

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL REFLECTIONS IN KANURI HUNTERS' SONGS

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Prologue

Researching a particular physical environment primarily falls into the domains of geographers, ecologists, botanists, zoologists and archaeologists who study their objects in external perspectives developed from their scientific paradigms. A chance to look at the environment in an internal perspective which takes into account the views, attitudes and concepts of its inhabitants, can be provided by linguists and ethnologists who study objects and discourses deriving from the inhabitants themselves. In particular we are dealing here with aspects of the oral literature and music of the Kanuri in Nigeria.

The Kanuri concept of culture and nature

Our dichotomy of 'nature' and 'culture' is expressed in the Kanuri language with the terms *al @ga* for 'creation' and 'creature' which embraces trees, mammals, birds, insects, humans, in short the whole of the natural environment, and *ada* for 'custom, habit, way of behaviour, family tradition' for culture as a whole. There is no genre of oral literature, which would describe *al @ga* as such, but aspects of it can always be expressed in proverbs, riddles, toponymic praise phrases and songs, of which those performed by the hunters figure most prominently in reflecting upon *al @ga*. Yet, in these songs (and partly in other genres) ideas about *al @ga* are not purely descriptive in naturalists' terms. They are much rather expressions, which centrally combine notions of the social and natural environment.

Our dichotomy of nature and culture is also reflected in the opposition of inside, which is the village and the domain of *ada*, and outside, which is ruled by the subjects of the creation which can be dangerous and advantageous at the same time. The hunters are intermediaries between these two spheres as they are able to integrate aspects of the dangerous outside with the controlled inside. The hunters themselves are not only threatened by the wild animals but also by spiritual agents which are likewise part of *al @ga* and thought to be the rulers of the bush.

The hunters

Hunting among the Kanuri and neighbouring peoples is exercised by amateurs on one side and professionals on the other. The professionals organize themselves in a guild which is interethnic in composition. This becomes evident in common hunting parties and ceremonies. Taking the model from the political structure of the emirate, the guild is hierarchically organized with a *mai*, a hunter-king, at the top. The guild, which is dominated by the Kanuri, is also joined by Kotoko, Margi, Shuwa, Hausa, Gamergu, Fulani and others.

Many of the professional hunters are thought to possess supernatural powers, because their ability to take in subtle clues from observation of the environment is often not transparent for other Kanuri. This gives the hunters a special position within the society which is not exclusively the provision of meat alone. Their special abilities and talents furthermore allow them to provide plant medicine for both prevention and therapy. Additionally, the hunters control an area far away from their villages. For this, the political rulers were always interested in them, which becomes evident from the traditional titles attributed to them. In recent times they also fulfil the functions of vigilantes fighting against criminals who seek refuge in the more densely grown savannah areas.

Hunters and musicians

The ability of many hunters to accompany their songs with the lute *ngang @ra* is surprising because traditionally the performance of a musical instrument is predominantly ascribed to members of the *duwu* group. In this respect, the singing and lute-playing hunters are representatives of a social overlap, which combines members of the hunters' guild *kandira* with members of the caste-like institution *duwu*, who can be compared with the griot in Senegambia. The *duwu* are performing artists such as musicians, praise speakers or even dancers. Being outsiders to society, ordinary Kanuri would never enter into a marriage relationship with them.

Yet, many hunters find their way into the *duwu* section of the society through their music. One has to differentiate between the various stages which mark the progression into the *duwu* group and which are distinct positions within the whole of the Kanuri society. The social stratification of Kanuri society acknowledges the roles of;

duwu g @nyi; a musician who does not stem from a *duwu* family and who doesn't take money for his performance

k @na nz @kkoma duwube; a musician who took the profession for economic reasons although he doesn't have a *duwu* family background

and *ng @ji duwube*; a professional musician who belongs already to the *duwu* section of the society.

A hunter-musician can also be called *duwun @m dat @* when his performance is regarded as that of a master musician.

The performance complex

The hunters' songs are performed on the same occasions as those celebrated by the entire society. These are the most important Muslim festivities of *id el fitr* and *id el kabir* and the ceremonies within the life cycle such as naming ceremonies, circumcision and marriage. For the hunters, the annual festivity of the renewing of the oath *zowu sawo* marks an additional highly important occasion. Besides reinforcing the bonds within the guild, apprentices are initiated into the guild during the festivity. An important aspect of the *zowu sawo* is the performance of the *ngang @ra* lute music and the dancing done by expert dancers. The whole performance is only partially intended to entertain by depicting animals and their behaviour. Themes of songs relate to animals like the leopard, elephant, duiker, roan antelope, gazelle, pig, giraffe and ostrich as well as spirits such as Meram Kuruwu and Goigoi. Equally relevant is the presentation of magical activities such as swallowing needles or playing with fire because it underlines the supernatural power which the hunters are regarded as possessing.

