



Hunting and Hunting-related Practices among the Kushi (Northeastern Nigeria)

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the practise of *shwεε* 'hunting' among the Kushi, a Chadic speaking community of northeastern Nigeria. Subsistence hunting is still practised by Kushi, even if its importance and impact have been decreasing over the last few decades. A mental model of the past and present hunting practises are kept alive in the collective imagery by means of oral traditions, an instrument of knowledge transmission ubiquitous to many African societies. *Shwεε* will be described through an oral text in which the narrator – a Kushi hunter – explains the nature and purposes of hunting along with the series of actions to be performed in order to carry it out properly, i.e. in a manner consistent with the values and social norms in force within the community. The procedural text describes some essential aspects of hunting: the way it is announced and who is allowed to lead it, the specificities of the kind of game that is hunted in terms of consumption and general use, and the traditional beliefs that need to be observed before and during hunting.

KEY WORDS: Kushi, hunting, oral traditions, meat consumption, Muri mountains

The Kushi live on the low plains at the foot of the northeastern fringes of the Muri mountains in northeast Nigeria (Gombe State, Chonge District, Shongom LGA, 9°35'33.9"N 11°11'16.9"E). The community is spread over the so-called Kushi 'village area', a series of wards and hamlets distributed longitudinally along the Muri fringes: (from west to east) Lapandintai, Kauri, Latogam, Kommo, Dirang, Gomle, Tabakro, Dankpanni, Tanzania, and Kugwayum (cf. ADELBERGER – BRUNK – KLEINWILLINGHÖFER 1993:25-26). The

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Ethnologue estimates the number of speakers at 12,000 (SIMONS – FENNIG 2018). The Kushi language (*fɔk Gòjì* ‘mouth of Kushi’, ISO code 639-3 <kuh>, Glottocode <kush1236>) is a West Chadic language classified in the Tangale proper of the Bole-Tangale group (NEWMAN 2013).

Kushi society is subdivided into 11 clans: Fojorak, Gupno, Fokori, Folokbe, Gbari, Dongo, Yange, Tagonro, Fojoklo, Fogolum, and Gok. Although in present-day, Kushi members of the eleven clans can be found in any of the hamlets forming the ‘village area’, the size of the clans as well as their distribution across the hamlets can vary significantly. Clans are exogamous, with some restrictions applying to inter-clanic marriages. In those cases where clans are seen as ‘brothers’ to each other, intermarriages are forbidden, like for example between the Dongo and the Fojoklo, or between the Gok and the Fokori. Kushi society is essentially horizontal. An official vertical authority – a chieftainship – surfaced as a by-product of the British administration. The *gùp* ‘chief’ of Kushi is chosen among the male members of the Gupno clan. Only the adult men of the group have active voting rights. The election of the *gùp* is carried out openly and may take place in any chosen venue within the village area.

Kushi are predominantly Muslim, with Christian adherents representing an important component of the community. Traditional beliefs are still practiced in a more or less open way (even if less frequently) by both Muslims and Christians.

In this article I will illustrate the practise of hunting among the Kushi through an oral text collected within the framework of a documentation and description project aiming at describing the language and the traditions of the Kushi people.

Eating habits among the Kushi

The Gongola river basin is home to a constellation of ethnic groups sharing an agriculturalist tradition dating back at least to the 1000 BCE (MANNING 2010:43). Kushi rely on a subsistence economy based essentially on farming; their eating habits are shaped by the food production system and do not differ significantly from those of the other groups inhabiting the region. Groups living in rural areas display ‘traditional’ (ROTHMALER 2012:154) eating habits based on the consumption of food rich in carbohydrates and fibres and poor in proteins. Kushi, who are no exception, present a consumption pattern structured in three meals: one minor meal consumed in the morning and two principal meals, one consumed at noon and one in the evening. The principal meal consists of a staple food (maize, Guinea

corn, millet, etc.) accompanied by a sauce. A small quantity of meat (chicken, ‘bushmeat’, and beef) may be consumed either as part of the principal meal or in form of traditional snack (e.g. skewers or *suya*-like meat).

