DOUBLE ENTENDRES IN AN AFRICAN SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Introduction

The folklore of students is a living tradition. It offers unusual interest and problems to the folklorist if the students are part of a group undergoing cultural change. For as the patterns of a culture undergo change, so does the form, function, and content of its lore. The folklorist who has analyzed this evolution is in an excellent position to comment on the group's syncretic style.

The folklore of the African students in Kings College, Budo, a Ugandan missionary school, is a good example of such a changing tradition. I have selected a genre of particular vitality, the double entendre, for analysis. Although we collected these items over a three year period from only one school, the use of ambiguous English words for humorous purposes is widespread throughout the educational system of East Africa.

The inspiration for this study comes from G. Legman, who wrote in The Horn Book:

...the folklore of our own century is being overlooked and left unrecognized, by almost the only group interested in dealing with it, owing to its increasing distance and external difference from the hitherto classic forms of folksongs, folktales, folkdances and the like.

Because my wife and I were not trained folklorists when this study was initiated, gaps in the data exist, especially in the area of form (we did not have a tape recorder and couldn't catch full usage in context) and meaning.

The School

Most secondary schools in East Africa were founded by missionary societies—roughly half Anglican and half Catholic. One of the oldest is Kings College, Budo. The school was built in 1906 on the hill where the kings of the large Banganda tribe were traditionally crowned. It was founded by the Church Missionary Society (Anglican), and since 1944 its governor has been the Bishop of Uganda. Julian Huxley, who visited Africa in 1927, thought it "the best school in Africa." Virtually all the African elite in Uganda are graduates of Budo, and as alumni they are proud, almost chauvinistic about the school. Budo is called by them the Eton of East Africa.

The headmaster of Budo uses Rugby as his model, and recruits his staff from English "public schools" like Eton, Rugby, Harrow and Winchester. Of the twenty-five teachers in 1966, eighteen were alumni of English
public schools and universities. The remaining seven had graduated from high schools and colleges in Scotland, Wales, Australia, and the United States. An educational barrier thus divided the staff. This was compounded by differences in nationality. The English public school "way of doing things" was ridiculed by the others, and the southern English accent, nurtured in public schools, was mocked. Religion was also a barrier. Most of the English were low-Anglicans or evangelical Baptists, while the seven outsiders were non-religious or agnostic. The non-English clique's refusal to participate in Budo religious life cast them as sinners to the headmaster, but heroes to the students. A final factor helping to divide the staff was age. The teachers in the non-English clique were young. Their informal manner contrasted sharply with that of the staid, older Englishmen.9

An esoteric attitude10 recognized by the non-English teachers confirms this division of the staff. The younger instructors felt close to the students, especially the sixth formers (corresponding to high school seniors in American public schools). The students knew of this attitude and responded by sharing with the seven teachers their problems and aspirations.

Tribalism was the most important factor in the segmentation of Budo student life. As of three years ago, Budo had an enrollment of three hundred boys and two hundred girls. They came from all parts of Uganda, but described themselves as being from the north or south. The northeners were Nilotics; the southerners, Bantu. Over thirty tribes were represented; however, half the students were from the large Bantu kingdom, Buganda. These students considered themselves superior to, and independent of, the other tribes. The northeners, however, considered the Buganda Anglicized and too proud.11 During the civil war of May-June, 1966, the headmaster closed the school to prevent violence between these groups.

Peer groups were a unifying factor. The extreme differences in the ages of the students actually strengthened peer groups. Students entered the first form (seventh grade) as young as 13, while others finished the sixth form as old as 26. This discrepancy created strong peer groups that often commanded more loyalty than tribal affiliation. The most difficult problem older students faced was living in two worlds. The younger boys were, for the most part, infatuated with Western traditions and imitated the teachers' speech, dress, and behavior. The older students, on the other hand, were more critical of Western patterns. Hugo Gatheru has summed up the attitude of an African caught between two worlds:

"One kind of truth was that which one got from one's fathers.
Another kind of truth was that which one got from the white man's books."

Unfortunately, the staff at Budo often ridiculed the former while praising the latter.

The Double Entendre

Children learning a language find humor in misnaming things, especially if the misnomer has a scatological connotation. Adolescents learning a foreign language do the same, only their delight is in words with sexual overtones. Certain of these words pass into tradition, for various reasons, and become double entendres. For adults, the use of these words
becomes increasingly incidental. At Budo, word play among students based on the double entendre was incidental but very frequent. Recognition of this frequency first came to me after a year at the school. Teachers were continually complaining about their inability to understand the African sense of humor. Students seemed to laugh for no apparent reason during classes, lectures and sermons. And they laughed as a group. After noting that it was words or phrases which elicited such laughter, I asked several students whom I knew well what was so funny. They explained that the words had double meanings known to all the students, but to none of the staff. For the remainder of my tour at Budo, I collected these words as they functioned in an informal natural context. 13

The following list contains the most common double entendre words. The age and sex of the student who gave me the word or phrase is noted in parentheses, along with the student's own definition of it:

