Tales, Tropes, and Transformations: The Performance of Gusaba no Gukwa in Rwanda

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This dissertation titled
Tales, Tropes, and Transformations: The Performance of Gusaba no Gukwa in Rwanda

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Abstract

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Tales, Tropes, and Transformations: The Performance of Gusaba no Gukwa in Rwanda

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Using methods from communication studies, performance studies, and anthropology to craft an ethnographic portrait of *gusaba no gukwa*, I explored the significance of *gusaba no gukwa* wedding ceremonies. I used an integrated qualitative research design that combines participant observation, in-depth interviews, and rhetorical analysis of themes, tropes, and forms. I attended thirty wedding ceremonies, thirteen of which were *gusaba no gukwa* ceremonies, conducted formal interviews with three wedding speakers, three married couples, a retired Methodist minister, a Kigali business woman, and I had numerous informal conversations with Rwandans about weddings.

Through my exploration of the rhetorical performance of wedding speakers, who present an oral battle of wits designed to challenge and test the groom’s family and their ability to remain cool under pressure and the tropes or ritual practices associated with key symbols of beer, cows, and milk, I demonstrate how strong ties of friendship and family are achieved through powerful communicative acts that present daily reminders of social bonds. In the Rwandan context, *gusaba no gukwa* transforms youth into adults, creates bonds between families, and unifies communities, while simultaneously transforming a single story of Rwanda’s genocide into many stories about Rwandese creativity, resilience, and joy.
Preface

Looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them, nor drowning them in a vat of theory, that is what anthropology is all about…it is the office of others to reassure, it is ours to unsettle.¹

There is a Rwandan proverb: *injunga y’urulimi inesha injunga zigitero*, which roughly translated means the sharp tongue achieves victory over the warrior. This proverb speaks loudly to who I am and what I do. Teaching freshman composition for 18 years and recently adding public speaking to my repertoire, I teach students about the power of words. I am fascinated with the strategic use of language. In my discipline, J.L. Austin gets credit for the concept of “doing things with words” but the power of words can be found in many examples prior to his drawing our attention to the fact that words do things rather than just tell about things. Particularly spoken words. In *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias asserts, “Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works.”² Plato’s notion of “winged words,” and the Egyptian Ptah Hotep’s advice to his son about “fair speech” are just a few of the many historical testaments to the power of the spoken word.

But for me, the works about African oral arts were where I first discovered the power of words to do things. In the 1980s I moved with my parents to South Africa. At that time, I was much like the American students who, as described by Nigerian author, Chimimanda Adichie, only know “one story” about Africa.³ My studies at the University

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³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story* (TEDGlobal, July 2009)
of the Witwatersrand quickly facilitated an expansive change in my thinking. Oblivious to my surroundings, I got tear-gassed on the way to my first biology mid-term exam as police broke up an anti-Apartheid demonstration on campus. What a powerful wake-up call! Vigorous debates about colonial critiques such as Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *The River Between*, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* ensued. I learned humbling lessons about western arrogance reading and discussing Camara Laye’s surreal *Radiance of the King* and Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*. I stayed for six years.

Now teaching Chinua Achebe’s novels to American students, I developed renewed fascination with the way his subtle words trouble readers, staying with them like a dripping faucet. Reading Ruth Finnegan’s work among the Limba in Sierra Leone demonstrating the performative aspect of words, and discovering Harold Scheub’s use of rich metaphors such as “tongue of fire” and “uncoiling python” to talk about story-telling during colonization and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, where spoken words instilled strength and resistance in the hearts of people, refreshed my interest in the performative power of words.

On my first and subsequent trips to Rwanda, I discovered that many Rwandans have a love for public speaking. We attended *Kwitizina*, the annual gorilla naming ceremony where all the baby gorillas born the previous year are given names. Speeches by various community officials culminate in speeches offered by each namer. Sometimes as many as fifteen gorillas are named at this special event. But even the most mundane everyday activity can be endowed with a ceremonial moment through a speech as

evidenced by the speech a university professor gave as he rose to exit our tour bus. He silenced a bunch of chatty English teachers momentarily as he expressed his joy at our decision to visit Rwanda, his appreciation of meeting us, his thanks for the lift we gave him, and his best wishes for the remainder of our trip. On another occasion, I watched in disbelief as a teenager managed to silence a group of rowdy orphan boys, former street kids as he rose to give a speech of welcome to us, suddenly you could have heard a pin drop in that cafeteria. I was thinking at the time, such a thing could never happen in a lunch room in America! And during a subsequent trip to Rwanda, I attended a good-bye party for a young man who was departing for Malyasia to pursue a course of study. We had been listening to music, dancing, and drinking for hours when suddenly the entire demeanor of the room transformed when someone suggested we give speeches.

Given my focus on “sharp tongues” of Rwanda, African oral arts, and rhetoric, my choices about writing have been a series of deliberate moves. The crisis of representation in Anthropology caused us to turn away from definitive grand narratives about cultural performance and the performance of culture. Rather, all we can aim for are fragmentary representations. I resist conclusive interpretation in my writing for two reasons. First, because I make no claim to be writing some grand narrative about *gusaba no gukwa*, I embrace the uncertainty. Second, I write to decenter my voice, to write with less authority. I prefer to center the Rwandan voices, to recursively rely on what Roger Sanjek refers to as moving away from “privileged recorder, salvager, and interpreter of cultural data” toward a “more polyphonic final ethnography.”

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foreground the “doing things with words”, the rhetorical performances of the wedding speakers, the words they combine in creative, formulaic, and yet spontaneous ways.

I arrived in Rwanda to do my dissertation research at the end of August 2012 and stayed until mid-February, 2013. Most popular literature and academic publications focus on the 1994 Rwandan genocide as though it were the only story about Rwanda. Through my dissertation, I present a different story about Rwanda, focusing on the creative use of language, oral arts, and performance during Rwandan wedding ceremonies known as *gusaba no gukwa*. Roughly translated that means “the introduction and the dowry.” During the ceremony, a speaker selected to represent the bride's side and a speaker selected to represent the groom's side engage in a playful battle of words and wits, men dressed as cow herders recite poetry praising the cows, and singers offer advice to the bride and groom. Using a combination of participant observation, interviews, and rhetorical analysis, I explore Rwandese rhetoric in the context of *gusaba no gukwa* as creative symbolic processes.

My contributions to communication scholarship are in three primary areas. First, my dissertation helps to fill the lacuna relating to communication in Africa. The NCA Black Caucus laments the gap that exists with regards to scholarship about African American communication, and a similar gap exists with regards to communication scholarship in Africa, by Africans, and about Africans. So here I offer a glimpse into communication practiced in Rwanda in the context of wedding ceremonies. Rwandese wedding ceremonies are culturally significant oral performances and as such they are a manifestation of communication, which as James Carey asserts, is a “symbolic process
whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed.”

Ritual practices performed during wedding ceremonies are equally important aspects of communication as Catherine Bell suggests: “the style of doing” endows a message with extra significance. If we in America call ourselves scholars of human communication, we must expand our knowledge with more scholarly work devoted to the study of communication across the world, especially in Africa. On an ethnographic level, I offer one story about my experiences in Rwanda. Dwight Conquergood identifies two kinds of knowledge: “official, objective and abstract – the map” and “practical, embodied, and popular – the story.” Performances of gusaba no gukwa present both types of knowledge because they simultaneously combine scripted performance with open space for spontaneous creativity. Sanjek suggests whether “writing down, writing over, or writing up, the work of ethnography is collaborative, intertextual, and rhetorical.”

Gusaba no gukwa is rhetorical because of the strategic use of language and performance because of the creative, dramatic, performative nature of the ceremony. Ultimately, I see my primary contribution in the fairly unique paring of rhetoric and performance. The wedding speakers’ rhetorical performances help to mediate the changes marriage brings and restore equilibrium among the community members. In the following pages, I explore the rhetorical performances of the wedding speakers and their ritual performance of stories during gusaba no gukwa, and analyze how the performances communicate core cultural values as they build relationships between families.

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8 Sanjek, Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology, 68.
Dedication

To the other doctor in the house, my husband, Robert L. Lawson
and my sons, James and Michael for their love and support.
Acknowledgments

I wish to begin by acknowledging both Dr. Judith Yaross Lee and Dr. Devika Chawla for agreeing to serve as co-directors of my committee. I benefited immensely from their expertise, guidance, and support throughout this process. I must also thank my committee members, Dr. J.W. Smith for being a sounding-board when the ideas for my dissertation were in their infancy and Dr. Steve Howard, my dean’s representative, for inspiring me to dream about conducting research in Africa and for encouraging me to apply for a FLAS Fellowship to study isiZulu. To all of the faculty and my colleagues in the School of Communication Studies, thank you for being my home away from home and welcoming me into the Coms family.

I also want to acknowledge my colleagues at Shawnee State University for granting my sabbatical and offering support in countless other ways. My friends at the Clark Memorial Library helped me to locate every book, article, and DVD I asked for and found me office space to work in during the spring and summer of my sabbatical.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my Rwandan friends and colleagues, including Francis Kana at the Kigali Institute of Education for the many cups of tea over the years as we discussed literature, culture, and eventually, Rwandan wedding ceremonies, and the many helpful contacts that arose from our friendship. To my students and colleagues at Catholic Institute – Kabgayi, a heart-felt murakoze cyane! (thank you!) including Jean Baptiste Mbanza for his advice while I was in the field. From the wedding speakers who took me under their wings to share their speaking talents, to the wedding couples and their family members who welcomed me into their homes, and to my Kinyarwanda translators, Richard Niyibigira, Serge Gatsinzi, and Dieudonne Ndikumana, who
carefully, painstakingly translated my recordings, you were extremely vital to my success. I am forever grateful to Flo, for welcoming me into her home and introducing me to her ever widening circle of friends and acquaintances. If I could, I would name you all. *Mwese uko mungana nzahora mbazirikana. Ndabashimiye.*
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the summer of 2008, I joined a delegation of American English teachers who traveled to Rwanda as part of a People to People Ambassador educational tour. For several months prior to our departure, I scoured our local university and public libraries for imaginative literature written by Rwandans – novels, short stories, plays, or poetry. I had studied African Literature as an undergraduate student in South Africa and sought literature to provide insight into Rwanda’s people and culture. Unfortunately, I could find no creative writing. What I did find were hundreds of books and articles about the 1994 genocide. The genocide collections provided a gruesome picture of Rwanda and its people, supporting Achille Mbembe’s claim that “the grotesque and the obscene are two essential characteristics that identify postcolonial regimes of domination.”  

I did indeed experience pages upon pages of the “grotesque and the obscene” as I read about the events leading up to the horrific genocide, the traumatic genocide itself, and its painful aftermath. As a result of my reading, I expected to see broken and traumatized people whom Mbembe describes as people “robbed” of “vitality” through a process he calls “zombification.”  

Of course, I did not expect to see literal zombies walking around the city of Kigali, but I did expect to see evidence of trauma and broken spirits etched on their faces and reflected in the deportment of their bodies. This was the story of Rwanda that I gathered through my reading.

Instead, I found a land of rolling hills populated by lively, creative, resilient people eager to speak with strangers, abazungu. The story I gathered through my reading

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10 Ibid., 104.
11 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, The Danger of a Single Story.
reflects the lingering effects of being colonized which, according to Chawla and Rodriguez, “has predominantly been about the institutional and discursive imposition of various suspicions, anxieties, and fears on the bodies of others, especially those that are seen as inferior/Other.”\(^\text{12}\) If my story of Rwanda reflects the imposition of my anxieties and fears upon them, what might their stories of Westerners, of whites, reflect? During my first trip to Rwanda in 2008, it seemed wherever we walked or drove in our tour bus, we heard cries of “muzungu, muzungu.” The term muzungu invokes white skin, foreigner, money, and power in various degrees depending upon the context in which it is used. As I walk the streets of Kigali four years later, I hear cries of “muzungu, muzungu” less often; perhaps because people with white skin seem to be everywhere, so sightings of foreigners are more frequent and people have become used to seeing them. Or perhaps, in my case, it is because I preempt those cries with a greeting of my own in the local language of Kinyarwanda. Some people also know me by name, at least in the neighborhood where I have been staying for several months.

