

Hieber, Daniel W. 2016. Singing the morals: The function of musico-linguistic shifts in Kisii folktales. Paper prepared for panel presentation for *Playing the changes, saying the changes: The social meaning of musico-linguistic style-shifting*, organized by Jessica Love-Nichols (UC Santa Barbara) and Morgan Sleeper (UC Santa Barbara), American Anthropological Association (AAA) 2016, Minneapolis, MN.

## **Singing the morals:**

### **The function of musico-linguistic shifts in Kisii folktales**

Daniel W. Hieber

University of California, Santa Barbara

#### **1. Introduction**

It is well known that the act of invoking a genre is fundamentally one of social action: speakers perform texts with specific social ends in mind, drawing on intertextual connections to imbue their performance with social meaning (Basso 1996; Bauman 2004; Briggs & Bauman 1992; Hodges 2015). But when a particular genre includes musical signs in addition to linguistic ones, the question becomes, ‘What does music add to the social act? Why mix the two modalities, and why switch between them?’

This paper describes the use of short songs in a particular moralizing genre of narratives called ‘folktales’ in Kisii (alternatively, Gusii or Ékegusíí), a Bantu language of southwestern Kenya, and shows how these musical performances not only play a role in the socializing function that these narratives have, but are in fact central to how the narrator accomplishes social action through the genre. Because the moral messages of these folktales are never supposed to be told explicitly, Kisii narrators must use indirect means of conveying the proper stances that listeners are meant to have towards events and characters in the narrative. By having characters within the narrative sing emotionally expressive songs, narrators avoid explicit moralizing by either themselves or the characters, while simultaneously layering the text with an implicit social metacommentary. In this way, the switch from linguistic to musical signs becomes the most central component of the text-as-social-action.

This paper begins by providing some background on Kisii language and culture, the data collected and methods used, and a brief introduction to the folktale genre in Kisii.

I then take a more focused look at several stories, and analyze the way that speakers deploy songs within them, before ending with some concluding comments on the use of songs in the folktales generally.

