

The Semiotic Resourcefulness of Okutongerera among Haya Newlyweds

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Abstract

This paper examines okutongerera incantations to determine their semiotic resourcefulness in the giving of presents to Haya newlyweds. The data are from three wedding ceremonies which took place in Bukoba town, Kagera Region. The analysis is informed by social semiotic theory. The findings indicate that the incantations use security-related expressions, precautionary expressions, well-wishing expressions, and main-use-of-the-tools/weapon expressions. These expressions are accompanied by different symbolic actions. The findings show that okutongerera incantations are relatively more resourceful than other kinds of incantations as they have more to communicate regarding the life of the newlyweds than the other kinds do.

Keywords: *eichumu, enfuka, Haya community, okutongerera, orupanka, orwabyo, social semiotics*

Introduction

When a wedding ceremony is conducted by the Haya people, there comes a time when the parents of the groom are invited to give presents to the newlyweds. It is at this juncture that the parents led by the groom's father give presents of varied nature, including what they call working tools and/or weapons. In the course of giving such cultural presents, the groom's father delivers a relatively short incantatory address whose content is mainly targeted at the bride and the groom. The process of delivering such an address is called *okutongerera* in Ruhaya.

The *okutongerera* incantations are basically aimed at instructing the couple on how to use the tools and weapons. More importantly, the father wishes the couple success in the utilization of the presents. This is done through the choice of particular cultural words/expressions. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine these expressions to indicate the role they play in effecting communication. The paper specifically aims at examining these expressions to indicate the way a father

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achieves the aims of well-wishing and instructing the newlyweds on the use of tools/weapons among other aims.

Incantation refers to a collection or combination of special words that are uttered or sung to have a magic effect. Thus, the utterance or the singing of the words is based on the belief that words are powerful to the extent that they are able to make the utterer achieve certain desired results/wishes/ends (Duru, 2016). Incantation is used for different purposes, such as casting a spell on an object or a person (Olaosun, 2012), curing ailments, the procurement of goods, the arousal of emotional states, appeasement of ancestral spirits, social control (Florey & Wolff, 1998), asking for self and one's property's protection from various evils (Al-Jubouri, 2003) and easy delivery among pregnant women (Duru, 2016).

Olaosun (2012) posits that incantations have power because their words build some spiritual connections and their expressions point to reality and model real-life arguments and logic. Thus, incantations are built on cultural words and/or expressions through which the intended cultural meanings are passed. According to van Leeuwen (2015), the cultural signs, in a specific cultural event such as wedding ceremonies, are social semiotic resources. Olatunji (1984) posits that the Yoruba have incantations used to kill, untie evil and to bring good luck.

In this paper, examination is done to show the significance of these resources in communicating the intentions of the givers and receivers of the tools given as presents. It is expected that the study on social semiotic resources in the incantatory expressions will help us to gain some insights regarding the way such expressions help the parent to do *okutongerera* successfully.

Incantations in Wedding Ceremonies

When given a chance to address the newlyweds, parents use words/expressions that express the expected message. Glantz (2021) submits that the parent's speech at a wedding ceremony should include, among other things, a piece of advice regarding the newlyweds' future life.

According to Sengupta (2013), incantations are one of the 10 elements in the Indian community which a Hindu wedding ceremony entails. This act is performed through a series of rites and incantations to let the world and deities know of the exchange and is mediated by a Brahman priest (pandit). Moreover, Deeza (2020) reports that incantations are among the resources used in traditional marriage ceremonies done by

the Ogoni in Nigeria over the girl to fortify her against evil forces that may come her way.

Analyzing the bridal chant among the Oyo Yoruba of Nigeria, Fatuase (2015) indicates that Oyo bridal chants are capable of creating moral armament for the modern bride who often faces challenges in handling the pressures and harsh realities of marriage.

According to Afful and Nantwi (2018), in the marriage ceremonies by the Krobos of Somanya in the Eastern Region of Ghana, some incantations are recited in the native language to commit the couple into gods' hands and plead with them to protect the couple and their marriage. It is interesting to study what purpose the incantations used in these ceremonies serve in the Haya community.

