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**How to become a Kisii folktale: Generic features of moralizing narratives among the Gusii
people of Kenya**

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1. Introduction

Among the Gusii people of southwest Kenya, there is a particular kind of narrative genre, referred to as 'folktales' (*ómogano* (sg.), *émegano* (pl.)), that are considered a central part of Gusii culture, and are meant to impart moral lessons to their audiences. This paper describes the way that narrators establish the moralizing authority of these folktales by minimizing the intertextual gaps between them, actively constructing them as traditional or ancient, drawing on culturally-recognized character types that invoke certain moral stances in the audience, and by downplaying the narrator's role in the performance as a means of objectifying the narrative. It is these moralizing features that define the genre 'folktale' for the Gusii.

It is well known that linguistic structures alone are insufficient for defining speech genres (Bauman 2004; Briggs & Bauman 1992; Hodges 2015). Generic style, like style generally, is constituted by a collection of features that conventionally recur together (Bucholtz 2015:41; Briggs & Bauman 1992:141). These features can be quite wide-ranging, including prosodic, lexical, phonological, and content-based cues, among many others, all of which help to establish expectations about the genre being invoked and its particular social function (Gumperz 1982, 1992; Hodges 2015:45). In order to understand what makes these features cohere as a genre, however, generic specification requires understanding "the interaction between the organization of the discourse and the organization of the event in which it is employed" (Briggs & Bauman 1992:142). Just as important as the *content* of a text in

determining its genre is how that text is *used* to accomplish social ends (Basso 1996). Speakers invoke a genre to draw on its intertextual connections and the meanings indexed by those connections (Briggs & Bauman 1992:141, 147), and thus every invocation of a genre is a mode of social action meant to bring those indexical meanings to the fore.

Another important component of genre is the extent to which texts become ‘enduring objects’ (Jakobson 1960:365–366) or ‘objectified units of discourse’ (Gal 2006:178). Because narratives are bounded segments of discourse with conventional, cohesive sets of features, they are particularly amenable to decontextualization from one setting and recontextualization into another. In other words, they undergo entextualization and thereby become culturally-recognizable objects that may be referred to and circulate (Barber 1999; Briggs & Bauman 1992; Urban 1996).

What I wish to show here is how Gusii folktales emphasize the text-as-object over the text-as-social-action, and thereby rely on its independent cultural authority over the social authority of the narrator. While it is true that genre always invokes particular roles and relationships between participants (Bauman 2004:6), I show here that this is not the primary focus of Gusii folktales. Many of the features of Gusii folktales are oriented towards backgrounding the narrator’s role in the generic performance, while simultaneously foregrounding the intertextual and moral authority of the narrative. It is not so much the relationship between narrator and listener being highlighted, but rather the relationship between the listener and the text-as-object.

2. Data & Methods

The data for this study consist of audio recordings of 24 folktales narrated by a single female speaker (Helen, age 52), and one other folktale told by a male (Kennedy, age 50). The stories total approximately 2 hours in length. All three speakers are members of the Gusii

community and native speakers of Kisii (autonym: Ékegusií; Bantu, Niger-Congo), the traditional language of the Gusii people, spoken by approximately 500,000 people in southwest Kenya (cf. Figure 1). While Kenya's 2009 census records 2.2 million ethnic Gusii [[cite]], only a portion of those people – most of them over 30 – speak Kisii, most likely due to educational reforms put in place by President Moi in 1985 making English and Swahili the languages of instruction, to the exclusion of the local languages.