Amorphous - vagina (18 F)
Attendant - a boy who tries but cannot seduce a girl (22 M)
Bite - kiss (17 F)
Boat - vagina (18 F)
Boller - penis (15 F)
Brave - drink warigi, a banana liquor (20 M)
Buzz - drink warigi (20 M)

Choke - kiss (20 M)
Chop - kiss (17 F)
Corking - intercourse (20 M)
Corrode - intercourse (15 F)
Crude - village made waragi (18 M)
Cut - intercourse (15 F)
Cylinder - penis (17 F)

Dancing - act of love (20 M)
Eat - intercourse (15 M)
Eat business - intercourse (15 F)
Eat swa - intercourse (19 M)
Erect - to get stimulated

Factory - to smoke (19 M)
Flat mouth - vagina (18 F)
Forest - pubic hair (18 F)

Get bright - drink pombe, a banana beer (17 M)
Guy - a handsome boy or man (18 F)

Lubricate - to get excited (18 F)

Man - penis (21 F)
Managing - intercourse (20 M)
Manilizer - a girl who enjoys sexual intercourse (16 F)
Mean business - to try and have intercourse with a girl (21 M)
Transmission of the double entendre at Budo takes place vertically in the houses and horizontally in the forms or classes. At Budo, as in an English public school, boys are divided up into groups called "houses." Unlike American fraternities, these houses are supposed to be similar. While at school (in Budo a boy spends six years) the house substitutes for home; it has its own authorities (prefects and house masters), dormitories, common rooms and tradition. The tradition of a house is often so strong that the student feels more loyalty to the house than to the school. The tradition is passed on by word of mouth and by force of example. The older boys often hold informal sessions where they teach the house or school lore. The double entendre is passed on in this way; although it functions incidentally it is transmitted intentionally. A student instructing an "uninitiated" peer will introduce a few of the
expressions as being "words you ought to know and won't learn from Miss So and So or Mr. Such and Such." At these sessions the younger boys soon become aware of which teachers are "in" on the words. Identification with the seven non-English teachers who are "in" begins early. In these sessions, older boys also pass on information about how a student can enjoy a "normal" sex life at the school and not be punished. Most boys admit that they learned most of their double entendres in these house sessions soon after coming to Budo.

Double entendres are also learned in the forms or classes. Each form is made up of twenty-five students, roughly the same age, but from different houses. New words which evolve in a particular house are transmitted to other houses in the forms. A teacher will use a word in class, for instance, that the boys from Australia House find funny. Everyone else will pounce on the Australians after class to discover why they laughed. Girls claim that most of their words are learned in the forms. They explain that their prefects are puritanical and they have to rely on the boys for their information. Actually, the female prefects are rarely prudes, and they are often the best source for sexual folklore.

The double entendre functions in an informal context. It achieves its humorous effect in three situations:

(1) The word is used by a person (generally a figure of authority) who is not aware he is using a double entendre;

(2) The word operates as a comic euphemism, replacing an English obscenity which Budo students seem terrified of using;

(3) The word is deliberately used by an orator to break down the reserve of his audience.

An example of this first situation occurred when an unmarried female teacher, in giving a lesson on manners and polite language, said: "Your form-captain cut me right in the middle of chapel." Annoyed by the laughing, she queried, "If you think your so smart, who knows what cut means?" One of the boys shouted, "Cut means corrode." The class exploded with laughter. Sensing she was being spoofed, the teacher changed the subject. Later she did find out what cut and corrode meant, and now she tells the anecdote with some pride.

An example of the second situation happened when two students, an artist and a scientist, were arguing about which of the "two cultures" 15 was of greater value to emerging Uganda. The artist engaged in some character defamation by saying, "All you scientists do all day is sit in a laboratory and corrode." The scientist replied, "You artists eat swa and play with your pencils." Both laughed and resumed their serious argument.

There are many examples of the third kind of situation, for Ugandan students relish speeches and debates, and will happily sit through hour after hour of harangues. During the rainy season, for example, a debate between Budo and a nearby girls' school, Nabbingo, was held. The Budo
speakers both opened with double entendres:

Tonight — Budo means business.

After such a pleasant evening, we are sorry Nabbingo must take off.

The function of the double entendre cannot be understood apart from the contexts in which the words are used. We must examine the function of the double entendre in relieving anxiety and validating African traditions. "In a transitional group everyone has ego troubles," commented Roger Abrahams during a recent lecture at the University of Pennsylvania. At Budo, the psychological problems of the students as a group were compounded by the emphasis placed upon passing the Cambridge Overseas Examination and the overt negation of traditional African values in the school's official attitude. The double entendre helped relieve anxiety caused by the Cambridge exam. Every student at Budo considers the Cambridge Examination the most crucial event in his life. If he passes it, a university education and a government position await him. If he fails it, at best he will end up as a primary school teacher or local clerk. Budo gets all its students through the exam every year, but doubts remain in the students' minds. Because of these doubts, students are highly motivated; there are no discipline problems. Teachers seldom hesitate to threaten, "If you don't stop being Bolshevik, you will fail your Cambridge." The atmosphere in the classroom is tense. The double entendre helps break this tension. In the middle of one dictation — which English public school teachers are fond of giving day after day — a teacher said to a confused student, "Odok, you dolt, stand up." Everyone, except the teacher, laughed. The teachers who know some of the double entendres will use them deliberately to induce a more relaxed atmosphere. My personal favorite was, "Don't get excited, you'll get your supper soon." This verbal play never failed and eventually began a word game in which the students would shout, "And you'll get your supper tonight."