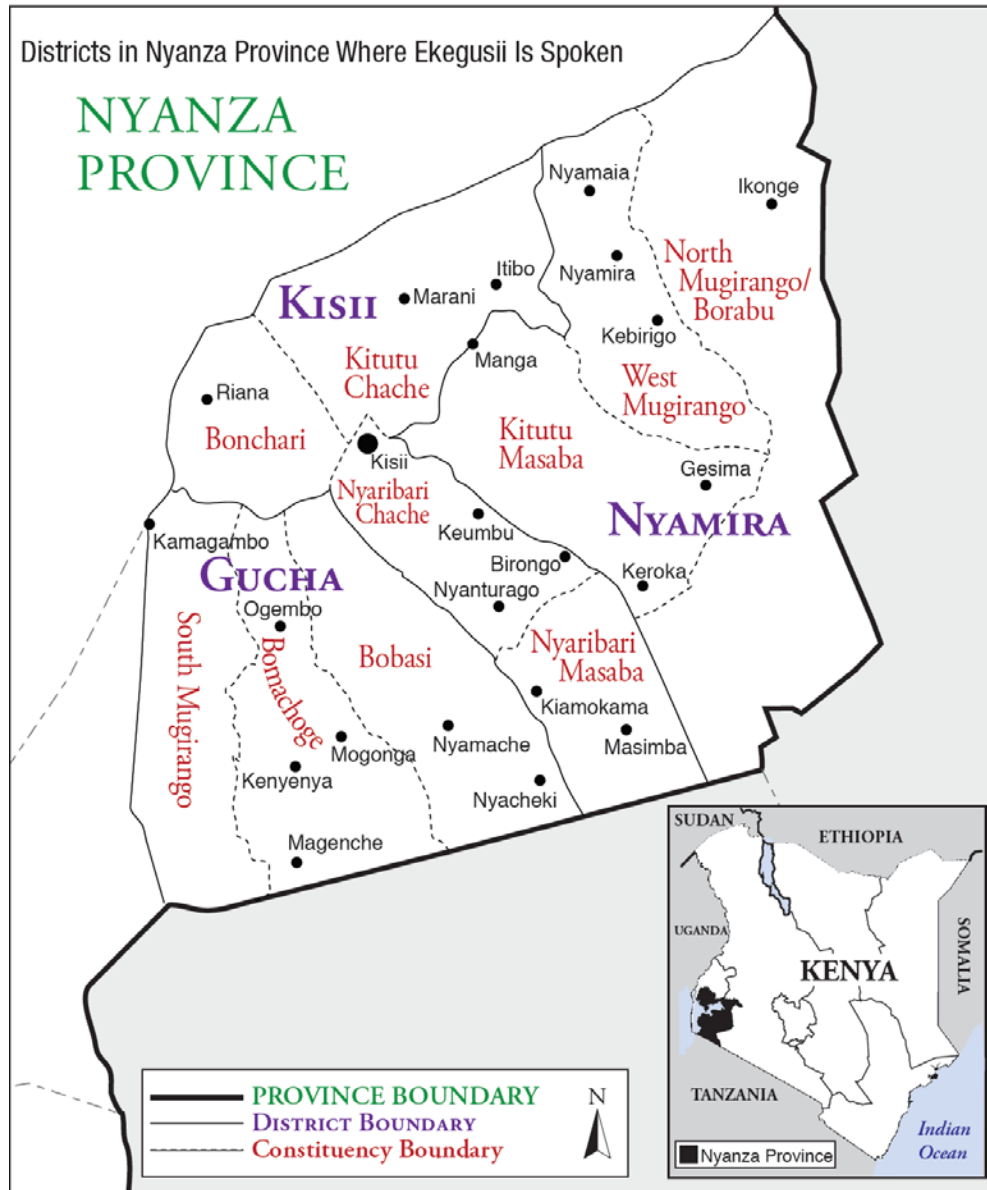


Figure 1. Nyanza province, the Kisii-speaking region of Kenya (Nash 2011:2)

## 2. Background

According to the 2009 Kenyan census, there are approximately 2.2 million ethnic Gusii living in Kenya, centered in and around Kisii Town, Nyanza Province, in the southwest part of the country (cf. Figure 1). However, very few Gusii people under the age of thirty speak the Kisii language fluently. This fact is likely due to educational reforms put in place by President Daniel arap Moi in 1985 that made English and Swahili the official languages of instruction, to the exclusion of local languages. Given that 70% of Kenya's population is under the age of thirty<sup>1</sup> (United Nations, Department of Economic & Social Affairs 2015), we can therefore calculate that perhaps as few as 660,000 people speak Kisii fluently today, and predict that within the next few generations, the language will become critically endangered.

Cognizant of this fact, and having seen firsthand the decline of their language over the past generation, several members of the Gusii community created the Ekegusii Encyclopedia Project (EEP), a nonprofit initiative to document the language and traditional cultural practices of the Gusii people. The EEP has since become the primary driver of language revitalization efforts in the Gusii community. The EEP published the first-ever dictionary of Kisii in 2013 (Bosire & Machogu 2013), in collaboration with linguists from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and with the benefit of training in linguistics and lexicography from their attendance at the Institute on Collaborative Language Research (CoLang) at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2008.

