



*The Bukusu of Kenya: Folktales, Culture and Social Identities* (Carolina Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2011. pp. 200, ISBN 97-1-61163-025-1) by Namulundah Florence. Reviewed by Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi (amitabhvikram@yahoo.co.in) of the Department of Languages & Literature at Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, Katra, India.

*The Bukusu of Kenya* was written by Namulundah Florence. This book is part of the *Carolina Academic Press African World Series* that publishes new works in the field of African and Black World Studies. The aim of this series is to identify and elaborate “the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world” (p. ix). The series editors have published several books on the African experiences, such as *Women, Gender, and Sexualities in Africa*; *The Tiv and Their Southern Neighbours, 1890-1990*; *Globalization and the African Experience*; *Food Crop Production, Hunger, and Rural Poverty in Nigeria’s Benue Area. 1920-1995*; *Ifá in Yorùbá Thought System* etc. This series intends to fill gaps in areas, including African history, law, politics, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Florence’s book offers an overview of Bukusu people’s practices and beliefs, and this text is an extension of her previously published text titled *Our Mothers’ Hearths: Bukusu Folktales and Proverbs*. The author incorporates her personal knowledge and experience of Bukusu life to present an anthology of social ethos, folklore, and cultural tradition.

In this book, Florence analyzes Bukusu folktales, based on her work titled *From Our Mothers’ Hearths: Bukusu Folktales and Proverbs*. The author has included five chapters excluding “Introduction” and “Conclusion.” The book demonstrates a close reading of cultural anthropology, sociology, literature, history, and comparative ethnography. The author also draws examples from other communities in the East African region. Florence has succeeded to keep this text readable, introductory and basic by avoiding notes, figures, maps, tables, photographs, and interviews. Overall, it is a coherent book informed by the growing scholarly works on various themes in folktales, culture, and social identities. The chapters are written so well that they can stand alone or can be read following a different order.

Chapter 1 illustrates the significance of folktales and narrators. Traditional storytellers keep folktales alive. They transfer this tradition from one generation to another. The author states that “narrators uphold traditional beliefs and shape the construction of identities” (p. 3).

Folktales are used for many purposes, such as for entertainment and education, for a pastime family ritual, for blissful wish fulfillment, alike. They appeal to all audiences across ages and they are free from spatial and temporal limitations. Florence argues that though folktales offer an alternative view to historical narratives dominated by male narrators yet they “sanction male privilege” (p. 23). The author believes that folktales establish a bond between narrators and audience.

Chapter 2 deals with the structural aspects of Bukusu folktales. These folktales “reflect a worldview of order, stability and harmony” but usually they lack a standard text and author (p. 25). Since Bukusu folktales are anonymous, the narrators embellish the stories using simple techniques, such as sequenced incidents, idiophones, pacing, the law of contrasts and repetitions. Songs function as transitions in the plots as they successfully engage the audience in the story-telling processes. Florence states that generally these stories lack chronology and most of them begin with phrases, such as “*Yabao khale/yaba khaale* (Once upon a time)” (p. 39). These stories establish humans having a control of and interaction with animals.

In chapter 3, the author explores the theoretical aspects of material and social environment of Busuku communities. These folktales provide a “community’s social history and depict conventional value structures” (p. 47). Characterization and settings in the stories tell about the community values, such as view towards life, death, resurrection and justice, gender roles, family/kinship ties, the marriage institution, the status of children, the concept of territorial boundaries, leisure, taboos, heroes, gender roles and dietary habits. Bukusu stories “portray marriage as a social ideal” and man is the ideal being. Man protects the family from outside dangers, such as ogres and livelihood bandits and woman takes care of domestic sphere (p. 121).

Chapter 4 throws light on animate and inanimate beings in Bukusu folktales. The author observes “animals converse with each other as humans do” (p. 123). These folktales not only illustrate the desirability or lack of particular behaviors and attitudes but also challenge established social hierarchies while reversing existing structures of prestige and power. In some folktales, Ogres exist and they encroach on the human’s territory. In one tale, the dog and sheep fall out on account of betrayal and trust. Sometimes a small animal outwit the mighty one. Bukusu tales represent birds as good emissaries; they expose crimes and assist humans in predicaments.

Chapter 5 provides illustrations of such folktales that reflect values in behavior. Implicitly, these stories emphasize on a need to re-examine taken-for-granted social structures, however, they recount what social ideals and roles are good. Emphasis is laid on: honesty, collaboration, diligence, and familial ties. Generally, a breach of established social norms resulted in a predicament and whosoever violates the norms gets punishment. Florence offers a piece of advice to adult readers that these tales are primary cultural conduit in communities thereby not to be considered as projectionist.

On the whole, these folktales provide facts about Bukusu people's existence-the language, customs, beliefs, hopes and fears and they reflect four traditions: diffusionist, psychoanalytic, functionalist and evolutionary. They provide a network of meanings for understanding the social and material environment of Bukusu. All in all, Florence offers an overview of social and cultural lives of Bukusu people. She has created a permanent record of one of the Kenyan cultures by her outstanding research on Bukusu folktales. Researchers interested in cultural anthropology, sociology, literature, history and comparative ethnography will find this text useful. The book can also be read by any reader for pleasure. There is but one criticism of this text. The distribution of chapters is uneven, for example, chapter 4 and 5 contribute 24 pages whereas chapter 3 has around 70 pages.

In the end, however, this is an outstanding volume. It is a great book for anyone who is interested in the history of Africa, Kenya in particular.