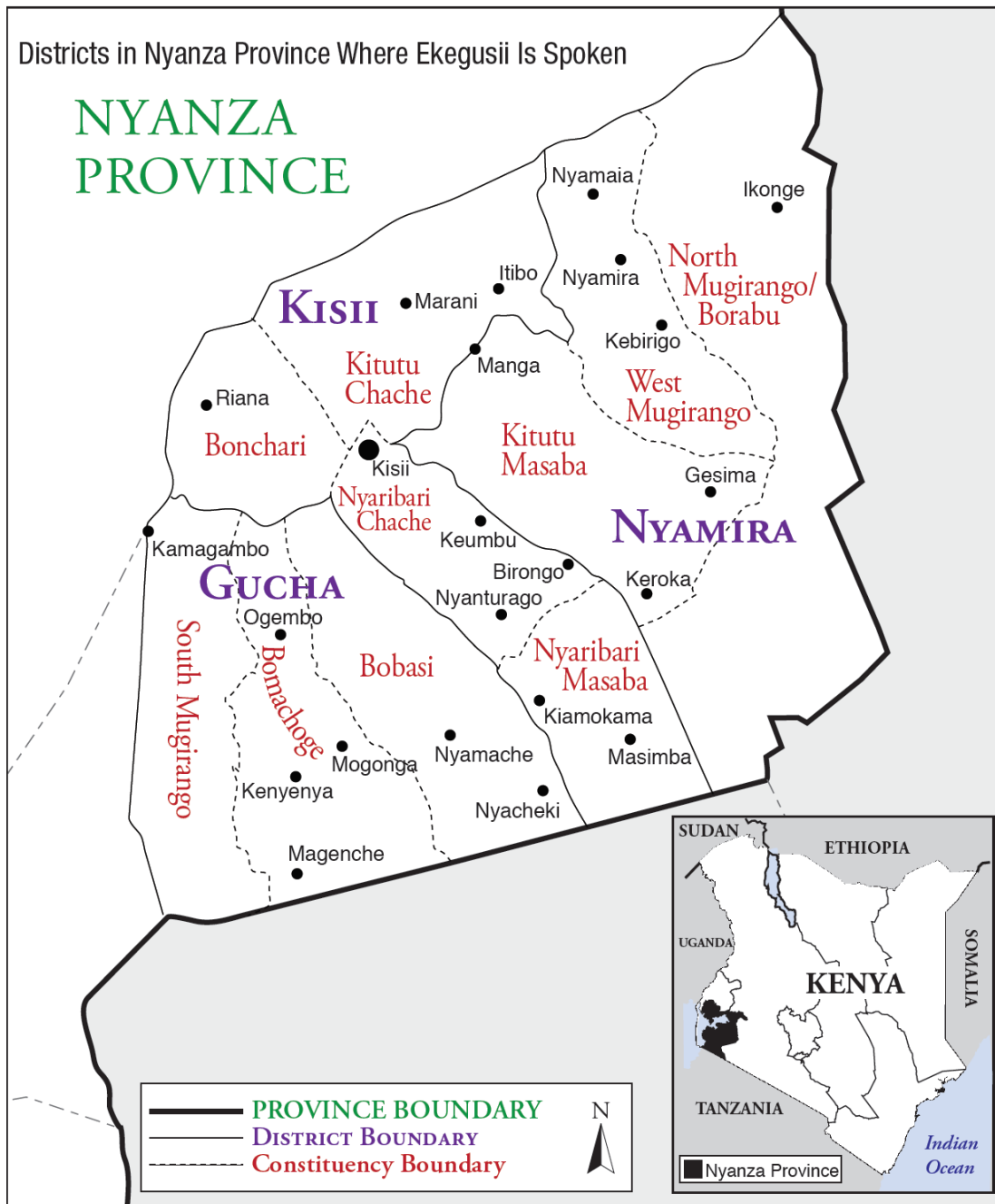


Figure 1. Nyanza province, the Gusii-speaking region of Kenya (Nash 2011:2)

The stories for this project were recorded during a two-month field trip to Kenya in the summer of 2014 as part of a community-led project to document various Gusii cultural practices for the purpose of cultural and linguistic revitalization. Though I had previously lived

in Kenya from 2006 to 2007, this was my first visit to this community for fieldwork. I came at the invitation of Kennedy Bosire (the male speaker), who heads a nonprofit organization called the Ekegusii Encyclopedia Project (EEP). The EEP is the primary drivers of language revitalization efforts in the Gusii community. Kennedy and his coauthor, Gladys Machogu, published the first ever dictionary of Kisii in 2013, in collaboration with linguists from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and with the benefit of training in linguistics and lexicography from attendance at the Institute on Collaborative Language Research (CoLang, formerly InField) at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2008. During my visit, Gladys worked with me to translate all the texts I had recorded. All translations provided in this paper are hers unless otherwise noted.

My field site was Kennedy's farm, located about 20 miles outside Kisii town, the urban center of the Gusii ethnic zone. Kennedy, with the aim of documenting traditional Kisii stories, did much of the work of recruiting the speakers I recorded, explaining to them the purpose of the EEP and how these recordings are intended to transmit important facets of Gusii culture to the youth. In addition to recording the folktales that form the focus of this study, we recorded songs, ethnobotanical terms and explanations, and some conversation. About a dozen participants contributed to the project, all of whom were enthusiastic supporters of the EEP's goals. The data are complemented by a small collection of ethnographic field notes I took during the course of my visit, and many numerous inline comments taken down during the translation process (from both Gladys and any others who happened to be present, which varied widely from day to day).

Helen's stories were recorded over a period of two days at Kennedy's farm. Helen herself is an elementary school teacher, very comfortable with telling these stories to her classes. (Local tribal languages are still permitted for the first 2 years of primary school as part of a policy of

transitional bilingualism.) Community members frequently remarked on her storytelling skills, and indeed it was clear from her tellings that she knew the stories by heart. For about half the narratives, the only participants on the recording are myself, Helen, and the occasional rooster, but for other half we were joined by a group of three neighborhood children (not Helen's students), which provided a more natural audience for the stories. Though the children recited the proper call-and-response sequence that always begins a Gusii folktale, this seemed to be the first time they had heard these particular stories, suggesting that they had been enculturated into the proper way to open a Gusii story, without necessarily having extensive experience with the genre. While the Gusii folktales are commonly known among Gusii people over the age of 30, they are generally not known by the youth – at least, not in Kisii. Folktales are a common genre in East Africa, sharing many of the same plot devices and character types. This knowledge of broader, East African cultural traditions but unfamiliarity with specific Kisii stories is a good example of the way that storytelling practices and yield insights into language shift (Falconi 2013).

As with any ethnographic work, my mere presence had potential effects on the data. For starters, Helen was at first slightly nervous about telling the stories to me, likely due to her minimal interactions with white people in the past, and the official-seeming nature of me using expensive recording equipment. For this reason, Helen preferred to be recorded using only audio and not video. Her nervousness however quickly subsided. My presence may have also had an effect on her narration, because I do not speak Kisii fluently, and Helen knew she was telling her stories to an audience that did not fully understand. At the same time, Helen's demeanor and style did not seem to change at all when we were later joined by the neighborhood children, who would be the normal audience for these stories. Indeed, every person I recorded telling a folktale looked straight ahead rather than at the audience

(including times when the audience consisted of other Gusii adults and not just myself), and while they used gestures, those gestures were noticeably lacking in attention-directing gestures aimed at an audience, such as pointing. Instead the gestures were illustrative of the actions being performed in the story (e.g. an arcing motion when a character jumps over a river).

