. A wife calls her mother-in-law *tata* (grandmother), while the mother-in-law refers to her son's wife as *ateran*, derived from the verb *atera* (to look after or to herd). These usages establish yet another bovine equivalence—as men herd cattle, so women herd their son's wives.

This second equivalence is manifested immediately after the act of sexual smearing. The classificatory mother-in-law takes up the wand used for driving cattle and repeatedly strikes the bride. In order to escape her beating, the bride rushes into the house in front of which she is sitting. There she finds her actual mother-in-law, who reputedly also

beats her with the wand. This impression is certainly conveyed by the shrieks emanating from the house. After a short but intense period, the door opens and the bride emerges clothed in white, the color of health, well-being, and transformation. She may never again wear the clothes with which she began the ceremony. More rituals take place the next day, but after this particular ceremony, the bride sleeps with her husband. If she sleeps with anyone not in the relationship of classificatory younger brother to him, he will be struck by illness.

This ritual sequence establishes a hierarchy of reproductive status into which the bride fits, brings her sexuality under the control of her husband's lineage, and asserts the responsibility of different categories of women for lineage and household reproduction. I will call the performance of ritual custom on this occasion the "official" ideology of the Iteso. It places the status of women into what is an essentially reproductive world view and strongly emphasizes the importance of women as vectors of reproduction, just as it establishes the equivalence of women and cattle. Perhaps the most striking feature of the ritual is the absence of men as active participants. Domestic ritual is performed by women among the Iteso, on behalf of groups constituted through links among men who are conspicuous by their absence. This provides a dramatic portrayal of the patrilineal paradox.

My bare-bones description fails to convey the feel of the ritual performance, however. The actions are accompanied by much joking, fun, good-natured criticism and general commentary on the part of the women. The emotional high point of the ritual begins not when the bride is smeared with cream, symbolically a very significant act, but when the bride is beaten with the cattle-driving wand. If any men happen to be present, they show distinct signs of nervousness as the moment approaches. The old woman doing the beating is licensed to beat anyone she may choose and males are particularly good game. Even anthropologists are not immune! Other women who have a reputation for selfishness and lack of cooperation may be beaten as well. This is all experienced as great fun. The women dissolve with laughter as the old woman strikes out and the shrieks from inside the hut are enormously amusing. Some of the sources of this amusement are easy to discern. Dignified men being chased by old women are certainly amusing to Western eyes. A joking punishment is a good agent of social control when applied to uncooperative co-wives. In any case we could easily argue that such rituals provide major contexts for the expression of female solidarity in Iteso society among women who occupy the same roles and cooperate in everyday life. Thus, they serve to establish a sense of community, of a group of persons with the same interests and experience.

All this is true, but I think there is more as well. The pleasure derived from the ritual arises out of the tension between the official and unofficial perspectives involved. Women are agents of reproduction in Iteso society, and their role is utilized to justify their lack of autonomy, in their view as well. The Iteso perform their marriage rituals in order to establish a sense of bodily and behavioral discipline through which the significant units that compose their social order will be reproduced. This goal is particularly stressed in the "beating" that provides the emotional high point of the ritual. This is the only point in any Iteso ritual where the whipping of another human occurs. I neither saw nor heard that it was so serious as to cause injury. The significance of the whipping is that it is performed at a ritualized moment of physical reproduction and in conjunction with a general equation made by the Iteso of women and cattle.

The women who do the beating have achieved successful reproductive status in the very lineages the brides are joining. Having performed the sprinkling ceremony, they are relieved of the responsibility of practicing the prohibitions that will become the defining conditions of the new bride. In some sense they are effecting a transfer of fertility and procreative power, which is symbolized in the ritualization of the act of intercourse.

Without the ritual actions of the women, the physical actions of men during intercourse will have no effect. This is the moment when the agency of women is made apparent. What is of particular interest in Iteso ritual practice is that women are agents in two of the dictionary senses of the terms. Through their practice they bring about the effect of social and physical reproduction. This is the first and primary sense of agency, in which one party acts for another. The limited autonomy of women has the paradoxical consequence of putting them in a situation of power. Their power is specific; it is the power of the subordinate agent upon whom the superordinate becomes dependent.