Nevertheless, I realize now that my white skin invokes outsider, muzungu status accompanied by class and cultural differences in the minds of Rwandans and I am shown only what they want me to see. Zora Neale Hurston explains, “The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle…he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song.”\(^\text{13}\) I offer a story fully aware that my white privilege, my Americanness, and the attendant wealth associated with it colors what I see, but I still feel


a powerful human connection that I seek to explore. Since that first trip in 2008, I have discovered a Rwandese proverb that states “pain stays in the heart; the face doesn’t show it,” which may suggest that everyday life is a manifestation of cultural performance. Proverbs offer insight into culture because they tend to be prescriptions or explanations for behavior, so that particular proverb reminds me that what I see on the surface as an outsider is only one perspective. Rwandans attribute proscriptions for behavior to proverbs because they say umuganî ntûvá ku busá (a proverb never comes as if from nowhere), which speaks to the idea that proverbs do not exist in a vacuum. Proverbs become special words because they are situated in particular contexts. I realize, of course, that there are other perspectives I do not have access to from mere observation. Participation and interviews work somewhat to alleviate this problem. Studying performance along with texts and transcripts, and performing when invited to do so, helps me to strive for what Dwight Conquergood calls a “rare hybridity…a commingling of analytical and artistic ways of knowing”¹⁴ in my writing. I acknowledge that my perspective of communication in Rwanda is dominated by Eurocentric frames and influenced by my understanding of rhetoric that emanates from European tradition. However, I seek some balance by privileging Rwandese voices and utilizing scholars from African countries to facilitate my interpretation and analysis. I do this in the spirit of broadening Western academia’s knowledge of communication and intellectualism within Africa, which, like the study of African American communication and

intellectualism within the USA, continues to occupy a marginalized position within the communication discipline.\textsuperscript{15}

During my first trip in 2008, after I had been there for ten days, the People to People group unexpectedly received a last minute invitation to attend \textit{Kwita Izina} (the naming ceremony) held by the Rwanda Office of Tourism and National Park (ORTPN), the predecessor of the Rwandan Development Board, to name all the gorillas born in the previous year. In fact, Jessie, our American delegation leader, was given the honor of naming one of the gorillas during the ceremony. The people selected to name the baby gorillas were escorted to a beehive-shaped grass hut where they dressed in ceremonial clothing before making their way single file on to the stage. Each namer proceeded to give a short speech, and then named a gorilla with a name selected from two or three choices provided by the park rangers. Some past naming notables were the President of Rwanda Paul Kagame, Columbus, Ohio zookeeper Jack Hanna, and American actress Natalie Portman. According to the \textit{Kwita Izina} organization website, the public naming ceremony was established in 2005 “to extend the much cherished secular Rwandan tradition of naming every new born baby to the Gorillas as well” as a means to celebrate and support gorilla conservation and tourism. Although publications highlight the fact that the gorilla naming ceremony is based on the Rwandan tradition of \textit{kwita izina} (naming children), there are few similarities other than the term used to designate the

ceremony and the fact that names are given. Oliver, one of the wedding speakers I interviewed, speculated that the human naming ceremony is done primarily to encourage the children to bond with the new baby, and to welcome and protect it.\textsuperscript{16} The gorilla naming ceremony ritual shares enough similarities with \textit{kwita izina} for human babies to personalize the baby gorillas for locals, helping to encourage them to protect the gorillas from poachers. But for the VIPs, it is all about money–tourist dollars. The decision to commercialize the naming ceremony appears to have succeeded as the government-backed RDB which oversees gorilla tourism brought in 9.6 million dollars in 2011.

Even though most of the three-hour naming ceremony was in the local language, \textit{Kinyarwanda}, which I could not understand at the time, I found myself captivated by two rhetorical features of the event: a rich cadence in the voices of the many speakers that day, and a playful engagement with the local audience, who unlike us (the VIPS – sitting in chairs under a tent), stood in a small, tightly roped off area in the direct heat of the June sun.

Even now, five years later, one speaker stands out in my mind. She was a tiny slip of a girl, who, we were informed, had won a local poetry contest. As she walked up to the microphone, dressed in a simple blue school dress, I wondered how such a small girl could walk with so much confidence. But as soon as she opened her mouth and the performance began, she became a powerful presence transformed by her voice, commanding the attention of thousands in the audience. Even though I could not

\textsuperscript{16} According to Oliver, one of the wedding speakers, on the 7th day after birth of a baby, children from the neighborhood are invited to the newborn’s home, given child-sized hoes to cultivate with, hold the baby as it is passed among them, and then write a name for the child in a book. A teacher told me that the children are given milk and asked to give a name for the baby. Ultimately, the father gives a name to the child.
understand a word she said, I found myself caught up in the moment. Later, I reflected on my *Kwita Izina* experience and contemplated the following questions: What is it about a live performance in a public space that communicates so much? How is it that mere words, symbols no less, are suddenly endowed with so much power? And, finally, why is it that we in the West, in academia, do not know about this other story of Rwanda?

Inspired by the above questions, during subsequent visits to Rwanda, I noticed occasions were frequently marked by ceremonial rhetorical performances. A speech of thanks from a university professor we gave a lift to on our tour bus suddenly transformed a chatty group of American teachers into a cohesive, responsive audience. A welcome speech given by the student Minister of Sport and Culture at an orphanage for street children transformed a rowdy bunch of boys into an audience whose gazes were transfixed on the tall lanky speaker. And a late-night goodbye party where music, drinks, and laughter had been flowing for hours abruptly became a solemn occasion for offering advice to the young man set to depart for Malaysia the next morning the moment someone suggested we give speeches.

My thoughts about how I might study this cultural emphasis on ceremonial rhetorical performance coincided with a Rwandese friend’s weekly updates on his wedding plans. I was intrigued by his descriptions of the rhetorical performances by special speakers he referred to as *abukwe bakuru* (*wedding speakers* for the groom’s side). Rwandese weddings offer an opportunity to explore live performance in semi-public spaces, and to examine the power of spoken words. I use the term *rhetorical* because creative language is used in a strategic way. *Rhetoric* used alone might limit readers to think of written or Greek rhetorical influence. However, by combining
rhetoric with performance, I hope to integrate my discussion of strategic use of language with creativity, music, and dance, all of which play a part in Rwandese wedding ceremonies. Ultimately, through my study of Rwandese weddings, I tell a story about Rwanda focused upon a series of carefully orchestrated rhetorical performances and ritual practices imbued with rhetorical significance that presents a different perspective about Rwandese people.

I delved into the rich performative tradition of Rwandese weddings, which include a series of ceremonies: gufata irembo (the engagement), gusaba no gukwa (the introduction and dowry), gutwikurura (bride’s introduction to new home), and kwinenga (the evaluation). These wedding ceremonies contain vestiges of primary orality as characterized by Walter Ong, as well as the incorporation of several features of secondary orality. My focus on the rhetorical performance within gusaba no gukwa illustrates the manner in which “ritual mediates thought and action.”¹⁷ I propose that these wedding ceremonies are culturally significant oral performances and as such they are a manifestation of communication, which as James Carey asserts, is a “symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed.”¹⁸ The ritual practices performed during the wedding ceremonies are equally important aspects of communication as Catherine Bell suggests: “the style of doing” endows a message with extra significance.¹⁹ Using a combination of participant observation, interviews, and rhetorical analysis, I explore Rwandese rhetorical performance in the context of gusaba

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¹⁷ Bell, Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice.
¹⁹ Catherine Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 166.
no gukwa as creative symbolic processes with the potential to create peace, unity, and transformation.

Weddings are celebrated community events in Rwanda. Cultural performance can be creative and transformative, a way of “reimagining and refashioning the world.” My focus on the performance of weddings will show how oral communication, especially through creative use of language, offers strength and cohesion within Rwandese families and communities.

To examine how oral communication offers strength and cohesion, it is helpful to view the performance of weddings as rite of passage rituals that create communitas, perhaps more fittingly defined as ubuntu. A rite of passage in the broadest terms is simply a transition from one social category to another. Rwandese wedding ceremonies, similar to wedding rituals across the world, are rites of passage because they mark the movement from childhood to adulthood. Arnold Van Gennep divides rites of passage into three phases: rites of separation that remove a person from a role, rites of transition that manage the in-between role stage, and rites of incorporation that move a person into a new role, all of which occur within Rwandese wedding ceremonies. Marriage, according to Van Gennep, introduces the most significant transition “because . . . it involves a change of family.” The gusaba no gukwa ceremony incorporates several rituals to facilitate the transition the bride makes from her birth family to her marriage family and to establish or strengthen bonds between the bride’s birth family and the groom’s family.

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22 Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, 116.
As to the question of whether to refer to Rwandese weddings as *rituals* or *ceremonies*, I use the term *ritual* not to denote something primitive, but rather to differentiate between what Victor Turner identified as “social transitions” while ceremonies are “associated with religious states.”²³ In other words, rituals are often transformative while ceremonies are often confirmatory. However, rituals can also be associated with religious events just as ceremonies can be associated with secular events. For example, a graduation ceremony can be classified as ritual because it marks the transformation from the state of being uneducated to being educated, but it is not typically considered a religious event. Similarly, Rwandese weddings are imbued with rituals marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, but they contain both religious and secular elements. As Turner explains, “performances of ritual are distinctive phases in the social process, whereby groups and individuals adjust to internal changes and adapt to their external environment.”²⁴ Because Rwandese weddings simultaneously confirm communal expectations of the new bride and groom and their families, Rwandese weddings may be considered both confirmatory ceremonies and transformative rituals. Rwandans have a similar distinction as evidenced by the use of the words *umugenzo* and *umuhango*. *Umugenzo* (plural: *imigenzo*) refers to ritual, custom or habit, and derives from the verb *kugenza* meaning to demonstrate or show.²⁵ However, the term *umuhango* (plural: *imihango*), comes from the verb *guhanga*, which

means to perform or create and is most often used to refer to a ceremony.²⁶ Maurice Bloch suggests that the term ritual is associated with religious beliefs while ceremonies are not, but he chooses to use the two terms interchangeably because he believes there is no difference between religion and politics.²⁷ Ultimately, Turner asserts that rituals take place within a ceremonial context, so I will use the term ceremony to refer to the communicative event in general and ritual to refer to specific actions that occur during the wedding ceremony.

Rwandese weddings may also be viewed as examples of communitas due to the bonding that is ritualized. Victor Turner characterizes communitas as powerful feelings of togetherness and belonging. Edith Turner coined the phrase “collective joy” to refer to these intense feelings that occur in special circumstances. Communitas is different from community because it occurs within a ritual context whereas community may refer to everyday life. Victor Turner noted, “communitas is a fact of everyone’s experience, yet it has almost never been regarded as a reputable or coherent object of study by social scientists.”²⁸ Even now, some 35 years after her husband made that observation, Edith Turner laments that communitas has not been taken up as a serious topic for scholarly study in anthropology but has been relegated to the realm of religious studies.²⁹ Part of the problem for researchers is that they “can only get a purchase on communitas when

they are right inside it.” My story of Rwandese wedding ceremonies acknowledges that there are times when I am “right inside it.” However, I must draw one important distinction between an aspect of communitas and what I experienced in Rwanda. The experience of “collective joy,” of social togetherness occurs during weddings; however, this may also occur in everyday life. In fact, social togetherness in the sense that both Victor and Edith Turner meant occurs within the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu, which is widespread in Rwanda, although it is referred to as Ubumuntu.

Ubuntu/Ubumuntu

A few years ago, I traveled 90 miles from my home to take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). After completing the test, I ate dinner with some friends from South Africa who attend the university where I took the test. When I attempted to leave, I discovered that my car battery was dead. Initially, I refused to believe that this was a problem that I could not fix on my own. After several unsuccessful attempts to start the car, the engine would not even turn over, so I decided to wait a bit and try again, which was nonsense since the car had been “waiting” for the past five hours!

My friends took a look around the campus and suggested that since there were many students with cars, surely one of them could help me get mine going. It took another thirty to forty minutes before I got up the courage to stop one of the students and ask for help. Americans, as a rule, do not like to ask for help. It made me feel inadequate. I waved the car to a stop and said, “If you are looking for a parking space, you can have mine if you will help me jump my battery.” The driver said, “I don’t have jumper cables,” and drove away. So the next time, I asked, “Do you have jumper cables?” But

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Edith Turner, Communitas, 8.
that did not get the results I hoped for as the driver simply said, “No,” and drove away.

The driver of the third car I approached ignored my gestures to roll down his window and nearly drove over my foot as he accelerated to get away from me. I am a forty-something white woman; what was he afraid of? Ultimately, after five unsuccessful attempts at asking for help with my dead battery, one of my South African friends phoned her Japanese friend who had a car and she came with jumper cables, advice for keeping the battery charged, and a pleasant smile.

“I am because you are; you are because I am.”

I tell this story to introduce the concept of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is an African Philosophy which is both ontological and epistemological. It describes both a state of being in the world and a way of behaving in the world. John Mbiti explains it best, “While Descartes stated, ‘I think, therefore I am’, the African stated, ‘I am, because you are; you are because I am.’”\(^{31}\)

My experience with the dead battery could have been anyone’s experience in any number of cities across America. It was difficult for me to ask for and receive help because “Americans are taught that they are separate persons responsible for their own stations in life and in command of their own destiny. They are independent [and] self-reliant.”\(^{32}\) Since American culture values independence and self-reliance, people who need help are often considered weak and inadequate. I have an image as a successful university professor. Owning a car with a dead battery does not fit that image. Clearly, I was reluctant to ask for help because I did not want to appear weak...

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or inadequate. And the people I asked for help dismissed me because they did not feel any social imperative to help a stranger. In contrast, many African cultures emphasize communal needs and interdependence. The Zulu in South Africa say, “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (A person becomes a person through people). Contextualized through the Ubuntu way of perceiving, the people I asked for help were under an obligation as a member of the human family to help. However, as soon as they declined to help, that diminished their status as humans.

The social imperative of the obligation to help varies from culture to culture. Anne Klein provides the following explanation to help us visualize this difference: “Japanese are said to see babies as overly individualistic and in need of training to become connected; in the United States, babies are seen as too connected and in need of training to become individuals.” From the ontological view of Ubuntu, there is a strong sense of “mutual indebtedness,” which creates an obligation to help. Social relationships are centered on roles and responsibilities one has toward another which are “critical for maintaining social order.” In Rwanda, the giving and receiving of help sits at the very core of society. I make this claim based upon my interviews with wedding speakers, wedding couples, and wedding guests, and my own observations made during my attendance at twenty-eight Rwandese wedding ceremonies and subsequent examination of the rhetorical features of the wedding speakers’ story-telling performances.