The folktales themselves are short (3-5 minutes long), and revolve around the actions and interactions of anthropomorphized animals, each of whom represents a distinct character type that is consistent across different stories. The Giraffe, for example, is characterized as graceful while the Tortoise is viewed as sleepy and slow. The actions of the animal characters are not especially fantastical: they do not exhibit magical powers, and they accomplish their actions in mundane and everyday ways. Humans also appear in the narratives, but are only sometimes given names, and do not exhibit strong personality traits in the same way the animals do. Unlike the animals, they are not meant to represent instantiations of a known character type.

It was explained to me by various people during my fieldwork that each story is meant to have a moral, but that the narrator is not supposed to divulge it. The task of determining the moral of the story is left to the listener. However, there are some materials aimed at cultural revitalization that discuss these morals explicitly, framing them as proverbs (another important Gusii oral tradition still in regular practice today). One story, for example, is presented as having the theme, *semi tiching'ana nguru* 'strength does not measure up to wit'.

The stories often contain a short song of one stanza, usually about five lines in length. These songs are always sung by one of the characters, and integral to the plot in different ways. In one story, for example, one character mimics the song and voice qualities of another character to trick his way into a house. The style of the songs varies, with some having extremely melodic qualities, and others being more chant-like. Often the last line of the song

will break from the melody of the rest of the stanza, and have the intonational contour of a typical statement, but is still clearly part of the song because it is always repeated when the song is repeated, using the voicing style for that character. The songs are typically repeated at least once in the narrative, although not immediately following each other.

Some folktales lack one or more of these properties, but adhere to the features of the genre otherwise. Stories are typically given names, such as *Máásámú Yáínchété Chínyama* ‘The Hyena who loved to eat meat’, or *Étwání n’Émíngichi* ‘The Rooster & the Ram’, that identify different narrative events as instances of the ‘same’ story regardless of variation, enabling the process of recontextualization and the recognition of that particular text as a cultural object (Gumperz 1982). There is variation among tellings of the same story by different speakers, or even the same speaker at different times. Helen herself told two versions of the same story, *Ómonyakieni* ‘Beautiful Girl’, both of which contained the same central plot events pointing to a similar moral lesson, but differed drastically as to the characters involved and how those events were set up. On the other hand, too much deviation from the story template described above is generally acknowledged to be bad storytelling. I worked with one speaker who recorded many of the same stories as Helen, but took up to twenty minutes to tell each one, embellishing it with extensive detail. Members of the EEP unanimously told me to not to spend much time working with those stories, because they weren’t ‘traditional’. As such, those stories will not be discussed here, even though much could be gained by doing so. As Bauman (2004:14) points out, even examining the performances of those not considered ‘star performers’ can yield useful insights into the way that generic features are recontextualized. But such investigations will be left for future research. Instead, the present project looks at the generic features holding across Helen and Kennedy’s stories, and the way that those features contribute to the moralizing authority of the texts. I turn now to the analysis of these features.

3. Analysis

This section describes four ways that Gusii speakers use the generic features of folktales to establish the moral authority of those stories. In §3.1, I show how intertextual gaps between folktales are minimized, thereby drawing on the authority of prior instances of the genre. Section 3.2 then describes a few ways that the folktales are explicitly or implicitly constructed as old or ancient, lending them the authority of tradition. In §3.3, I discuss how ‘characterological types’ (Agha 2005) – the recurring anthropomorphic animal characters – are used to invoke moral attitudes towards their actions, thereby contributing to the moral message of the story. Finally, §3.4 demonstrates a few ways that speakers downplay their own role in the narrative performance, and in so doing emphasize the text as a cultural object, and the cultural authority that implies.

3.1. Minimizing intertextual gaps

In Briggs & Bauman’s (1992:149) important article on genre, they introduce the notion of *intertextual gaps*, the extent to which a particular text fits its generic model. Speakers work to either minimize these intertextual gaps, making the interpretation of that text more transparent by relying on well-established generic features, or maximize those intertextual gaps to highlight creativity and individual authority.

As we are about to see, Gusii texts work to minimize this intertextual gap in numerous ways. The present section will exemplify just some of the many ways this is accomplished.

