

INSIDE NYUMBANITU TRADITIONAL FOREST: REINTERPRETATION OF FOREST EMBEDDED FOLKLORES OF WABENA IN NJOMBE

Stanley Elias

Department of Literature, University of Dares Salaam, Tanzania.

Abstract: This study reinterpreted Nyumbanitu traditional forest embedded folklores of Wabena in Njombe in the cultural milieu perspective. The study in particular, exploits the cultural meanings of the forest embedded folklores and their functions in Wabena cultural settings. As per findings of the study, it can be argued that the identified forest embedded folklores not only are the carriers of traditions, customs, norms, and beliefs, world view of Wabena community and rituals and religion but also signify cultural practices in the life patterns of the Wabena. They form a distinctive relationship with daily lives of the Wabena in moulding behaviour, attitudes, knowledge, values and social morals of Wabena. However due influx of other forms of beliefs and religion, there have been threats to these forms of cultural heritage of Wabena. Lastly the study calls for further and extensive studies to explore on other forms of folklores embedded in the Nyumbanitu traditional forest and other natural arte facts in Njombe or other places.

Key words: folklores, natural artefact, culture

1. Introduction

This study has its genesis from my two tours I had made in the Nyumbanitu traditional forest in 2015 and 2016. After I entered the forest, I came up with various narratives that supplemented to what I heard and believed about the forest before the visit. My interest after the tours was *inter alia* to interrogate such narratives in the cultural milieu.

The Nyumbanitu traditional forest is located in Mlevela village near boarder of Nyumbanitu village and Tanganyika Wattle Estate Company in Wanging'ombe district in Tanzania. It is about 15 kilometres from Njombe Townⁱ. The name *Nyumbanitu* has its origin from caves found inside the forest which literary means "black house". It is believed that Bena people used to hidin during tribal wars with rival tribes and from German forces during *MajiMajiWar*ⁱⁱ between 1905 and 1907. The forest has rich history of Bena community and it entails political, social and cultural life of the community (Kiwale, 2016; Nyagava, 1988; Resani, 2015). The Bena people are commonly called *Wabenaw* whereby the prefix 'wa-' when it is added to Bena (*wa* –Bena) refers to people of Bena community (Mitterhofer, 2013). Henceforth, the term Wabena will be used throughout the discussionⁱⁱⁱ. According to Enhret (1958) as cited in Nyagava (1988) explains that the Wabena originated from the East African coast. They were searching the source of river Rufiji through Ulanga and Kilombero district for agricultural reasons and they lastly settled in the area called Nyumbanitu (Nyagava, 1988; Resani, 2015). Today, Wabena are spread all over Njombe region but majority live especially in the Njombe Municipal, Njombe District, Wanging'ombe District, Makambako Sub-Urban area and some live in nearby areas like Ludewa, Makete, Mbarali, Ruvuma, Ulanga and Mufindi districts.

To my best of knowledge so far, there are very few and limited studies that have been done on Wabena folklores (Kilimile, 2009; Nduye, 2015), and partly Kiwale (2016). Kilimile (2009) and Nduye (2015) for example focused on folktales and narratives of Wabena from literary perspective while Kiwale (2016) investigated in passing the myth and history of Nyumbanitu traditional forest. Of course, Njana, Mugasha and Kajembe (2012) on the other hand studied on the sustainability of Nyumbanitu traditional forest resources and they focused on the ways local ritual leaders and associated traditions help to preserve the ecology of the forest. As pointed out earlier, the forest entails the political, social, economic and cultural life of Wabena which is also

reflected in the forest embedded folklores. Generally speaking, folklores of the forest tell about the life, the people, events and social organisation of the Wabena. In this paper, I investigate the forest embedded folklores of Wabena from a cultural perspective. In particular, the study attempts to examine cultural meanings encoded in the forest embedded folklore forms and their functions to Wabena cultural group.