Game is a feasible option when other sources of proteins are inaccessible. The importance of hunting as a means to find partial sustenance shows a certain stability. Extensive game hunting has caused an irremediable decline in the population of big animals whose presence is now limited within the fragile borders of the poaching-threatened Yankari National Park, about 50 km west of Kushi. Bushmeat (small mammals and reptiles), on the other hand, is still available: it is generally preferred to the meat of domesticated animals (cf. WILLIAMSON – LONNEKE 2016:5) and constitutes a significant part of the protein intake of the communities settled on the plains at the foot of the Muri mountains.

Oral texts

Oral texts are quintessential in documenting languages spoken by communities without a written tradition. Fieldwork linguists rely on oral texts to build a naturalistic corpus of data to be used to describe the lexicon and the grammar of the language they study, while researchers dealing with language documentation see oral texts as highly valued samples to collect, transcribe, translate, and archive in digital repositories. While oral texts, as language samples, are all equally important, not all oral texts fulfil the same function in terms of culture and knowledge transmission. Chelliah and de Reuse propose a working categorisation of orality into traditional and non-traditional texts (CHELLIAH – DE REUSE, 2011:425, but see also FINNEGAN 1992:135-157) illustrated in the table below.

Traditional texts	Non-traditional texts
Creation stories or myths	Anecdotes
Folk stories or fairy tales	Life experiences
Genealogies	Biographies or autobiographies
Legends	Stories about professional activities
Parables, sayings, proverbs, riddles, and jokes	Descriptions of pictures or video-clips
Ritual ceremonial texts or prayers	News broadcasts from radio or TV
Procedural texts	Tapes with messages
Songs	Letters, good wishes
Poems	Re-tellings of stories
Plays	Religious or moralizing sermons
	Conversations
	Any kind of non-traditional literature, songs, poems, plays, sayings, proverbs, riddles, or jokes

Figure 1: Types of oral texts (based on CHELLIAH – DE REUSE 2011:425)

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Oral traditions are instrumental in the intergenerational transmission of norms, beliefs, values, and general knowledge. They adhere to a shared model shaped upon criteria of acceptability and consistency. Oral traditions are the tool available to community members to learn how to behave in specific occasions, perform certain tasks, and operate in the physical world. Therefore, they are collective and anonymous: rather than having authors, oral traditions have interpreters and performers.

From a textual point of view, oral traditions cover a wide spectrum of sub-genres. Some of them are quite rigid in their morphology and require a word-by-word transmission (e.g. formulaic language, proverbs, genealogies), others are more flexible and allow their interpreters to 'play' with the language by implementing variations and resorting to paralinguistic features (that is the case, for examples, of folktales and legends). Hence, traditional texts are a form of verbal art (i.e. related to the actual narration or performance and defined by means of aesthetic criteria) as well as 'packets of information' independent of the actual narrator or performer. In this paper I will deal with this second aspect, focusing on the contents of an oral text related to the hunting practise among the Kushi.

Hunting as a procedural text

The most daunting challenge in collecting oral traditions is the unpredictability of the immediate output, i.e. the inability of the researcher to control the situation and to collect a specific type of oral text at a specific time. This restriction is due to the fact that oral traditions, if collected under the framework of a language documentation project, are texts recorded in a naturalistic setting over a certain period of time through the mutual interaction of researcher and community. Oral traditions, in other words, are collected where the language is spoken by implementing documentation techniques that 'listen' to the community rather than merely 'extracting' something from it.

Procedural texts provide members of a given society with the set of norms and instructions to follow in order to carry out a certain activity. To collect significant procedural texts the researcher has to rely on the expertise of society's members. Sometimes this expertise is collective, i.e. shared by a vast majority of the group, sometimes it is restricted to specific figures, like for example traditional priests, herbalists, or craftsmen. In this sense, the knowledge Kushi have about hunting is collective: hunting affects the hunters who experience it, the women who roast the meat, the children who stay at home waiting for their fathers, and generally all the people who interact directly or indirectly with the activity as

well as with all the stories that it generates. Hunters, of course, are the preferred interpreters of the knowledge about hunting. Even if hunting surfaces in oral traditions in several sub-genres (folk-tales, songs, proverbs), procedural texts are by far the most extensive and valuable descriptions of the practice.