One important way that Gusii speakers minimize intertextual gaps is through lexical and structural consistency across texts. For example, the folktales begin with an opening call-and-response sequence, where the speaker opens with *mogano ngóochá inde* ‘May I, Story, come?’, and the audience replies with *mogano ínchúó* ‘Story, come.’ This is followed immediately by an introduction of the characters. This opening sequence has the additional function of invoking

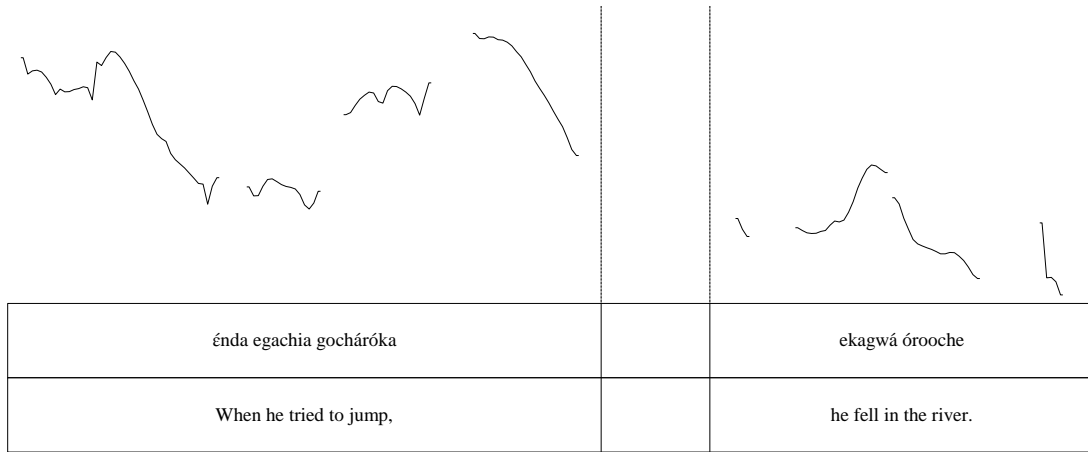
the folktale genre, and all the expectations that come with it, providing a framework within which to interpret the actions of the characters (Briggs & Bauman 1992:147). Thus from the first utterance in the story, speakers are closely linking the text to other texts in that genre. The opening sequence from one story told by Helen, titled *Ómoiséké Ómonyakieni* ‘Beautiful Girl’, is provided in example (1) (located at the end of this section; cf. p. 13 below) with its accompanying pitch traces. In this example, if a line has three tiers, the second tier represents any speech by the children in the background. The prosody in this example is illustrative of the pattern seen in all Helen’s recordings – including some that Helen recorded five years before my field visit – as well as those of other narrators.

Evidence that these story structures are part of the generic conventions is the partial repetition of line 2 by the three children who were present. They apparently knew enough of the genre to know that *áaréngé* ‘there was (in the far past)’ is a common technique for introducing characters in the folktales, and that they should expect it at the beginning of a story. They can be heard mimicking Helen in the background in line 5, simultaneously repeating *áaréngé* and matching her intonational contour. In order to accomplish this as simultaneously and precisely as they did, they must have known not just that Helen would say this word next, but say it with the prosody she did.

As just alluded to, there are also prosodic similarities across the stories, which can be seen in example (1). The opening of a story is often told with exaggerated prosody, i.e. prosodic lengthening of words, extended pauses between each unit of information, and very large pitch excursions (the pitch range of the above example extends up to 650 Hz in line 2). All these features can be seen in (1). Certain intonational patterns are also common in folktales, such as the sharp final high contour followed by a pause, that leaves the clause half-finished, and then a rapid, low pitch conclusion to the clause (line 2). An example of Kennedy performing this

same intonational convention is shown in example (2) (note that Kennedy tends to realize this final high contour with the pitch peak towards the beginning of the syllable, while Helen realizes it with a peak towards the end – hence the falling contour in this example).

(2) High final intonation contour followed by a low conclusion



The net effect of these similarities is a style that is immediately recognizable as being an instance of the folktale genre. It is this sameness across different texts that contributes to the authority that the genre has. As Bauman (2000:86) notes, “Prescriptive insistence on strict generic regimentation works conservatively in the service of established authority and order.” By obeying the norms of the folktale genre and minimizing intertextual gaps, Helen and Kennedy both draw from and contribute to the genre’s authority.

A final way that speakers minimize intertextual gaps is by relying heavily on intertextuality for the interpretation of the text, i.e. relying on the listener’s ability to draw on other instances of the genre to help interpret what they hear. The interpretation of the present text thus becomes dependent on prior ones (Briggs & Bauman 1992:149). If the present text deviates too widely from established norms, its interpretation becomes impossible.