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35 Ibid.
In Rwanda, weddings consist of three distinct ceremonies: a civil ceremony 
(commune) sanctioned by the government, a religious ceremony sanctioned by a church 
(Catholicism or Protestantism is practiced by the majority of Rwandans), and 
“traditional” ceremonies known as gufata irembo, gusaba no gukwa, gutwikurura and 
kwinenga sanctioned by the community. These ceremonies involve dramatic 
performances that I liken to a verbal fencing match because there are many rules of 
engagement and formulaic aspects to the performances. A performance lasts up to three 
hours, during which permission to marry is symbolically enacted through the exchange of 
stories and other oral forms. Rites of separation followed by rites of incorporation 
highlight what Van Gennep characterizes as “essentially a social act.”36 The wedding 
speakers’ rhetorical performances help to mediate the changes and restore equilibrium. 
In the following pages, I explore the rhetorical performances of the wedding speakers and 
their ritual performance of stories during gusaba no gukwa, and analyze how the 
performances communicate core cultural values as they build relationships between 
families.

Oral arts are powerful communicative forms in their own right and should not be 
framed simply as a precursor to written communicative forms. “Speech is not merely 
communication,” according to Turner “but is also power and wisdom . . . . The wisdom 
(mana) that is imparted in sacred liminality is not just an aggregation of words and 
sentences: it has ontological value.”37 Just as Harold Scheub explores the way oral arts in 
South Africa pervade life, Barbara Hoffman shows with her work among griots in Mali,

36 Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, 117.
Transaction, 1995), 103.
and Ruth Finnegan exemplifies with her efforts among the Limba in northern Sierra Leone, I attempt to trace trends in Rwandan oral arts to reveal the communicative power that moves with the times and yet has withstood historical assaults to continue as a viable, important aspect of culture.

Despite renewed interest in oral arts as a viable field of study, Finnegan asserts that many times “oral” has simply become a replacement for “primitive.”38 I make no claim that what I observed manifests a “primitive” rhetorical performance. On the contrary, each performance is a complex process uniquely created and skilled in its delivery. Karen Barber stresses, “African textual forms of all kinds—oral, manuscript and print—make up a field with consonances and divergences, shared and disparate histories, echoes and singularities, which have never been adequately appreciated (emphasis mine).”39 To date, scant research has been published regarding oral arts in Rwanda, and little is accessible to enable English speakers to appreciate its vibrancy.40 It is significant to note that many elements of gusaba no gukwa existed prior to the 1994 genocide and have continued after it, but western scholarship has ignored this resilient aesthetic process of cultural continuity.

40 For instance, a search in Academic Search Complete reveals just 35 entries and a search of WorldCat reveals just sixteen books on the subject of Rwanda and oral tradition. Moreover, a majority of these were published in the 1980s or earlier, and focus on either oral history or oral poetry. Aloys Bigurwami Imihango N'imigenzo M'imizilirizo mu Rwanda (Gisenyi, Rwanda: Nyundo Dioscese, 1974) written in Kinyarwanda, contains a chapter about marriage; and Simon Ndekezi, Ubukwe Bw’abanyarwanda: Le Mariage Rwandais (Kigali: Imprimerie de Kigali, 1983), is a book about marriage customs based on interviews he conducted in 1980 and was originally published in Kinyarwanda and translated into French.
Specifically in the field of communication, there exists vast opportunity for study, as Cecil Blake observes: “Africa, both in its historical and contemporary contexts, has not featured prominently in rhetorical scholarship across the spectrum. . . . Africa, in terms of rhetorical scholarship remains the ‘dark continent.’”\(^4\) The narratives performed during *gusaba no gukwa* are worthy of study separate and apart from stories told in other contexts because they are told during a rite of passage that is distinct from everyday life; thus, they hold greater significance and rhetorical influence than stories told in and about everyday social contexts.

**Negotiations, Gift-Giving, Bridewealth, and Social Bonds**

The concept of a love match between a man and a woman as the primary reason for marriage is a relatively recent one largely conceived in Western Europe and North America. According to Stephanie Coontz, “In the eighteenth century, people began to adopt the radical new idea that love should be the most fundamental reason for marriage and that young people should be free to choose their marriage partners on the basis of love.”\(^4\) Prior to that, most societies around the world saw marriage as an important political and economic match. The focus of these marriages was not on personal satisfaction of individuals, but rather on “getting good in-laws and increasing one’s family labor force.”\(^4\) Marriage alliances converted “strangers into relatives” and “extended cooperative relations.”\(^4\) Eventually marriage also helped families to accumulate and consolidate wealth and resources. The institution of marriage also

\(^4\) Ibid., 5.
established rights of inheritance and the division of labor and power by gender and age “confirming men’s authority over women.” The rhetorical performances of Rwandese wedding ceremonies emphasize this focus on the needs and desires of the group as opposed to the needs and desires of the marriage couple.

Weddings are a significant rite of passage widely practiced across the globe. Worldwide, there are many variations among marriage customs. For example, some regions practice and sanction polygamy while others do not. While many regions conduct Christian ceremonies quite similar to those in the United States, some areas have continued to maintain wedding ceremonies markedly different from those practiced in mainstream USA. Some regions in Africa emphasize payment of bridewealth in the form of cattle exchange while others make do with cash or other valuable items, and some regions continue to engage in bride stealing and bride kidnapping. Thus, I have teased out some practices and beliefs which will help to contextualize my discussion of Rwandese wedding ceremonies. These practices are negotiations, gift-giving, bridewealth, and social bonds.

One practice fairly widespread in Africa involves negotiations between family members or their representatives. These negotiations rarely involve the direct participation of the bride or the groom. For example, during fieldwork collected in 1949 and 1953 among the TIV in Northern Nigeria, Laura Bohannan observed marriage negotiations conducted through a “marriage guardian,” usually the bride’s uncle, who negotiates the bridewealth because, as Bohannan suggests, the father is too close to his

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daughter and must honor obligations of kinship. Bridewealth, also known as dowry, acts as compensation for the family that loses a daughter. In South Africa, it is customary practice among amaZulu to select respected elders to speak for them. A girl will express interest in a boy by giving him a bead necklace, and then elders will go to the girl’s home to negotiate on the boy’s behalf. While the girl’s father is involved in the negotiations, his daughter is called to confirm her interest in the boy. If she does not indicate an interest, negotiations end. Similarly, among the Limba of northern Sierra Leone, a boy will offer a formal greeting to his perspective bride’s parents, thereby initiating a relationship, but the formal speeches made during the wedding ceremony to win over the hearts of the prospective in-laws and show respect are carried out by a friend of the groom. Swazi marriage ceremonies also make use of professional speakers to represent both the bride and the groom.

In Rwanda, the bride and groom do very little speaking, if any, during the gusaba no gukwa portion of the ceremony, and they do not even attend the gufata irembo. The mother and father of both the bride and the groom play a very low key role in the ceremonies. In fact, two marriage speakers I interviewed told me that in the past, the parents of the bride did not even attend the ceremony. Instead, all negotiations are handled through abakwe bakuru (wedding speakers). When prompted for a reason why fathers do not speak for their daughters or sons, one wedding speaker indicated that he did not know the reason for this. But the other wedding speaker told a legend about

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47 Lindokuhle Mnyandu, interview by the author, Athens, Ohio, February 9, 2012.
48 Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond*, 38.
50 Nomcebo Nkosi, interview with the author, Athens, Ohio, May 25, 2011.
Semuhanuka, the best liar you have ever heard. The story was about how Semuhanuka
tricked his son and managed to marry his son’s bride.

Semuhanuka, the story goes, escorted his son to a neighboring village where a
beautiful young woman lived. Along the way, he told his son to eat inyonza, a red
fruit which stained his son’s mouth red. He also told his son to eat a plant that was
known to make a man vomit. When they arrived in the neighboring village and
began marriage negotiations, Semuhanuka’s son vomited. When the people saw
that his mouth was red, they refused to allow their daughter to marry a sick man.
Semuhanuka confirmed their suspicions, telling them that his son had
tuberculosis. However, not to disappoint, he offered himself as a groom in his
son’s place. Semuhanuka married the daughter and they soon had a baby son.

Determined to take what he believed was rightfully his, Semuhanuka’s son
killed a rabbit and then snuck into the couple’s sleeping quarters one night. He
put some of the rabbit’s flesh around Semuhanuka’s mouth and on his chest.
Then he picked up the baby who was sleeping between his father and his wife and
replaced it with some of the flesh and bones of the dead rabbit.

When the wife awoke in the morning and could not find her baby, seeing
the flesh and blood in the bed and around her husband’s mouth and on his chest,
she shouted, “He has eaten our child!” Hearing her shouts, the neighbors came.
Seeing the flesh and blood in the bed and around Semuhanuka’s mouth and on his
chest, they determined that he had, in fact, eaten the child. They chased him out
of the house and beat him to death. At this point, Semuhanuka’s son approached
the wife, gave her back her child, and they were married.
The story demonstrates two important points. First, fathers cannot be trusted to let their sons marry. And secondly, umukwe muku (singular form – marriage speaker for the groom) possess great skill to extemporaneously summon a story to fit whatever context demands. In my case, it was to answer my question as to why the fathers do not speak for their sons or daughters at gusaba no gukwa.

Wedding ceremonies in Rwanda are often brought about by the bride and groom introducing each other to their respective parents and close family members. If family members approve their son or daughter’s choice, formal negotiations will commence. Such negotiations often involve beer. The drinking of beer is a significant symbolic element because many important negotiations involve the offering of beer. Beer brings messages, beer builds bonds, and in fact, many Rwandese have indicated that the absence of beer is a significant statement as well. A visit to someone’s home should result in the offer of beer (or milk for women and children or Fanta in the case of religious abstinence from alcohol). It is customary in Tanzania among the people in Machame to offer gifts of beer on three separate occasions when negotiating a marriage. Stambach conducted fieldwork over six years beginning with language study in the summer of 1990, culminating in an extended stay of 18 months near Mt. Kilimanjaro from 1991 to 1993, followed up by a return visit in October of 1996. She explains that the banana from which beer is made is a staple in the diet of the people of Machame and the production and consumption of banana beer is symbolic of the peoples’ ties to the land and inheritance practices. Similar importance is accredited to banana and sorghum beer among the Rwandese. During gusaba no gukwa, these negotiations and gift-giving involving beer

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51 Amy Stambach, Lessons Learned from Mount Kilimanjaro: Schooling, Community and Gender in East Africa (New York: Routledge, 2000), 65.
are performed. More detailed discussion of negotiations and gift-giving practices follow in Chapters three and four.

Another marriage practice common to several regions involves the giving of bridewealth. Bridewealth has been likened to a dowry, although in most cases *dowry* implies something a wife brings into the marriage rather than something that is given to the parents of the bride. Others have interpreted bridewealth as *bride price* which implies the purchase of a wife. This is a limited characterization of the custom, as Hilda Kuper explains with regards to the Swazi custom of bridewealth, “It is clear that a woman is not regarded as a commodity by the people involved,” she observes. “On the contrary, she is a valued member of the community, and her past status and future security are symbolized in the transaction.”

Like the Swazis, Rwandans see bridewealth as an expression of female value; my sense after attending several ceremonies echoes that of Kuper’s that brides are valued community members, as evidenced by several rituals but none more so than those rituals that demonstrate their concern for her well-being as she transitions to the groom’s family. However, I also saw some instances wherein money was offered in lieu of cows, a substitution that does alter the nature of the transaction and may very well reinforce perceptions of brides as commodities to be purchased.

Maurice Bloch suggests that the ritual giving of bridewealth helps to restore balance which has been upset by the groom’s group when they take the bride. He explains, “Except in the case of systems with direct exchange, it is an asymmetrical transaction in the short term and therefore introduces an element of hierarchy conflicting

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with equality.”"53 In agrarian-based societies, the number of children significantly offsets the need for help with the cultivation of crops and the raising of cattle. In its most basic sense, the groom’s group gains a laborer, while the bride’s group loses a laborer and all her future offspring. Such an imbalance creates tension, which the ritual of offering cows to the bride’s family helps to eliminate. The giving of a cow is not just an offering of a valuable commodity; rather, it is a gift that is reserved for special occasions and special friends. The giving and receiving of a cow implies a social bond. The social bond created by the bridewealth cow given in Rwandese marriage ceremonies deepens when, as is customary, the bride’s family gives the first-born calf to the married couple.

Ultimately, such negotiation and gift giving practices serve to emphasize that marriage is a union between families as much or more than a union between husband and wife. The focus on uniting families can be found in many regions in Africa. According to Kuper, “Swazi marriage is essentially a linking of two families rather than of two individuals.”54 This attitude is exemplified by the Luo of Kenya who refer to their marriage partners as, “our enemies, we marry them.”55 The communication of this social bond during gusaba no gukwa is the focus of my study. Hartley elaborates, “Marriage was traditionally oriented toward establishing alliances between families,” alliances that centered upon the vital need for access to land in the largely rural areas of Rwanda.56 Although in the past, women did not own or inherit land, they had a crucial role to play in producing offspring who could work the land. Much of the ritual and rhetoric displayed

at *gusaba no gukwa* reflect this historical dependence upon land and the importance of establishing alliances between families. I explore how *gusaba no gukwa* establishes alliances between families and communicates cultural values which help to reinforce such alliances.