2. Traces of the Relationship between Folklores and Natural Artefacts

There have been studies conducted to investigate folklore materials associated with natural artefacts like forests, rivers, mountains and rocks to mention a few. Longchar (2011) explains that such scholars' initiatives to study the folklores and natural artefacts are prompted by the fact that cultural heritage is preserved in natural artefacts as well as in oral traditions. Thus, folklores and natural artefacts form a distinctive relationship within the cultural settings in aspects of traditions, customs, religion, food, social organisation, rituals, political and economic organisation (Longchar, 2011). Putnam (1964) in holding such a view on cultural richness that folklores have, puts it simply that folklores are an evidence of people's own description and so they are an invaluable reflection of people's culture. The same way Dundes and Bronner (2007) in *Folklore as a Mirror of Culture* underline that folklores are autobiographical ethnography that provide unique description of people unlike the sociological, political, scientific or anthropological description. According to Benter, Mukundi, & Onyango (2016) natural artefacts are often associated with the identity of an individual, society or community as they do provide experiences shared across generations, as well as settings for communal interactions that become important for enriching cultural ties of the community. Dundes and Bronner (2007) see that this shared experience across generations is done through folklores. As a result folklore materials are at some point useful in conserving natural features from man's destruction because of such symbiotic relationship that exist between the folklores and natural artefacts (Benter et al., 2016; Lima, 1997; Njana, Mugasha and Kajembe, 2012; United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2003)

Conforming to such reciprocated relationship between folklores and natural artefacts Guerin (2006) maintains that forest have traditionally been contributing to a considerable repository folkloric knowledge of the community. Consequently, such forests become important

in constructing particular worldview of the community towards cultural life in respective settings. Hashik (2012) referring to a river in particular, appreciates that such natural arte facts apart from providing human needs they also shape people's life patterns culturally. On the other hand Benter et al.(2016)with particular focus on the significance of traditional oral information and natural artefacts for heritage conservation at *Kit-Mikayi* tor (rock) in Kenya found that such tor had thematic folklores that attested to cultural richness of the community with multifaceted interpretations.

Corroborating with the foregoing findings Tudor et al., (1997) argue that when something is culturally encoded, in our case folklores, it becomes inextricably connected into shared meanings and social practices of a particular group. Hence, folklores become culturally meaningful and affect on the ways people think, talk and do. This reiterates what Dundes and Bronner (2007) explain that folklore as a mirror of culture display similarities and differences in ways of thinking and doing from one cultural group and the other. For Tudor et al.(1997) the meaning we code is largely influenced by the way we represent it. Thus, Novoselov (2014) in his paper *Meaning and Interpretation in a Context of Semiotics* argues that the meaning of a sign is the way how we use and interpret it. Of course, in the context of semiotics language is made of signs that correlates with the cultural conventions of the society. Since folklores are largely shared orally, that is through language, therefore the meaning in folklores is largely lodged in the signs we use to express that in turn are culturally coded. According to Hall (1997:21)“..since all cultural objects convey meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they must make use of signs; and in so far as they do, they must work like language works...”. Accordingly, Dundes and Bronner (2007) call for reinterpretation of such signs and symbols lodged in folklores anew for cultural meaning. It is in this light this paper reinterpret the forest embedded folklores of Wabena from a cultural perspective.

3. Methodology

This study deploys qualitative approach in its process of data collection. In particular, I first use the interview I had conducted with the local leader in-charge of protecting the forest (Julius Msigwa) and available recorded interview between the local leader and the media journalist. Secondly, I use the available documentary video about the forest and other natural artefacts of

Njombe region and lastly I use available people's narratives about the forest, as well as participant observation (as a native and resident in nearby village). The critical study of data from the sources is followed by analysis and reinterpretations of the forms of folklores associated with the forest.

4. The Wabena Folklores

Generally speaking like any other African society, the Wabena folklores comprise myths, folktales, proverbs, riddles, taboos, beliefs, legends, tongue-twisters, folksongs (such as *ligimiloninyengo*, *pamwambopala*, and others)^{iv} and ballads, and folkdance (such as *lingapulila*^v). However this paper aimed to interrogate the Nyumbanitu traditional forest embedded folklores in the cultural milieu.

4.1 Mythical Narratives of Black Chickens

From both interview, narratives and documentary video the findings explain the mythical narratives about the existence of wild black chickens in the forest since time immemorial. Such animals have been associated with the origin of the forest. According to the interview it was reported that wild black chickens are always seen during harvest season and it is very rare to find them during rainy season. The local leader however admitted that no one knows when these black chickens entered the forest and do not know where do they go during rainy season. From available people's narratives it is said their existence is believed to be guarded by the unseen power from the forest and even when they get out of the forest to nearby villages no one dare to catch them. Villagers in the nearby village comment that "...even when it happens they enter our village (Mlevela) no one dares to catch them because they fear them." (Mlevela Villagers, 2016, Oral narratives). These animals have formed a special interaction with the people's life in the aspects of beliefs, attitudes, and cultural practices and more importantly they have successfully entered into canons of forest folklores in forms of mythical narratives, legends, chants, tales and rituals.