Hunting as an abstraction

The main characteristic of a traditional oral text is that it exists beyond the specific narrations provided by community members. No single story *is* the oral tradition, and no individual is the ultimate repository of its contents and morphology. Traditions are shared abstractions that can be regarded as ‘idealised cognitive models’. An idealised cognitive model, in Lakoff’s terms, is a structure we use to organise our knowledge and that can fit the world with different degrees of precision (LAKOFF 1987:68 ff.). Oral traditions tell us what hunting is and what is not, the series of actions a man should perform before leaving for the bush, what kind of game a hunting party is allowed to kill, the way the meat is distributed once the hunting is over, and also the way different kinds of meat are considered in terms of good and bad taste. All this knowledge about the hunting practise does not describe an objective reality, i.e. the world as it is, but rather an idealised conception moulded over time by several factors of geographical, social, political, historical, and cultural nature. When the reality in the world (e.g. a group of Kushi men hunting in the Muri mountains) and the idealised cognitive model (e.g. what Kushi people think is the correct way of hunting) are consistent, then the result is a prototype: hunting according to the set of norms transmitted in oral traditions – which are regarded here as ‘recordable’ idealised cognitive models – will be prototypical because they align with a shared model. As a consequence, deviating a little from the accepted and widespread definition of proper hunting will be less prototypical, while infringing or ignoring all the norms will definitely void the prototypical charge.

The abstract nature of oral traditions lies also in the fact that they function in a system of beliefs and transmission of knowledge where their physical realisations – the single oral texts – are just approximations of a mental narration whose utterance is partial, flexible, and subject to change.

Hunting in Kushi oral traditions

In this section I will present some extracts of an oral text describing the practise of *shwεε* 'hunting' among the Kushi. The narrator is Malam Tengkje Chiroma, 62 years old, a farmer and former hunter. The translation has been kept close to the original to preserve the style typical of procedural texts and, more generally, of oral texts. Contrarily to oral texts such as songs, poems, and proverbs, procedural texts are essentially self-explanatory and linear.

The text describes the following aspects of hunting among the Kushi: announcement of the hunting; preparation and definition of the hunting party; norms about the distribution, skinning, and consumption/use of the hunted game; hunting with dogs; and disputes over the game.

Announcement

1. There are two types of hunting in Kushi¹. One is called 'war' and the other is called 'begging'. In the hunting known as 'war', the man will pass through the town in the morning and again in the evening. In [the type of hunting called] 'begging', the man will go through the town only in the evening. He will walk through the village of Kushi, and then head back home. This is the difference between 'war' and 'begging'. When the decision that there will be a hunt is made, the man will walk through the entire town and announce it to all the people. You will tell them that you have come to look for water to drink. Then, after all these things, you will go back home. In the evening, you will go through the town again to know whether the people are well and to tell them where they will meet you in the morning. When you have finished to walk through the village, you will go back home. Then you will rise early in the morning, you will light a fire and go to the place where you are

¹ The narrator defines two ways of getting food: hunting and begging. *Shwεε* 'hunting' is associated with *gei* 'war' and opposed to *keya* 'begging'. Hunting and war share some nuclear features: (a) they are both life-risking activities that involves pursuit and killing, (b) they require a specific outfit and gear, (c) they are performed by men, and (d) they are organised activities that imply the presence of a leader, a call for manpower, and the respect of a set of norms. When a man decides to hunt alone, i.e. without being part of a hunting party, then the Kushi use the term *pára* 'hunting alone'.

going to lay. Once you have reached the place, you will put your armour over the tree under which you will sleep and light a fire.

2. Before Kushi people start, a member of the Gupno² clan will announce the hunting. No other clan is allowed to announce the hunting. There are men of the Gupno clan in Kommo, Dirang, Gomle, and Kauri. A man of the Gupno clan will wake up before his brothers and will make the announcement. There is no way to start a hunt unless God has told you in a dream. The worship place is in Damade³. You are going in line: the people in Kauri will rise first and then meet the people in Kommo, and then they will meet the people of Dirang and Gomle. You will climb the mountain, go down to the river and enter Nagom⁴. When the worship is over, you will burn some cornstalk. A member of the Fojoklo clan is in charge of burning cornstalk. After all these things are done you are allowed to go hunting.