As a consequence of my fieldwork, observations, and experience, I propose that the rhetorical performances offer three significant ways of cementing alliances. First, through the verbal display of the wedding speakers, audience members witness a test of wit, showing that the groom not only comes from a family that can think its way out of a problem creatively, but also that the bride is being given to a family that is talented and patient. The *Kinyarwanda* phrase *abanya musozi igifura* refers to people who are quick to anger and do not possess the oral skills to work their way out of a problem. Knowing how to use one’s wit to converse—possessing the ability to enter a conversation at the appropriate point, to respond carefully to challenges, and artfully introduce a new topic—are some of the abilities which are tested during *gusaba no gukwa*. The rhetorical performances during *gusaba no gukwa* produce and maintain these cultural values.

Second, through the stories that are told and the symbolic meaning of the rituals, discussion and confirmation of important cultural values occurs. The rhetorical performances of the wedding speakers operate as a creative mode for creating and reinforcing social bonds of unity. Patience, honesty, generosity, and the importance of keeping one’s word are communicated through the performances and the narratives embedded within. For example, Oliver, one wedding speaker I interviewed, used the term *friendship* to label the social bond that is created between the families of the bride and groom. He quoted a Rwandese proverb “*Inshuti nyanshuti muragendana ntigusige*
murasangira intigucure, wagira ikibazo ikagutabara, inshuti nkiyo murarambana’”
(When you are working together a friend never leaves you behind, when you share he
never finishes before you, when you have a problem, he helps you. With such a friend
you live together forever.) He also explained that in the past, the groom’s family would
walk to the home of the bride’s family, bringing large calabashes of beer to offer the
bride’s family. However, it was expected that they arrive with the calabashes half empty
because they must share the beer with people along the way to show that they are
generous. Sharing along the way would also serve to establish social bonds with people,
even those who did not attend the wedding. With the advent of cars to transport the
groom’s family to the home of the bride’s family and the health concerns over sharing
drinks from a single straw in a calabash of homemade beer, this particular custom has
fallen away. People at the wedding now receive individual bottles of store-bought beer
and people along the way do not interact with the groom’s family in any way. When
asked what if any tradition was added to replace this, Oliver responded that people might
make a toast during the ceremony. However, a toast would not extend beyond the
boundaries of the ceremony to community members as the custom did in the past.

This example illustrates the manner in which gusaba no gukwa is an event that
entails action. While Scheub suggests, “The oral tradition is never simply a spoken art: it
is an enactment, an event, a ritual, a set of symbols, a performance,” 57 J.L. Austin notes
words possess “illocutionary” and “performative force” thereby acknowledging
relationships and formally undertaking social commitments, and ultimately performing

57 Harold Scheub, The Tongue is Fire: South African Storytellers and Apartheid (Madison:
University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 126.
action beyond merely “saying” something. A simple greeting invokes a social bond as does uttering the words “I accept” with regards to an apology or the giving of a gift. The words spoken, largely by the wedding speakers, at Rwandese wedding ceremonies create and reinforce strong social bonds.

Finally, the ritual exchanges set up tangible, visible, enduring reminders of the social bonds created and reinforced through Rwandese weddings. Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz alludes to the bond that intercultural weddings in America create when they combine elements from the bride and groom’s cultures. But the social bond formed at gusaba no gukwa goes deeper and manifests itself in more ways. Oliver, a wedding speaker, identified six types of social bonds that were important in the past. Marriage was one of them, but interestingly enough, marriage ranked below the bond between king and subject, blood brothers, and gift of cows. The kingdom was outlawed in 1959, and the practice of blood brothers, which involved cutting a place on the belly and consuming one another’s blood, has been discouraged as a result of the proliferation of HIV/AIDS. Thus, gifting of cows, marriage, and soldier bonds are the remaining three out of six, according to Oliver. Gifting of cows occurs during marriage but can also occur on other occasions. For example, a close friend can give cows to his friend’s daughters. However, because fewer and fewer Rwandese live in areas where they can keep cows, the practice of cow-giving is fading away. This leaves marriage as one of the few remaining

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59 Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond*, 41. See Christopher Taylor, *Milk, Honey, and Money: Changing Concepts in Rwandan Healing* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1992) for an extensive comparison between a commodity economy such as we have in the USA and what he labels a gift economy in Rwanda.
practices for cementing social bonds. How deep and how strong this bond goes will become clearer as I delve deeper into my analysis.

Description of Wedding Ceremonies

I assemble the structural descriptions that follow based largely upon my participation in twenty-eight wedding events. I foreground description and reflection on my participation “in the thick of things.” 61 Richard Schechner explains that performances differ one from another because “fixed bits of behavior” can be arranged in infinite variations, and because the particular event and context creates a distinct performance.62 Some of the details may be unique variations that can be ascribed to a particular event, while others are more clearly identifiable patterns that I found repeated in several Rwandan weddings that I attended. The structural descriptions provide an introduction to the wedding ceremonies I will discuss. More detailed description, discussion, and analysis follow in subsequent chapters.

I observed the wedding speakers participate in four different phases of Rwandese wedding ceremonies: gufata irembo, gusaba no gukwa, gutwikurura, and kwinenga. The first three are listed following the chronological order in which they occur. Typically, gufata irembo occurs days, weeks, or even years before gusaba no gukwa. While the amount of time that passes between each ceremony differs widely, the order, for the most part, follows the same recurring pattern. The exception is the fourth phase, kwinenga, which should follow immediately upon the completion of each performance of gufata irembo and gusaba no gukwa, as well as after the reception to the church wedding.

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**Gufata Irembo (the engagement)**

The first phase, known as *gufata irembo*, loosely translated means to “take the gate.” This ceremony signifies the private introduction of the groom’s request for the bride to her family. Taking the gate entails first gaining permission to enter. This simple function is not as easy as it sounds. Although the planning of a wedding ceremony already indicates that the marriage will take place, in the performance of the ceremony, the groom’s family must first gain entry before they can introduce the reason for their arrival. Once they have been granted permission to enter the premises, they must cleverly wait for an appropriate opening in the conversation to introduce the fact that they have come to ask for a certain bride.

Oliver, one of the wedding speakers, referred to *gufata irembo* as “the booking.” When pressed for an explanation, he explained that the groom’s representatives were booking the bride. His choice of words reflects the patriarchal emphasis upon selecting the bride and reserving her for marriage. Men do the asking, women do not. I did hear of a case where a mother unofficially asked a young man to consider marrying her daughter, but he refused. I liken *gufata irembo* to a betrothal. Coontz notes that in ancient Greece, *betrothal* marked the transfer of authority over the woman from her father to her husband. I book a ticket for a bus or airline, and my name is formally entered on the passenger manifest. Even if I book a friend for a lunch date, I still formalize the appointment by making a note on my calendar. Thus, when the wedding speaker refers

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64 Coontz, *Marriage, A History*, 75-76.
to *gufata irembo* as “the booking,” he suggests that once this ceremony has taken place, the couple is considered engaged and no other man should be allowed to enter the gate, implying no other man can pursue this woman. Of course, after this ceremony, the groom is for all intents and purposes considered engaged too.

I might also use the term *engagement* as a synonym for what is signified by this phase. Nsanzabaganwa Straton, from the Rwanda Academy of Language and Culture, explains that “no marriage preparations can go on before this step.” During *gufata irembo*, the groom’s representatives make known to the bride’s representatives the name of the woman they wish to make a bride, and if their request is approved, the woman becomes engaged to the groom.

At this point, I provide a general description of the structure of each of the wedding phases. During my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, I attended three *gufata amarembo*. On all three occasions, I participated as a member of the bride’s representatives, and I make the following three generalizations about the structure of the event. First, *gufata irembo* is held at the home of the bride’s parents, or in the absence of parents, an older male family member such as a brother or an uncle. The bride’s representatives arrive before the groom’s representatives and are instructed to sit in a specific area, leaving particular seats grouped together near the door open for the groom’s representatives. The groom’s representatives enter the home together in a solemn procession. At all three that I attended, the wedding speakers sat opposite one another, behind small tables upon which drinks were placed. The physical separation of the two groups was maintained throughout the ceremony with the exception of the greeting when

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*Amarembo* is the plural form of *irembo*.
the two speakers met in the middle of the room to shake hands and share a drink and at the end, when the bride’s representatives escorted the groom’s representatives to the gate.

Second, specific dress requirements are observed. Married women wear *umushanana* or African print dresses, and married men wear suits and ties. Unmarried youth tend to dress more informally in slacks and shirts or blue jeans. Agorsah asserts that wearing traditional dress at weddings denotes “a good future and happy celebration for the alliance of the families.” However, I suggest *umushanana* is an integral part of the ritual itself. I did not observe women wearing *umushanana* in their daily lives, at home, work, or school. But I did see women wearing *umushanana* at all phases of the wedding ceremonies, at Sunday worship services, baby baptism ceremonies, and other special occasions.

Third, the composition of the groups representing the bride and groom adheres to specific patterns. The groom’s group tends to be fairly small, anywhere from four to ten people, while the bride’s group tends to be larger. At the very least, there should be a male relative of the groom, a male family friend, and a man designated to speak for the groom and his family. According to Ndekezi, the person designated to speak for the groom’s family must be “worthy, experienced, full of wisdom and tact.” Two female relatives (one older and one younger) also numbered among the groom’s group in two of the three ceremonies I attended. While I was told it is taboo for the groom or bride to be present at *gufata irembo*, the bride might be lingering in a back room, listening to the

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66 *Youth* can refer to any unmarried people and is typically used to refer to 15-30-year-olds. The legal age for marriage in Rwanda is 21; however, many young men wait until they are in their 30s and many women are 25 or 26 when they marry.


proceedings. I saw the bride at one gufata irembo walk past the doorway. When I asked about her presence, I was told it was okay because the groom’s representatives did not know what she looked like. While the parents of the bride were present at two of the ceremonies, I never saw the parents of the groom at gufata irembo. Some Rwandans told me it is taboo for the groom’s parents to attend. Didier, in an interview conducted by Nakayima, explains that if the father comes, it will show that the groom’s family is anti-social because they do not have friends to send to represent them.69 Several family members, friends, and community members may attend to represent the bride. At one gufata irembo I attended, there were ten women representing the bride, including her mother, grandmother, several aunties, family friends, and neighbors.

Each gufata irembo I attended followed the same basic performance pattern. The guests were welcomed by the bride’s speaker, a prayer was said, and drinks were served. It is the responsibility of the groom’s speaker to explain the reason for their visit. It is he who must tell them the name of the bride they wish to have. In order to do this, he must offer another drink, for it is understood that alcohol (inzoga) paves the way for a message. The groom’s family demonstrated their request was serious and they have the capacity to provide for the bride through the gifts they bring. Gifts consisted of bottles of liquor, cases of beer and soda pop, an empty jerry can, a hoe, a cow, and/or cash.70 If their request is accepted, then the bride has been booked, the engagement is official, and a date for gusaba no gukwa is set.

70 I saw various combinations of these items offered as gifts at the gufata irembo I attended. The jerry can and hoe demonstrate the capacity to care for the cow, while the money may also represent the cow. More discussion on the symbolic importance of these various gifts follows in Chapter 4.
I was told that it is still possible for either family to change their minds at this point although I did not witness or hear of any broken engagements. One source indicated that another purpose of *gufata irembo* is for the groom’s representatives to determine how neat and tidy the bride’s family is.\(^{71}\) According to Martha Kayirebwa, after *gufata irembo*, the bride’s family conducts research to see if the groom comes from “an ill-mannered family involv[ing] theft, unfaithfulness or laziness.”\(^{72}\)

*Gusaba no Gukwa (Introduction and Dowry)*

*Gusaba* loosely translated means the *introduction*, whereby the groom and his family are introduced to the prospective bride’s family and friends. There are two additional meanings for *gusaba*, which are *to pray* and *to beg*. On occasion, I have heard the ceremony referred to as “the begging” ceremony as in “to beg for the bride,” so these other definitions may play a role in how the ceremony is understood. This is where the bulk of the story-telling occurs, whereby the groom’s family is challenged to demonstrate through the wedding speaker the family’s wit and patience. The structure of *gusaba no gukwa* can be divided into four segments signaled by the offering of *inzoga* (alcohol).

Welcoming the groom’s group dominates the first part of the ceremony. The bride’s speaker or the master of ceremonies (MC) usually informs them that they have interrupted another ceremony such as a birthday, baptism, or anniversary. He invites them to join the celebration and offers them a drink. What ensues next could be construed as “small talk” or “chit chat” because it centers upon topics such as their journey and the weather until the groom’s side offers the next drink, which when taken,

\(^{71}\) Nakayima, “*Gufata Irembo: The Traditional Engagement.*”

\(^{72}\) Ibid.
clears the way for them to ask for the bride. What happens next can be characterized as the heart of the rhetorical performance, as it is here where the bride’s side challenges the groom’s side through a series of denials of the specific bride they are asking for and through stories of accusations against the groom’s family. The groom’s side must respond creatively to these challenges until such time as the bride’s speaker relents and agrees to give them the bride.

Once they agree to give the bride to the groom, the groom’s family offers the third *inzoga* as a thank you gift. Detailed description and analysis of the *gusaba* portion of the ceremony follows in Chapter 3. At the end of this phase of the ceremony, agreement is made and *gukwa* commences.