Thus, Iteso ritual sets up a complex relationship between the control of women and the delegation to them of the right and ability to act. This paradox is dramatized most effectively in the act of whipping the bride. On the one hand, women are ritually associated with the attributes of cattle. Both cattle and women are incapable of exercising the forms of self-control that enable independent goal-directed action. Both need the external discipline that is manifested in the act of whipping (perhaps "driving" is a better word). The wand that drives the bridewealth cattle to the natal home of the bride is made of the same material as the wand that drives the bride into her mother-in-law's house. The only other use for this wand is as a display of status for post-menopausal women. Thus, the

bodily discipline that is enforced in the ritual is externally enforced.¹⁰ Yet the very agents who enforce it are women themselves.

Laughter at marriage is one of those ephemeral forms of action that are not easily described or explained in discursive and linear terms. If I can draw a difficult distinction, laughter is expressive in its own terms and resists reduction to comment and explanation. How often have we had the experience that telling the point of the joke destroys its effect as humor.

It was not until I had written the first version of this paper, many years after I had initially gone to the field, that I thought of asking Iteso women about why they laughed at marriage. Very few chose to interpret their experience. Yet this is the only point in Iteso ritual life where women are whipped. It is also the sole point where so much amusement is expressed. Women's laughter is not the embarrassed giggling characteristic of young women and men, an expression of awkward and uncertain social skills. Nor is it the laughing found with the teasing that often happens during intimate occasions. This is uproarious amusement shared by audience and participants alike. The special association of what women do (they whip each other) and how they experience it (they laugh) insists on an interpretation.

I have already pointed out that there is a slapstick element in the laughter. The dignity of jurally superordinate men and ordinarily dignified women can be subverted with impunity. My informants did point out that "This is the only occasion for a woman to cane a man without retaliation." Physical punishment, as I mentioned, is the prerogative of the husband.

Iteso ritual is characterized by little verbal material, in striking contrast with much East and Central African material. Gesture rather than speech is far more often the focal point of Iteso rituals. Nor are the Iteso particularly fond of interpreting their ritual gestures. In this case I was dealing with actions that were not only non-verbal but informal as well. Beyond the stereotypical assertions of female right to discipline men and other women, I got little in the way of interpretive comment. Finally, after completing the analysis on which this paper is based, I resorted to an often effective field research technique, the leading question. I was interviewing three women who are very knowledgeable about Iteso ritual. The oldest, a woman in her early eighties, is often called in to officiate at rituals because of her extensive knowledge. Her daughter-in-law and her daughter were also present, sitting together, legs stretched out in front of them.

I presented my interpretation of laughter at marriage, arguing that it was women who possessed the power (*apedor* = capacity) to make the

ritual effective and that the men were dependent on women in ritual contexts. The three women replied simultaneously, as if in choral response, "*ee-bo*," an Iteso form of agreement. Then the oldest added, "You see, we manage the bulls that day." I sensed some discomfort on the part of the men present. The household head interrupted his mother and cut off his wife, actions not characteristic of Iteso discourse.

There is little more I can say in describing the laughter. It is but a brief episode in an elaborate ritual complex. Yet it happens, and it happens in the midst of the most serious transformation of status women undergo in Iteso society, a transformation that is as abrupt as it is severe.¹¹

I think Durkheim would have been pleased with the official ideology of Iteso ritual. In Iteso society men and women seek to control the bodies of women for agnatic good. The paradox is that those bodies originate outside the lineages they reproduce and that men are excluded from the most fundamental contexts in which their lives are reproduced. The dependence of men is not that they do not control the lives of women but that they are forced to delegate their control to women themselves.

Thus, men become dependent on women in a way they cannot escape. From one point of view, that of the women, this can be very funny, in an ironic way. They exclude the very men on whose behalf they act from supervising the rituals through which their lives are reproduced. I believe it is significant that the aspect of *akiguan* that is so amusing is the beating and driving associated with cattle-herding. The association of the control of women with the control of cattle is fairly patent in the ritual symbolism entailed here. Yet the paradox of the delegation to women of the control of women has its amusing aspect and consequences. Women are simultaneously controlled and controlling in this ritual. It is always difficult to interpret the inchoate aspects of experience, but I suspect that they experience the power of procreativity in their rituals. After all, these inchoate aspects have the most serious consequences and often emerge out of serious situations such as severe illness. There is here a paradox of autonomy and control, of power (in the sense of capacity) and hegemony, that is manifested in women's experiences and rituals. The body is obviously a critical element in Iteso life. Women's bodies are significant vectors of social and physical reproduction. Yet Iteso capacity to control them is limited. The body is continually escaping from the constraints put upon it. A parallel can be drawn between the treatment and attitude toward the body for women in ritual and Bakhtin's account of the body beneath the uniform in carnival. The body continually betrays attempts to hide or clothe it. Our hopes for the world are continually controverted by our attempts to control it. This then is the unofficial side of the external controls Iteso attempt to place

on women's bodies. Their view of the consequences of their failures to control the body is tragic. Iteso domestic rituals are obsessively concerned about failures in fertility. Yet they may escape the tragedy during a brief disorderly moment when women celebrate their resistance to control through laughter.