The unity of language, melody, rhythm, motion, play and dancing is expressed in the Kanuri language through the word *biske* which combines in its semantic concept all these different aspects. Furthermore, it is impossible to find literal translations for our European concept of tone, melody and rhythm. This shows that the focus of a performance lies, from an emic point of view, on a different level. To understand the artistic value of a performance, one has to observe how the musical composition process combines a poetic with a motional performance. The concept of motional performance describes the combination of the relevant body movements of the actors. This includes the finger action of the lute player as well as the hand and arm movements of the percussionist or the whole body movement of the dancers. The cognitive perception of the composition, its melodic and rhythmical structure, can best be shown in the correlation of these motions. Furthermore, the performance allows the dance-imitation of the animals as an additional level of understanding. The particular mastery of certain musicians becomes obvious when the motional performance is combined with a poetic one which creates an impression of a *biske ng @lja*. This means literally a "sweet performance", which affects body and soul equally.

Musical structure

Musically the songs and the lute accompaniment are structured through the repetition of short melodic phrases, which form the foundation of a composition. At the beginning and end of each phrase the singer follows the

lute melody. In the process of fitting the text, which is probably not metrically structured, into this musical frame, certain variations can be observed specifically in the middle of some phrases. Even when they are sung, the syllabic tones of the language are usually carefully maintained which induces additional variations of the repeated melodic formula. The rhythmical accompaniment, produced through the axe heads *nd @rwa*, links the song with the lute playing and the dancing. Dancers and luteplayer incorporate these patterns into their activity. Thus, the rhythmical patterns are the audible aspect of a motional pattern which all performances share although they express it through different means. The unity of melody, rhythm and performance, *biske*, is then obvious.

Textual aspects

The song texts are structured in short lines which do not show much repetition, though sequences of lines can be repeated as whole paragraphs. From our text corpus we can recognize that each hunter-singer has songs with personal wording, though the main themes and a significant number of phrases are common to all the singers known to us. Syntactically the lines consist of noun-phrases, some with invocative functions, and complete sentences with narrative or qualifying functions. The main language is Kanuri with single lines and words in Hausa which reflects the interethnic composition of the performance group.

Formal elements such as personal names and place names are incorporated in the texts; for instance, the giraffe bears the prototypical name Aisa, one of the most common Kanuri female names also implying queenly status. Many names like Bukar S@l@m, Dala Fannami, Madu Gana etc. refer to actual hunters who enjoyed and still enjoy great fame in the society. In one of Mai D@rma's songs the giraffe is linked to members of the former Seyfawa dynasty to which the animal is related via its classificatory attachment to the T@ra clan. Toponyms usually refer to the name of lakes which the giraffe passes on its migratory route (lines 16-19 in appendix) or to savannah areas where a certain species is known to live. This name-dropping memorizes and praises the great heroes of the past; likewise through them the animals are elevated in status thus producing a dialectical praise relationship between animal, man and resourceful place.

The lines of the narrative type relate the typical behaviour and activities of the hunter who for instance picks up sand and drops it to check the direction of the wind, as well as the character of the animal which is often depicted as cruel and troublesome like the buffalo, roan antelope and giraffe (see line 8 and 9). In qualifying lines the animal can also be admired for its aesthetics, such as the ostrich:

the one whose gait is like one who lives in paradise/
the one whose running is like one who lives in hell,

which refers to the elegance of its slow walking and the image of its hectic running. Because of its feathers the ostrich is also compared to the finest and most shining types of Kanuri garments.

Many of the actions surrounding the prey animal are expressed in metaphorical terms like, for instance, the giraffe which lies dead in the forest and has so much meat that many people have to walk between that spot in the bush and the village, thereby trampling a path to recover the bulky prey. The created image is that of the killed giraffe forming a market with all its hustle and bustle of people (lines 6 - 7 in appendix). In another giraffe song the big mammal is depicted as a black heavy cloud whose masses of rain bless the country just as the masses of meat support the village. Also the ostrich is referred to for its economic value as its feathers once fetched high prices on the market:

„If you kill the female you will have an axe-carrying slave/
if you kill the male you will have a female slave carrying a small
calabash“

Without being able to present all the poetic and rhetorical constructions here one can see, however, from these examples and from the other song texts known to us that the Kanuri combine in their hunting songs elements of natural space with elements of social and economic order thus producing an integral and dense notion of the environment unparalleled in other Kanuri music, oral literature and communication.

Conclusion and outlook

According to our informants the hunters have witnessed major changes within the last decades, which result mainly from the rapid decrease of game. For this reason the provision of meat only plays a minor role while other specializations of the hunters gain more and more ground. One of them is the lucrative sale of plant medicine, the other the formation of a militia, which increasingly contributes to public security, which the national authorities are less and less able to provide.

