



**International  
Journal of Society, Culture & Language  
IJSCL**

Journal homepage: [www.ijsc.net](http://www.ijsc.net)  
ISSN 2323-2210 (online)

## **Identity Construction in Three AbaGusii Bewitchment Narratives**

**Eucabeth Ong'au-Mong'are<sup>1a</sup>, Augustine Agwuele<sup>2b</sup>**

### **ARTICLE HISTORY:**

Received October 2016  
Received in Revised form December 2016  
Accepted January 2017  
Available online January 2017

### **KEYWORDS:**

AbaGusii  
Witchcraft  
Identity  
Culture  
Society

### **Abstract**

The stories we tell about our lives unveil their content just as much as the lexical choices we make index a certain worldview, attitude, positionality, and relationship to reality. In essence, in narratives, individuals construct the self and denote personal identities. The available narrative identity studies have largely ignored the language employed by the bewitched while narrating their experiences. Based on the personal narratives obtained from three self-professed previously bewitched individuals from the AbaGusii community of Kenya (Aba = people, hence AbaGusii = Gusii people), this article examines the verbal clauses employed by these narrators as they recounted their experiences. The goal is to understand how these individuals constructed their personal identities through the three different phases (i.e., pre-bewitchment phase, the bewitchment phase, and the post bewitchment phase) of their bewitchment experiences. The paper argues that understanding the various identity constructions by the bewitched is invaluable for understanding not only how they represented and structured events in their lives, but also how the identities represented them as particular agents in their world, and how they viewed themselves as particular community members.

© 2017 IJSCL. All rights reserved.

<sup>1</sup> PhD, Email: [eucamore@yahoo.com](mailto:eucamore@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Email: [aa21@txstate.edu](mailto:aa21@txstate.edu) (Corresponding Author)  
Tel: +1-512-2454726

<sup>a</sup> Kisii University, Kenya

<sup>b</sup> Texas State University, USA

## 1. Introduction

**B**ewitchment narratives among the AbaGusii (Aba = people, hence AbaGusii = Gusii people) provide an important avenue for the exploration of personal identity construction. The personal identities of the individuals involved are constructed across the various stages of what the self-identified bewitched individuals considered and described as their bewitchment experiences. Based on personal narratives obtained from three previously bewitched individuals, this article examines how these individuals employed lexical items, especially verbs, to construct different identities during the different phases of their experiences as bewitched. Previous witchcraft studies on the AbaGusii (e.g., Masese 2006; Ogembo, 2006) have not focused on the experiences of the bewitched as portrayed in their narratives. We address this neglect through the analysis of narratives as told by the bewitched. The paper argues that understanding the various identity constructions by the bewitched is invaluable for understanding how they represent and structure events in their lives, hence how they view themselves as members of their community (Gusii) as well as their own relationship with the community.

Language is an important resource in identifying an individual with his/her community. As the greatest human resource for representing and structuring events in people's lives, language codifies the most meaningful content of a culture in a subconscious way. As a symbol of representation, the spoken version or immediate utterance is both conventionally based and situation dependent, hence dynamic. Furthermore, utterances are connected to larger social milieu, beyond intersecting the material and mental, they devolve from within socio-cultural situatedness that lend to them credence and force. Thus seen, the denotative, connotative and indexical functions of utterances, as variously suggested by scholars such as de Saussure, Pierce, and Hjelmslev not only exist as a matter of fact, they become *sine qua non*. The linguistic codifiability of experiences makes them retainable, communicable, and an invaluable instrument not only of socialization but also of marking belongingness and indicating one's positionality within a community. As a system of meaning,

the grammar of a language, according to Halliday (1994), offers users different choices for expressing not only the self but also for locating the self. How people relate to each other and how they understand their world is communicated through personal narratives. Thus, people organize their experiences using narratives (Burr, 2003).

Beyond being seen as trivial, mundane or idle tales, narratives of personal encounters, though informal in nature, are invaluable as a means of representing and presentation of reality more so when individuals relate their experiences, such often come across more forcefully, makes the people more authentic and in most cases, relatable. Personal narratives are an invaluable aspect of the social life of any culture (Goodwin, 1982) and have significant socialization effects (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). The importance of personal narratives in the construction of identity has been underscored in several works (e.g., Bruner, 2001; Mishler, 2006; Smith, 2007). People's lives are made of stories, and narrating them assists the narrator to construct his/her identity (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Through storytelling and aided by an array of linguistic devices, personal narration of experiences are employed to reveal messages about narrators' protagonists while the narrators replay their experiences in their stories (Goffman, 1974). Consequently, in narrating, there is often a merging of reflection, relieving, re-evaluation with positionality, stance, and attitude towards the experienced, thereby making self-narratives an invaluable site for the construction of personal identity. As summarily noted by Baumann (1986), story-telling, in this instance, oral performance of (*Erlebnisse*) events is an interplay of situational factors such as participants' identities and roles, the expressive means employed during the narration, social interactional ground rules, norms, strategies for the performance, the criteria for its interpretation and evaluation, and the sequencing of actions that make up the different scenarios of the events that have been conveyed. Thus, storytelling, especially of personal experiences, occurs at a cultural level, it unveils some of those pertinent issues in the social life of a community as reflected through an experiencing member of the community, who during narration, deploys societally approved connotative and denotative

signs to index socio-cultural realities and to situate the self.