Methodology and Theory

This paper used video recording, onlooker observation, and short interviews to collect data. Having sought permission from the wedding organizers to record the ceremonies, a videographer was hired to record the events in three different wedding halls in Bukoba Urban. As onlooker observers we noted various details useful in understanding the recorded videos. The analysis focused on the cultural significance and communicativeness of *okutongerera*.

Short interviews were done on the bride and groom to ask them whether and how they found *okutongerera* communicatively important. The interviews were important because this was deemed the only reliable way through which we could tell that most of the intended aims regarding the expressions by the parents were being met or not.

The data obtained were analyzed qualitatively using Social Semiotics Analysis (SSA). The Social Semiotics Analysis is mainly concerned with identification and description of social semiotic resources as well as investigation of their contextual social usefulness culturally, historically, and institutionally as well as how people talk about these resources in these contexts (Delu, 2010; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2009; Van Leeuwen, 2005). Thus, we identify the semiotic resources in the *okutongerera* and then describe their usefulness in delivering the intended message.

The main tenets of Social Semiotic Theory are as follows. First, social/cultural meanings are transacted in various texts (verbal or visual) or embedded in various objects, actions, practices, or behaviors, which are generally termed as semiotic or meaning-making resources.

Second, the semiotic resources are used by people in a given social context based on the meaning they wish to represent at a given moment in such a specific social context. Third, the semiotic resources have two types of semiotic potentials (affordances) — the possible uses of a semiotic resource. These are a theoretical semiotic potential (affordance) and an actual semiotic potential (affordance). The theoretical potential of a resource consists of all its past uses and potential future uses, whereas the actual semiotic potential of a resource constitutes the uses that specific users know with specific needs in specific contexts. Fourth, it is the sign-maker's interest that guides his or her selection of semiotic resources.

The role of the semiotic resources on the meanings of *okutongerera* was analyzed and interpreted based on, according to van Leeuwen (2005), that anything that is culturally valuable and significant is a social semiotic resource; a resource for making cultural meaning with. Van Leeuwen added that everything that we do or give cultural significance is a semiotic resource.

Analysis and Results

***Okutongerera* Expressions and Semiotic Resources**

A total of eight *okutongerera* expressions were identified from the three wedding ceremonies studied, namely three *okutongerera* expressions during *eichumu* 'spear' giving, two *okutongerera* expressions during *enfuka* 'hoe' giving, one *okutongerera* expression during *orupanka* 'machete' giving, one *okutongerera* expression during *omuhoro* 'long handled machete' giving and one *okutongerera* expression during *orwabyo* 'sickle' giving.

We present the semiotic resources in terms of words/expressions used in *okutongerera* and their applicability to communicativeness as captured from the wedding ceremonies during presentation. This part is organized around two related aspects, namely weapons (spear) presentation and working tools (hoe, long-handled machete, machete, and sickle) presentation.

Three *Okutongerera* Expressions during *Eichumu* 'Spear' Presentation

Expression in Eichumu 'Spear' Presentation (SP) 1:

Eichumu eli nalikukabidhi; nabona okwo waba mushaija, omushaija emanzi. Ogende okole opakase mara nabona okwoli mushaija ebintu byona nibija kugoshooka omumaisho gawe.

'I have given you this spear; I have seen that you have become a fully-grownman, a courageous man. Go and do your work; go and do business to generate income. And I have

realized that you are now a real man. All things will prosper as you plan.’

Expression in Eichumu ‘Spear’ Presentation (SP) 2:

Nakukwasa eichumu eli tilyaukoza bantu kushai, likulinde n’okulinda emali yawe; emali yawe ni pamoja n’efamilia yawe. Ekilikwija kubi obe nilwooliyaayo, chonka ebya nanka yanjuma twaba tuli amilimo kangye mukoze, tikyonalikuweela!

‘I am giving you this spear. It is not for piercing people. Let it protect you and your property; your property includes your family. Use it only when there is a threat. Don’t misuse this spear. Don’t use it against a mere insult. This is not the purpose for which I am giving this spear to you.’

