

Deception Motif in the Oral Narratives of the Sengwer of Embobut Forest, Kenya

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Abstract

While the people of north Marakwet of north western Kenya called Sengwer/ Cherang'any are revered craftspeople in pottery and ceramics, wood and others, it has not escaped the Marakwet of Kerio Valley that they are as well wily. This observation is based on analyses of two oral narratives told among the Marakwet and published by Kipkorir (2009, 433-434) as Mr 'Half barrel' (Araap Septeet Akeenge) and Mr 'Honey-at-the-top soil-at-the-bottom' (Kipkumat-kuut nyung'uny-keel). The paper observes that the Sengwer tradesmen have mastered the Marakwet buyers as so gullible to an extent that the tradesmen could tell them indirectly that they were cheating on them by mentioning their names in relation to their present transactions. It takes the intervention of group thinking and wise old men for the deception to be discovered. Thus the paper concludes that the stories are deceptive both thematically and by stylistic enablement but leaves a lot of suspense as to what happens next.

Key Words: Deception, Motif, Oral Narratives, Sengwer

Introduction

Deception is the literary act of deceiving, or misrepresenting the truth or reality in order to gain certain advantage, while hoping to escape the wrath as a result. In written fiction, it entails the works of a character intentionally or unintentionally deceiving the other characters. In the end, the deception is discovered and the character is usually punished. Deception presents itself as some form of dramatic irony. For example, Juliet feigns death to avoid being married by Paris, only to be meted by a certain psychological punishment after finding Romeo dead upon waking up (Shakespeare).

In African oral literature deceit is often intended because the deceitful characters mean to lie. There is no means to trace the deceitful protagonist unless they reappear to deceive again after their intentions have been noted (Finnegan). In most part, such deceitful actions go unpunished.

Deception Motif

In the first story the protagonist is quite knowledgeable of both the geography and lifestyle of the people of Kerio Valley. He could take his half-barrel and sell without anyone taking a moment to reflect on the character of the tradesman. The buyer agrees to give him a goat instead

of asking him to bring the other half-barrel then he would go with the goat. So, the buyer is gullible. He did not doubt the seller at all. In addition, the seller indicated by his name that he was a cheat, yet the buyer did not take time to think about it. The seller proceeds to the next settlement using the same method without being suspected. He exchanges the other half-barrel for another goat.

It was only through an unrelated gathering that the buyers could take issue with the transactions. Therefore, other than being gullible, the Marakwet buyers, at the same time were less cautious. That is the character trait that was mastered by the seller. The point of departure of the seller was a deceptive gain.

1.

Mr 'Half barrel' (Araap Septeet Akeenge)

A man from Cherang'any approached a settlement in the Kerio Valley carrying one half piece (septeet) of a honey-barrel and offering the complete barrel in exchange for one goat. He soon found a buyer but when asked where the other piece was, he stated that he had left it at the top of the escarpment but would bring it down 'tomorrow once I have a buyer'. Not doubting him, a buyer soon presented his goat in exchange and the tradesman set out on his journey; but before he departed he was asked for his name. He said he was called 'Arap Septeet Akeenge' ('son of one piece of a barrel'). He did not turn up on the following or any other day, for the crafty tradesman had already gone to another Valley settlement, a day's journey farther along the escarpment. There he repeated his now tried scheme, received a second goat, and thereafter disappeared. Several months later, at a big gathering for a totally unrelated purpose, a man stood up to narrate his story of the encounter with a honey-barrel tradesman. Then a second man stood up to say that he had had a similar experience. At this point a wise old man asked if each of the men could bring their pieces to the meeting. When the pieces were placed together, it became apparent they were the two halves of the same barrel!

The second story is even more deceptive in its entirety. The tradesman timed the circumcision period where a lot of honey was needed to prepare mead (honey-beer) to fulfil some of the ritual requirements for such ceremonies. Without being provoked he fills half of the honey container with soil and the other half with honey and leaves the buyer with both the honey and the honey-container. But by not transferring the honey into another container as a way of suspecting the generosity of the tradesman in leaving the container to him, the buyer failed the test of good commerce.

In addition, by failing to think about the name of the trader and the nature of the transactions, the buyer was very gullible. The tradesman caused a lot of pain and disappointment to the buyer by failing to honour his side of the bargain. But it was only the wise old man who discovered that the buyer had been duped.

2.

Mr ‘Honey-at-the-top soil-at-the-bottom’ (Kipkumat-kuut nyung’uny-ke)

One day a Cherang’any honey-vendor came to a settlement in the Valley. He had timed his arrival to coincide with the start of the circumcision ceremonies, when huge quantities of the precious commodity were needed. He carried his honey in a metre long wooden jar called tendu. When it was sampled the honey was judged excellent, and a deal was soon struck with a local resident in exchange for a goat. The wily tradesman told his new client to keep the container until the next time he came with a fresh supply of honey. Before leaving the tradesman was asked for his name. He said he was called Kipkumat-kuut nyung’uny-ke (literally: one known for honey at the top, soil-below). His audience laughed at the recitation of the name but, believing the man was something of a clown, thought nothing further of it. Several weeks later when the honey was being scooped out in preparation for beer-brewing, it was found that the container held honey in the top half and an equal volume of soil below. Then a wise old man asked what the vendor had given as his name: ‘Kip kumat-kuut, nyung’uny-ke!’ Almost simultaneously, everybody remarked that they had been coned by someone who had actually openly revealed what kind of a man he was!

Conclusion

The two stories reflect on traditional customs as a theme, the role of character traits and the motive of human actions. They are both thematically and stylistically deceptive. The titles of the stories and the names of the protagonists indicate some element of deception – half-barrel instead of full-barrel, and honey-at-the-top instead of a barrel wholly filled with honey. Likewise, the deception is only discovered when the buyers are in groups and also by others who are not part of the transactions. This level of ignorance and lack of caution by the buyers is inexcusable. Piecing the half-barrels together and proving them to match was another testimony of the inaction of the buyers in the first story. Finally, while in written fiction deception is punished, in these oral literature stories they are only realized and noted. The suspense is perhaps what happens next.

Works Cited

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