*Gukwa* is most often translated as the payment of the dowry. This part involves negotiating the number of cows that will be given to the bride’s family. Often eight is the agreed upon number, yet in practice the groom gives only one cow or he gives the value of one cow in cash ($500-700). But the actual amount given can vary widely. One groom I knew gave approximately $1500 to his bride’s family. Sometimes this portion of the ceremony involves performances by cow herders praising the cows, songs praising the bride and lamenting her departure from the family, and traditional dancing. *Kurongora* occurs, whereby the bride makes her entrance; she and the groom join one another, the groom places the engagement ring upon her finger, and they are deemed married.\(^{73}\) Together they greet and give gifts to the groom’s speaker, his mother and father, then they greet the bride’s speaker, and give gifts to her parents. Often the bride and groom will drink a toast of champagne. Food and drinks are often served at this

\(^{73}\) A second ring, the wedding band, is given during the church wedding.
point in the ceremony. Sometimes the groom’s family will leave before food is served so that they can go share the good news with others who did not attend the ceremony. The final drink, offered by the bride’s side, cements the deal and signifies that the groom’s group may now leave to share the good news with the rest of the community. More detailed description and analysis of the *gukwa* portion of the ceremony can be found in Chapter 4.

I attended thirteen *gusaba no gukwa* ceremonies: two during brief, preliminary fieldwork trips in 2011 and eleven during my fieldwork in 2012-2013. All of the ceremonies I attended were held outside under tents (See Figure 1). As with *gufata irembo*, the bride’s parents host *gusaba no gukwa*. Most were held in the yard of the

Figure 1. Tent Arrangement at *Gusaba no Gukwa*. Photograph by the Author.
parents’ or male relative’s home; however, commercial sites for renting are available and three of the ceremonies I attended were held on these sites. The seats are arranged in rows in a square around a center stage area. One side is reserved for the bride’s group, the opposite side is reserved for the groom’s group, and a side connecting the two is reserved for the bride and groom and the bridal attendants (See Figure 2). The fourth side is often the front porch area of the house and may contain overflow seats, the disc jockey and his equipment, food for a buffet, or simply the entrance area for the bride.

![Figure 2. Foreground area for bride and groom and their attendants. Background area reserved for groom's group. Photograph by the author.](image)

The physical separation among audience members begun at gufata irembo is maintained. The bride’s family and friends are instructed to arrive before the groom’s family and friends and they are seated in a designated area. When the groom’s family and friends
arrive, they wait outside the gate until all have arrived and then enter in a procession to sit in rows facing the bride’s group. The groom and his attendants sit in the audience until the designated time in the ceremony where they present themselves to the bride’s group and take their seats in the bride and groom’s section. The bride remains sequestered inside the house for most of the ceremony. The wedding speakers sit front row and center of their respective sides, and each has a microphone.

Similar dress code is followed. Women, especially older, married women wear umushanana or elaborate African dresses embossed with gold trim and with headdress, while men are dressed in suit and tie. The bride and groom and the bridal attendants dress in themed clothing usually rented from one of many wedding planner shops. Sometimes the groom and his attendants wear the male equivalent of umushanana, or an Indian sherwani and turban to match the sari worn by the bride and her attendants, but the vast majority of brides wore umushanana and the grooms wore suits and ties at the ceremonies I attended.

Gutwikurura (The Unveiling)

I attended only two gutwikurura ceremonies. This is because only a small number of people are asked to participate in this very private ceremony. The word gutwikurura means “unveiling,” and the ceremony marks the reintroduction of the bride into the community after a period of seclusion within her new home with the groom and his family. In the past, this period might have lasted for months. According to Bigirumwami, this time of seclusion was to consummate the marriage and to help the
bride get used to her new husband and his family. Some people I talked with suggested this period was to ensure that the bride got pregnant. Bigirumwami also writes about a ritual preparation, during this period of seclusion, of *ubugali*, a dietary staple made with ground cassava and water, whereby the mother of the groom, the bride, and the groom prepare it together. Some people told me that when the bride and groom cut the cake and then pass pieces around during the reception, that is meant to symbolize the preparation and serving of *ubugali*. However, a period of seclusion rarely occurs these days. One woman told me it was not feasible since so many women work now and cannot afford to take time off work.

Currently, sometimes the church wedding, reception, and *gutwikurura* are held on the same day immediately after *gusaba no gukwa*. Other times a few weeks might transpire between *gusaba no gukwa* and the church wedding, reception, and *gutwikurura*. I witnessed two important rituals enacted during this ceremony. First, the bride’s family and friends arrive at the new home with gifts of food, household items, and agricultural tools to help establish the family. It is taboo for the parents of the bride to participate in *gutwikurura*. Second, a small group including the bride’s auntie, sister, and matron of honor and the groom’s speaker, uncle, brother, and best man go to the couple’s bedroom, where the bride’s hair is cut to symbolize her new status as a married woman and the couple drinks milk and shares it with a young boy and girl to symbolize fertility. Then the bride’s family leaves to join the rest of the bride’s family at another location, and the groom and his new wife celebrate with food, drink, and music.

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75 Ibid., 128.
**Kwinenga (Evaluation)**

The word *kwinenga* derives from the noun *inenga* which denotes a fault or stain. So in essence, *kwinenga* is the act of discussing faults that occurred during the preceding ceremonies. I heard it described as “the evaluation” or alternatively as “the debrief.”

The focus of the discussion centers upon the wedding speaker’s performance; however, sometimes other aspects of the ceremony are also evaluated. *Kwinenga* is held immediately following the ceremony. Each group holds its own *kwinenga*. For example, at *gusaba no gukwa* the bride’s family hosts the ceremony so the groom’s group will depart and convene at another location for their *kwinenga*, while the bride’s group will hold *kwinenga* at the same place as the *gusaba no gukwa*.

People wear whatever they wore to the ceremony immediately preceding *kwinenga*. There were no discernible seating arrangements at the ones I attended; however, it is important to note that the bride might join the evaluation of the bride’s speaker. The rules center upon the order in which comments are made, following a hierarchy based upon sex and age.

In the pages that follow, I combine my initial observations about structure with interpretive discussion and analysis of the performances enhanced with information gleaned through formal interviews conducted with three *abavuzi b’amagambo* (wedding speakers) and informal interviews and discussions with numerous Rwandans. In chapter two, I present an introduction to oral art as performed by wedding speakers. I introduce each of the three wedding speakers, Emmanuel Dusenge, Oliver Uwamahoro, and Jean Pierre Akimana and provide examples of their use of rhetorical features such as military

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76 All interviews were confidential; I have assigned the wedding speakers pseudonyms.
metaphors and allusions, metacommunication, silence, and kwinenga (evaluation). In chapter three, I describe the gusaba (introduction) part of the ceremony, focusing on the rite of passage, and the movement from trick ceremonies, to hindrances, to the co-constructed accusation stories, tracing how the rhetorical performances are not only transmitting culture but also constituting and transforming culture. Chapter four focuses on the gukwa (dowry) portion of the ceremony, and I tease out how dowry cows, beer, and milk and the attendant rituals surrounding them play an important symbolic role. I conclude in chapter five with a discussion of three levels of transformation, firstly that children are transformed into adults through gusaba no gukwa, secondly, that bonds are strengthened between friends, and finally, I explore my own transformation as scholar and participant.

In essence, my story constitutes an ethnographic portrait constructed based upon my fieldwork in Rwanda. Like a Cree hunter who, testifying in court was asked to tell the truth, I confess, “I’m not sure I can tell the truth…I can only tell what I know:”77 mine is not a complete story. Ethnographic representations remain “inherently partial…constructed truths made possible by powerful ‘lies’ of exclusion and rhetoric.”78 My story of Rwandese weddings is also complicated by the activity of studying culture. Culture is constantly changing. It is not a fixed entity. As Clifford explains, “Culture is contested, temporal and emergent. Representation and explanation—both by insiders and outsiders—is implicated in this emergence.”79 Despite the inherent limitations in writing about culture as an outsider and non-native speaker of Kinyarwanda, I am motivated to

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79 Ibid., 19.
tell my story, because as Bigirumwami asserts, “Rwandan cultural heritage is a rich
treasure and is an integral part of the development of our people.”

In the preface to the French version of Ndekezi’s important work on Rwandan marriage ceremonies,
Bigurumwami offers the proverb *Ntibimenya yavomye umugezi wa Ntibibuka*, which he
translates as "He who ignores the wealth he possesses does not care about his treasure." While I hope my story will sit alongside the work done by Rwandans before me and after me, I am acutely aware that my audience is primarily Western and it is to them that I tell this story.

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80 Ndekezi. *Ubukwe Bw’abanyarwanda*, 12.
81 Ndekezi. *Ubukwe Bw’abanyarwanda*, 11. One Rwandese man explained to me that *Ntibimenya*
was a story-character that people knew as someone who doesn’t know himself and who fetched water from *Ntibibuka* (who forgets everything) river.
Chapter 2: Oral Arts in the context of Rwandan *Imisango* (Rhetorical Performance) of *Abavuzi b’amagambo* (Wedding Speakers)

The West privileges written literature. If it is not picked up by one of the major publishing houses, we fall into the trap of believing it does not exist. As a result, an artificial binary often emerges with regards to oral and written rhetorical forms. When taken in the context of other discursive binaries historically associated with the continent of Africa, the split becomes ever more insidious. The binary discourse takes on an “us-them” view. The thinking goes something like this: we in the West are urban, industrial, and developed while they in the Rest are rural, agricultural, and underdeveloped. The resulting discourse that everything “we” are is good and everything “they” are is bad, profoundly affects the standard of representation we in the West project onto the scholarship we do about the African continent.82 Specifically, oral arts often get labeled as everything written literature is not. For example, in a collection entitled *African Literature: Overview and Bibliography*, Arlene A. Elder begins her chapter about English language fiction in East Africa with the following quotation from the 1976 publication, *Mazungumzo*: “Twenty years ago East Africa was considered a literary desert.” Elder’s chapter traces the influences of colonial and post-colonial education, foreign publishing houses, and pre and post-independence politics upon the development of English language writing in East Africa. Although she does mention the use of traditional songs and proverbs within novels written in English, coupled with her opening reference to a “literary desert,” her lack of acknowledgement that an oral tradition existed prior to and

influenced the development of writing in English inaccurately and unjustly implies a
dearth of creativity in the region. Her allusion to a “literary desert” harkens back to my
experience the first time I traveled to Rwanda. The “literary desert” I experienced when
searching for published imaginative writing led me to a misguided perception about
Rwanda.

Other collections do not even mention oral arts. Such approaches create the
illusion that written literature has no connection to oral arts. The problem, Hofmeyr
elucidates,

centers upon an analytical binary that oral literature and orality in general is
shaped by an analytic watershed which funnels thinking into two separated
domains: the one labeled oral, traditional, rural, and popular; the other written,
modern, urban, and elite. The ideas of the spoken and the written are in effect
yoked as ideological opposites, with orality often being projected as anything
which writing is not.83

On the surface, such divisions between the written and the oral might be perceived to
reflect useful distinctions for study. But they represent a false binary because written
literature and oral arts are intricately linked. Hofmeyr goes on to point out a “deleterious
consequence of the binary framework is to imagine orality as traditional and hence
static.”84 Failure to recognize the connection between written and oral literature can result
in the incorrect conceptualization of regions in Africa as “literary deserts.” Some
enlightened scholars recognize the symbiotic relationship between oral arts and written

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83 Isabel Hofmyer, “Not the Magic Talisman: Rethinking Oral Literature in South Africa,” World
literature or visualize a more dependent relationship in the way that Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o expresses it as “the literary fed on the living memory of the oral.” However, African oral arts, according to Finnegan, are “still only too often down-graded by outdated images of [their] 'traditional' nature, supposed simplicity, lack of individual creativity, or irrelevance for the modern world. It is strange that such views persist despite what is by now extensive writing on the subject.” My study of rhetorical performance at the Rwandan gusaba no gukwa ceremony shows the complexity and creativity of African aesthetics as well as the transformative potential of the oral performance event as it combines with past and present elements to communicate and create culture. This chapter examines the intersections between Rwandan oral art, rhetoric and performance primarily through a focus on the role of abavuzi b’amagambo (wedding speakers).

Oral arts continue to be marginalized in comparison to various forms of written literature as demonstrated by their lack of inclusion as a subject of study in most university literature departments even in Africa. Although some university literature departments such as the University of Nairobi in Kenya and Makerere University in Uganda wrestled with questions about the inclusion of oral arts back in the 1970s, when they advocated abolishing English Literature departments and replacing them with Literature departments standing African Literature at the center, the place of oral arts in the academy remains contested even now, in the 21st Century. In 2008, Deborah Seddon called for adding oral arts into the South African literary canon as the subject is not widely taught in university literature departments or anthologized with its performance

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aspect adequately contextualized. I experienced similar thinking when I approached the vice rector of a university in Rwanda about my research interests in studying oral arts. He suggested that there was no place for that kind of study in the literature and linguistics department at his institution and recommended that I speak to his colleague in the theatre arts at a neighboring institution.

The study of oral arts in the USA is often relegated to the field of folklore. Like oral arts, the term *folklore* is contested because it often implies that culture is static and unchanging or produced primarily by uneducated populations, or the term refers only to historic forms of expression in danger of disappearing. As folklore studies have declined, and we see the focus on historical speeches and popular culture in communication studies, conceptualizing oral arts as a viable field of study presents challenges for scholars.

When oral arts do happen to be included in literary scholarship, African literary criticism and cultural studies often limit scholarship on them to an examination as textual evidence for continuity in African aesthetics dating back to pre-literate periods, while other veins of study remain unexplored. Leif Lorentson argues the need for scholarly work to examine the literary qualities of African oral arts, measuring them by some of the same criteria we use to evaluate contemporary written literature. Pushing for an interdisciplinary perspective, Adeleke Adeeko recommends exploring oral arts as

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“historical data” or “studying stylistic variations over time with the aim of understanding how they reflect social changes.” How oral arts might reflect or even mobilize social change is significant because they stand as a method to challenge the hegemonic power of language and who possesses the power to speak. Ngugi notes the importance of oral arts to colonial resistance: “Not surprisingly it is the only tradition against which the colonial state often took firm measures, banning many of the songs and performances, and gaoling the artists involved.” Rwandese wedding ceremonies feature rhetorical performances by the wedding speakers. Their speaking performance, called imisango, emphasizes the influential role that words and word play achieve in the ceremony.