I joined this project in 2013, and conducted a two-month field trip to Kenya in the summer of 2014, where I stayed on rural farms around Kisii Town, the urban center of the Gusii ethnic zone. Though I previously lived in Kenya from 2006 to 2007, this was my first visit to this particular community. The primary goal of that trip was to record and transcribe Gusii folktales, a genre of story which is viewed by community members as a central component of traditional Gusii culture. We transcribed 25 stories in all, totaling approximately 2 hours in length. Most of these were narrated by a single female speaker, Helen, a 52-year-old primary school teacher who speaks Kisii natively, Swahili as a second language, and almost no English. Helen frequently tells these

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<sup>1</sup> Approximately 32,280,000 out of a total population of 46,050,000.

stories to her classes (in the Kisii language, which is permitted only in the first and second years of primary school), and is considered by local community members to be a model storyteller. The data we recorded are complemented by my own ethnographic field notes, and many inline comments on the stories themselves, taken down during the process of transcription and translation.

The folktales themselves are short (3-5 minutes long), and often revolve around the actions and interactions of anthropomorphized animals, each of whom represents a distinct character type that is consistent across stories. The Giraffe, for example, is characterized as graceful, while the Hare is characterized as sly and cunning. The actions of the animal characters are not especially fantastical other than the ability to talk: they do not exhibit magical powers, and they accomplish their actions in mundane and everyday ways. Animal folktales of this kind are heard throughout East Africa, and similar versions of the animal stories may be found in the regional traditions of Bantu and non-Bantu tribes alike. Other narratives feature humans as main characters, but these personas are only sometimes given names, and do not exhibit strong personality traits in the same way animal characters do. It was explained to me that each story is meant to have a moral, but that the narrator is not supposed to divulge it explicitly. The task of determining the moral of the story is left to the listener. Moreover, Gusii storytellers go to great lengths to minimize their own role in the narrative performance through a process of self-erasure, going so far as to personify and embody the story itself, beginning each telling with the call and response sequence, 'May I, Story, come?', to which the audience replies, 'Story, come.' (Hieber 2016).

Of particular interest here, however, is the fact that many stories contain short songs, usually a single stanza about five lines in length. The songs are always sung by one of the characters, and are integral to the plot in different ways. They are often repeated at least once, although not immediately in succession. The style of the songs varies, with some having extremely melodic properties, and others being more chant-like.

The question that this paper attempts to answer is, what is the function of these songs in the narratives? What information do they convey to the listener, and what social function do they perform? And why is this action performed through song rather than non-musical language?

### 3. Why song?

A first insight into these matters can be gleaned by considering which stories do *not* contain songs. Of the 25 stories, 12 have human main characters, and it is these stories which contain songs (with just one exception, which time does not permit me to discuss in detail here).<sup>2</sup> In only one case does an anthropomorphic animal sing in the stories, and then only with the assistance of fortune tellers – a fact which, in Gusii culture, suggests that this animal’s act of singing was strongly unnatural. In another story, a rabbit and a cat perform a semi-rhythmic point-counterpoint of whistling and meowing, but this appears to be the extent of their musical abilities. In Gusii folktales, singing is construed as something uniquely human, while animal attempts at singing are portrayed as deficient, or even a troubling perversion.

Let us now take a more detailed look at a single story, titled *Ómwáná ómomurá n’ékerandi* ‘A boy, a girl, and a gourd’. To get a feel for the general structure of these stories and how the songs are used within them, I will play the story in its entirety (about three minutes in length).

[Audience members can follow along using the transcription on the handout, which is attached here as an appendix.]

In this and other Kisii stories, one readily-apparent function of song is to express the attitude of the characters, without necessarily advancing the action of the plot per se. Because the narrator is restricted (by the conventions of the genre; Hieber (2016)) from offering any metacommentary or direct report of the thoughts and attitudes of the characters, song is a useful mechanism for providing insight into the characters’ mental states in a more roundabout manner. The characters must ‘speak for themselves’ (or rather, sing), and song provides a means for them to accomplish just that.

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<sup>2</sup> The exception, one of the variations of *Ómoiséké ómonyakíéni* ‘A beautiful girl’, is rather unique among the stories in several ways. There are numerous variations on the story, so much so that one consultant even related two entirely different versions. Further, the story contains no supernatural feats (such as talking animals), unlike all the other stories. The story (in all its variations) is about a young man trying to get a beautiful girl to marry him, and in other respects is much more mundane than the other stories. It seems then that this story is somewhat of a deviation from the genre.

