History, Culture and Orature: A Study of Shimoni Slave Caves

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Abstract

Shimoni slave caves in Kenya are a significant historical site reminiscent of the history of slave trade on the East African coast. A people's Orature always embodies their philosophical world view, their religious orientation while at the same time recording moments in and aspects of their history. In this regard, the study investigated whether the community around Shimoni reconstructed the traumatic experience of slave trade through their Orature. The objective of the study was to examine how the people's philosophy of life is reflected through their oral narratives in their attempt to reconstruct their history. The data for the study was collected through face to face interviews with the informants. Participant observation was employed to enable the researcher to interact freely with the oral literature material. Purposive sampling and snowballing were used to identify the informants. The narratives collected were analyzed to establish the morals transmitted through them and their implication for the community. The functionalist theory was instrumental for the analysis of the function of the narratives. The findings reveal that the narratives of the community not only reconstruct the history of slave trade but also reflect the philosophical world view of the community. They show that the community believes in divine intervention, unity among its members and sanctity of life. Bad deeds were punished as a way of ensuring conformity.

Keywords: Shimoni, Slave caves, History, Philosophy, Culture, Oral narratives

1. Introduction

Shimoni slave caves in Kwale district, Kenya are not only an interesting tourist spot but also an important historical site that is quite telling of a people's history embedded in slave trade. 'Shimo' is a Swahili word meaning hole. Shimoni therefore means 'at the hole.' The site constitutes a network of caves once reputed to be connected to underground routes extending about five kilometers inland. Initially, apart from an opening at the roof, the caves were also accessed through the underground routes. According to Fatma, a resident of Shimoni, the caves were natural but the routes were dug by the slaves under supervision of their captors.

The caves were formed millions of years ago by tiny coral polyps under the sea. Over the years however, the coastline has been forced upwards by movement of tectonic plates. Due to cumulative siltation, the underground routes have been blocked leaving the hole at the roof of the cave as the only entrance

Abungu (2010) observes that the slave cave is a multilayered heritage landscape due to its use over the years as a hiding place by the community from danger posed by cattle raiders, a slave pen, a shrine and a gazette monument by the government of Kenya. Currently, the cave is used by the community as a tourist site.

According to Mr Herman Kiriama, the head of coastal archaeology, in his report after the excavation and research in the area, the caves were used as places of confinement of slaves before shipment to the biggest slave market in Zanzibar. This claim is given credence by the metallic shackles that dot the walls of the caves. The shackles were used to chain the slaves to the cave walls to hinder their escape.

Fatma, an informant, asserts that confinement in the caves could last as long as three weeks since the onward journey to the auction markets depended on the flow of the monsoon winds. These winds were essential for the propulsion of the dhows. The periods of confinement were periods of suffering for the slaves during which they were subjected to torture and a poor diet of water and dry food to avoid the inconvenience of easing bowels while in the cave. Ordinarily the slaves were lowered into the cave via the hole in the roof using a ladder. Many succumbed to death through injuries, diseases and even starvation.

Among the natives, stories of gross mistreatment of slaves abound. The slaves were captured by Arab caravans from the hinterland then matched to the coast for shipment. During the match to the coast, thousands died, their bodies were left by the roadside to be devoured by wild animals. In case of strong waves during the journey to Zanzibar,

thousands of slaves were thrown overboard to be devoured by sharks to prevent the dhows from capsizing. Also when the slave ships were being pursued by authorities enforcing the ban on slavery, shackled slaves were jettisoned resulting to their death since they could not swim to safety. Shimoni thus comes across as a site that holds may poignant memories of a sad past. This is what is emphasized in the lyrics of Shimoni as sang in 1983 by Roger Whittaker, a Kenya- born singer and song writer,

'There is a hole in the side of Africa, where the walls will speak If only you listen. Walls that tell a tale so sad that the tears on the cheeks of Africa glisten. Stand and hear a million slaves tell you how they walked so far that many died in misery while the rest were sold in Zanzibar. Shimoni, oh Shimoni, you have the answer and the answer is written down in Shimoni.'

Whittaker's song aptly captures the inhumanity to which the slaves were subjected. Besides its connection with the history of slave trade, Shimoni was also the original headquarters of the Imperial British East African Company long before Kenya even became a British colony. Today, the remains of the headquarters building, which later became the District Commissioner's house in colonial times, attests to this.

Orature, history and culture are inextricably intertwined. A people's culture and history are interwoven in their oral literary material. As a result, a people's narratives, songs, proverbs and riddles always embody a people's philosophical world view, their religious orientation while at the same time recording moments in and aspects of their history. It is in this regard that the present study investigated how the people around Shimoni reconstruct the traumatic experience of slave trade through their Orature. In particular, the study was interested in the people's philosophical world view as projected in their oral narratives, the assumption being that Orature is a reflection of a people's culture.

Culture on the other hand is a way of life. As Miruka (1984) asserts, each culture holds certain things as desirable and has standards to be adhered to. Anybody who goes contrary to the standards is scorned. It is these standards that constitute the society's norms and which in turn define their philosophical world view. Members of various communities are thus socialized in relation to the prescribed norms as defined by the community.