Terminological Minefield

Many terms exist to describe aspects of the gusaba no gukwa ceremony. I could use oral literature or orature to refer to the storytelling aspects of the performance. I could also use either verbal art or oral arts to include the performance aspects of the storytelling. My selection process amounts to a terminological minefield because the connotations associated with each term threaten to influence the reception and response to my analysis. According to the World Oral Literature Project sponsored by the University of Cambridge,

Oral literature is a broad term which may include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations, life histories or historical narratives.

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Most simply, *oral literature* refers to any form of verbal art which is transmitted orally or delivered by word of mouth.

Use of this term would enable me to get at the orality of *gusaba no gukwa*. Although it is the most commonly accepted and widely used term, *oral literature* remains contested primarily because of the word *literature*. Use of this term is problematic because it derives from the Latin *litterātūra*, which means *letters*; thus its connotation is “misleading…since it specifically designates letters.”92 Inclusion of the term *literature* implies written texts, and such emphasis may encourage thinking of oral literature as simply written recordings of oral performance or of a permanent object with its own unqualified presence. Isidore Okpewho supports the use of the term *oral literature*, but he notes the significance of the audience cannot be discounted. He described oral literature as “an art form created in the warm presence of an audience as against the cold privacy of the written work.”93 Performances are fluid, entirely dependent upon unpredictable features involving both performer and audience. The audience functions as both performers and critics and as such play a much more dynamic role than do audiences who read literature as printed texts. The term used must not be limited by the textual connotations we tend to associate with writing.

Another term, *orature*, popularized by Ngūgī and preferred by some African scholars, has not been widely embraced. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines *orature* as a portmanteau term denoting imaginative works of the oral tradition. . . to avoid suggesting that oral compositions belong to a lesser or derivative category.”

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Using the term *orature* does help to emphasize the oral aspects of the performance but I am not so sure that it is far enough from *literature* to suggest equality with literature or its own category. When Ngugi introduced the term in the 1970s, he cited Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu, who used the term *orature* to emphasize the idea that an utterance could be seen as an aesthetic means of expression. Building on that idea, Ngugi explained that the term emphasizes that which is “communicated orally and received aurally.”

94 Pitika Ntuli uses the term *orature* to refer to the “fluidity between drama, story, song, discourse and performance” and suggests it is a Gestalt that is “more than the fusion of all art forms. It is the conception and reality of a total view of life. It is the capsule of feeling, thinking, imagination, taste and hearing. It is the flow of a creative spirit.”

95 Taken in Ntuli’s sense, *orature* helps to create an identity that does not lend itself as easily to being dismissed as an underdeveloped precursor to written literature. But rather than the term itself representing a Gestalt, I would suggest that the performance that the term purports to refer to might present a “conception and reality of a total view of life” that the term *orature* does not necessarily connote primarily for the same weaknesses mentioned with regards to oral literature. The term is just a blend of the words *oral* and *literature*. The effervescence of live performance is somehow lost. While it may easily be associated with all things spoken, despite attempts to conjure otherwise, the term *orature* will still fall into the associative trap of written texts.

Scholars still prefer *oral literature* over *orature* as evidenced by a search of publications from 2010 and 2011 using the aforementioned key words. It is interesting to

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95 Ibid., 5.
note that the majority of academic articles using the term *oral literature* tend to be about African countries or other developing nations such as China and Turkey. Furthermore, the majority of academic articles using the term *orature* tend to be written by African academics and refer specifically to African oral traditions. In America, the term is sometimes used to refer to performances associated with the oral skill of African Americans, especially with the speech of ministers and politicians.

Another term, popularized by Baumann in the 1970s, *verbal art*, uses the word *art* to get at both the creative use of spoken language and performance. *Verbal art* can be used to refer to all of the communicative events associated with the term *oral literature* as well encapsulating the flow Ngugi attempts to get at with the term *orature*. However, *verbal art* is still too close to written language. *Verbal* is used to refer to both spoken language and written words. Given the challenges with the terms *oral literature*, *orature* and *verbal arts* and the denotations and connotations associated with those terms which privilege the written over the oral, and the danger of reducing performances to flat texts, I will use the term *oral arts*. *Oral arts* allows for emphasis on spoken language and creative performance. However, within quotations, the reader should be advised that *oral literature*, *orature*, and *verbal arts* are for my intents and purposes the activity I am referring to with the term *oral arts*.

**Rhetoric: Purposeful, Processual Speech**

A significant feature of the gusaba no gukwa ceremony involves the strategic, purposeful use of language. The groom’s family speaker must play the role of asking for the bride while the bride’s family speaker must play the role of challenging, provoking, and delaying. The people who officiate at gusaba no gukwa are called *abavuzi*
b’amagamao. Literally translated the phrase means “those who speak words.” It is significant to note that the word abavuzi comes from the verb kuvuga which means “to speak.” The title denotes their function at the wedding ceremony as the ones who speak. Contrasted with other wedding ceremonies, where the person who does the primary speaking is called a priest, minister, rabbi, or maulvi, all of which denote a religious leader well versed in religious teachings, the emphasis placed on the speaking over and above any religious purpose is the reason for my choice to examine the rhetorical aspects of gusaba no gukwa.

The wedding speakers strategically select their words because they are self-consciously aware of the impact or effect of their words. Dusenge, one of the wedding speakers I interviewed, told me that the wedding speaker must “know who he is speaking to so that he can speak according to his opponent’s level.” He also said that there are instances of wedding speakers who have performed badly and the gusaba no gukwa ceremonies stop until they can find “someone who can speak properly.” Scheub identifies the stylistic manipulation of words for impact and effect as “the single most important characteristic of African oral performances.” We could characterize the wedding speakers’ words as “performative utterances” that according to Austin shifts our focus to “doing things with words,” emphasizing the action accomplished through speaking—action that Finnegan places in the African context as “processual and dialogic activities through which [words] are manipulated, constrained, used, contextualized, recontextualized or transformed.” Furthermore, in the context of gusaba no gukwa, who speaks and who does not speak reveal just as much as what is said and what the

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96 Scheub, The Uncoiling Python, 110.
97 Austin, How to Do Things With Words; Finnegan, The Oral and Beyond, 6.
words do. Finally, the word choices the speakers make are influenced both by the role they play as either speaking for the bride’s family or speaking for the groom’s family and by their interaction with the audience.

Rhetorical Performance as a Lens for Viewing *Gusaba no Gukwa*

Role-playing and audience interaction are most often associated with performance. The wedding speakers at *gusaba no gukwa* play dramatic roles. For this reason and the equally important aspect of audience interaction, I also use the term *performance* to refer to what the wedding speakers do. Scheub describes performance as “rhythmical verbal dancing” and as “dancing metaphor” of the storyteller’s illusion combining realism with fantasy, with voice, and body.\(^98\) *Gusaba no gukwa’s* structure requires both scripted performance and opens space for spontaneous creativity. In addition to the performers' doings with words, the occasion and location also belong to oral arts. Ngugi elaborates

Performance is the central feature of orature, and this differentiates the concept of orature from that of literature. Performance [often] involves a participatory audience; and performance space, in orature this being anything from the fireside, the village square or market place, to a shrine. But whatever the combination of location, time and audience, orature realizes its fullness in performance.\(^99\)

Audience participation, and event context and space are key factors that differentiate oral arts from literature. *Imisango* is a noun used to denote public speaking. The word comes from the verb *gusanga*, which means “to join with people” or to “encounter others” or “to arrive at the same time as an event takes place,” all of which

\(^{98}\) Scheub, *The Uncoiling Python*, 14, 96.

include people, a public before whom the speaker speaks. Dusenge explained that *imisango* are speeches that impart Rwandan culture. *Gusaba no gukwa*, one event where *imisango* occurs, provides a backdrop for the performance of culture in Rwanda. Thus, the ceremony is a space where culture is performed, where, as Schechner suggests, “cultures are colliding, interfering with each other and energetically hybridizing.”

Spaces and contexts and silence communicate rhetorically. The oral mise-en-scene, “sources of light, whether the fire, the moon, or the sun,” creates “different ambiences” and the “production and consumption” of live performances dynamically affects the process and efficacy of the event. The specific context and space which houses the ceremony also reveal much without words.

_Abavuzi b’Amagambo (Wedding Speakers)_

**Emmanuel Dusenge**

“*Umuc wacu*” (my culture, my home)

The phone call from Augustine came Monday evening, my last Monday in Rwanda. He asked me if I still wanted to talk with Dusenge. He said, “I am talking with him right now.”

“Where are you?” I asked.

“We are having a drink at my bar.”

My initial elation turned to disappointment as I did not think I could arrange transportation to the outskirts of town so late in the evening. I asked if it was possible to arrange a meeting for the next day. Augustine said he would try to arrange something. I

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102 I have used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of all participants.
hung up the phone thinking I had just lost the only chance I would have to talk to a quintessential expert on *gusaba no gukwa*.

Emmanuel Dusenge was the first wedding speaker I observed in 2011. Since then, I had seen him play all the important roles, that of Master of Ceremonies (MC), of *abamurika inka* (cow praise singer), and of *abavuzi b’amagambo* (wedding speaker). In fact, I had seen him speak as *ubusangwa* for the bride’s side and *ubukwe* for the groom’s side. Most recently, he spoke at my adopted daughter’s *gufata irembo* and her *gusaba no gukwa*.

I had been trying to arrange an interview for months. I had mentioned my wish to two male friends who knew Dusenge. I had his phone number. He gave it to me when we met at a wedding in 2011 and again at a *gufata irembo* in October. But I hesitated to phone because I felt this was one man who put so much stock in Rwandese culture that for a stranger and a woman to arrange the interview would not work here where patriarchal remnants permeate social relations, and trust, especially among strangers, is problematic. Now I could kick myself for not being confident enough to just jump in a car and head off to the bar hoping to catch the two of them before they went home!

The next day, I waited a few hours and then phoned my friend, Augustine.

“Good Morning, Augustine. How are you?”

“I am fine. How are you, Shannon?”

“Fine. How is your wife?”

“Good, good.”

“So were you able to set up a meeting for me with Dusenge?”

“Yes, we will meet tomorrow.”
When he informed me that we would meet the following evening, I was relieved. Finally, I would have my meeting with Dusenge! Rather than asking me to drive to the outskirts of town, Augustine arranged to pick up Dusenge and drive him to a bar within walking distance of where I was staying in Kacyiru.

A few minutes after the appointed time, Sara and I approach the entrance to the bar. The bar is like many bars in Kigali. It is attached to a hotel but located within a neighborhood of residential houses. Inside the bar, a handful of patrons watch a football match on a large screen television. It is noisy in there and so I am relieved to see Augustine and Dusenge making arrangements with the waiter to have a table and chairs brought outside into the grass, under the trees. After Dusenge greets us, he sits down on the grass. I follow suit, sitting like a proper Rwandese woman with my legs stretched out in front of me, covering as much of my flesh as I can manage with the fabric of my dress. He lies back on the grass. I remain sitting up.

Every time I see Dusenge, he is dressed in a suit with a dress shirt and tie. Today is no different. Dusenge, in his 40s, is a man of average height. He sports a mustache, closely cropped hair, and intense eyes. He speaks softly, as most Rwandans do, but his self-assured tone commands attention.

Soon thereafter, our table and chairs arrive and the waiter asks us what we want to drink and to eat. Dusenge orders Uganda Waragi and coke while the rest of us order beer. This time I am not only drinking to be sociable but also to calm my nerves. Why am I feeling so nervous about this interview? Perhaps because Dusenge is also a soldier who sings in the army band? I have seen him performing in music videos on the local television station. But it is more than just his celebrity status that intimidates me. I have
seen Dusenge perform in various roles during the ceremonies, and he is good! He reminds me of a chess player, making one strategic move after another. He is always a formidable opponent. At the same time, I recognize that he has a profound respect for Rwandese culture, and I do not want to make some terrible culturally insensitive mistake!

I hesitate to start my introduction about my study and the interview protocol because I do not want to appear the rude, aggressive American. I look to Sara and Augustine for direction but before I can say anything, Dusenge gives me a notebook and a pen and asks me to write my questions down. Of course, I have my list of questions already written down both in English and Kinyarwanda, but I do not pull them out. I give my introduction orally and go over the interview protocol in English. While Sara translates for me, I do just as he asks and write my first five questions in his book. I write them in English. Dusenge takes the notebook, looks at it, and then passes it to Sara. She explains in Kinyarwanda that I am asking him to tell about when he began speaking at weddings and what kind of formal or informal training he received. Dusenge responds and Sara translates

I began speaking at weddings in 1995 when I was 43 years old. I am a Rwandese who likes my culture and the values of my culture. I like ceremonial speaking because it is the foundation; it is responsible for the growth of Rwandese men and women.

Dusenge, within seconds of our interview, without my prompting, highlights what he believes his words do. He articulates the ritual connection between his speaking and the transformation of Rwandan youth into adult members of society. Transformation is made possible because, as Bell notes, “ritual mediates thought and action.”