Culturally, the black chickens signify mystical power and consecrations on the other hand. The power of the unseen and master who control the forest and everything in the community is *interalia* seen in black chickens. These have not only constructed the worldview of Wabena

towards black chicken but signify change in cultural practice of the community. For example it was reported by the local leader that normally these black chicken are normally seen in the forest and in nearby village during harvest season and disappear during rainy seasons. Consequently, that all ritual performances in the forest and even in other parts of Wabena community are conducted during harvest season normally from June to September. As the local reader comments:

*“hapandipokunakilakitu cha
kimilaambacho Wabenahutumiakwenyeibadazaodzajadi.....eneohili la
sebulenitunatumiakwaajiliyaibadananitapatumiakuwasimuliahistoriyamsituhuu,”
(Kiongoziwamsitu ndugu, Julius, 2016)*

[English]

“.....this is where there is everything which Wabena uses for their rituals from June to September.....this *living room* is used for rituals and I will use it to narrate the history of this forest”(Julius Msigwa, 2016).

Similar to these mythical narratives there are other legends associated with the black chickens. As Banda and Morgan (2017) legends are retold to incite cohesion, historical account of families, event or any other, sources of tribal memories and social relationships and of course carrier of customs and traditions. Wabena legends among other things reinforces social morals, obedience and social cohesion. For example one of them is that of “A businessman who stole the chicken from the forest”. He stole and put it together with other chickens he had in order to sell them in the town^{vi}. He sold all chickens except that chicken from the forest. Unexpectedly, the chicken become heavier than it was before as he was riding bicycle back to the village. As he approached the forest he fall down with his bicycle and the chicken ran away and entered the forest. The businessman had to see the leaders of the forest who finally asked him to apologise otherwise he could get more serious problems because of what he had done. Similar to this narrative, another story that relates to black chickens is that of driver who hit the black chicken while they (black chickens) were crossing the road; The local leader narrates “...that driver after had hit the chicken continued with his journey but after a short distance his car got problems. The villagers advised him to go back and apologise. After he had done this he

<https://www.jsrd-humanities.com>

continued with his journey". In all the narratives, the idea of morality and obedience is placed fore and whoever goes astray is brought back to normality with unseen power from the forest.

For (Tudor et al., 1997) culture does not end up on making things meaningful to our life but to signify social practices that people do about in association with such cultural things. Confirming on the foregoing assertion, there are two reasons that speak on such schedule of the ritual performances during the period, one, it is time the controller of everything visit the forest during this period so it is a right time to go and speak to their master, second, it is time to give thanks to their master for all blessings they have been granted throughout the year and ask for another blessings as they go into another season of cultivation. From people's narratives it was said that in unusual circumstances like during droughts, hunger or other calamities ritual performances can be conducted outside the normal schedule. During this hard times the elders normally from the clan of Kiswaga would conduct sacrifices in the forest and rain and plentiful harvests would follow. This had a message that rituals and sacrifices were fruitful. For this reason the forest had implicative message to the community of the place and nearby people that there is a need to conduct rituals and sacrifices to avert droughts, hunger, famine and diseases. So, this mythical narratives about the black chickens give another angle of understanding Wabena culture. This validates Dundes and Bronner (2007) assertion folklores describes the in and out the culture of the society. While black chicken could be taken for granted Olusola (2005) sees that animals can form a distinctive relationship and incite some acts towards them in the place we live because they canonical to folklores of the community.

3.2 Tale of Three Sons

Another form of folklore that was identified was the tale of the three sons in the forest.

"Once upon a time the chief of Wabena who used to live in the forest called his three sons. He had already studied the behaviour of each son before. He had decided to handle over the responsibilities of being a chief. The first son was called Fute and he was given a hoe. The first son had to lead and control all agricultural activities of the community. The second son was called Mkongwa and he was given a spear. His task was to provide security and administration to the community. The third son was called Kiswaga and he was given a "traditional tray" made from woods "*ungo*" and he had to protect the forest and lead all ritual performances in the forest. After distributing the task the chief did not live longer. He passed away"(Julius Msigwa, 2016)