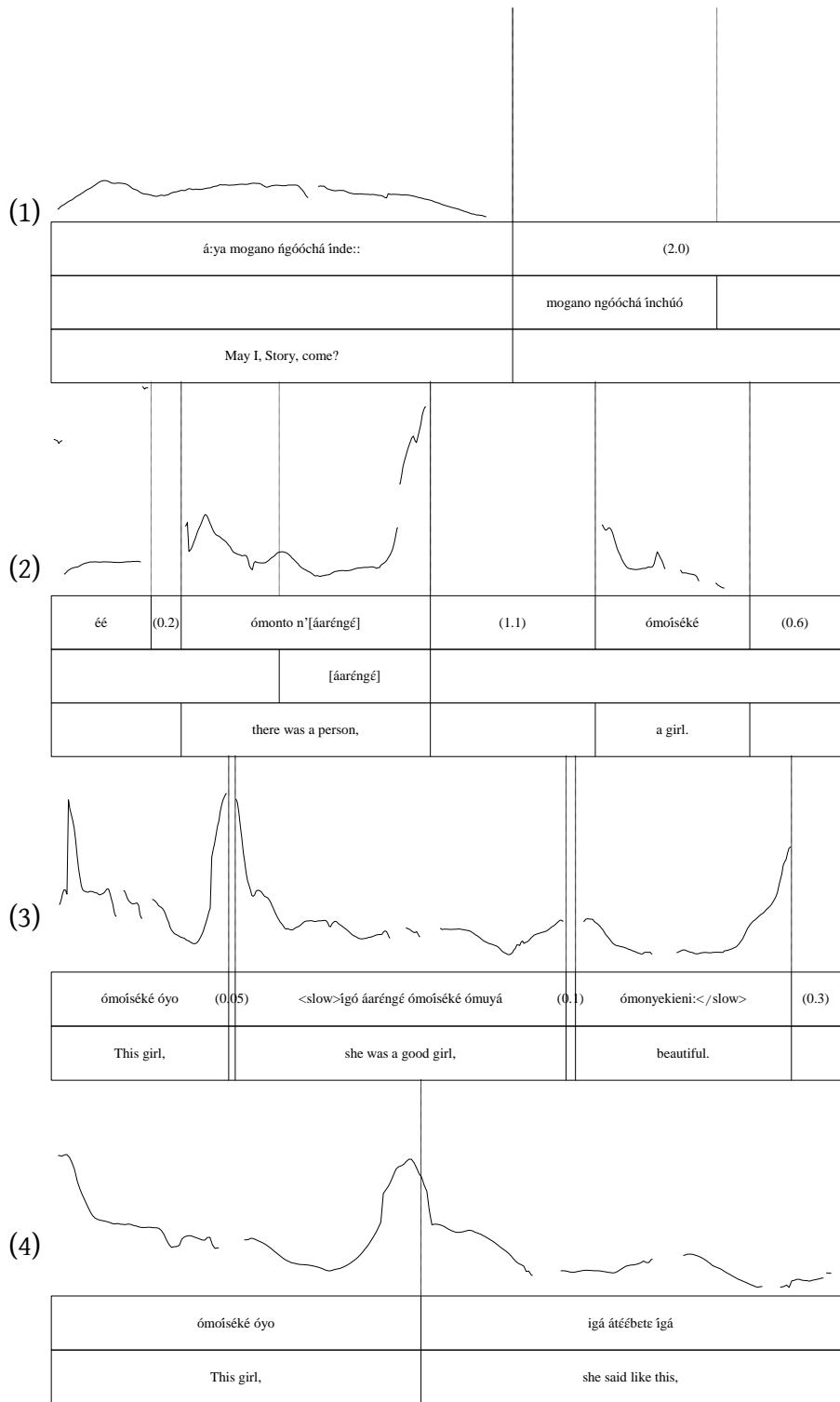
To give a concrete example, consider the way that the anthropomorphic animals are introduced in the stories. In Kennedy's story, the first sentence following the opening call-and-response is as follows:

(3) *Kare, kare kare kare, Ókang'ombé n'Ógansoná n'Ókandá bikagenda íbáká.*

'Long ago, long long long ago, Cow and Flea and Jigger went to an in-law proposal.'

The anthropomorphic characters are introduced with no context, but the listener can draw on the intertextual connections to other stories to know who Cow, Flea, and Jigger are. Moreover, it is only through prior knowledge about these characters that the listener can interpret their actions throughout the story. In the present case, Jigger is often the brunt of jokes, so the knowledgeable listener will immediately have certain expectations about how the story will go (sure enough, Jigger later falls into a river). Such a reliance on intertextuality for the interpretation of the story highlights the tight continuity with other stories in the genre, again contributing to generic and textual authority.

(1) Opening sequence from *Ómoiséké Ómonyakieni* 'Beautiful Girl'



3.2. Constructing tradition

The second way that Gusii folktales are imbued with authority is by presenting them as old and therefore traditional, a “powerful strategy for creating textual authority” (Briggs & Bauman 1992:148). This is accomplished in several ways. First and most straightforwardly are lexical and morphological means: Narrators often begin their stories with sentences that include the word *karε* ‘long ago’. This was seen in example (3) above. And while Kisii has Hodiernal, Recent Past, and Far Past tenses, the majority of the narration in folktales is done in the Far Past tense. A second means of traditionalizing the folktales is by selectively including references to cultural traditions and objects that were prevalent in historical Gusii society, even if they are not particularly common today. Example (3) also illustrates this strategy in the word *óbaká*, an older tradition of going to make a wedding proposal to one’s future in-laws that is less practiced today. References to more modern items are supposed to be avoided: when Helen slipped at one point and made reference to *mandazi* (triangular donuts of Swahili origin) and *soda*, my translator Gladys had me add the note, “There were no breads and sodas in those days.” Certain older word forms were also preferred: whenever Helen used the phrase *mama ómwabó* for ‘her mother’, using the Swahili form *mama* now popular all over East Africa, Gladys pointed out that the traditional term is actually *ng’ina*. This variety of small ways in which the folktales are presented as old come together to imbue the texts with an air of tradition and therefore authority.

3.3. Invoking moralizing characters

Perhaps the most important means that Gusii storytellers use to imbue their texts with moral authority is the inclusion of the anthropomorphized animal characters described in §2. In doing so, they invoke the particular ‘characterological types’ (Agha 2005) that are associated

with those characters. That is, the invocation of the folktale genre simultaneously invokes an entire set of recurring characters and everything that is known about them from prior texts. Because this association between the particular animal and their personality traits is formed primarily within the context of the folktales, this indexicality is closely linked to the folktale genre. In other contexts, mentioning the same animal may not invoke any personality traits whatsoever. In this way, recurring character personalities become similar to the enregistered voices of Agha (2005:39), who describes the way that “a register’s forms [in this case, the generic folktale register] are social indexicals in that they index stereotypic social personae.”