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Rwanda, marriage is a significant indicator of the transformation of individuals from childhood to adulthood. *Gusaba no gukwa* functions as an important rite of passage involving the symbolic crossing of a threshold and entering a new world. Thus it retains an importance lost to most Americans although, as Stephanie Coontz explains, in most parts of the world prior to the late eighteenth century, “marriage was the most important marker of adulthood and respectability as well as the main source of social security.”

Since then, many other markers of adulthood have emerged. In America, a man or woman can achieve adult status through various means such as bearing children, getting an education, or developing a successful career; however, in Rwanda, marriage is still arguably the most important rite of passage because a man or woman’s success is measured by starting a new family unit.

Marriage sits so firmly at the center of Rwandese culture that there is no word for an unmarried adult. People are referred to as youths until they marry. In one accusation story, the daughter, whose husband had not come to get her for many, many years, was referred to as *umukobwa*, meaning “girl” even though she was an eighty-year-old woman. A linguistic marker can be found in the Kinyarwanda words *umugabo*, which is synonymous with both man and husband, and *umugore*, which refers to a married woman. Dusenge’s comment that *gusaba no gukwa* is “responsible for the growth of Rwandese men and women” suggests he recognizes the power imbued in his words when spoken during *gusaba no gukwa* to transform youth into adults.

As our interview continues, Dusenge explains the preparation he made before becoming a wedding speaker:

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The values of Rwandan culture were erased by colonial culture and replaced by European ones. Rwandese used to follow certain rules but because they were not literate, the rules were not written and got erased. For my research, I talked to the elders and to my parents about oral history, music, poems, and also important words that were not spoken during colonial times.

In addition to transforming youth to adults, Dusenge sees himself in the role of keeping and transmitting culture and cultural values. He laments the loss of amatorero, schools conducted by the kings and their representatives during pre-colonial times, explaining that in the meantime, children came home from the European schools asking their parents why school did not teach about Rwandan history. Children, he explains, wanted to know why they did not have their own history. So in some families, “every evening, family members, after having dinner, would sit down outside around the fire, singing, talking, and drumming [drums, according to Dusenge, were symbolic of government] to interact and learn about things, about stories from long ago.” Dusenge surmises that gusaba no gukwa is one of four special speaking occasions which help “resurrect” aspects of Rwandan culture “wiped out” by colonialism that will “unite and strengthen” Rwandese society. He lists four imihango (ceremonial) occasions for imisango (speaking): ubukwe, (wedding), inkwano, (cow-gifting), kwiti izina, (naming ceremony held eight days after the birth of a child), and kubutizo. As for formal or informal training, Dusenge affirms that the amatorero (schools) of the past taught speaking whereas he learned about speaking from his parents and elders.

Dusenge shares some of his speaking strategies with me. He likes to take two helpers with him. They perform a good cop bad cop routine if the opportunity presents
itself. One will really push, giving the other side a hard time while the other will play moderator and try to get the two sides to agree.

Oliver Uwamahoro: “igimuka kiruta agaturo” (a broken pot is greater than a grave)

One of the other speakers I interviewed, Oliver Uwamahoro, also learned about speaking from his parents and elders. Like Dusenge, Oliver tells me that he showed a profound love for his culture at a young age. Thus, according to Oliver, his father taught him about Rwandese culture and encouraged him to develop his speaking skills.

Many Rwandans assured me weddings are open events that I could easily attend without invitations, but I preferred to go with someone who at least knew the family of the bride or groom and could help me obtain permission to record the ceremony and take photographs. Since I wanted to study the rhetorical performances of wedding speakers, my plan for fieldwork was to interview three wedding speakers and then shadow them as they moved from wedding to wedding. Knowing my plans for fieldwork for several months before I arrived, Sara, my interpreter, worked hard to make preliminary contacts. She phoned me two weeks prior to my departure for Rwanda to tell me that she had attended a wedding and met a wedding speaker named Oliver whom I just had to meet because, in her words, “he is very funny.” I met Sara in 2008 during my first trip to Rwanda. She writes “tour consultant” when asked for her occupation. She does all the behind the scenes work, making hotel reservations, getting various permits, trying out restaurants, arranging transportation, organizing itineraries, and guiding foreign visitors around Rwanda. We have kept in touch since our first meeting; she organized the study abroad trip for my Shawnee State University students in 2009, and she has invited me to stay with her whenever I am in Kigali. One of the best things about Sara is that she
knows literally thousands of people. Ever the professional, she tells me she exchanged phone numbers with Oliver and will phone him every few days to lay the ground work for the relationship we hope to establish upon my arrival.

Within a few days of my arrival, we are on our way to the Giporoso-Remera *Muri Gari* (taxi park) to take a taxi bus to Rwamagana, the town where Oliver lives. I put on a brown print dress with black heels, trying to look the part of a serious graduate student. Sara and I make a stop at Nidoli’s, one of the larger supermarkets in Kigali, to purchase a bottle of Johnny Walker whiskey and a half gallon of milk. She informs me that gifts for the wedding speaker and his wife are important gestures. Her advice proves invaluable because not only did the gifts please Oliver, but as I discovered later at the *gusaba no gukwa* ceremonies, *inzoga* (alcohol) is the liquid that brings a message with it. “We never talk with empty hands” explains one wedding speaker. Visitors are expected to offer *inzoga* before they introduce important topics of conversation. *Amata* (milk) also features prominently in weddings because as one guest said, “*Amata* is a symbol of *umugisha*” (blessings).

For 900 Rwandan francs (about $1.50), we decide to ride for an hour with 20 people in a van which the manufacturer recommends should seat 15 passengers. Sara climbs in first, moves to the back row choosing the seat by the window. I slide in next to her followed by two men who squeeze in beside me. We are all touching one another, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, thigh to thigh. I turn to the man beside me and greet him.

“*Muraho.*” (Hello).

He responds, “*Muraho neza,*” (Good hello) and offers his hand to shake.
“Amakuru?” (How are you?) I ask as I shake his hand.

He responds, “Ni meza.” (I am good).

This becomes my approach to all such close physical encounters on public transportation. I feel a strong need to greet the person who I am allowing such close physical contact! I feel happy when I get a comment on my knowledge of Kinyarwanda or efforts from the stranger to engage me in additional conversation. Then the close physical contact seems more natural because as I talk with the stranger, s/he begins to seem more like a friend. This is just one of many trips I take on public transportation. Sometimes we were serenaded with reggae, pop music, French ballads, or American hip hop. I had to laugh sometimes when suddenly I would hear Dolly Parton or Kenny Rogers, which I assumed they had played specifically for my benefit. I must trust that my limited language skills will enable me to communicate my destination to the driver or the conductor and that they will alert me when I near my destination. I must trust the other passengers to respect my body even though we are touching one another so intimately. They always did. On one occasion, two passengers sitting in the row behind me touched my hair. My traveling companion spoke to them and then I asked what she had said. She explained that they wondered if my hair was real. They touched it to see if they could determine whether it was real. I laughed and asked her to tell them that my hair was in fact real but the color was not. A few other times, small children would tentatively reach out to touch my skin. To these curious efforts, I always smiled, greeted them, and gently grasped their hand in mine, if they were willing. As I watched the other passengers, I saw the way they respected each other’s privacy as best they could, and offered help with a baby or chatted quietly with one another. Of course whenever I tired of using public transportation, I
hired a car or drove with a friend who had a car. The majority of locals using public transportation probably did not have that choice.

On that day, as we wait for the taxi bus to fill up so we can leave, I feel the sweat begin to trickle down the sides of my face, the back of my neck, and between my legs. The temperature in Rwanda is quite comfortable most days, somewhere in the low to mid 80s. My sweating most likely results from a combination of nervousness about my first interview and sitting so close to strangers on the taxi bus. I tie my hair up, which offers some relief but I can do nothing about my legs as we are wedged so close together that I cannot even adjust my position a little.

After about an hour travel on the paved road to the east, Sara informs me we need to get off the taxi bus. We disembark into a grassy roadside alongside a ditch that is at least two feet deep. I try to maintain my balance in my heels, wondering how so many professionally dressed women in their black skirt suits and heels cope with public transportation. I cannot begin to imagine how they manage walking on the roads, which even when paved, are still complicated by the hilly terrain juxtaposed alongside the continual vying for a space alongside cars, trucks, motorcycles, and bicycles. I make a resolve to stay firmly on my feet, thinking to myself if they can do it, so can I. I am relieved Sara has volunteered to carry the bottle of whiskey and the jug of milk. She phones Oliver and we wait for him to come to the road to escort us to his home.

Sara is looking around trying to get her bearings as she has been here once before but clearly she does not know which direction to go. I am seized with a moment of panic. I think, “She is my guide; if she does not know where to go, how will I ever get where I need to go?!” But my panic dissipates quickly as a tall, distinguished man with a touch of
gray at his temples and mixed in with his neatly trimmed mustache and goatee makes his way toward us. I think how strongly he walks despite a pronounced limp, using a crutch to steady himself as he strides through the tall grass toward us. He smiles as he extends his good hand and introduces himself to me. Sara hugs him and asks about the cast on his right arm. He explains, as we walk toward his home, that a few days ago he was walking without his crutch, and he fell and broke his wrist.

His home is close to the main road but the traffic sounds are buffered by a thick fence of shrubs and trees. We enter into a small sitting room with chairs and sofas arranged in a square around a low table in the center. A dining table and chairs are in the other half of the room, near a small television perched on a table. Opposite the television on the other side of the dining table, I see large framed photographs of a man and a woman on either side of a photograph of President Paul Kagame. Oliver notices where my eyes are looking and tells me the man and woman are his parents. There are two doorways leading to other parts of the house. Oliver’s home is typical for what we might classify as the middle class in Rwanda, made up of several rooms, wired with electricity, running water, and modestly furnished. We visited his home several times over the next months, but I never passed beyond this room. Two things stand out from that first encounter. First, he enthusiastically agreed to let me shadow him, stating, “You are in trouble! I will wear you out!” He carefully took the time to introduce me at each ceremony, speaking something like the first introduction:

This young lady is an American from the region called Ohio. She is married and she has two children. She is a student. She likes the Rwandan culture. She wants to write a book about the Rwandan culture. Her book will be about gusaba no
gukwa. She is here so as to conduct her research. When she arrived in Rwanda, the people told me that there is Umuzungu who needed me. This one is called Sara and this one is called Shannon. They came home to see me. When she arrived at my home she asked me to go with me wherever I will be going for attending the Rwandan wedding. That is how we became friends.

Oliver took the parts of my introductory protocol, translated them into Kinyarwanda, and proceeded to introduce me to many, many people whom I was able to talk with about gusaba no gukwa.

After the interview, as we walked around his property, he showed us his vegetable garden, and his cows, and we posed for several photographs, the second thing I realized was in spite of his injured leg and broken arm, he never once stumbled or seemed to tire. He looked and acted much younger than his 78 years. During that and subsequent visits, Oliver struck me as someone who had lived with his disability for many years.

The first time I heard Oliver make reference to his disability was during an apology for an illegal marriage known as the kwirega ceremony. The speaker for the bride’s family accused Oliver of demonstrating bad manners knowing their lost daughter was living in his town but not informing them. His response was to acknowledge that he should have informed them but he also assured them that he had done his part by looking after her. He declared, “You can see I broke my arm and leg to be sure she lives a good life!” In this manner, his disabilities function as visible tools to illustrate the depth of his own efforts to protect their daughter even as she had been stolen and in this way he defends the groom’s side. At the same time, he used his disability for comic effect.
The speaker for the bride’s family also capitalized on Oliver’s disabilities near the end of the ceremony when he summarized,

I remember when you entered this home this morning. You were not yet a man! We were considering you an enemy whose son has kidnapped our daughter. But now you have made it. You are now a friend of us and a part of us indeed. Even if you are living with arm and leg disabilities, you are a wise man in words.

In this way, the speaker for the bride’s family set up Oliver’s disabilities as physical weaknesses that contrast with his intellect and mastery of speaking. However, Oliver got the last word on the subject with his response, “No! No! No! Please do not insult me. I do not live with a disability. I live with my wife and children. I’m handicapped but I do not live with a handicap.” The audience exploded with laughter as Oliver played jokingly upon the literal and figurative meanings of the phrase “I live with a disability.”

The subject of disability is variously used as an illustration of effort, an insult, and a joke all in the same ceremony which shows how each performance, as an embodied action, may contain fixed bits of behavior which make use of similar words but when framed in different contexts, shift meaning. Performances, Richard Schechner explains, “adorn and reshape the body, tell stories, and allow people to play with behavior that is ‘twice behaved’, not for the first time, rehearsed, cooked, prepared.”105 Oliver’s ability to make use of his disability in a variety of ways demonstrates his strategic use of language, his rhetorical performance.

In another gusaba no gukwa a few weeks later, Oliver brought up the subject of disability again. This time, as the speaker representing the bride’s family, he was

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charged with setting up the challenges for the groom’s family. After the verbal welcome, he invited the groom’s speaker to come over to get a drink to quench his thirst, asking, “Are you disabled? Leave those crutches there and come alone.” The speaker for the groom replied, “What does a disabled person use to walk?” And Oliver responded, “He uses crutches.” Oliver opened with this challenge to try to distract the groom’s family speaker; however, the speaker is quick on his feet as he fired back an honest question to which Oliver has no choice but to answer. A few moments later, Oliver tried again. This time he challenged the speaker for the groom to sing “Happy Birthday,” but the microphone kept cutting in and out. Oliver insulted the groom’s speaker, “I said that you are disabled!” referring to his poor singing. He used the word *ikimuga* which means “broken pot.”