People, as “story telling animals” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 216) narrate their experiences and in so doing actively construct their personal identity, stance, and positionality. In an oral society such as that of the AbaGusii of Kenya, narration of life stories is an integral component of life. People are often found narrating informally; they do so on the pathways, street-corners, while hanging out with friends, during burial ceremonies, over meals, and at weddings. Wherever AbaGusii people congregate, (life) stories and observed events are bound to be told. Indeed, we humans are story tellers. The stories mostly told touch on day to day happenings in the community, quite prominent in the various narratives are different stories pertaining to witchcraft. Of great interest to us in this paper are the stories of individuals who presume themselves to have overcome bewitchment or were victims of bewitchment, a very common obsession of the people. In their stories are expressed aspects of themselves that unveil their identity, their worldview, and their relationship to social reality. We explore these stories as they offered the tellers/narrators a means of making sense of their lives and those of others (McAdams, 1996) and the intersections of both. Identity is constructed through interaction and as suggested by Appiah (2007, p. 18) “in response to facts outside oneself, things that are beyond one’s own choices”.

Belief in witchcraft is wide spread the world over (Moore & Sanders, 2001). Studies on witchcraft are many (e.g., Ashforth, 1996; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993; Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Offiong, 1991). There is no way any observer will look at the diversity and scope in the studies of witchcraft without concluding that witchcraft is a major preoccupation of many people, and as will be demonstrated, witchcraft is a major concern for the Gusii people of Kenya. Mesaki (2009) observes that in Africa, witchcraft is a real belief system that is deeply rooted in the minds of the people. Ogembo (2006) for instance found out that among the AbaGusii, cases of lynching suspected witches and destruction of their properties are rampant. The gory images of suspected witches been burned alive in Gusiiland abound and are freely available

online. There are news-reports of these on TV where the community comes out at large to meet out instant justice on suspected witches along with members of their families. These mob actions and hysteria are due to the fact that the AbaGusii people view witchcraft as the greatest threat to human existence (Masese, 2006). Those who practice witchcraft are believed to possess rare powers with which they wreak havoc in the lives of others. Life and existence come with many difficulties; individuals seek solutions to these life persistent problems, often the solutions include making sure that they remove the sources of the problem which include burning of those that we suspect of witchcraft as they are part of our problems. Our data revealed sentiments like ‘they make us fail exams in school, they make our businesses fail, they cause us to be barren, they destroy our future’; so, it is pertinent that we get rid of them. Societies have gotten rid of their suspected witches for centuries. However, while we are quick to burn witches, we most often overlook the personhood and subjectivity of those who are thusly branded, including those victims who survived and are coping with the trauma of witchcraft. These people tell their stories to those willing to hear them, perhaps for cathartic purposes. While it is easy for one to quickly dismiss stories and narratives of such individuals as mundane and perhaps fictions, among the AbaGusii they are straightforwardly recognizable stories whose veracity is not in doubt. These stories and the fact of witchcraft are considered crucial in the social organization of the AbaGusii community. However, there is not any known study that explores the language employed by the so called bewitched AbaGusii when they narrate their stories. Our goal in this paper was to explore how the bewitched re-presented themselves in their narratives. Excerpted from a larger body of work that focuses on witchcraft and bewitchment experiences, this article studies the language employed by individuals who claimed to have once been bewitched as they narrated their experiences in order to understand how these individuals marked their social identities prior to and during the period of bewitchment. Following Malinowski (1922), our intent is to grasp the AbaGusii's point of view, their relation to life, so that it becomes possible for us to realize, i.e., comprehend their vision of their world.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Approach and Focus

There are several approaches to the study of language and language use. A theoretical perspective devoid of socio-cultural component owes to Chomsky (1965) for whom the grammar of a language is only a rule for grammaticality. This perspective studies syntax without any cultural flavor or particular situation, since such are considered distractions from the ideal, speaker hearer. Different from this perspective is Halliday's (1985) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) that constructs language as a functional system of meaning as well as a system of social semiotics; that is, the understanding of the relationship between language and the function of language in its social context. SFL asserts that any act of communication involves choices and that language is a system in which the choices available in any language variety are mapped using the representation tool of the 'system network'. There are two parts to SFL. The first part explores internal relationships in language as a system of meaning potentials that furnish speakers with choices in codifying and transmitting their experiences. The second part dwells on the social function of language; this second part rekindles Malinowski's view that "in every type of civilization, every custom, material object, idea and belief fulfills some vital function, has some task to accomplish, [and] represents an indispensable part with a working whole" (Kardiner & Preble, 1963). Malinowski also argued that it is important to understand how meanings are created and communicated among members of a culture. To do so, one has to understand those categories that are meaningful to a culture as well as the relationship between them. Together this will uncover the relationship between language, culture and the society. For Halliday (1985), language is affected by the interrelationship of social and cultural situations. Halliday's (1985) idea which privileges the analyses of language in its social and cultural context is also analogous to Sapir (1929) especially the notion that "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached" (Sapir,

1929, p. 69). Halliday's (1985) SFL underscores the situational especially how speakers produce utterances and texts in order to express an intended meaning through generalized meta-functions that relate language to the outside world where interactants and their social roles are consequential.

In his functional theory of language, Halliday (1985) further described lexico-grammar as having a network of three meta-functions, these are ideational (transitivity), interpersonal, and textual. Ideational or transitivity meta-function pertains to the linguistic representation of reality, individual consciousness, and that which is represented by clauses. This function could be said to encode the actor or doer, the action or what was done, to whom it was done, when and where, that is the context of the action that was performed. Halliday's (1985) transitivity also deals with the transmission of ideas, representing 'processes' or 'experiences': actions, events, processes of consciousness and relations" (Halliday, 1985, p. 53). The scope of the ideational meta-function of lexico-grammar includes the experiential and the logical meta-functions. Through the experiential meta-function people organize their experiences as well as their understanding of the world, while the logical meta-function aids the understanding of the meaning that is expressed by different clauses of a complex clause.

The second meta-function, the interpersonal, concerns the social world and is based on the clauses of exchange. The interpersonal meta-function focuses on the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. Finally, the textual meta-function focuses on the verbal world, specifically the organizational flow of information across the preceding two meta-functions with respect to their cohesiveness. At any rate, the flow of information, including the organization of meaning occurs through a deliberate, that is, conscious choice of lexical items (Fowler, Hodge, Kress, & Trew, 1979) in the grammatical system of the networks, consequently, every clause, or perhaps, utterance realizes the three meta-functions or meanings encoded by each concurrently.