When the students laugh at a teacher who unknowingly uses a double entendre, the function of the joke operates as an expression of aggressive behavior. However, when the double entendre is used tongue-in-cheek by a teacher or another student, the word or expression functions more as a social cohesive. It reminds the students that despite the crisis awaiting them, they are still capable of enjoying life and, however momentarily, the company of their friends. There is much of the "we two against the world" feeling in these moments. Generally, the younger the student, the more he enjoys the use of the double entendre by an unknowing teacher; the older the student, the more he appreciates the deliberate usage of the expressions by sympathetic teachers.

The continual attack on African traditional values undermines the student's faith in the efficacy of his tribal beliefs and customs. This was especially true of the thoughtless comparisons that were made between the African and English family. Common African beliefs such as the notion that no child ought to be unwanted, even if the parents were unmarried; the bride price; polygamy; ways of rearing children; traditional education and circumcision rituals were frequently misunderstood and ridiculed by some Western teachers. These
slurs on African culture were bitterly resented. If the school had allowed the students to relieve their anxieties and tensions in prescribed traditional African forms of expression (i.e., dancing, drumming, drinking), then perhaps some of this resentment would have been dissipated. But the headmaster and the majority of teachers feared that if these activities were allowed, students would "run amok." Again and again the non-English clique of teachers would argue for the inclusion of traditional activities in the school program. These pleas always failed, and the reason given was generally the same: "These are not like English students; they tend to go crazy if you allow them to dance those dances and pound away and..." Seldom was the fear of the student engaging in prohibited sex mentioned. It was, however, this fear that lay behind the "going crazy" argument. This attitude of the teachers toward sex was frequently ridiculed by the students. But once the laughter was over, the students became nostalgic and hopeful, and expressed their desire that Budo would some day be Africanized.

The double entendre also functioned as a social cohesive. It was used as a secret African language, albeit in English. The words symbolized for the students the sexual customs and attitudes they felt were their heritage. The use of these words thus validated an ideal as well as a very real set of values. The double entendre functioned as a substitute for their vernacular language. To greet another boy with, "Did you eat swa last night?" gave the same emotional charge as would a tribal salute.

Because of the variety of their tribal backgrounds, students often discovered that there was really no typical African attitude toward sex; one tribe's attitude toward male circumcision or the value of sexual experience before marriage, for instance, might differ sharply from another tribe's attitudes. The different attitudes toward polygamy and adultery especially bothered the younger students and many arguments about the ethics of having extra wives and concubines took place. The use of the double entendre took the edge from these arguments, provided "comic relief," and helped focus the discussion onto similarities rather than differences. By the time the students reached the fifth and sixth form, tribal differences were ignored and an ideal African attitude adopted. This attitude drew heavily upon the values put forward by African poets believing in Negritude.

Arguments still continued, but among the older students they were always centered on the way in which African attitudes toward sex could be reintroduced in Uganda, especially in the cities. The barrier was the "Christian-Western" misconceptions that had remained as a legacy of colonialism.

Post Script -- Letters from former students suggest that the double entendre is presently more widespread than in 1963-66. Anecdotes are now being told about former students who used the form with expertise.
FOOTNOTES


5 This conclusion was reached after conversations with over ten American teachers serving in East Africa with Columbia University's Teachers for East Africa project.

6 Ingrams, 1960: 123.


8 Huxley, 1964: Elspeth Huxley's books on East Africa are excellent for the student who needs to understand the milieu of the area.


11 Jansen, 1965: 45. This attitude is similar to that used as an example by Jansen.


15 Heated discussions about the merits of C.P. Snow's "two cultures" take place regularly at Budo.


17 My discussion of function is based on William Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," Journal of American Folklore, 67 (1954), 333-349. I also was strongly influenced by Legman's functional definition of folklore (Legman, 1964: 332).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Notes for Queries, cont'd from p. 82.

Beam, editor of the *Pennsylvania German Dictionary*, advises us that he recently heard the tale in Narburg, West Germany. This version emphasized the fact that Jackie had rarely visited the grave but Parkland Hospital often.

**QUERY**

**WRITER-ETHNOLOGIST SEeks INFORMATION ON CIRCASSIAN (ADYGHE) LINGUISTICS, LANGUAGE STUDY, FOLKLORE, LITERATURE, CULTURE**

Any information on the North Caucasus Mountains folklore wanted. Any information on groups of Circassians in America or other nations wanted, photos, music records, Circassian novels, literature, folklore, language lessons, etc. Any literature or information on "Cherkess" culture.

Possible project of translating Circassian literature/folklore into English if enough is collected. Most novels, etc., were published in Maikop, Circassian People's Republic, SSR. or Adyghe or Abkhazia. Any information wanted.

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