Women's roles among the Iteso can present real difficulties for themselves. It is just a little bit ironic that they can also present real difficulties for men. This is the unofficial side. If women are committed to the official ideology of Iteso society, this does not suggest that they cannot, on occasion, enjoy the problems they present both to men and even to themselves. At some moments the unofficial gains a momentary triumph over the official. In this rupture of the official through performance emerges the laughter that constitutes the aesthetics of Iteso marriage rites.

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NOTES

1. This is actually a more complicated distinction than I indicate, since it involves at least two sorts of "unsaid" aspects of performance. The first are the implicit conventions that defy the frame of interaction and the second are the intentional creations of speaker and hearer (Tyler 1978: 459).

2. Don Handelman has explored the complexities of these issues with respect to Bateson's analysis of the Naven ceremony. His emphasis is on how performance can be used to redefine the definition of the situation from ritual to play.

3. See his 1974 article for the clearest statement of his position with respect to performance.

4. See especially Handelman 1979 and Kapferer 1983.

5. A major effort of Bakhtin was to assert that a multiplicity of conflicting messages was invariably communicated simultaneously (Clark and Holquist 1984: 68-70).

6. My fieldwork was primarily in the Amukura area and in the southern division of Busia District, Kenya. I have no evidence that those aspects of marriage rituals I will be discussing are different in locations with which I am less familiar.

7. Lineage-based forms of organization among the Iteso are not property-holding corporations and are corporate with respect only to ritual and marriage.

8. See especially Ngubane's account (1977) of how Zulu wives are accused of sorcery in terms of the logic of accusation and their stranger status.

9. Among the Ugandan Iteso, the final ceremony in which the prohibitions are lifted is called *ekonyokoit* and is performed one year after the birth of the third

child (Nagashima 1976). Among the Iteso of Kenya, the timing is erratic and based on sustained illness. The emphasis is less on removal of prohibition than on the creation of a community of successfully fertile women. Thus, the *egwasit* leads to a second phase of the ritual, called *akinyam alitibor*, 'eating the vagina,' in which the married women of a lineage return to the married home of the wife to share the roasted perineal flesh of the sacrificed cow.

10. A striking contrast can be found in Suzette Heald's account (1982) of the neighboring Gisu male circumcision rituals, which require self-conscious bodily control on the part of the initiate.

11. Two of the three instances I collected of attempted suicide among the Iteso were of young women about to be married.

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J. H. Kwabena Nketia

The Intensity Factor in African Music

The development of performance traditions which give scope to specific modes of expression and presentation of music and related arts seems to be a major preoccupation of African societies and particularly of those individuals who play creative and leadership roles in music and dance in community life. Whether it is the Ga *kpledzoo*, the Ekonda *bobongo*, the Chopi *ngodo* or the Tallensi *dea*, it seems essential in African musical practice to consider not only the modes of communication that can be established through music itself, but also the ways of presenting music as an event that provides an integrated aural, kinesic, and visual experience that stimulates particular modes of response and interaction. Hence a performance-tradition is distinguished in terms of the style of its music, instrumentation or choral organization, as well as its performance practice, modes of behavior, dance styles and dance formations, distinctive costume, make-up, masks, and objects related to the occasion of performance.

Such performance traditions are cultivated by recreational groups as well as voluntary organizations, musicians of the royal court and religious groups. Accordingly, in some societies ritual experts are also performers of some sort, who may play distinct roles both as priests and priestesses in command of esoteric knowledge and as mediums or "actors," singers, and dancers (Beattie and Middleton 1969). In such societies training for the priesthood (which may begin after a person has been "called" by a deity) is quite protracted and may include learning the details of rituals and the lore of healing and medicine as well as the songs and dances of the particular deity or of the religious domain as a whole.

Many aspects of performance can be investigated in such traditions, aspects which form part of the background knowledge and experience that music makers and others bring to a performing arena. For example,

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