In this particular case, the sister uses the song to express frustration that her brother didn't bring home a wife, asking in effect, 'Why did my brother bring home this useless gourd instead of a wife to help with the chores?' This reflects the common social expectations that a) men will find wives to marry, and b) that those wives will assist their husband's family with work. Crucial to our understanding of the social function of the song in this story, however, is its key role in establishing the stance that the listener is expected to have towards the son's negligence in procuring a wife. It is the song that accomplishes the moralizing work of contrasting the useless gourd with the virtuous idealized wife. The ironic fact that the person doing the chores is actually living in the gourd only highlights this contrast more starkly through irony. So what seems *prima facie* to be a meaningless tune to while away the time is in fact central to guiding the listener to the proper moral stance they should have towards the different characters and actions in the story.

In other cases, the social action accomplished by songs is more explicit. In one story, five girls are trying to determine who ate the last of their berries, and so they each sing an oath similar to a curse, wishing bad omens on the person who breaks it. They sing as follows:

(1) *Tárí íné náriété ékemánkúrúma.*

'It's not me who ate them, la di da.'

*Ómotwé époopó ékemánkúrúma.*

'Your head bangs, la di da.'

*Ámagoró éséng'íséng'í ékemánkúrúma.*

'Your legs make noise like crushed glass, la di da.'

When the fifth girl, who had eaten the berries, attempts to sing the curse, she is physically unable to sing it in its entirety, and then she falls into a river and drowns. As in the first story, the song is the key element which tells the listener the proper moral stance for them to take. We as listeners are not meant to feel sorry for the girl, but rather to view her ill fate as punishment for her lie, and it is the song which tells us this.

In some cases, the songs contain keys to understanding the source of conflict in the tales. They help answer the question, 'What act of social wrongdoing is responsible for

the present state of affairs?’ An illustrative example is one of the variations on the story *Ómoiséké ómonyakíéni* ‘A beautiful girl’. The conflict in this tale revolves around a girl who refuses to marry any acceptable suitors. The disgruntled boys therefore pretend to be river beasts, and turn the river to blood, such that nobody can water their cattle. The brother and father of the girl then sing back and forth with the river beast. They offer the river beast various members of the family and even the cattle, but only when they offer their beautiful daughter does the river beast (i.e. the disgruntled suitors) accept. The daughter is taken off and married by one of the suitors, and the river returns to normal. This is very much a King Lear-style narrative, where the world is thrown into chaos until the proper social order is restored, i.e. one where the beautiful girl is properly married. Notice, however, that the brother and father never come to know why it is the river beast wanted their daughter. Unlike the audience, they are unaware that the river beast is actually the suitors. Instead, the song performs the crucial function of informing the *audience* what it is that the suitors want, and therefore the source of the wrongness in the world. In this way the song emphasizes the evil that such social aberrations can bring.

#### 4. Conclusion

A first listen to Kisii stories and the songs therein leaves one with the impression that those songs are meaningless – nothing more than aesthetic little ditties. But this perspective fails to answer several important questions: Why use song at all? Why at those particular points in the narratives? In answer to these questions, we have seen that song in Kisii stories is a crucial method of gaining access to the intentions and attitudes of the characters within them, in a way that adheres to the conventions of the genre, wherein the narrator downplays their own involvement in the oral performance. This technique neatly sidesteps the need for explicit third-party metacommentary such as, ‘She thought to herself’ or ‘He recoiled in disgust.’ The musical medium is thus a subtle and creative means of working within the bounds of an otherwise rigid and highly entextualized genre. Moreover, by providing internal access to the attitudes of the characters, the listener is provided a framework within which to situate their own moral attitudes. That is, songs provide listeners with key information to determine the proper moral stances they are being expected to take towards the actions of characters in the story. Far from being just aesthetic ornamentation at the fringes of a speech-

oriented genre, songs in Kisii folktales are perhaps the most crucial component of the genre, through which the social work of stancetaking is accomplished.