These above three form an interacting system networks of culture, situation, and verbal

context, that could be said to occur in Hymes' (1962, 1964) ethnography of speaking, (that forms the acronym s-p-e-a-k-i-n-g (setting, participants, ends, acts sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre) which focuses on analyzing the way people use language in real situation, are invaluable in uncovering how in the narration of personal experiences an individual codifies and expresses aspects of the self that we have termed identity in this paper. The SFL of Halliday (1985) presumes that context allows the identification of extra-linguistic features that implicate meaning which are coded lexically and grammatically, hence lexico-grammatical, and these are conveyed in the particular phonology of the speakers' language.

Due to their discourse orientation, the ideational meta-function and the experiential meta-function are of importance to the study of this paper. The ideational meta-function component is important because communication occurs in culture (individuals codify cultural meanings and experiences in words, sounds, tonal quality, and through non-verbal means that are then perceived as intended). Thus, the situational context is implicated in language use; for our purposes, it is implicated in the language that our subjects employ in telling their stories. The importance of the experiential meta-function owes to our concern with how individuals view and represent the self as they underwent different experiences; how an individual processes events and understands the world, in this case, their world within their own worldview. The textual component of SFL is less pertinent to the paper as it mainly examines oral discourse. However, to the extent that both oral conversation and written discourses involve logical cohesiveness, then, the flow of information and meaning as well as their organization become pertinent.

Essentially, with Halliday's (1985) theory of meta-function, the various meanings encoded lexico-grammatically in the narratives can be unraveled. For instance, the functional component of language pertains to our experiences and the representation of them (the experiential and logical meta-function) as well as the attitude of the narrator and the interaction between those involved in the communicational exchanges

(interpersonal meta-function). With these, the different meanings, intentions and positionality of the narrators become realizable through the different lexical choices that each narrator makes out of the array of the different features that are available in their language. In essence, we are exploring the linguistic codification and representation of mental concepts. Speakers' or in this case narrators' choice of linguistic codes are not neutral reflections of reality, rather, they embody their ideological stance as affected by their social and cultural institutions (Fowler, 1986). Therefore, the study implements the ideational, that is transitivity meta-function, to the extent that this component deals with different 'processes' or descriptive categories specific to a language in the representation of ideas and codification of experiences, consciousness and relations. Specifically, we will be focusing on the use of semantic verbs by the narrators, especially those semantic verbs that cover 'doing', 'feeling', 'sensing', 'saying', and 'existing' etc. (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Hasan, 1976) as well as those that express events, relation, mental, and emotional state. In implementing the ideational, we analyze these various 'processes' (according to Halliday, 1985), that is, something that is performed; we try to make sense of the mental state of the narrator, and we seek to obtain insight into their perception of the world which we consider to be a particular socio-cultural construct of a particular community of practice. By this analyses, we presume to be locating ideologies in narrative discourses and we would be identifying "how ideology and ideological processes are manifested as systems of linguistic characteristics and processes" (Fowler et al., 1979, p. 155). In this connection, the function of language as a social act (Halliday, 1985) as well as a form of "social practice" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 20) are foregrounded. As noted by Harvey (1996),

Discourses express human thought, fantasy, and desire. They are also institutionally based, materially constrained, experientially grounded manifestations of social and power relations. By the same token, discursive effects suffuse and saturate all other moments within the social process (affecting, for example, beliefs and

practices as well as being affected by them). (p. 80)

Thus, our paper is focused on making sense of the narrators' experience of the world, their own subjectivity and their attitude, especially the way that they evaluate their subjective experiences and how they view their self to have been determined if not influenced by them. We focus on the use of verbs that depicted a certain identity of the bewitched at various stages of the bewitchment episode.

The 'processes' (Halliday, 1985) considered for this study are material, mental, verbal, relational, and behavioral. In the material processes category, action verbs are analyzed. Verbs in the material processes are concerned with action and activity. They depict the narrators as actors, as *sensers* of a *phenomenon*. They express the notion that someone does something therefore emphasizing both the actor and the act itself. They represent the experiences of the narrators. Mental processes pertain to actions that take place in the mind, relating to affection and perception. The mental processes construct the writer as well as the narrator as *senser*, the experiencer, the one who felt and perceived an action, an event, and they concern also what was perceived, the *phenomenon* (Halliday, 1985). By exploring the verbs employed by the narrators at different stages of their bewitchment experiences, it is possible to understand how the narrator senses and portrays the self, which is identity. The verbal process involves the giving of information, directly or indirectly, which represents narrators' experience (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004) and constructs the narrator in a certain light. Halliday (1985, p. 129) sees it as "any kind of symbolic exchange of meaning". We assume, following de Saussure that linguistics communication involves a dyad of signifier and the signified, the mental and the material, consequently, to communicate is to transfer certain content of the speaker's mind to the mind of the hearer. Related to this, we also consider the *senser*, the narrator to be analogous to Pierce's 'interpretant' to the extent that the listeners take their cues from the narrator with respect to how they should understand the communicated information. The *sensers* also are the ones who through their lexical choices

cause the participants to enter into their experience, into their world and in so doing, bring them and their unique perception into a relationship. Relational processes are about the state of being; this involves the constructing of the narrator as a living entity, the relational processes displayed the narrators' humanity in the face of bewitchment. The behavioral process is a combination of mental and material processes. The 'actions' and 'emotions' in the narrator's story construct him or her as a *behavior*, *senser*, *experiencer* and one constructing their own personal identity as they relive it through the various stages of bewitchment. Summarily, by implementing SFL for the narratives obtained from the three subjects, we are in a position to observe the experiential meta-function -that is the type of experiences that the narrator has chosen to codify linguistically-, the interpersonal meta-function- that is the type of relationship that is expressed in the narratives-, as well as the linguistic choices that the narrator has made in organizing the aforementioned meta-functions. In this paper, therefore, we accept linguistic exchanges as involving a semiotic system that pertains to social life.