Interestingly, the invocation of a characterological type in Kisii folktales, such as example (3) above, is more explicit than its translation makes it seem. The Kisii language has a variety of noun prefixes that change depending on the semantic class of the noun, and whether the noun is singular or plural. The singular prefix for animals is usually *én-* or *éke-/ége-*. When anthropomorphized in folktales, however, the word receives a special prefix *óka-/óga-*, which to the best of my knowledge is not used elsewhere. Thus *éng’ambé* ‘cow’ becomes *ókang’ambé*, *égesusú* ‘hare’ becomes *ógasusú*, *énda* ‘jigger’ becomes *ókandá*, and *énsoná* ‘flea’ becomes *ógansoná*. Some variation exists as to how consistently these prefixes are used within the folktales. For example, Kennedy introduces Cow, Flea, and Jigger in his story with the anthropomorphic prefixes (see example (3)), but after a sequence of five utterances without mentioning any character names, reverts back to the non-anthropomorphic suffixes for the remainder of the story. I do not think the use of the non-anthropomorphic forms in these or other cases should be taken as anything more than a mental slip on the part of speakers however.

What personality traits are being invoked by the use of the anthropomorphizing prefix, and how does this contribute to the moral authority of the texts? The intertextual reach of the

character types in Gusii folktales is thus actually quite large, drawing on cultural knowledge from not just the Gusii tradition, but also broader East African traditions that most people receive exposure to through formal schooling. Because these characters recur over and over again in not just Kisii stories but also East African folktales more generally, culturally-informed audiences know what types of actions and personality traits to expect from that character. The extent to which these personality traits are recognized as enregistered voices is made salient by a set of pedagogical materials for cultural revitalization that Kennedy created several years ago, which includes a list of common characters in Gusii folktales along with a brief description. Here is a selection from that sheet (note that a few grammatical patterns common to Kenyan English have been changed to improve their understandability here):

- (4) a. the hardworking and never-tiring donkeys
- b. the timid and chicken-hearted hyenas
- c. the clever, cunning, and sly hare
- d. the climbers and good-for-nothing family of chimpanzees, baboons, etc.

Not all characterizations are as explicitly normative as these (cf. the ‘graceful giraffes’ or ‘sleepy tortoises’ mentioned in §2), but more ‘neutral’ characterizations nevertheless create a certain set of expectations about how that character is likely to behave in any given narrative. These expectations are crucial to understanding how it is that these character types lend moral authority to the text. If the listener has the *expectation* that a given character will, say, act honorably, then they are likely to *interpret* the actions of that character in the story as honorable ones. It can therefore never be the case that a characterological type is invoked neutrally; there is always a set of implicit moral attitudes which listeners have – and are expected to have – towards the characters, by virtue of the intertextual and enregistered nature of those character personalities.

To illustrate how this happens in the Gusii narratives, I will provide one extended example. Below is the complete English translation of one of Helen's stories, *Ókando n'Ókanyang'áú* 'Lion & Hyena'. As with Kennedy's story, the characters are introduced without context or background information, leaving the listener to draw on their cultural knowledge to interpret their actions.

(5) *Ókando n'Ókanyang'áú* (Lion & Hyena)

May I, Story, come? [Story, come.] There was a lion and a hyena. This lion used to go and plant ground nuts. This hyena comes and keeps on eating this lion's ground nuts. It keeps on eating this lion's ground nuts. This lion says, "Who is this who comes and eats my ground nuts? Who comes and eats my ground nuts?"

One day, the lion said, "Today I'll go and lay a trap. When I have laid the trap, I can see who comes to eat my ground nuts." Then he went and brought [tree] gum. When he brought the gum, that lion brought the gum and saw an opening [in the hedges] where that hyena had been using to pass through. It put the gum there. When that hyena tried to come and eat the gum-- and eat those ground nuts, the gum caught it. Then that gum held it.

Now, when the lion came, it found it was the hyena. It asked, "My friend Hyena, is it you who comes and eats my ground nuts?"

"No my friend. It's not me. Try to go there and hide yourself. You'll see the thing that usually comes and eats your ground nuts."

After a little while, while the lion was hiding itself, Rabbit came. Hyena told him, "My friend Rabbit, come and untie me. Come, I tell you." When Rabbit came close enough for that lion to whisper to it, that lion it-- Rabbit was caught. It got caught on the gum. The lion came with a club and got hold of Rabbit. That hyena ran away and disappeared. It [the lion] hit him and hit him, that rabbit, and that rabbit died.

My story ends there.

How should the listener view the actions of Hyena? On the one hand, Hyena could be viewed as smart or cunning for having outwitted both Lion and Rabbit. On the other hand, his actions could be viewed as despicable for having gotten Rabbit killed. Perhaps both are implied. In the absence of a cultural knowledge of what actions are typical for these characters, it is impossible to know for certain. But once the listener knows that the hyena is generally considered a loathsome, cowardly character, they have a framework for evaluating his actions. The rabbit is also viewed as sly and cunning, but since Rabbit does nothing particularly cunning in this story, he is not invoking his characterological type in the same way Hyena is.