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## 6. Appendix

*Ómwáná ómomurá n'ékerandi*

‘A boy, a girl, and a gourd’

Narrated by Helen Makana

Kisii	English
Mogano ígóochá índé.	May I, Story, come?
Ee,	Ah,
ómwáná n'áarengé,	there was a child,
ómomura.	a boy.
Ómwáná óyo ómomura,	This boy child,
ígó atagété,	he wanted,
ee,	ah,
koréeta ómosúbááti,	to bring (home) a wife,
rakíni táaré kómorenta.	but he never brought her.
tá:tá tágété kónyúómá.	He didn't want to get married.
Bóɔɔɔ,	Now,
mama ómwabó ágachandika sána.	his mother became very troubled.
Ákányá gótééba,	She kept on saying,
“Íńakí índáákóré,	“What can I do,
ómwáná óyo oné,	so that this child of mine,
ányúómé?”	so that he marries?”
Ríituko érimó ómomurá óyo ékeró ákónyá gótaara,	One day when this boy was walking about,
akagenda akaúméra ékerandi.	he went and came across a gourd.
Ékeró aúmerá ékerandi,	When he came across the gourd,
agaachá n'ékerandi kería,	he took that gourd,
agaachá agakebéeka nyombá mwábó.	and he came and put it in their house.
Ékeró ákébéeka nyombá mwábó,	When he put it in their house,
bóɔɔɔ mama ómwabó ányágótééba,	now his mother kept saying,
“Bóɔɔɔ ómomurá óyo,	“Now this boy,
ékerandi éke nakío áréngé kóréetá	this gourd is what he brings?
Gósé ígó íntágete ányúómé ómosúbááti.	I want him to marry a woman.
Árénta ómoiséké ígá ígá,	He should bring a girl here,
ómoiséké óyo ánkónyé égáási.”	a girl to help me with the chores.”

Bóṅṅó rítúkó érimó,	Now one day,
ee,	eh,
ómoiséké óyo,	this girl,
n'áarengé,	was,
ómoiséké óyo ígó aményéte áasé ékerandi éke íme.	this girl was staying inside this gourd.
Mwóyó ómong'ina óyo támányete ómoiséké n'aré áasé ékerandi éke íme.	That woman didn't know that there was a girl in the gourd.
Ómong'ina óyo achígó:chá koru mogondó,	Whenever this woman came back from the farm,
mamá ómwabó ómomurá óyo,	the mother of this boy,
ányóóré,	she finds,
ényombá y'ábúsíré,	the house swept,
ébinto bísibírié,	the utensils washed,
éndáágera éróósírié.	the food prepared.
Ómwong'ina óyo anyágótééba,	This woman would always say,
“Íng'o bóṅṅó ogóóchá ónyakṛṛṛṣia égáási éye?”	“Who is this who comes and makes this work?”
Íng'o ógóóchá ónyá gosibíá ébinto ébi?”	Who is this who comes and washes these utensils?”
Bóṅṅó rítúkó érimó,	Now one day,
ákányá gótééra.	she started singing.
Ómoiséké ómwabó n'áarengé ómwabó ómomurá óyo.	There was a sister to this boy.
Ákányá gótééra.	She started singing.
“Momura ominto orentire ekerandi,	“My brother brought a gourd,
kerandi getachi rooche ekerandi,	a gourd which doesn't go to the river,
kerandi getachi kwaa ekerandi,	a gourd which doesn't rinse vegetables,
kerandi getachi mogondo ekerandi,	a gourd which doesn't go to the farm,
kerandi getachi gotenya ekerandi.”	a gourd which doesn't fetch firewood.”
Na éndé,	Again,
mama ómwabó ágachia akabóória ómoiséké óyo,	the mother went and asked this girl,
“Íng'o bóṅṅó ógóóchá ónyá gosi- sibíriá ébinto?”	“Who is this who comes and washes utensils for us?”
“Ínche tǐng'ómanya, Mama.”	“Me, I don't know, Mom.”
“Íng'o ógóóchá ónyá gotwábúúsérá ényomba?”	“Who is this who comes and sweeps for us?”
“Ínche tǐng'ómanya, Mama.”	“Me, I don't know, Mom.”
Na éndé,	Again,
agachaaka gótéérá rítúkó érimó,	she started singing one day,
“Omomura ominto orentire ekerandi,	“My brother has brought a gourd,