## 2.2. The Gusii People

The Gusii people, also known as AbaGusii, live in the north-western part of Kenya near Lake Victoria and close to the Rift Valley. They are neighbors to the Kipsigis, Luo, and Maasai. They are traditionally farmers and form a close knit people who maintain homesteads in multiple villages within a patrilineal and patriachal system. Witchcraft belief and practice is a pervasive aspect of the Gusii community (Masese, 2006). Witchcraft is nearly always the reason in the minds of the people who are struck by misfortunes like the demise of a close relative, all kinds of grave illnesses, impotence, snakebites, and madness. Despite the fact that many ailments are treated in hospitals, the AbaGusii use traditional medicines to treat some of them like the 'bad or evil eye'. There are specialists in this community who deal with the effects of witchcraft. These ones deal with ailments that cannot be cured by conventional medicine. When a community member falls ill or dies, the community attaches a human cause to it. The AbaGusii believe that witchcraft is the cause of many social-medical problems like

madness, infertility, boils, and epilepsy among others. Belief in witchcraft therefore is deeply rooted in the community and causes much fear among the community members. Contemporarily, some successful AbaGusii individuals maintain a comfortable lifestyle only outside of the Gusii community. There, they have their nice houses, big cars and other material possessions that equate with success; however, in their family homestead they project the image of a person still struggling to survive. This ploy is to avoid bewitchment from neighbors who might become jealous of their success. It is believed that the witches can injure them through mystical powers. Witchcraft presents them with a natural philosophy through which the relations between humans and misfortunes are explained. To them, witchcraft offers a satisfactory explanation as to why a misfortune occurred in the manner it did.

### 3.1. Participants

Data for this study was obtained from 3 participants who claimed to have been bewitched, namely Nyabo (female), Obiri (male), and Mesa (male). Each narrated stories describing how their lives were before, during and after the bewitchment episode so as to show how the presumed bewitchment affected them and the course of their lives. The narrations unfolded in their native language, EkeGusii. The stories were tape-recorded as the individuals narrated them, the recordings were then played back and transcribed.

### 3.2. Materials

#### 3.2.1. *The Story of Nyabo*

Nyabo was a university student at the time of the interview. She was 22 years old. She was a Christian. She narrated that she used to be one of the best students in her class until grade seven when she started becoming the poorest performing student despite her intense studying habit and personal diligence. This troubled her so much and more so when her parents began accusing her of having become complacent. Her father took her to the hospital but no disease, ailment or problem was diagnosed. Later on, the father took her to a witchdoctor but the medicine man did not attend to them since they were unable to afford

his fee. Without any aid, they went back home where her health continued to deteriorate until she could no longer do anything by herself and had to be assisted by the siblings. One day, she remembered that a certain pupil from her neighborhood whose mother was suspected to be a witch had gotten hold of her book. She suspected that the book may have been used to bewitch her so that she doesn't dominate her class in academics any more. Nyabo narrated to her mother what had unfolded and she was very angry. She decided to confront the suspect. The community gathered as is often the case when there is a suspected case of witchcraft and through a thorough beating, the witch confessed and finally undid the harm through the medium of a queer dance that was accompanied by singing. Nyabo recovered from the effects of witchcraft and continued to excel in her studies. She was finally admitted to university.

#### 3.2.2. *The Story of Obiri*

Obiri was 55 years old at the time of the interview. He was a business man. He was also a practicing Christian. He had a wife and children. Poverty pitched camp with them in the early years of their marriage. In order to get by he and his wife did several odd jobs because they did not have a good education. Later on, their efforts bore fruit and he was able to build a good residential house for his family, they also had several rental properties, they started dairy farming, ran four retail shops, and bought a car. Their overwhelming success attracted the jealousy of people in his community who were not happy with his new status as a wealthy and successful business man. A certain old lady who was suspected to be a witch started ridiculing and abusing him. Obiri found the old lady by his door one night but she ran off leaving behind some witchcraft paraphernalia by his door. His wife raised the alarm and neighbors poured in to find out what had happened. Obiri narrated to them what had transpired and this did not augur well with the old lady who felt ridiculed. She warned him of impending danger. Soon after, Obiri's dairy cows began to die one after the other, his shops were looted, not long thereafter he was involved in a road accident that claimed the life of his wife. His enemies were very pleased. He narrated that fire engulfed his shops a night before his wife's burial. After

the burial, Obiri contracted a mysterious disease that defied treatment. He could no longer afford to pay his children's school fees. His fellow Christians fasted and prayed and as a consequence of this spiritual intervention the old lady died. Obiri regained his health, he remarried and his children went back to school and progressed to university.

### 3.2.3. *The Story of Mesa*

At the time of the interview, Mesa was a 60-year-old man. He was not engaged in any economic activity. He was a Christian. Mesa narrated that earlier on, he was a successful high school head teacher and a farmer. His teachers were hard working while the students were well disciplined and excelled in national examinations. His children attended local and international educational institutions. They did well academically and were holding prestigious positions in various organizations. Suddenly, Mesa started experiencing pain all over his body. He made several efforts to obtain medical treatment locally and internationally, all of these efforts failed and he lost a lot of money in the process. A friend of his advised him to consult a witch doctor; he did, only to find out that the so called witch doctor swindled him of his money. His ailments continued seemingly without solution. Soon afterwards Mesa became insane, he ran mad, that is a raving lunatic. His children were not spared either, gradually they became bankrupt. They were dismissed from their employments one after another. One of his children committed suicide while Mesa's wife fell ill and died. During this ordeal, his neighbor converted to Christianity and confessed to the cause of Mesa's woes. Being very contrite, despite his confession, he was so thoroughly ashamed of himself and unable to bear the consequences of his action on his neighbor and family, he therefore committed suicide.