2. Literature Review
Various organizations and scholars have conducted extensive research and archaeological work around Shimoni. These studies have been guided by different objectives, dictated by the researchers' areas of interest.
Ndurya (2007) examined the slave caves as an exposition of slave trade and the harsh treatment that the slaves suffered at the hands of the Omani traders. Whereas Ndurya's interest lay in the history connected with slavery, the current study was interested in how the people's history and culture is reflected in their orature and how this conveyed the people's philosophy of life.
Another set of researchers, Wynne-Jonnes and Malsh (2010) examined the narratives and metanarratives on the East African coast. They assert that the lyrics of Shimoni did not simply embellish a local tale, but recreated it in the image of metanarratives about the history of slavery on the East African coast. They argue that these metanarratives now dominate reconstructions of the past in Shimoni and are reinforced by the activities and institutions that constitute and promote the cave as an important site of cultural heritage. Their paper traces the impact of these intertwined metanarratives on the development of oral traditions in and around Shimoni. The present study differs from the two scholars' study in that interest lay in how the people's history is reconstructed in their oral narratives and how this reflected the people's philosophy of life.
Adapting a different perspective, Kiaka (2012) examined resource use struggles in the small scale coastal fisheries of Kenya including Shimoni. He argues that struggles in small scale coastal fisheries of Shimoni are influence by unequal power relations that transform the existing socio-political relations of fisher groups. Whereas Kiaka's interest lays in resource use struggles, the present study focuses on the interface between history, Orature and culture and how this informs a people's philosophy of life.
From the above review it was evident that research interest in Shimoni had mainly been scientific, historical or archaeological in nature. The current study is literary in approach thus gives credibility for further investigation since this dimension still remains widely unexploited.
3. Theoretical framework
The study relied on the Functionalist theory of oral literature proposed by Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown. This theory expounds the view that any cultural activity must have a utilitarian value for its people. For the

purpose of this research, this theory was considered ideal since the researcher's interest lay in the utilitarian function of the oral narratives as reconstructions of a community's culture and history and as media through which the community's philosophy of life is expressed.

Functionalists see the society as a stable entity perpetuated by various cultural activities. Narratives are then seen as embodiments of the beliefs, customs, rituals and structures that need to be maintained. They are also charged with the role of censuring deviants (Miruka, 1994).

The theory in effect proposes an absolutist way of looking at life as a construct maintained by selected immutable principles and perhaps processes that must be perpetuated. However, it is worth noting that societies change and accommodate contemporary thought. For the purpose of this research the theory was used to investigate how the people around Shimoni reconstruct the traumatic experience of slave trade through their Orature. In particular, the study was interested in the people's philosophical world view as projected in their oral narratives.

4. Methodology

The study was mainly qualitative. It was conducted through an ethnographic approach. It began with the identification of resource persons who were conversant with oral narratives about the history of slave trade in Shimoni. Both Purposive sampling and snowballing were used to identify these informants.

Face to face interviews were used to collect information about the history of slave trade. Participant observation was adapted so as to enable the researcher to interact freely with the oral literary material being delivered. Informal dialogue with the inhabitants was engaged in. The oral narratives by the informants were tape recorded during the narrative sessions.

The narratives collected were transcribed, and then translated for the researcher's use. Observation of the historical site was done through a tour of the caves to ascertain their existence.

4.1 Data collection techniques

The study began with a preliminary study of the available related literature in the library. This formed the basis of secondary data collection.

The primary data was generated through content analysis of the narratives collected. Nachmias (2009) defines content analysis as any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages. According to Kothari (2009), content analysis consists of analyzing the content of documentary material such as books, magazines and the content of all other verbal material which can be either spoken or printed.

Qualitative content analytical approaches focus on analyzing both the explicit or manifest content of a text as well as interpretations of latent content of texts- that which can be interpreted or interpolated from the text, but is not explicitly stated in it (Granhein & Lundman, 2003).

In the current research, analysis and interpretation of the collected narratives was done to identify the set of beliefs held by the community or their attitude to life that guides their behavior.

4.2 Data analysis

The data collected through the analysis of the content of the various oral narratives was then coded according to the specific set of beliefs conveyed by the narratives and the relevant circumstances to which they applied as dictated by the characters' behavior. The functionalist theory was applied in the analysis to establish the utilitarian function of the narratives. These set of beliefs conveyed by the narratives are presumed to define the community's philosophy of life which in turn guided their behavior.

5. The Narratives and the Philosophical World View

The narratives around Shimoni slave caves go beyond mere entertainment. Through them the people reconstruct the history of slave trade as well as express their world view. A discussion of narratives around the area attests to this.

5.1 Jiwe Jahazi (the dhow that turned to stone)

The site Jiwe Jahazi is found in Mkunguni, not far from Wasini Island. It derives its name from a dhow that turned into stone. According to Rashid Abdalla, a native of Shimoni, some Arabs from Omani settled in Wasini Island, not far from Shimoni. With time these Arabs intermarried with the natives. This was also a time when slave trade still thrived on the East African coast. The slaves were captured by Arab caravans from the hinterland and were always subjected to a lot of mistreatment.