Expression in Eichumu ‘Spear’ Presentation (SP) 3:

Tola eichumu eli; okwate mashaija, otabaare mashaija...

Receive this spear; be courageous and fight courageously...’

The Semiotic Resources in the SP1, SP2, and SP3

In the three *okutongerera* expressions during spear presentation (SP1, SP2, and SP3), there are four main groups of semiotic resources. These are security-related, well-wishing, precautionary and main-use-of-the-tools semiotic resources.

Security-Related Semiotic Resources

In the three expressions (SP1, SP2, and SP3), the speakers deliberately choose expressions that communicate cultural meanings relating to self and family protection against threats. The groom has to protect himself and his family against threats. Such expressions include ...*Likulinde n’okulinda emali yawe; emali yawe ni pamoja n’efamilia yawe.* ‘...Let it protect you and your property; your property includes your family.’ This spear has been given for no other reason but self-protection and property protection. The presentation of the spear represents good wishes from the parents to the groom and bride.

Another expression in relation to the spear and protection is *Eichumu eli nalikukabidhi; nabona okwo waba mushaija, omushaija emanzi...* ‘I am giving you this spear; I have seen that you have become a real man, a courageous man...’ The spear is given to the groom after the parent has assured himself that the groom is ready to use the spear courageously to protect himself and his family.

The relationship between presenting the spear to the groom and security is also evident in the expression: *okwate mashaija, otabaare mashaija...* ‘be courageous and fight courageously...’. The expression is chosen to indicate that the spear is mainly given to the groom for fighting against a threat.

What seems to be an understanding and acceptance of such empowering for fighting for self and the family’s security is the nonverbal action by the groom of raising the spear in the air and shaking it vigorously to indicate that he is now powerful and ready to protect his family. Another act which might count as a response to show understanding is when the groom, upon hearing *okutongerera*, pulls the spear off the ground.

Well-wishing Semiotic Resources

In the three expressions (SP1, SP2, and SP3), the speakers use expressions that show well-wishes for the groom. The speaker says *Ogende okole opakase... ebintu byona nibija kugoshooka omumaisho gawe*. ‘Go and do your work; go and do business to generate income... All things will prosper as you plan.’ Another example of the expressions wishing the best to the groom is ...*Likulinde n’okulinda emali yawe...* ‘...Let it protect you and your property...’ In the Haya community, it is the responsibility of a parent to wish the groom the best in marriage life.

Precautionary Semiotic Resources

In the three expressions (SP1, SP2, and SP3), some precautions regarding the use of the spear are provided. The addresser uses the expression: ...*chonka ebya nanka yanjuma twabatuli amilimo kangye mukoze, tikyonalikuweela!* ‘Avoid thinking that “someone insulted me today when we were going to the office, let me go and hurt him/her by using this spear.” This is not the purpose for which I am giving this spear to you.’ This is used as a precaution to the groom regarding one of the possible misuses of the spear. The father wishes that the spear should not be used in bad ways that could cause trouble to the user.

Another precautionary expression is ...*tilyaukoza bantu kushai* ‘... it is not for just piercing people’. The use of ...*kushai...* ‘just’ implies that the spear can be used to pierce a person only under unavoidable circumstances.

Okutongerera Expressions at Presenting Enfuka, Omuhoro, Orupanka, and Orwabyo

Two Expressions at *Enfuka 'Hoe' Presenting*

Enfuka 'Hoe' Presenting (HP1):

Ekindi inywe sahezi mwina efamilia. Lazima mugilimile eigute. Kwata enfuka egi otagila ngu nanka naba ninduga kutaha amaizi nanka yagilaki kanyije ngimutemese. Oteme eitaka muiguse abana mutambe enjala kwema kileki olwonagibakwasa.

‘Moreover, you now have a family that needs to be fed satisfactorily through your cultivation. Take this hoe but do not use it to cut a person that you think has wronged you while you were coming from fetching water. Let it be used to cultivate food for feeding your children and for preventing famine from today on.’

Enfuka 'Hoe' Presenting (HP2):

Kandi mkamwana wange tola enfuka omushaija ayerure olime. Enfuka egyo ehige ebyokulya, oyete baro amo n'omutungo gwanyu ogwo rugaba rubao alabatungaga.