## 4. Findings

In order to understand how each of the three subjects presented and represented themselves in their stories, we have divided their narration into three phases. These phases emerged from listening to them tell their stories. These are the 'pre-bewitchment phase', 'the bewitchment phase', and the 'post bewitchment phase'. These three individuals narrated their stories,

out of these are lifted some of the constructions that are presented below for analytical purposes.

### 4.1. Pre-Bewitchment Processes and Identity Construction

During her narration, Nyabo employed a relational process type of clause to express how she was before the bewitchment episode. As presented in the utterance below, she used the verb 'was' to reveal her various traits before bewitchment:

1. ... *nareng* *mobere* *muya* ... *nareng* *omworokigwa* *orange* *no'obong'aini* ...

... I was body good ... I was pupil who was with intelligence

[I was a healthy and intelligent student.]

In sentence 1 above, Nyabo portrays herself as someone who was previously healthy and who was an intelligent pupil. This positive self-portrayal unveils her view of herself, the qualities she possessed, and the way she fitted into the society. The exclusion of any negative aspect in her life is enough evidence that she did not believe that she had any problem whatsoever. Further affirming her identity as a well-adjusted person who was in control of her life, Nyabo defined herself as follows:

2. *Igo nare gotang'anaase* *amatemwa* *onsi*

So I was leading in exams all

[I led in all examinations]

The use of the verb 'lead' is a material process. With this verb, Nyabo describes herself as the brightest student in her class. Nyabo uses the verb to construct her identity not only as a student but one with academic prowess, someone who was a leader. Essentially, she was a high achiever and ambitious. The past tense usage indicates that this was her view of herself; it also suggests that a promising trajectory was somehow truncated. It is important to underscore the self-identification as smart and as the best student. In Kenya, students are ranked within their cohorts based on their performances in examinations. First position is for the students who scored the highest grade point across all subjects. To be adjudged the best academically is to receive institutional acclaim and public



affirmation of oneself as intelligent. For a female to be thusly celebrated is an exceptional honor in Kenya. This makes the person the pride of the parents and of the community to which they belong.

As summarily presented above, Obiri narrated that he and his wife were poor in the initial stages of their marriage:

3. ... *igo twarengeabataka ogokumia ... tokagasana*

... so we *were* poor very ... we *struggled*

... [we were very poor but we struggled]

Similar to the previous subject, Obiri used the verb 'was' in a relational process to show his social identity at the onset of his marital life. It is clear that he understood his status to be one that could be changed if he took certain actions. This portrays him as a man with resolve, a man who believes that his fate lies in his own hands and that with hard-work, he could in concert with his wife bring about their desired ends. This resolute and determined personality is captured by the use of the verb, 'struggled'. By struggling, Obiri showed optimism that his identity could change for the better and it indeed changed as borne by the success that came his way. The next clausal phrase captures his view to life and his attitude to dire circumstances as well as the success that he had when he enumerated them:

4. ... *inaagachete enyomba engiya ogokumia, ngatugachiombe chi amabere, nkagora egari ...*

... I built house good extremely I reared cows for milk I bought car...

[I built an extremely good house and started rearing dairy cows, I bought a car]

Furthermore, he stated that:

5. *nkaigorachituka inye na koagacha chinyomba...*

I opened shops four and built houses

[I started retail business, owned four stores and built houses]

The above clauses which reflect Halliday's (1985) material process is made up of the verbs 'build', 'rear', 'buy', and 'start'. These

verbs construct him as an actor. Through his efforts, he succeeded in acquiring a lot of wealth thereby transforming his economic status and he enjoyed a relatively comfortable life. The verbs also construct his identity as a rich man. The implication of this construction is that he had a good income from his various businesses and was enjoying.

The third subject Mesa in his narrative also employed verbs that displayed material processes as follows:

6. ... *nare kobaakaneraabana be esukuru batare kwenyara*

... I used to pay for them children of school were not able

... [I used to pay school fees for poor students]

7. ... *abarwaire naborobwo nare kobakonya goakana chibesa chia okorwarigwa*

... the sick also them I was them help pay money for to be treated

... [I also assisted the sick to pay their medical bills]

The use of the verb 'pay' in examples 4 and 5 is a material construction of Mesa's actions. This verb constructs Mesa as an active individual who assisted the less fortunate in his community. He constructs his own identity prior to bewitchment as a philanthropist, and in essence a generous and honorable person who takes his civic duties very seriously. His worldview includes active participation in the communal life of the members of the community. This is in line with the communal base of the Gusii nation. Furthermore, he is underscoring his own personal attitude towards those values that were now subsumed under western cultural institutions. He believes in education, hence he invested his personal wealth in making sure that members of his community who could not afford formal education obtained it. He also paid the medical bills of those who were less fortunate and in need of treatment. In all of these, he marks himself as wealthy enough to be philanthropic as well as vested in the advancement of his own people. His wealth, personality and life style would have made him a public figure and opened up to the envy of others. The active verbs unveil his social status and situate his

mental disposition in addition to indexing his worldview with respect to this relationship with others well before the bewitchment episode.

The narratives of the three subjects show them as actively constructing their own personal identities in relation to their interaction with others and in response to facts outside oneself (Appiah, 2007). The narrators presented a sequential story with logical connections between the different clauses.

The consciousness of the subjects as reflected in their stories is existentially practical, rather than abstract. We attribute to these reflective minds a perception that is clear, distinct, and certain, so we rely on them as pointing towards certitude. Essentially, what the experiencing subjects have cognized are intimately linked to their consciousness. Cognition, therefore, is only to be realized and accomplished in a subject. Thus, we take cognition to be an objective registration of certain experiences in addition to been the reality of the same. The next section looks at their representation during the bewitchment phase.