Preparation and definition of the hunting party

3. In the morning, the men will come to meet you where you have told them. When all the people are gathered beside you, you will tell them to wear their shoes. When all the people have worn their shoes, you will pack your armour and wake up and when the people wake also, you will hike a little and then stop, and the people will stand behind you. Once the people stand behind you, you – the leader of the hunting – will move forward a little and stand and that is all. Then you will put your hand inside the skin bag that is hanging on your back and take some of the grinded corn flour that you have prepared before. You will pinch some flour and scatter it on the ground in front of you for two or three times. When you have finished doing this thing, then you will carry your armour and greet the people [standing] by your left and by your right and finally those in the middle. After you finish greeting them, you will tell them the place that you have chosen for hunting. Once you finish telling them the

² *Gùpnò* 'my king'.

³ Name of the place where some worship practices are carried out.

⁴ Area south of Kushi.

place that you have chosen for hunting, then the people will start running and looking for game. They will go through the bush and look everywhere.

Norms about the distribution, skinning, and consumption of the hunted game

4. When you finish hunting, you will go back home. Whoever kills game such as Guinea fowl, duiker, gazelle or other types of animals is not allowed to eat the meat anyhow. The meat will be eaten by the members of the family the hunter belongs to. Every clan has its own place⁵. If one kills a Guinea fowl, then he will cook it in his house, and in the morning he will bring it to the house of his elders⁶: it is then, when all the people are gathered, that the meat is divided between them. But you – you who killed the Guinea fowl – you will be given the breast of the Guinea fowl, and then you will go to meet your father and share the meat with him. As for the meat of duikers and gazelles, you will only cook the intestines; you put the remaining parts on the top of a fence so that, if there is a marriage in your clan, this meat will be taken and prepared by the cooks of the bride. The types of meat that women eat are duiker, Guinea fowl, and gazelle. Apart from these, women do not eat any other animal.

On leopards

5. If you are lucky to hunt [bushmeat like] a leopard, whether you are in Filiya, Burak, or Loo⁷, then you will cut the leopard into pieces and put the meat over grass sticks. Then you will send the meat to your relatives who dwell in Kushi. You should not give the meat to people who are not related to you. [Let's consider] the case of those who don't eat leopard meat⁸. In the case of a person who doesn't eat leopard meat,

⁵ Different clans live in different parts of Kushi 'village area'.

⁶ The elders of the extended family or clan.

⁷ Filiya is a town about 10 km west of Kushi and home to a Chadic language-speaking community. The village of Burak is about 8 km east of Kushi on the road connecting Filiya to Bangwinji. The 'village area' of Loo lies south of Kushi beyond the northern range of the Muri mountains. Kushi people have strong relations with these settlements.

⁸ The narrator does not elaborate, but the reason for not eating leopard meat would be probably due to some restrictions related to the belonging of the hunter to a specific clan, secret society or cult, and not to a mere taste preference.

when he goes hunting and encounters a leopard, then he will spear it, remove the weapon, and exchange it with the spear of the fellow hunter beside him. He will not keep his spear, because the point is covered with the blood of the animal and it's his brother who will carry the dead leopard to the village⁹. The skin of a leopard is usually worn by those who carry the body of a dead person. If a rainfall causes the stones of the mountain to loosen so that the corpse remains exposed¹⁰, then these stones will be put back in place and [it's is in that occasion that] the people will dance wearing the skin of a leopard. Not everybody is allowed to put the stones back.

On buffalos and elephants

6. A buffalo killed during a hunt has its uses too. Once the people have finished eating its meat, they will use the skin of the animal to make traditional shoes and repair their shields. The shoelaces are made with the skin of the elephant. This skin is too thick to be used for shields and people eat it. To make shields they will use instead the skin of the elephant's stomach, because it is not too heavy and hard. During the hunt, if an elephant appears, all the people will start running. They will climb into trees and wait for the elephant. When the elephant comes close to you, you should kill it with a poisoned spear. Then you will run and spear it [again], and when you have killed it, you will announce your hunt. No matter where you have hunted it, you are now the owner of the elephant.

On hyenas

7. As for the hyena, you will spear it as soon as it comes close to you. If your spear reaches its body¹¹, you will not shout anything because it is said that the hyena has a shadow¹². But if you kill it, then you will carry the dead animal to your house and

⁹ The hunter who brings home some game is supposed to prove his actions by showing the blood on his spear.

¹⁰ The narrator refers to the traditional burial: dead bodies are disposed on the slopes of the mountain and covered with stones.

¹¹ That is, without killing it.

¹² A second life.

there will be people who will eat it and people who will not eat it, and this is because people are of different types.