Jiwe Jahazi was a boat travelling from Zanzibar to Kenya. The dhow was loaded with Arabs merchants going to the Kenyan coast in search of human merchandise. As the boat approached Wasini, it was spotted by the some of the

Arabs who had settled in the island. Incidentally, the Arabs at Wasini Island detested the trade in human merchandise still conducted by some of their fellows. Arab elders of the time were people well versed in mysticism. They converged at a point and invoked the powers of the supernatural through reading certain verses of the Koran, pleading for divine intervention as a way of saving the would be victims of slavery. Unexpectedly, the dhow laden with perpetrators of slave trade turned into a rock monument. The occupants were thus stopped in their tracks. The presence of the historic rock at Mkunguni testifies to this.

Fatma, an inhabitant of Shimoni, narrates a version slightly different from Rashid's. In her story, it was the African elders who through witchcraft were able to cast a magic spell on the dhow thus turning it to stone. The occupants of the dhow turned into birds and flew away.

Like Fatma, Juma Mohammed, another native of Shimoni attributes the supernatural act of turning the dhow to a rock to the African elders. The performance of witchcraft was a way of saving their fellow Africans from the torture of slavery. According to him, even today those who go to Mkunguni where the incident took place still hear voices of the occupants of the dhow crying out for help. As a result people hardly ever visit the place. Only birds commonly flock the site.

Wynne and Malsh (2010) recognize that oral accounts are particularly sensitive to manipulation based on contemporary concerns as well as to the effect of collective memory distortions and change over time. Careful comparative research often picks up dissonance and similarity among accounts allowing for compilation of synthetic narratives which explore not only past events preserved as a series of echoes across the different explications of the story but also the implications of what the people have chosen to represent.

In this regard it is possible to determine the world view of the Shimoni community as reflected in the various versions of the existing narratives. Common to all of them is the people's belief in supernatural powers. The convergence of either the Arab elders or African elders in prayer and witchcraft respectively is an acknowledgement of human limitation. It is only through the acknowledgement of supernatural powers vested in either the Koran or witchcraft that man is able to perform superhuman feats.

Conflict of interest is reflected in the interplay of power relations, Muslims have faith in the Islamic religion whereas the African's believe in witchcraft. For the Arabs, the Koran thus becomes a means to an end. It offers a timely solution as depicted in the transformation of the dhow to rock. The superstitious nature of the Africans is reflected by their belief in witchcraft. They however achieve a solution to their problems in the sense that they are able to paralyze the movement of the formidable dhow and transform it into a rock.

Common to both parties is the essence of faith and commitment in actions undertaken. The Africans' strong belief in witchcraft helps them realize their objectives. Likewise, it is the Arabs' faith in the Koran that helps them succeed.

The element of communalism is reflected in the people's convergence either in prayer or witchcraft. United as one front, they are able to outdo their common enemy. The undertone seems to be that solidarity enhances might. The community thus believes in unity of purpose.

Of note however is the fact that whereas some of the Arabs were sympathetic to the plight of the African slaves, majority saw slave trade as a source of wealth and cheap labor. The materialistic nature of the Arabs is contrasted with their sense of humanity displayed by the sympathizers at Wasini Island. Likewise, whereas the African elders were sympathetic towards the plight of their fellow Africans likely to be captured as slaves, African chiefs from the hinterland aided the Arab caravans in capturing their kin as slaves. Among the Africans slave trade was practiced as a form of disposing off of captives from warring groups. It was also a means for the common African to procure wealth. Perpetual debtors were often sold off as slaves.

Oral tradition has it that few traders went into the interior in search of Africans to enslave, mostly due to fear of disease and attack. Instead, they bought their slaves from local African dealers. In this way, the Africans and Arabs are united in their thirst for wealth. The transformation of the dhow into a rock is construed as punishment for evil deeds, particularly disrespect of humanity. The community thus acknowledges the sanctity of life. Those who perpetrate evil against their fellows often come to no good as was the case with the Arabs merchants in the dhows.

Today however, significance of the narratives connected with slave trade as a way of expressing the people's philosophy of life is waning among the people of Shimoni. New concerns have taken precedence particularly the economic gain derived from the influx of tourists in the place. The slave cave is significant more as a tourist spot from which the local community generates income and not as reminiscence of their Orature or as reflective of virtues that they held dear to them.

6. Conclusion

The narratives related to the slave caves not only reconstruct the history of slave trade but also capture the people's

philosophy of life. They reflect the people's belief in divine intervention in instances of need and the recognition of a supreme being whose power surpasses that of man.

Emphasis is laid on the need for unity as a way of overcoming challenges as was the case when the African elders united in prayer. Communalism is essential for it enhances a sense of togetherness among people of a community.

Human life is regarded as sacred and those who dehumanize others come to no good end as exemplified by the Arab slave dealers who were transformed to birds whereas their dhow became a rock. In essence therefore, evil deeds must be punished.

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