#### 4.2. Processes during Bewitchment and Identity Construction

The effects of witchcraft were felt during the bewitchment episode by the three subjects, each one of whom expressed it clearly during their narratives. This section from their stories unveils them as the *senser*, the *experiencer* who now materializes the mental states they occupied as the bewitched. Nyabo for instance expressed what happened to her during this period as follows:

8. ... *kera engaki nigo nareng  
kogwaamatemu na gosieka ...*

... every time so I was fail  
examinations and to come last

... [I failed examinations every time and  
took the last position]

Failing examinations and being ranked last in her cohort are expressions of the changes that had taken place in Nyabo's life. Earlier on, Nyabo had indicated that she topped her class in academics. The identity constructed here is not only of a failure, but of someone who has

become inept, made incapable by situations beyond her control, and consequently was no longer in charge of her own academic performance. Nyabo attributed this change to the effects of witchcraft which were beyond her control. Appeal to witchcraft unveils her personal disposition and worldview towards causality, just as it reveals her status as one now dispossessed by the will of others and robbed of personal initiatives. Apart from becoming a poor student, Nyabo's health also deteriorated. According to her:

9. ... *omobere one nigo ogenderere  
kogenda echii*

... body mine socontinued going  
deteriorating

... [my health kept on deteriorating]

In addition to the psychological estrangement which Nyabo was experiencing, there were physical manifestations in her body in the form of illness that incapacitated her and caused her to become dependent on others. The unexpected transformation indicates a change of status from healthy to infirm. Since she exhausted all avenues of help without any decipherable causes, she attributed both her ill health and her academic failures to witchcraft. The physical deterioration that she is experiencing constructs a sick identity that passivizes the narrator's agency. Eventually, Nyabo stopped attending school due to her ill health and her parents began taking her to hospitals in search of cure. She narrated:

10. *Nigo natigete kogendaesukuru  
nkairwanyagitari*

So I not more attend school I was taken  
hospital

[I could no longer school and was taken to  
hospital]

To be prevented from attending school and to be ferried from one hospital to the other, backgrounds Nyabo's agency which had been foregrounded earlier on in her narrative. Thus, this narrative unveils a construction of a weak identity where the narrator is no longer in charge of her actions. She could not go to hospital on her own and therefore had to be 'taken'. This physical invalidity is merely one of the outward manifestation of the handicap she now has become; she is intellectually

challenged and physically dependent on others to move her even as she seeks help, consequently, this state indexes her new weak status as well as her inability to play any active role in determining the course of her own life.

Different from Nyabo, Obiri used the verb 'fear' in a mental process that indicated his psychological status:

11. ... aria twaoboetenigo achagete kororekana...

... what we feared so started being seen

... [our fears were confirmed]

The fears referred to in the clause 11 above are to do with their success. This is a construction of a cowardice identity. Among the AbaGusii, however, the rich were not without fear because wizards could harm them as they were said to be jealous of the success of the rich. Obiri therefore feared because he believed in the negative effects of witchcraft. This fear also reflects his interaction with the supernatural. Soon after, Obiri was visited by a series of misfortunes which he attributed to the powers of witchcraft. His shops were destroyed by mysterious fire, he was involved in a car accident that claimed the life of his wife, he contracted a disease that defied treatment, and ultimately became financially bankrupt. He narrated:

12. ... omobere one ore gotengechigwakera engaki

... body mine was shaken every time

... [my body was always shaking]

Obiri used the verb 'shake' to depict a behavioral process that is a combination of a material process and mental process. Using this verb, Obiri constructed for himself an identity of a person who was no longer in control of his body. Similar to the narrator before him, there is a decimation of the body and the mind, which ultimately result in a financial disaster. Mesa used a mental process to construct how his whole body ached after he contracted a disease that defied treatment.

13. ... kera ekimo kia omobere nigo kiarekoroma

... every part of body so was aching

... [every body organ ached]

To 'ache' is a construction of the pain and suffering that Mesa went through in his illness. No doctor was able to treat it and it took a toll on Mesa's economic activities. Mesa's narration also indicated that he quit his job as a school principal shortly before he finally ran mad and became a raving lunatic. The behaviors displayed by such mad people who could be seen roaming in the village included walking about naked with unkempt hair, screaming indiscriminately, harassing students as they commute to school, and physically abusing people in addition to abusing his own herds of cattle and the cattle of others. Though he actively engaged in the said acts, Mesa narrated that he did not do them voluntarily, rather he had been dispossessed of his own rationality and was under the controlling influence of witchcraft. By doing so, Mesa distanced himself from the said acts therefore showing that he was forced to do them. Mesa employed a material process to construct his status and identity as a person who not only was possessed and but as someone who during the period of bewitchment was manipulated and compelled to irrational deeds. For those actions for which he was responsible, Mesa used the verb 'went':

14. ... nkaimokagochia ase omoragori...

... I stood to place witchdoctor

... [I visited a witchdoctor]

After conventional medicine failed to cure his illness, Mesa's friend advised him to seek the help of a witchdoctor. Among the AbaGusii, witchdoctors who are often called upon when apparent illnesses defy all medical intervention provide alternative curative services to their clients. It is believed that they are the only ones equipped to deal with such ailments that are due to witchcraft. Mesa constructed his identity as an active agent who visited the witchdoctor. This act also revealed his worldview, his interaction with causality and his attitude towards witchcraft. Overall, each of the three subjects unveiled their identity during the second phase, the period of bewitchment. They constructed themselves as individuals who were robbed of all rationality, who became the manipulated, and then were estranged from their usual self. They are during this phase, different persons, adorned

with a new identity. The next section is the post-bewitchment phase.