Many hunters playing the *ngang @ra* become professional musicians, who can earn an income although they have little prestige within society. This influences the artistic and thematic qualities of the hunters' songs. For the present historical period we can classify three types of hunters' songs:

- a. The first type is represented by Mai D@rma, the hunter King of Borno Emirate: in thematical perspective he is intimately associated with the observation of the animal world and other environmental factors. In musical terms his repertoire of melodic phrases, which he combines with a large number of text phrases, is relatively restricted. He is not a professional, who purposely plays to earn money.
- b. The second type is represented by Makinta Kolo who in his song-texts praises animals as well as humans, in particular his patrons and other

outstanding personalities of the society. In musical terms his performance is characterized by virtuosity and the ability to successfully entertain a large audience. Depending on the perspective of the observer he is classified as either *duwu* (professional) or as non-*duwu*.

- c. The third type is represented by Bukar Moloma, whose song texts take up phrases and metaphors of hunting lore, which he, however, does not associate anymore with the fauna and the environment as such, but rather with the praise of the important personalities, for which the hunting metaphors are mere stylistic devices. His performance is that of a *duwu* who effectively communicates with his audience by exploiting a sophisticated musical repertoire.

Bearing in mind the changes to be observed not only in the relations between man and the environment but also in the economic situation, we suggest that this third type of hunter-singer will soon develop to represent the main type of hunter singers. Hunter-singers of the first type, like Mai D@rma, will surely disappear, because the basis for an intimate notion of the animal world and environment will inevitably get lost. Even today his songs reflect a view of the environment, which hardly has a physical base anymore, but rather survives in the music of the singer himself.

Appendix

Song by Makinta Kolo, rec. 18.11.1994 (JRP Fieldnotes 1994:74-75)

Giraffe (k@nzar)

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|-----|---|--|
| 1. | <i>Wai komboli let@ma</i> | Oh, the trekking trader |
| 2. | <i>Garwa mandama k@lwuma</i> | the wandering trader of salt and potash
(= the giraffe moves very long distances) |
| 3. | <i>Aisad@ Mafiwo Fiyomiram</i> | like Aisa from Mafiwo Fiyomi (in Fada area) |
| 4. | <i>Yan@mga lar@mi</i> | If she is your mother you are lucky (praise name of Aisa) |
| 5. | <i>Kamun@mga z@kt@mi</i> | If she (Aisa) is your wife you should worry
(= the giraffe is fearful and troublesome)
(4. and 5. depicting both sides of giraffe) |
| 6. | <i>Ashe karaa d@li dawu
dawurammin kasuwu napcin ba
ada</i> | So it is said that in the thick forest there cannot
be a market. |
| 7. | <i>Aisa yanyibe karaa d@li
duwurammin zawal g@naji.</i> | Aisa my mother has made a road in the thick
forest (to bring all the meat home).
(The killed giraffe has as much meat as a market
and the many people who repeatedly carry the
meat home, trample a road into the forest which
otherwise does not have a market). |
| 8. | <i>Aisa mekku nduri cejiya</i> | When Aisa kills twelve (hunters) |
| 9. | <i>Mekku nduri k@skaro
goz@yiu.</i> | she makes twelve (other hunters) climb trees. |
| 10. | <i>K@rinyi Suluwe Bundimiram</i> | My dog of Suluwe Bundimi (a dead hunter) |
| 11. | <i>K@ri Abdu Dogo Mbanji</i> | The dog of Audu Dogo Mbanji (a certain dead
Fulani) |
| 12. | <i>Kwa Mal@m Karumi</i> | The man Mal@m Karumi |
| 13. | <i>Mai Ciroma Cimbabe</i> | of Mai Ciroma Cimba (dead) |
| 14. | <i>Babbarube</i> | of Babbaru (dead) |
| 15. | <i>Zoli yanyiro gambara sadi.</i> | My foolish mother is presented with the Gambarara
cloth (a costly and nicely spotted dress). |
| 16. | <i>Sambisaro lewoko nya</i> | When I went to (Lake) Sambisa |
| 17. | <i>Abba Kudumro lewoko Aisa ba
Aisa ba.</i> | When I went to (Lake) Abba Kudum, there
wasn't Aisa (giraffe), Aisa was not there. |
| 18. | <i>Nda gagaran lewoko</i> | I went to (Lake) Gagaran |
| 19. | <i>Nda Dawu Kalimo</i> | I went to (Lake) Dawu Kalimo |
| 20. | <i>Zoli komboli let@mabe</i> | The foolish trekking trader |
| 21. | <i>Garwa mandama k@lwuma</i> | The trader in salt and potash |
| 22. | <i>K@ri kwa g@shiri fulatabe</i> | The dog of the man G@shiri Fulata. |