Thus a guess at the moral of the present text might be a reference to the Kisii proverb *kobeka Mokeira ibega inkebera kwerentereire* ‘becoming friendly with an infectious person inflicts trouble on oneself’, i.e. don’t keep company with bad people, because they may turn on you later (Bosire & Machogu 2013:1354). But such an interpretation is only possible because of the broad intertextual reach that the anthropomorphized character types in Kisii folktales have. It is through drawing on these character types that narrators position certain actions as ethically or culturally good or bad, thereby establishing the moral authority of the text.

3.4. Downplaying the self

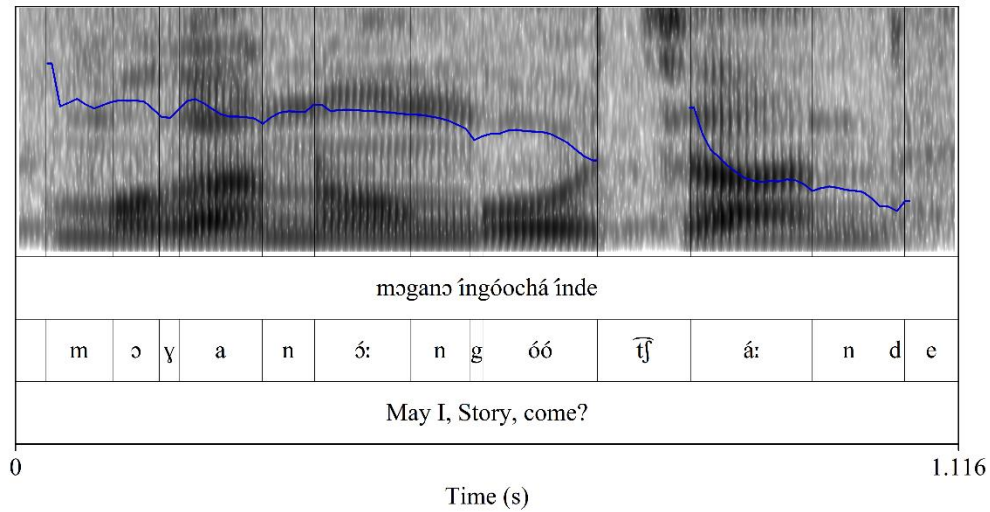
Stories within genres like folktales are always entextualized to the extent that they circulate in a community, have names, and have internal cohesion so that they are treated as a bounded entity (Barber 1999; Briggs & Bauman 1992; Urban 1996). In this way texts become ‘enduring objects’ (Jakobson 1960:365–366) or ‘objectified units of discourse’ (Gal 2006:178). This objectification of the text lends it a degree of importance stemming from its status as a culturally-recognized object. Texts become objects of, and representatives of, a broader culture, not just the performance of a single individual. I wish to show in this section that Kisii speakers use a variety of techniques that greatly deemphasize their own involvement in the performance of the narrative, thereby contributing to its status as a cultural object.

One of the most important means by which speakers accomplish this is to personify the story itself by taking on the story persona. As mentioned above, every Kisii folktale obligatorily begins with the phrase *mogano ngóochá inde* ‘May I, Story, come?’, to which the audience is expected to reply, *mogano ínchúó* ‘Story, come.’ Each story then ends with the phrase, *mogano óne n’abo óng’ana ígo* ‘My story went that way.’ This is a very strongly conventionalized opening and closing sequence, such that the initial call-response sequence is assumed to have occurred even in the cases where there is no audience. For example, in the early stages of my fieldwork,

before I had learned that this response was expected of me as a listener and how to say it, one speaker actually recited the response herself, before continuing with the rest of the story. In another case, a speaker was recording a video of his performance of a story, with the intention that the video would be distributed to youth in the community as part of his organization's language revitalization efforts. After reciting the initial call, the speaker paused for 2.1 seconds before starting his story, significantly longer than any other pause in that text (generally around 0.5 seconds). In retrospect I realize this pause was intended to give his future audiences time to recite the appropriate response.

The conventionalized and thus routinized nature of this call-response sequence is also evidenced by a distinctly monotone prosody, which contrasts sharply with the highly prosodically marked nature of most phrases in these stories (see §3.1 above). Even the lexical tones in these opening phrases are difficult to distinguish because the pitch contour has been flattened so significantly. Figure 2 shows the pitch trace for one instance of the opening phrase. Even though there is a sequence of three lexical high tones in the middle of this phrase, there is no corresponding uptick in the pitch trace, and the overall pitch range is quite small even for Kennedy, who is an especially deep-voiced speaker (87–122 Hz).

Figure 2. Monotone pitch trace for the opening sequence of a story



This opening phrase also exhibits a morphological device indicative of how the story has been personified. The noun for ‘story’ in Kisii is *ɔmaganɔ*, but in both the opening call and response as well as the closing line, ‘story’ appears as *maganɔ*, without the ‘preprefix’ *ɔ-*. This omission of the nominal preprefix is otherwise reserved for names and terms of address. ‘story’ in this case, then, is not being used as a noun but rather a name. This is why I represent the term with an initial capital in my translations. The speaker, by using this form of the word accompanied with the first-person verb *ngóochá*, is thereby implicitly adopting the persona of the story itself, as though to say, ‘May I come and tell myself?’.