This tale entails the socio-cultural, political and economic aspects of life of Wabena. It signifies the economic activity that the Wabena engages with. That is agricultural activity. Though recently there have been other economic activities that the community engages with, agriculture still remains the main economic activity that majority attaches with. Secondly, the tale signifies social organization in the aspects of leadership structure, cohesion and division of labour. While leadership structure may not be relevant today the tale of the three sons remain significant to the social cohesion and division of labour of Wabena((URT), 1998). On the other hand, the tale of the three sons comments on the cultural identity of Wabenain aspects of beliefs, traditions, customs, religion, social organisation, as well as rituals commonly known as “*matambiho*”^{vii}. This echoes what Longchar (2011) asserts that folklores form a distinctive relationship with people’s life within the cultural settings in aspects of traditions, customs, religion, food, social organisation, rituals, political and economic organization (Longchar, 2011). For instance people’s view on the forest is that it is a sacred place, a place where ritual performances are conducted and some associate it with superstitions. Because this tale of the three sons is retold from generation to generation, the belief and attitudes towards the forest have been internalised and have become culturally meaningful and more importantly cements the society as argued by (Rurangwa, 2006). However, from the interview it was reported that recently there have been threats from some fanatical Christians who visit the place for the intentions of destructing the forest because of what they had heard from people narratives.

3.3 Beliefs and taboos

Beliefs and taboos are used to reinforce knowledge or the perceived “truth” acquired (Banda & Morgan, 2017). In the forest there are beliefs and taboos (“*imani* and *miiho*” respectively) about how to behave in the forest, describe or explain order of the forest, predicting weather and describing manners that relates to moral concerns about food, health of the Wabena. Breaking taboos is subsequently followed by dangerous effects like death and get lost in the forest or anything harmful to an individual’s life. For instance a woman who undergoes ovulation (in menstrual cycle) is not allowed to enter into forest and if she enters she will experience such situation non-stop in the rest of her life. As a result, whoever (woman) visits the forest will be cautioned on this taboo before one enters the forest. Similar to this taboo is that no shoes or hats are allowed when entering the forest. So as a visitor you will be asked to take them off.

Culturally these taboos signify hygiene is to be maintained in the sacred place. Considering the great importance and holiness of the forest such a woman or shoes and hats in one way or another would impure the place. Such taboos are extended to the life Wabena whereby such a woman wouldn't be allowed to enter any other sacred place. There is also a belief that has translated to cultural practice that entering the forest with no permission from ancestors would lead to one getting lost in the forest and associated problems. Before entering the forest the local leader in-charge asks for the permission. "*Himba, HiswaganaMkongwamkomale pa nyumapesuavagenzi ava mtwavadzilehulolainyumbaiyitwisuhavingilesalamavahumesalama*" which translates to "Himba, Hiswaga and Mkongwa stay at our backs these guest of chief have come to see your house, we beg you they enter and come out safely"^{viii}. According to the local leader in-charge of the forest it was reported that in recent years a group of Christians (fanatics) who entered the forest without permission for the purpose of destroying whichever they saw in the forest. They got lost until the next day when the then local leader in-charge of the forest went to rescue them. This narrative has been shared among people and to every visitor in the forest. Consequently, the in and out of Wabena culturally is being shared through these narratives, beliefs and other forms of folklores under discussion.

5. Conclusion.

This study reinterprets Nyumbanitu traditional forest embedded folklores of Wabena in Njombe in cultural milieu perspectives. The study particularly exploits the cultural meanings and their functions in Wabena cultural settings. I argue that the identified forest embedded folklores not only are the carriers of traditions, customs, norms, and beliefs, world view of Wabena community and rituals and religion but also signify meaningful practices in the life patterns of the Wabena. The folklores forms a distinctive relationship with daily lives of the Wabena in moulding behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, values and social morals of Wabena. However due influx of other forms of beliefs and religion there have been threats to these forms of cultural heritage of Wabena. This study also calls for further and extensive studies to explore on other forms of folklores embedded in the Nyumbanitu traditional forest and other natural artefacts in Njombe or other places because this study was limited to a few forms of folklores in the forest.