‘Moreover, my daughter-in-law, take this hoe so that when your husband clears the grassland, you may cultivate. Let that hoe be used for getting food... After getting food, call your husband and your children that you will be given by the Almighty God to eat the food.’

One *Okutongerera at Omuhoro Presenting Omuhoro 'Long Handled Machete' Presenting (LP1):*

Tola omuhoro oyerure orweya omukazi abone kulima.

‘Take this long-handled machete so that you can clear the grassland so that your wife may cultivate it.’

**One *Okutongerera* at *Orupanka Machete*' Presenting
Orupanka Machete' Presenting (MP1):**

...omukibanja kyonakuwa alimumbali ali omuti, alimumbali ali obwokushalilashalira naki, otumie orupanka olu kukora omulimo ogwo; otalilutumia kutema mukazi, anga kutema mwana anga kutema muntu ngu yaija omwange nabantaikwenda. Yatela hodi na bantaikwenda yashanga ntamilwe kamuteme. Lubae emilembe lubemererere oyelule mulime ekibanja kyanyu ekyo.

'...in the banana plantation that I have given you, there is a tree somewhere. Some plants in the plantation need to be pruned, etc. Use this machete for such activities. Do not use it to stab your wife, a child or a person who comes to your home and maybe you would not like to see them knocking at your door. Let it give you peace; let it help you so that you can clear the banana plantation that I have given you.'

**One *Okutongerera* at *Orwabyo*' Sickle' Presenting
Orwabyo' Sickle' Presenting (SP1):**

Aliyo akanyaasi kokushara sahezi nolwo olabaotagizile bigae chonka akanyaasi kokushara nolwo wakwenda kuteka omwijiko kutekankaha, oshaze orwabyoolu. Otalilushaza ebyananka nabona nafumola na nanka kanyijemushale, lukole omulimo gumoi!

'There is grass to cut especially at this moment when you may not have fixed tiles on the floor of your main house. The grass may also be used in the kitchen or in similar places. Use this sickle for cutting the grass. Never ever use it for stabbing a person like "I saw her talking to my husband let me stab her." Let it be used for only one intended job!'

Apart from the security-related semiotic resources which are only found in the *Okutongerera* for spear giving, other semiotic resources are found in the presentation of the working tools, namely hoe, machete, and sickle. These semiotic resources include well-wishing semiotic resources, precautionary semiotic resources, and main use semiotic resources.

**Well-wishing Semiotic Resources at Presentation
of *Enfuka*, *Orupanka* and *Orwabyo***

The givers of the *enfuka* 'hoe', *orupanka* 'machete', and *orwabyo* 'sickle' consistently wish the best to the receivers of the tools. This is evident in the use of the following expressions: *Oteme eitaka muiguse abana mutambe enjala kwema kileki olwo nagibakwasa* Let it (hoe) be used to cultivate food for feeding your children and for preventing

famine from today on.’ Thus, through such an expression, the parent wishes the best to the bride who receives the hoe, and more importantly, the wishes are sent to the couple. It is the bride (in singular) who is told to cultivate *Oteme eitaka*... ‘You cultivate...’ but the couple is also addressed regarding feeding children and keeping away famine using the cultivated food: *muiguse abana...mutambe enjala*... ‘You feed your (Plural) children... you (Plural) prevent famine...’ Thus, the bride is expected to cultivate and her husband will participate in using the food to feed the children and in keeping away famine.

Another example of well-wishing is observed when the *orupanka* ‘machete’ is being given: *Lubae emilembe lubemererere oyelule mulime ekibanja kyanyu ekyo*. ‘Let it give you peace; let it help you so that you can clear the banana plantation that I have given you.’ Thus, the parent wishes the best to the receiver of the machete, the groom so that the use of it bears the expected fruits. Hence, the clearing of the farm is done successfully and peacefully.

In the presentation of *orwabyo* ‘sickle’, there is wishing the best through the expression *lukole omulimo gumoi* ‘Let it be used for just one intended job’. This implies wishing the best to the bride so that she can use the sickle for cutting grass successfully and not using it to hurt people.