The importance of personifying the story this way was also made salient by the fact that speakers could do it wrong. One speaker, for example, was criticized by my translators for ending her stories with the phrase *n'abo ɔmogano ɔné oererete ɪgó* ‘That’s how my story was.’ Although superficially similar in meaning to the standard ‘My story went that way.’, and using all but one of the same words in the Kisii, this was deemed incorrect by both Gladys and Kennedy.

By personifying the story in this way, the narrative ‘tells itself’, symbolically erasing the speaker and their opinions from the telling. Speakers become mere vessels for Gusii culture and mores. In addition to this symbolic linguistic means of self-erasure, speakers minimize the effects of their role in the narration as much as possible through a variety of stylistic means. As mentioned above, narrators do not engage with their audiences when telling the stories, instead staring straight ahead. They avoid audience-oriented and attention-directing gestures like pointing, but include many gestures that complement the events of the stories, such as smacking one hand on top of the other when something happens suddenly.

Narrators also never include direct first-person statements or metacommentary. In fact, speakers do not even self-correct. The preferred repair device in this stories is instead to simply stop the current utterance and restart with the correct one. We have already seen one striking example of this in the Lion & Hyena story (example (5)) above. A portion of that text, with both Kisii and the English translation, is given below.

(6) Excerpt from Lion & Hyena

Ririá ógasusú ágóchia goochá éndo égóchia

kómamonyérérá,

(0.2)

éndo eriá eka-

Ógasusú akabwátwa,

akananta igá ariá áasé óborembo

When Rabbit came close enough for the lion to

whisper to it,

that lion it –

Rabbit was caught.

He got stuck on the tree gum.

In this excerpt, Gladys believe (and I agree) that Helen was about to say ‘that lion grabbed the rabbit’ or something similar, but then remembered that in this story Rabbit is supposed to get stuck in Lion’s trap. Rather than self-correct and point out the near slip, or even hesitate (notice the lack of pause), Helen simply restarts with a new utterance, even though it somewhat breaks the flow of the narrative. This was by far the most common means narrators

had of repairing their discourse. There no overt repair devices in the narratives similar to the way an English speaker might say, 'sorry, what I meant is...' Even filler devices such as *ee* (Kisii's version of *um*) are exceedingly rare in the stories. Since repairs and fillers do occur with some frequency in everyday conversation, their absence seems to be a stylistic feature of the folktale genre.

In another case, Helen accidentally mixed up the details in the first 30 seconds of a story significantly enough that she asked to stop the recording and start over. The mistake was switching the identities of two characters, something she could have corrected fairly easily by saying, 'Oh actually, Hare was the one who stole it', or something similar. Instead Helen preferred to restart the story, presumably because such metacommentary would have broken the genre. There are still some plot inconsistencies that crept their way into Helen's stories before she realized it, but her way of dealing with these was always to immediately restart the utterance with the correct details, ignoring any contradiction with what was just said before.

Helen in particular also seemed to noticeably sacrifice her own personal comfort at times to ensure that the story was told properly. By this I mean that she seemed to time her breathing to fall within the appropriate breaking points in the narrative, rather than insert breaking points within the narrative when she needed a breath (Hieber 2016). As a result, she was frequently short of breath and needed to make large inhalations to continue telling the story. This shows, I think, the need that Helen felt to adhere to the proper dramatic flow of the narrative.

This dedication to the proper performance of the narrative seemed to me a common theme among narrators. While this is admittedly a subjective and impressionistic observation, some evidence to this effect is that reported speech within the folktales is always done with highly animated character voicing, and the short songs are always sung in their entirety, even though

the song is repeated up to six times in certain stories. Speakers always used exaggerated prosody, especially at the beginning of the story, and animated the story with gestures. One might expect there to be variation along these lines, with some narrators simply reporting character speech in their own voices, or taking shortcuts by saying, 'then she sang the song again', but at least in the 24 texts examined here, narrators are remarkably consistent. The general impression I receive from these stylistic trends is that Kisii folktales are never 'told lightly'. The narrator is expected to give a wholehearted performance of the narrative, not just a mere reporting. In this way the narrator's personal style is backgrounded in favor of the more animated yet regimented generic style.

4. Conclusion

The invocation of a genre is always a kind of social action that takes place in a social context. Kisii stories are meant to convey important cultural mores to their listeners, and in times past were an important part of the socialization of Gusii children. But emphasizing the social relation between the narrator and their audience is not the only means that narrators have of accomplishing social action. Just as effective is the act of emphasizing the relationship between the audience and a larger set of cultural norms and objects that have been imbued with the great weight of tradition. This is how Gusii narrators accomplish social action through their narratives. By downplaying their own role in the narration while simultaneously highlighting the status of the text as a traditional, reified cultural object, they make explicit the relationship between the audience and the text-as-object. They accomplish this mainly through four features of the folktale genre: they minimize the intertextual gaps between stories, thus strengthening their degree of entextualization and giving legitimacy to conservative regimentation of the stories; they frame the stories in the distant past to imbue them with a sense of tradition and therefore authority; they invoke culturally-recognized

character types that index certain moral positions and encourage certain moral stances in the audience towards those characters; and to the greatest extent possible they engage in a process of self-erasure in the performance of the story. The result is a highly entextualized, reified cultural object imbued with moral and historical authority. It is in employing this text-as-object, and all the cultural weight that comes with it, that narrators accomplish the more fundamental task of social action.

5. References

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