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Singing the morals: The function of musico-linguistic shifts in Kisii folktales

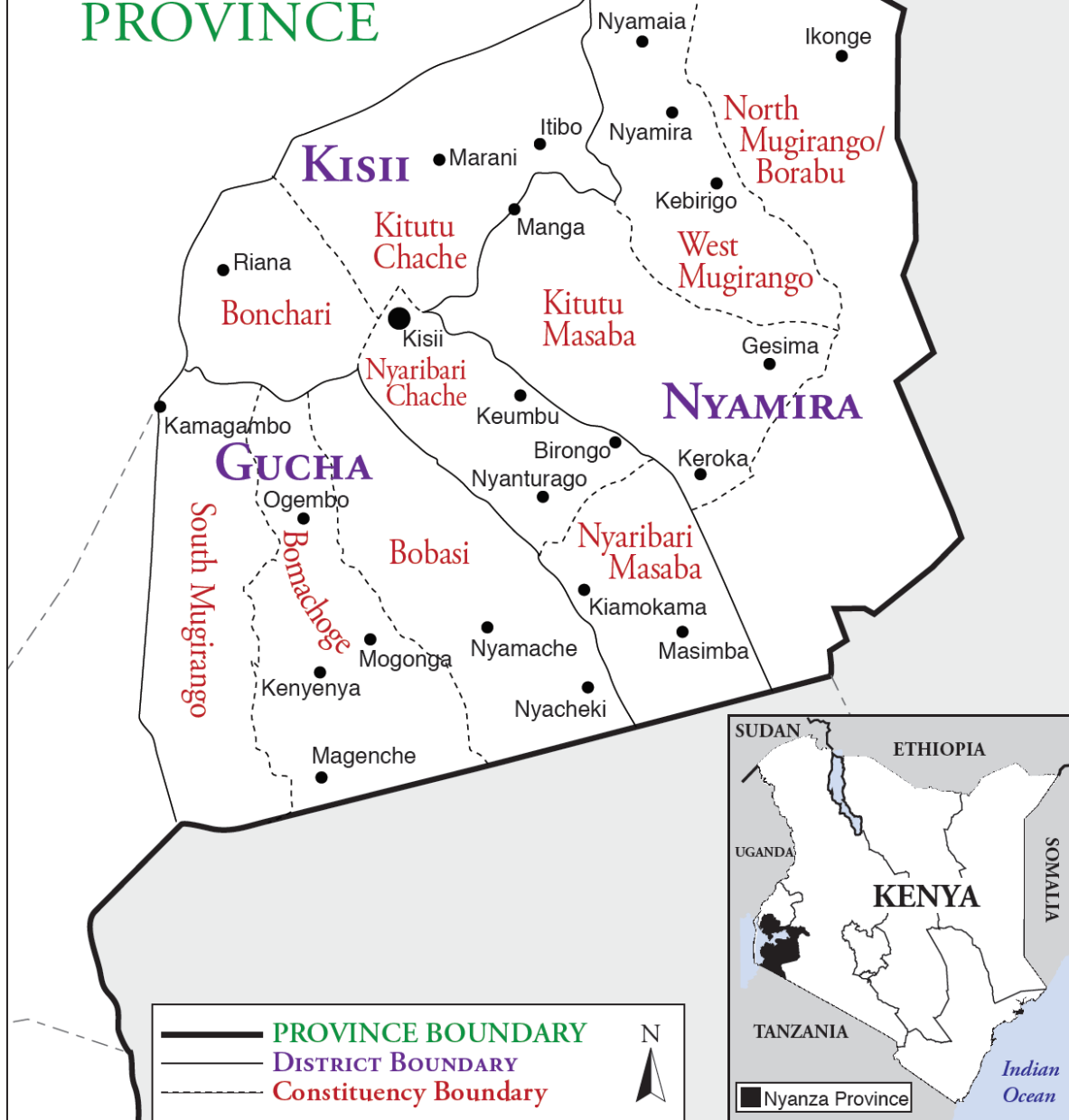
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Districts in Nyanza Province Where Ekegusii Is Spoken

NYANZA PROVINCE



Kisii (Ékegusií; Bantu, Niger–Congo)

- Endangered – few speakers under 30
- 2.2 million ethnic Gusii people, ~600,000 speakers
- Ékegusií Encyclopedia Project (EEP)
- 2 mo. field trip in Summer 2014: 24 folktales; lexical database with audio (14,000 words)

Generic features of Kisii folktales

- Self-erasure of the narrator
- Personification of the story
 - Mogano ngóochá índé? ‘May I, Story, come?’
 - Mogano írchúó. ‘Story, come.’
- Avoidance of metacommentary and self-correction
- No third-party descriptions of mental states

Generic features of Kisii folktales

- Characterological types – anthropomorphized animals
 - Giraffe, Lion, Hyena, Hare, etc.
 - Provides the listener with the proper moralizing stance
- Songs
 - Usually a single stanza, ~5 lines in length
 - Voiced by characters in the story (rather than the narrator)
 - Integral to the plot
 - Varied in style – from extremely melodic to very chant-like

Why song?

- In the absence of metacommentary, songs are a useful mechanism by which characters express their attitudes towards events in the narrative.
- This in turn tells the listener what kind of stance they are expected to take, on the basis of their prior knowledge of characterological types.

Who sings?

- 25 stories total
- 12 have human main characters
- These same 12 stories – and only these stories – have songs
- Only humans sing (unless animals are aided by supernatural means)

Ómwáná ómomurá n'ékerandi

A boy, a girl, and a gourd



- Mother wants son to get a wife
- Son brings home gourd
- Gourd has woman living inside it
- Woman does house chores
- Mother discovers woman
- Mother makes son marry woman

Ómwáná ómomurá n'ékerandi

A boy, a girl, and a gourd

- The song is how we know the attitude of the mother
- Reflects common social expectations in Kisii society that:
 - a) men find wives to marry
 - b) wives help the women of the husband's family with chores
- The song does the moralizing work of establishing the stance that the listener is expected to have towards the son's negligence
- The ironic fact that the ideal wife is living in the much-criticized gourd further highlights this contrast more starkly

Ábááná bátáno bányóórété chínkεηεε Five girls pick some mulberries

- Five girls go picking mulberries
- One girl eats all the mulberries
- The girls each sing an oath promising bad luck if they ate the mulberries
- When the culprit attempts to sing, she cannot
- She falls into the river and drowns

*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.’

Ábááná bátáno bányóórété chínkεηεε Five girls pick some mulberries

- Song is the key element telling the audience which moral stance 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

Ómoiséké ómonyakiéni

A beautiful girl

- A girl refuses to marry any suitors
- The disgruntled boys pretend to be river beasts, and turn the river to blood
- Father of the girl sings to the river beast, offering various gifts
- The river beast (i.e. the suitors) accepts the girl as a gift
- Girl is given to the river beast.
- Suitors take girl away and one marries her
- Father is none the wiser

Ómoíséké ómonyakíéni

A beautiful girl

- King Lear-style narrative
 - World is in chaos until the proper social order is restored (i.e. the girl is properly married)
- Father never knows why the river beast wanted the girl
- Song informs the *audience* of what the suitors want, and the source of wrongness in the world

Conclusion

- Songs may seem like nothing more than aesthetic ditties
- But then why use song at all?
- Why at these particular points in the narrative?
- Why by these particular characters?

Conclusion

- Each of stories show moralizing functions for their songs
- Songs provide insights into the attitudes of the characters
- Neatly sidesteps the need for third-party metacommentary
- Help establish the moral stance that the audience is expected to take