Precautionary Semiotic Resources at Hoe, Machete, and Sickle Presenting

When presenting the hoe, the father says: *...otagila ngu nanka nabaninduga kutaha amaizi nanka yagilaki kanyije ngimutemese*. ‘...but do not use it to hurt a person that you think has wronged you while you were coming from fetching water.’ Thus, the father warns the bride to not use the hoe for such unintended use.

Another example of precautionary resource is when the machete is being given: *...otalilutumia kutema mukazi, anga kutema mwana anga kutema muntu ngu yaija mwange nabantaikwenda. Yatela hodi nabantaikwenda yashanga ntamilwe kamuteme*. ‘. Do not use it to stab your wife, a child or a person who comes to your home and maybe you would not like to see them knocking at your door.’ This cautions the groom regarding the possible situations in which the machete may be misused to hurt people. This starts from members of the family (children and the wife) up to outsiders (guests coming home).

Moreover, during sickle giving, the bride is pre-cautioned regarding the possibility of hurting other people by using the sickle as a tool for

hurting others. The giver of the sickle says: *Otalilushaza ebya nanka nabona nafumola na nanka kanyijemushale*. ‘Never ever use it for stabbing a person like “I saw her talking to my husband; let me stab her.” Thus, the bride is pre-cautioned to never think of using the sickle as a weapon for fighting against the persons she accuses of having an affair with her husband.

Generally, the main responses by the receivers, seen when the presenting of the working tools (hoe, machete, sickle, and long-handled machete) are mainly nonverbal. Thus, it is material to say that acceptance of the *okutongerera* is nonverbally done through accepting to receive the specific present being given. In other words, receiving a specific present implies understanding what is contained in the *okutongerera*, including appreciating, well-wishing, and promising to use the tool as directed.

Responses in Short Interviews by the Grooms and the Brides

As stated in the Methodology and Theory section, we were interested to hear from the brides and the grooms regarding the content of the *okutongerera* from their parents. The following are their verbal responses in Kiswahili as the interviews were conducted in Kiswahili.

Groom1: *Yale maneno kwenye maelezo ya baba kuhusu mkuki yamekuwa msaada mkubwa kwangu kwani nilipoyasikia nimeona kwamba hakika mkuki utanisaidia katika kujilinda na kuulinda familia yangu.*

‘The expressions by my father about the spear have been very useful to me because upon hearing the expressions, I felt that for sure the spear will help me in protecting myself and my family.’

Bride1: *Kuambiwa kuwa nisitumie jembe kuwadhuru wengine kumenikumbusha watu niliowahi kuwaona wakitumia jembe kama silaha. Hii itanisaidia katika matumizi halali ya jembe, yaani katika kulima au hata kupalilia tu.*

‘Upon hearing that I should not use the hoe to hurt other people reminded me of some people who happened to use a hoe as a weapon. This will help me use the hoe as a cultivating or even a weeding tool.’

Bride2: *Matumizi ya orwabyo niliyoambiwa kama mwanamke nayafahamu na nimeyaelewa na niko tayari kuyatekeleza kama yalivyo. Hata hivyo, kwa mimi ninayeishi mjini sina matumizi makubwa ya orwabyo kwa kiasi alicheleza Baba Mkwe. Hata hivyo, inaweza kutumika kwa matumizi*

madogomadogo kama kukatia nyasi zinazozunguka nyumbani.

‘The use of the sickle that I have been told about as a wife, I know them and I have understood them, and I am ready to implement them as they are. However, as for me who lives in town, the sickle does not have such many uses that I have been told about by my father-in-law. Nevertheless, it can be used in some small uses such as cutting grass around my home.’

Groom2: *Nimeyaelewa matumizi ya panga ambayo baba kaniambia kama kusafishia migomba. Hata hivyo, bado panga hutumika kama silaha dhidi ya maadui.*

‘I have understood what my father has told me regarding the uses of a machete including pruning banana plants. However, normally a machete is also used as a weapon against enemies.’