### 4.3. Post-Bewitchment Processes and Identity Construction

In this post-bewitchment phase, each of the narrators constructed in their stories various identities. Nyabo narrated that she finally returned to school. This was after her mother had violently forced the culprit witch to undo the harm she had done to her. Efforts to have her treated by a doctor at a local hospital had failed as the different diagnoses of the doctors did not detect any treatable diseases or ailments. Furthermore, the witch-doctor that they consulted was unable to accept Nyabo as a client because her family could not raise his fee. She narrated as follows:

15. ... nanyarete koba *nkoiranaesukuru na goeta amatemu...*

... I was able to be I went back school and pass examinations

[... I went back to school and excelled in my examinations]

Still employing a material process Nyabo now indicates that she once again began to do well in her examinations at different levels. 'Going back to school' and 'excelling' in the examinations construct an identity similar to the pre-bewitchment one. It is an identity of an active agent in control of her life. Regaining her former identity is a sign of having overcome her bewitchment and reclaiming her former identity, now that she is rid of every witch influence. Nyabo, in her story further narrated that she continued working hard such that she secured a place at a local university to pursue a higher degree:

16. ... *nanyaretekwenyoreraribaga ase eyunibasti*

... I was able to secure place in university

... [I secured a place at the university]

The pronoun 'i' indicates an active agent, the verbal phrase also points to a person who acts rather than acted upon. Clause 16 unveils the personal efforts and exertion of Nyabo realizing a set goal, in this case, gaining admission to a university. In the verbal clause Nyabo constructs a personal identity of an

intelligent, hardworking student whose efforts were no longer thwarted by the power of witchcraft.

Obiri's post-bewitchment identity was characterized by various uncertainties. He had lost his wife and wealth and was at the crossroads not knowing what to do next. According to him:

17. ... *amang'ana aya nigo amigete*

... events this so suffocated me

[... I was suffocated by these events]

The verb 'suffocate' is a mental construction that implicates a confused identity. Obiri had not overcome the effects of witchcraft in his life and therefore had not regained his former identity. He however remarried and was looking to turn a new leaf in his life.

Obiri also narrated that he 'advised' his children to persevere through difficulties and to be patient, especially to delay their return to school for another year, when he presumes he will be in a better position to support them:

18. ... *igo nabasemetie abanabane baremererie baka omwaka okobwatia*

... so i them advised children mine them persevere till year it next

[... i advised my children to persevere till the following year]

In the above example, Obiri used a verbal process, indexed by the verbal clause, to construct his identity as a parent, an elder and an advisor, thus showing reintegration into the community. This was necessary so that his children, who were definitely adversely affected during the bewitchment phase, could come to terms with what had happened. After the witchcraft episode, he had to devise ways of sustaining himself and his family. This is a mechanism for counteracting the effects of witchcraft. In essence, he depicts himself to be in the process of working out his own healing. This active effort is only possible since he is no longer possessed. Reflectively, Mesa narrated:

19. ... *obogima bwane bwa magega bogachaka koba endoto ne eistori*

... life mine of past it started to be a dream and history

[... my former life became a dream and history]

Sample phrase 19 evidences Mesa as having not reverted to, or reclaimed, his former self. He used a behavioral process through the verb 'dream' to construct an identity that is different from the initial one. The implication is that he may never regain his former identity, but he was willing to try.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Narratives that people construct about their lives can be informed by the way they see themselves at a specific time. Therefore, narrative is supposed to be looked at as life stories (Whitty, 2002). Narrative and self, therefore, are not independent because narratives are produced by experience and give structure to experience. Narrative is a kind of reality. Narratives are not only about people talking about their past experiences, but how they understand those experiences and by so doing, ascribing meaning to actions (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). In addition, they present their beliefs and values (Bastos & Oliveira, 2006). According to Ricento and Wiley (2005), identity is constructed, maintained and negotiated through language and discourse. There is therefore interplay between language, narrative and identity (Weldeyesus, 2007).

The present tense verb according to Halliday (1994) states facts, refers to habitual actions, and discusses the speaker's own ideas on an issue; it can also be used for dramatic effect, especially when a past event is narrated as if it were ongoing. In the various sample utterances (1-19) we find instances of the use of present tense verb to state facts, and reveal speakers' positionality on their circumstances. Past tense verb narrates events in reference to the speaker's view of the development of ideas over time. Future tense suggests an intended voluntary action to be carried out by the speaker

The concept and framework of Halliday (1985) on transitivity constructions exemplify the behavior and social function of members in discourse, as well as the relationships and influences enacted between them. The

relationship between the speakers, causality, their community and their interlocutors are made apparent across the narrative. For instance, the fact of witchcraft remains for each subject, indisputable, the reality of them being robbed of their previous enviable state was unquestionable, and the change that they experienced was all uncovered as they constructed their identities in reaction to these influences beyond their control and outside of the self. The various linguistic devices employed by each speaker were ultimately uncovered and helped us define the role of the different narrator either as a student, a parent, a bewitched, a successful business person, a principal, a philanthropist or in other instances, a failure, and a possessed and manipulated person. Furthermore, the variously presented utterances excerpted from their stories spanning the different phases not only show a systematic and strategic use of these processes, but also unveil how the speaker successfully persuaded and appealed to their hearers invoking imageries, meaning and understanding socially constructed and on which certain aspect of the organization of their world rests. The narrators chose different verbs that represented them as particular people who engaged in particular activities and related to people in characteristic ways. The stories ran across three phases: before, during and after a bewitchment episode. From the data analysis, it is evident that the narrators constructed a favorable identity before the bewitchment narrative. They lived considerably good lives and were doing well in their day to day activities. They met their basic needs, succeeded in careers and were enjoying good health. Their identity constructions were active and assertive, displaying that they were fully in control of their lives. They therefore foregrounded their productive characteristics. They did not report any serious challenge in their lives. The processes that featured mostly were material, relational, mental and behavioral. During the bewitchment episode, the narrators' assertiveness deteriorated and they therefore constructed passive identities. They employed verbs that presented them as passive and victimized individuals where people decided and did things for them. The narrators' lives were disrupted by what was believed to be witchcraft powers. They lost their mental, intellectual and physical capabilities. They

were no longer in charge of their lives which seemed disorganized. Their failures were attributed to the evil forces of witchcraft. The post-bewitchment phase represented narrators as witchcraft victims who were trying to overcome adversity and reinforce a more active, assertive self. They were on a journey to regain former identities. Only one narrator out of the three had managed to live a life similar to the former.