kerandi getachi rooche ekerandi,	a gourd which doesn't fetch water,
kerandi getachi kwaa ekerandi,	a gourd which doesn't fetch vegetables,
kerandi getachi mogondo ekerandi.”	a gourd which doesn't go to the farm.”
Na éndé bakagenda,	Again they went,
bagenda,	they went,
égaási yábó ya botámbe.	about their usual work.
Ékeró bágóchia góóchá,	When they come back,
bányóó[rá]-	they find-
ényombá ya búúsiré,	the house is swept,
ébinto bísíbiríé,	the utensils washed,
ee,	ah,
éyú éndáágera éróósiríé,	the food cooked,
kéra égentó gékóríré buyá.	everything done well.
Bóóno ríitúkó érimó,	Now one day,
mamá ómwabó ágatéébbá,	her mother said,
“Igó íngóóchá kwebísá,	“I'll hide myself,
ígáa nyombá.”	in the house.”
Agatéébbíá ómoiséké óyé	She told her daughter,
“Bóóno tóimóké tógendé égaási.”	“Now let's set off to go to work.”
Bakaímóka bagasóóká.	They stood and left.
Mamá ómwabó áké:bísá nyombá.	The mother hid in the house.
Ómoiséké óyo bóóno oré [áá] ékerandi támányetí gósé ómong'ina oriá bwebísiré nyómbá.	This girl who is here in the gourd, does not know that the woman had hidden herself in the house.
Bóóno,	Now,
akaímóka korwa ariá áase ékerandi keria kíayé agasóóká buyá búná ágasó:ká botámbe,	she stood and walked out of her gourd as she does always,
agachaaka akabúúsá buyá,	she started by sweeping well,
agasíbbíá ébinto buyá	she washed the utensils well,
akaróósiá éndáágera buyá.	she made food well.
Bóóno ririá,	Now then,
ágóchia kogenda búná áiráné góchia ékerandi keria kíayé íme.	she started to move, heading back into her gourd.
Mamá ómwabó akamobwáta búná, ká!	The mother grabbed her like “ka!”
Mamá ómwabó ómomurá oriá,	The mother of the boy,
akamonyúnyúnta.	she kissed her.
“Bábá,	“Lady,

n'áye ógóchá kwányá gonsibériá ébinto?	Is it you who usually comes and washes utensils for me?
Igá ákónyé n'áye,	So it is you who,
ómomurá óné ányúómeté ómuyá igá,	my son married a good one like that,
ógóóchá kwányá gonsibériá ébinto.	who comes and washes utensils for me.
Akamotéébíá, “Rээрó íntágété,	She told her, "Today I want,
óché óményé mwáné igá igá gócháákera reерó,	you to come and stay in my house starting today,
ógendééré kóbá mokámomurá óné.”	you continue being my son's wife.”
Ómoiséké óyo ákagenderera kóményá óó,	That girl continued to stay there,
akabééra óó bakaményá báre n'ómrembe.	she stayed there and stayed happily.
Bóно ómomurá oríá ákanyúómá.	Now that boy married.
N'abo ómogano óné oererete ígó.	That's how my story was.
Ímbuyá mónó.	Thank you.