On skinning

8. If God grants you access to the type of game that Kushi people call ‘animals with black knees’ – like leopards, chimpanzee, and bush dogs¹³ –, then what will you do? Will you skin the animal there [in the bush] or will you carry it home? Well, if you have been lucky enough to catch ‘black knees’ game such as a leopard or a bush dog, then you will carry the animal to the skinning house. But if you have hunted a bush dog, you will skin the animal in the bush and then you will go home carrying the skin and what remains of the meat on the top of your head. In the case of a leopard or a chimpanzee, no matter how much meat there is, you must go to the skinning house. This is because the elders have chosen a place where leopards and chimpanzees need to be skinned, and they do like that due to a superstitious belief. Moreover, there is a way to carry leopards and chimpanzees: you will carry them on your back as if they were human bodies or babies. You will carry the game to the special place and skin it in Dirang.

Hunting with dogs

9. Concerning the use of dogs during hunting, some Kushi people use them and some others don’t. When a dog catches an animal, you will remove it from its mouth, and then you will become the owner of the game. But there has been some talking about the fact that not anybody should be allowed to remove a hunted animal from a dog’s mouth. Since some Kushi people own one or more dogs, keeping them in their compounds or in their farms, only the rightful owner of the dog that has caught the animal can claim the game as his own. There are people who don’t own a dog but who nonetheless get hold of the animals hunted by other people’s dogs. There are also hunters who, not owning a dog, tie a rope on their wrist in order to make other people think that they are hunting with dogs: it is their way of being cunning. This

¹³ The Kushi naming bush dog applies to fennec fox.

is not how the Kushi people used to behave [in the past], but now we are doing as strangers have taught us, appropriating the game caught by other people's dogs.

Disputes over the game

10. When you hunt an animal, if the hunter next to you is a person you hate, then you will not give him any meat. Who is a hated person? A hated person is somebody who takes your wife away from you and then marries her, or somebody who previously has refused to share any of his meat with you – and this is why you shouldn't give him any part of your hunted game. If such a person who has done bad things to you gets hold of your game, you will raise your elbow and he will raise his and you will fight with your knives. You will both hold the game in your hands and fight over it. The men who are nearby will ask: how have they started fighting? Somebody will say: is there no way to reconcile one hunter with the other? Somebody will say that you have arrived first. Somebody will tell the other hunter to remove his hand from the meat. If he is a good person, then he will remove his hands from the game and you will go to [the field to talk with] the judge to be reconciled. But if he is not a good person, he will not drop the meat. In that case, the person who has witnessed the scene trying to divide them will say that the other hunter has refused to agree and that he will tell what has happened¹⁴.

Conclusions

Any practice can be analysed on two different levels: a) as a series of actions, and b) as a mental picture describing a series of actions. Oral traditions transmit knowledge by providing a community with certain models whose contents include both objective realities and projections over these realities. The text presented in this article is just one of the many texts that might be (and have been) collected among the Kushi on the subject of hunting. As procedural texts belonging to the oral traditions, they all show a certain consistency. Within certain limits given by reasonability and social acceptability, they are all deemed to be 'right', valuable, and equally plausible. However, the degree of detail can vary, and not all the

¹⁴ As a witness before the chief or the judge.

narrators elaborate or linger on the same topics (Malam Chiroma, for example, does not describe the several techniques used by the Kushi to trap animals, nor the different weapons that are part of their hunting outfit).

Another aspect that should not be neglected is the neutralisation of past and present operated by the mechanisms of orality. Leopards, chimpanzees, and elephants have disappeared from the factual universe of the Kushi, but they are all still present in their cultural horizon. In other words, oral traditions actualise the past by creating a temporal continuum narrative where hunters leave for the bush to face animals that have long ceased to populate the area.

Oral traditions are subject to physiological change, but also to bleaching and ultimate disappearance. In the long run, the decreasing importance of hunting will affect the form and the contents of the intergenerational transmission of this specific knowledge. There will be a point where the fracture between the physical world and the mental models rooted in the collective imagery will be too deep: then, talking of leopards and elephants will not make any sense and entire packets of lexical and cultural information will be dropped altogether. Language documentation provides both researchers and communities with the theoretical and methodological tools to collect oral traditions before the natural process of cultural erosion takes place.

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