According to Hall (1997), the content of discourse is not whether things exist; rather, it is about where meanings come from. Narrative research is interested in understanding meaning that narrators attach to events rather than whether their narratives are an accurate reflection of real events (Chase, 2011). There is no doubt that the stories narrated by our three subjects, the content of their narrations, and their logical sequencing would attract dismissal from casual observers or those who seek scientific proof, however to the AbaGusii these are social facts. The number of witches already burnt in the first part of 2016 is over 10. To those whose lives ended in the hands of lynching mobs, the contents of these stories are not trivial. To those individuals currently defining themselves in terms of the activities of witches, the stakes are high and to the society at large, there is a pervasive fear. Wiredu (2009, p. 8) uses the term “category of thought” by which he meant the fundamental way that people employ to conceptualize experiences of the world and their own identity. From the above discussion, it is clear that while telling their stories, narrators often enacted a characteristic type of self and that their identities were dynamic. It is evident that witchcraft affected the way they constructed their identities. During the bewitchment episode, narrators displayed weak identities. Among the AbaGusii, anyone whose problems are believed to be caused by witchcraft is normally sympathized with. Witchcraft seems to be a readily available reason for an individual’s failures; notwithstanding that there could be other possible causes. This is because witchcraft is their reality.

## References

Appiah, K. A. (2007). *The ethics of identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Ashforth, A. (1996). Of secrecy and commonplace: Witchcraft in Soweto. *Social Research*, 63(4), 1183-234.
- Bauman, R. (1986). *Story, performance, and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Bastos, L.C., & Oliveira, M. C. L (2006). Identity and personal/institutional relations: people and tragedy in a health insurance customer service. In A. de Fina, D. Schiffrin, & M. Bamberg (Eds.), *Discourse and identity* (pp. 188 –212). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bruner, J. (2001). Self-making and world-making. In J. Brockmeier & D. Carbaugh (Eds.), *Narrative and identity: Studies in autobiography, self and culture* (pp. 25-37). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. (Eds.). (1993). *Modernity and its malcontents: Ritual and power in postcolonial Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chase, S. E. (2011). Narrative inquiry: Still a field in the making. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 421-434). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1994). Personal experience methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 413-427). London: Sage Publications.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1937). *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- Fowler, R., Hodge, B., Kress, G., & Trew, T. (1979). *Language and control*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Fowler, R. (1986). *Linguistic criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. NY: Harper and Row.
- Goodwin, M. H. (1982). Instigating: Storytelling as social process. *American Ethnologist*, 9, 799-816.
- Hall, S. (1997). *The work of representation in representation: Cultural representation*

- and signifying practices*. London: Sage Publications.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Harvey, D. (1996). *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hymes, D. H. (1962). The ethnography of speaking. In T. Gladwin & W. C. Sturtevant (Eds.), *Anthropology and human behavior* (pp. 13–53). Washington, DC: Anthropological Society of Washington.
- Hymes, D. H. (1964). Introduction: Toward ethnographies of communication. *American Anthropologist*, 66, 1–34.
- Kardiner, A., & Preble, E. (1963). *They studied man*. New York: Mentor.
- MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the western Pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: G. Routledge & Sons.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2006). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Maseke, E. R. (2006). Witchcraft among the Gusii. In J. S. Akama & R. Maxon (Eds.), *Ethnography of the Gusii of Western Kenya: A vanishing cultural heritage* (pp. 317-330). New York: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- McAdams, D. P. (1996). Personality, modernity, and the storied self: A contemporary framework for studying persons. *Psychological Inquiry*, 7, 295-321.
- Mesaki, S. (2009). The tragedy of ageing: Witch killings and poor governance among the Sukuma. In L. Haram & C. B. Yamba (Eds.), *Dealing with uncertainty in contemporary African lives* (pp. 72-90). Stockholm: Nordin Africa Institute.
- Mishler, E. (2006). Narrative and identity: The double arrow of time. In A. De Fina, D. Schiffrin, & M. Bamberg, (Eds.), *Discourse and identity* (pp. 30-47). Cambridge: CUP.
- Moore, H. L., & Sanders, T. (2001). *Magical interpretations, material realities: Modernity, witchcraft and the occult in postcolonial Africa*. New York: Routledge.
- Ogembo, J. M. (2006). *Contemporary witch-hunting in Gusii, Southwestern Kenya*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Offiong, D. A. (1991). *Witchcraft, sorcery, magic and social order among the Ibibio of Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing.
- Ricento, T., & Wiley, T. G. (2005). Identity and education. *Journal of Language*, 4(1), 22-23.
- Sapir, E. (1929). The status of linguistics as a science. *Language*, 5(4), 207-214.
- Scheffelin, B. B., & Ochs, E. (1986). Language socialization. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 15, 163-246.
- Smith, B. (2007). The state of the art in narrative inquiry: Some reflections. *Narrative Inquiry*, 17(2), 391–398.
- Weldeyesus, W. M. (2007). Narrative and identity construction among Ethiopian immigrants. *Colorado Research in Linguistics*, 20(1), 1-10.
- Wiredu, K. (2009). An oral philosophy of personhood: Comments on philosophy and orality. *Research in African Literatures*, 40(1), 8-18.
- Whitty, M. (2002). Possible selves: An exploration of the utility of a narrative approach identity. *International Journal of Theory and Research*, 2(3), 211-228.