Based on these expressions by the brides and the grooms, the communication intended by the parents through *okutongerera* has been valuable and effective. This is because the responses by the brides and the grooms justify that through *okutongerera* the brides and the grooms are ready to use the tools as told. The brides and the grooms are also appreciative of the best wishes from the parents. Moreover, the brides and the grooms promise to use the tools appropriately.

Discussion

The study aimed at examining, social semiotically, the *okutongerera* expressions to identify expressions that are used as semiotic resources to make the *okutongerera* communicate effectively. From the analysis made, four main expression semiotic resources were found to be useful in making the *okutongerera* incantation communicate its aims. These are security-related resources, precautionary resources, well-wishing resources, and the main-use-of-the-tools semiotic resources.

Security-related semiotic resources are found more at presenting the spear. This is because the spear being a weapon, it is given to equip the groom so that he can protect himself and his family. As regards the precautionary semiotic resources, they are used to caution the bride and the groom against misusing the tools.

Well-wishing is aimed at communicating what the parent(s) wish would be a success if the tools are used as planned. Thus, the parent communicates his wish. We would comment that well-wishing is the core part of *okutongerera* incantation.

The main use of the weapon/tool is to make the bride and the groom handle them appropriately. More importantly, the activities spell out the main responsibilities of the bride and the groom. This is because stating the main use of these tools and weapon(s) is basically stating what the main responsibility for each of the brides and grooms.

Among the Haya, *okutongerera* expressions are believed to have the power to make what the parents wish to happen in a way that these parents/speakers like. The evidence that communicativeness of the incantation is attained is seen through the receivers of the tools. They respond in different nonverbal forms. For instance, the action of receiving the spear and working tools (hoe, machete, sickle, and a long-handled machete) by the bride and/or the groom communicates a message that these brides and grooms are ready to use these tools in the way they are told by the parents.

Looking at all these tools and weapons as well as the incantatory expressions, one gets tempted to argue that it is the actual cultural affordance (cf. van Leeuwen, 2005) of these expression semiotic resources that is being communicated. This is because everything is done in accordance with what the Haya culture requires of the giver (the parent) and of the receiver (the bride and/or the groom).

It may also be argued that the total attainment of communicativeness is reflected in what happens in the life of the couple. This is because one may accept and appreciate what s/he is told on the wedding day and behave differently in marriage life. Nevertheless, some expressions such as well-wishing may not necessarily need a response from the receiver of the weapon or tool because they act like a prayer which may be responded to by just a single word, 'Amen' or even silence.

Giving presents in wedding ceremonies has been a normal practice in almost all weddings in almost all communities. However, what could presumably differentiate the Haya community from other communities is the way the cultural presents are given. In the Haya community ceremonies, accompanying the cultural present giving with special *okutongerera* mainly for the newlyweds has been a necessary process.

Generally, it can be established that the *okutongerera* incantations in the Haya wedding ceremonies are resourceful in two main ways. First, they are used for ensuring that the groom and/or the bride receive the right directions regarding the usage of the tool/weapon. Secondly, the incantations are used as a means for providing special words from the father of the groom who gives presents with the aim that the tool or weapon gets used in an expected manner for the expected aims so that it can produce the desired results.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the semiotic resourcefulness of the *Okutongerera* incantations during cultural present giving in the Haya wedding ceremonies. It was realized that since the parents intended to communicate their wishes regarding the weapon(s) and working tools, they deliberately chose the expressions that could work as a resource to communicate their wishes. These expressions include security-related, precautionary, well-wishing, and the main use-of-the-tools/weapons expressions. All these expressions were uttered in accompaniment with the giving of a particular weapon or a working tool (i.e. spear, hoe, machete, long-handled machete, and sickle

Based on these findings, it can be argued that despite the fact that *okutongerera* incantations are different from other incantations, most of which address non-human being items regarding expected results, they are very resourceful to the couple's future life. One example in which *okutongerera* incantations are resourceful to the newlyweds' future life is their content on the best utilization of the given tools and/or weapons.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest(s) with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this paper.

Funding

The author(s) declared that they received financial support for the research from the University of Dar es Salaam.

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