REFERENCES

- (URT), U. R. of T. (1998). History of local government system in tanzania. *URT, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania*, (Cap 105), 1–10.
- Alan Dundes and Bronner Simon J. (2007). *The Meaning of Folklore*.
- Banda, D., & Morgan, W. J. (2017). Folklore as an instrument of education among the Chewa people of Zambia Author (s): Dennis Banda and W . John Morgan Source : International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l'Éducation, 59(2), 197–216.
- Benter, O., Mukundi, J. B., & Onyango, A. (2016). Significance of traditional oral information and natural artefacts for heritage conservation at the Kit- Mikayi cultural site.
- Guerin, E. (2006). “*The Fairy Tale of the Forest*” *Mythic Passages. The Magazine of Imagination*.
- Hall, S. (1997). The work of representation. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 15–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0898010110393351>
- Hashik, N. K. (2012). *River as a cultural construct: myth and ritual on the banks of bharathappuzha*.
- Julius Msigwa. (2016, August 18). Interview with Mwananchi Newspaper journalist. *Mwananchi*.
- Kilimile, M. (2009). *Hadithi na Masimulizi ya Wabena*. Phoenix Publishers.
- Kiwale, B. (2016). A Myth About Nyumbanitu. Retrieved from <http://kiwale1990.blogspot.com/2016/06/a-myth-about-nyumbanitu.html>
- Lima, G. (1997). UNESCO/WIPO World Forum on the Protection of Folklore; Economic exploitation of expressions of folklore: the experience of the Americas; 1997, 1–9.
- Longchar, R. (2011). *Oral Narratives of Ao-Nagas : Constructing Identity. (Unpublished PhD Thesis)*. Centre for Folk Culture Studies School of Social Sciences. University of Hyderabad.
- Mitterhofer, B. (2013). Lessons from a Dialect Survey of Bena: Analysing Wordlists. *SIL Electronic Survey Reports, 2013–20*, 1–131.
- Nduye, H. (2015) Dhima za Mwingiliano Matini Katika Hadithi za Watoto wa Kabila la <https://www.jsrd-humanities.com>

- Wabena(Unpublished B.A Dissertation, St.Augustine University.
- Njana, M.A W Mugasha, G. K. (2012). Are traditional institutions effective in regulating forest use and sustaining forest resources? experience from Nyumba-Nitu, Southern Highlands, Tanzania. *Tanzania Journal of Forestry and Nature Conservation*, 82(1).
- Novoselov, V. (2014). Meaning and Interpretation in a Context of Semiotics. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 2(3), 149–151. <https://doi.org/10.12691/education-2-3-6>
- Nyagava, S. (1988). *The History of the Bena up to 1908*. (Unpublished Phd Thesis)University of Dar es Salaam.
- Olusola, a. G. (2005). Animals in the Traditional Worldview of the Yorùbá. *Folklore (Tartu)*, 30, 155–172. <https://doi.org/10.7592/FEJF2005.30.olusala>
- Putnam, J. F. (1964). Folklore: A Key to Cultural Understanding. *Educational Leadership*. Retrieved from http://www.ascd.com/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_196403_putnam.pdf
- Resani, M. (2015). Maana katika Majina ya Wabena nchini Tanzania Mnata Resani Ikisiri. *Mulika*, 35, 98–113.
- Rurangwa, N. (2006). Translating Rwandan Folktales Into English: a Culture-Based Analysis, 7–33.
- Tudor, A., du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H., & Negus, K. (1997). Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 48(4), 704. <https://doi.org/10.2307/591607>
- United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation. (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. General*. Paris.

Endnotes

ⁱ<http://tanzaniatourism.go.tz/en/destination/nyumba-nitu-natural-forest>

ⁱⁱ It was an armed war fought in the southern part of the present day Tanzania against the German rule. It involved the use magic power which it was believed that it could turn bullet into water. Water in Swahili language translates *tomaji*. So whoever could hear the bullet sound had to say *maji* and the bullet could turn into war.

ⁱⁱⁱ I use Wabena to specify the scope of my study as I consider cultural interpretations of such folklores are cultural specific to Wabena and the way they associate with the forest. Also the choice of the natural artefact under study is identical to Wabena who live in

^{iv} These song translates to “hoe and machete” and “on that side of the ridge” that is normally sung during wedding ceremonies advising the couple to consider their involvement in agricultural activity is core and like a father and mother.

^v This is a traditional dance for Wabena normally accompanied with the folksongs with messages that teach, advise, entertain, warn, ridicule and praise .

^{vi} Town refers to Njombe Town, the now Njombe region headquarter.

^{vii} *Matambiho* is a Bena language term for rituals

^{viii} Himba, Hiswaga and Mkongwa relates the tale of the three sons. Of course they are the same names in Wabena and they mean the big clans of Wabena in Njombe.