The groom’s family speaker (GFS) responded, “I am not *ikimuga*. *Ikimuga* is a broken pot! Why do you insist that I am disabled?” Oliver, speaking for the bride’s family apologized, “I am sorry. You are not *ikimuga*. But leave those crutches and come here!” The use of the word *ikimuga* for a person with a disability sets up a metaphor signifying damage. The person, likened to a broken pot, is also damaged due to his or her disability. The proverb, *igimuka kiruta agaturo* (a broken pot is greater than a grave) is sometimes used to refer to a disabled person suggesting the prevailing attitude meant to be one of rejoicing that the person with the disability is still alive. However, I was told that this terminology is outdated and the politically correct term is “living with a disability.” That Oliver joked about it at three ceremonies within a short span of time shows he has no reservations about drawing attention to his physical self. The exchange continued:
GFS: Crutches are used by people with disability but not disabled people! But let me ask you Beautiful One’s Walk.

BFS (Oliver): That is not my name! But let me tell you the truth! Don’t you live with disability?

GFS: I don’t live with disability but I walk with it!

BFS (Oliver): Are all your companions disabled?

GFS: Not! Disability is on me that is why I walk with normal people to help me while . . .

BFS (Oliver): You are not normal because you say that only your companions are normal.

GFS: But I don’t know your point about the orientation of life! The science of life is too wide; it can’t be studied here and now. Let us continue our ceremonies as it is the program of today. I am here to share with you the right ideas and I think that is all about life.

Oliver used both the old connotations associated with disability and the new connotation to confuse the groom’s speaker to the point that he only succeeded by changing the subject and asking Oliver to continue the program. Later in the ceremony, when the call for accusations against the groom’s family commenced, he insulted the groom’s speaker about his disability again through the use of a back-handed compliment. He admired the groom’s speaker for his “kindness and heroism” and declared, “He is with good people even if he has a problem with his leg.”

There is no equivalent to the Americans with Disabilities Act governing access in Rwanda that I am aware of: no special accommodations built into public places, no
ramps at the entrances to buildings, no Jazzy or Hoveround motorized chairs to facilitate movement around town. In Rwanda, a person with physical challenges, especially when it comes to mobility, has got to be strong, resilient, and creative to manage to move among all the able-bodied crowds of people. Oliver gets hearty laughter from the audience when he uses this joke. But in calling attention to the other speakers’ disabilities he also emphasizes his own disability. His performance reflects both the way he uses his body expeditiously as part of gusaba no gukwa and how he performs his own disability. Oliver’s performance of his disability can function simultaneously as self-deprecating humor, as well as demonstrating he feels no shame for his physical ailments. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander note that while identity is largely performed unconsciously, the “notion that disability is a kind of performance is to people with disabilities . . . a lived experience.” In this way, they explain, “the self-conscious performer becomes an active maker of meaning rather than a passive specimen on display.” Oliver has learned to get around in spite of his leg injury. In fact, I even saw him lift his crutch threateningly in the direction of some children, and they all ran away screaming. The way he carries his body assertively despite his disability asks for respect, but the way he uses his words so creatively to speak of his disability actually demands respect. These excerpts demonstrate how he unselfconsciously incorporates his disability expeditiously both as a challenge to the opposing side and as a joke. The proverb igimuka kiruta agaturo (a broken pot is greater than a grave) reflects the attitude I observed in Oliver.

Jean Pierre Akimana: “On the Job Training”

All three speakers I interviewed connected their development as speakers to their interest in culture, an interest that was encouraged by parents and colleagues, and learned by talking with the elders and by doing. Jean Pierre Akimana, another speaker I interviewed, explains, “Normally there is no training for imisango, but when you are old enough and you are somehow well known as someone with knowledge about traditional culture, you can speak [at gusaba no gukwa].” Akimana says he has spoken at just four ceremonies in the past four years. Friends in his work place (he is an instructor at a technical college) ask him to speak at their weddings. “I am 45 years old; I talk to the old people; I try to participate; there is not any specific training for that.” He adds, I learn through “on the job training and experience. Training is at the same time that you are doing the ceremony.” As an example, Akimana tells a story about the first time he spoke as umukwe mukuru. He says,

I was alone but the way I did on my first time, is not the same as I did for the second or third time. [The first time] I was not aware if what I was saying. Sometimes I was hesitating; I was afraid; I was forgetting some words to be used. Some people in the audience reminded me what to say. They told me I had to accept, to admit that I had done the bad behavior before I could offer my response.

Another speaker I talked with briefly told me that he was in the process of teaching his son to take up imisango, so he attends gusaba no gukwa ceremonies with his son and helps him out as needed.
Rwandese investment in verbal prowess dates back to pre-colonial days, when *interero* (*amaterero* – plural) was held to instruct selected youth, who were called *intore*, in military tactics, dances, praise poetry, and public speaking. The noun *intore* derives from the verb *gutora* which means to choose or to select. Historically, *intore* was the term used to describe the youth who were recruited from among the upper class families to receive training at the king’s court or the homes of important chiefs. Today, the *intore* dancers I have seen carry spears and shields while they dance the hero’s dance, a very upbeat, fast, energetic dance celebrating their success in battle. The dancers wear bells tied around their ankles and jump and beat the ground with their feet such that they add to the beat of the drums. They wear long grass wigs that resemble a lion’s mane. They shake their heads powerfully. I can only infer that they might be invoking the bravery of the lion in their dances.

The combination of military training with dance, poetry, and speaking shows that in the past, oral finesse was as important as military prowess. Consider, for example, the proverb *intore ntiganya ishaka ibisubizo*, which means the “warrior does not complain every day; he finds a way out.” On one level, this proverb can mean that the warrior “finds a way out” of a difficult battle situation; however, given the dual instruction that *intore* received, the phrase can also be applied to speaking. Another proverb, *injunga y’ürulími inèsha injunga z'igitèro*, which means “the sharp tongue achieves victory over the warrior,” suggests that speaking is viewed as more powerful than weapons and supports the second interpretation of the previous proverb that emphasizes using language to “find a way out” of difficult situations. In the *gusaba no gukwa* ceremony, the verbal challenges offered by the bride’s speaker must be responded to carefully by the
groom’s speaker. If he is good, he will “find a way out” of whatever verbal challenge the bride’s speaker sends his way, thereby demonstrating that the bride will go to a family with “good manners” populated by patient, clever problem-solvers. Commenting on the wedding speakers in the past, Grace explains, “In the olden days they were really serious. The bride’s family had to make sure these guys were capable of taking care of their daughter.” Self-control, especially with regards to displays of anger or frustration, is an important demonstration of “good manners.” Many Rwandese believe that a family that demonstrates “good manners” will be capable of taking care of their daughters. “Good manners” that were rewarded in the past, sometimes with payment among the intore at special events called ibitaramo for demonstrating their skill at educating and entertaining, were their ability to express themselves well, to recite poems, to demonstrate self-control, and to argue convincingly. There exists a common thread between what the warriors of old used to do and what the wedding speakers do trying to achieve adequate balance between arguing convincingly and maintaining self-control.

Rhetorical Features

The wedding speakers’ embodied performances communicate in tandem with the meaning of the words they speak. In this way, their performances present what Conquergood identifies as two kinds of knowledge: “official, objective and abstract—the map” and “practical, embodied, and popular—the story.” Performance studies scholars “turn and return insistently, to the crossroads” between abstraction and participatory experience, between thought and action. I examine the words of the wedding speakers through a performance lens, informed by my observations about the

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108 Ibid., 154.
actions of speakers, audience, and myself in addition to the analysis offered by the 
wedding speakers both during their performances and through my interviews with them.

**Military Metaphors and Allusions**

In the speeches of the wedding speakers and embodied in the cultural dance 
troops that performed at some of the *gusaba no gukwa* ceremonies, I observed what I 
want to refer to as military metaphors. Use of military metaphors illustrates a way that 
the *gusaba* portion of the ceremony can be viewed as a kind of battle, a battle of wits. 
References to military metaphors also point to the orderly manner for conducting battles 
and the strategic moves made by the wedding speakers.

In one *gusaba no gukwa* that I attended, I observed the bride’s speaker deflecting 
every attempt by the groom’s speaker to introduce his message to the point where the 
groom’s speaker quoted the above proverb *intore ntiganya ishaka ibisubizo* to emphasize 
to the bride’s side that his side was trying to find a way to introduce their message. Later 
in the same ceremony, the bride’s speaker mentioned *intore*, reminding the audience that 
every *intore* has his own praise song. Then he challenged someone from the groom’s 
side to “sing his praises” (*kwivuga*) to show the family has *intore*. A man sitting on the 
groom’s side stood and said, “I am ‘Mbagire’ very known in history from this area 
Buganza, who traced Rwamagana road connected to Kanombe, and connected to all 
countries of the world to Rwanda through that. And in our praise let us sing:

I rushed with my strength on the way to Nyabugogo,
And whom I met on that way, started making a loud noise,
Thinking that the country was attacked,
And that was when *inkotanyi* [invincible warriors] came in,
We are the bravest, and we are fearless.

When the audience member stood to recite this praise poem, I was unfortunately sitting several rows behind him and could not hear what he said. However, he received very big applause, which I take to indicate that the audience really enjoyed this display of strength and courage. The groom’s family speaker was having a difficult time responding to the bride’s family speaker, so the bride’s family speaker gave the groom’s family the opportunity to restore some respect by inviting them to recite a praise poem. By claiming to be *inkotanyi*, namely brave, fearless, invincible warriors, the groom’s side reclaims a position of strength.

Near the end of this ceremony, the Master of Ceremonies (MC) used an allusion to a historical figure to interpret the significance of the behavior of the groom’s family speaker. In a long, drawn out, roundabout way, the groom’s family speaker asked permission to leave so that the family could go spread the news that their request for a bride has been approved. At the end of every *gusaba no gukwa*, the groom’s family speaker must ask permission to leave and the audience members clap to signal their approval. However, in this case, the bride’s speaker reminded them that they had agreed to help celebrate their elder’s birthday, so they could not leave yet. Consequently, both to support the bride’s speaker and to honor the groom’s family, he alluded to *Mbanzamihigo*, the first warrior, whom everyone knows as a brave man, to suggest that the groom’s speaker is a brave man who presented a well-spoken speech. The MC’s allusion to *Mbanzamihigo* shifted the meaning of the audience’s applause from showing approval for the groom’s family to leave, to showing approval of the groom’s family speaker’s oratorical skill.
In another gusaba no gukwa, Dusenge, playing the role of the bride’s family speaker, used allusions to a great warrior king and his weapon to encourage a visibly discouraged groom’s speaker after he had set up a challenge that the speaker for the groom’s family was having difficulty responding to. Dusenge had opened the ceremony with a very difficult move. He told the guests that the imaginary ceremony they were invited to attend was gushyingira, to escort the bride to her new home! So the speaker for the groom’s family offered a bottle of whiskey as the beer for the message, but instead of opening it so they could drink it, the bride’s speaker accepted it as a gift for the imaginary couple and sent it away. At this point, I could see the utter perplexity on the face of the groom’s speaker. He did not have an idea about how to get around this. So Dusenge followed with these allusions:

BFS (Dusenge): Do you remember Imbenuramahina ya Rugango? [the one who shows himself very brave in the middle of the battle].

GFS: (laughingly) Yes, I remember him.

BFS (Dusenge): Do you remember one who could not joke when warriors were waiting for the battle to start?

GFS: I remember him for sure.

BFS (Dusenge): Do you remember Inkotanyicyane? [the very active one at battle].

GFS: Really.

BFS (Dusenge): Do you remember Inkataza kurekera? [the one who doesn’t fear to confront the first].

GFS: I remember him.
BFS (Dusenge): So dear why shouldn’t you start from there and tell us your praises as the real Ndayishimiye should do?

The words *inkotanyicyane*, and *inkatazakurekera* appear in *ibivugo*. During King Rujugira’s reign, *ibivugo* developed as an oral art form to celebrate heroic endeavors of kings. They were deliberately difficult poems the meaning of which was inaccessible to the average Rwandan. David Newbury explains that *ibivugo* functioned to praise the kingdom and to reinforce the kingship’s legitimacy.\(^\text{109}\) The heroic poems were recited by special speakers who served the king. Newbury called the marked increase of heroic poetry during the Nyiginya Dynasty of the last quarter of the 18\(^{th}\) century an “efflorescence of verbal art forms.”\(^\text{110}\) The direct translation of *inkotanyicyane* means “great warrior.” But in the context of the heroic poem, *inkotanyicyane* refers to the owner of the weapon, in this case, King Kigeli Rwabugili. This one refers to the owner of the bow (Rwabugili) who had killed many enemies. The word *inkatazakurekera*, according to a Rwandese university professor I consulted, refers to a bow and arrow weapon that was used to fight enemies. This kind of poetry was meant to praise brave warriors and/or their weapons. Alluding to the king and his weapons, Dusenge attempted to remind the groom’s family speaker that he needs to continue the battle: remember they are only joking, the allusion implies, so be active, and don’t be so afraid.

The speaker’s mouth is his bow from which the words that he shoots come. However, Dusenge’s attempt to reassure the groom’s family speaker did not work, as evidenced by the speaker’s request for his brother to speak for the groom. And after his


\(^{110}\) Newbury, “Precolonial Burundi and Rwanda, 256.
failed attempts, Dusenge capitulated, saying, “I can see you are really all overwhelmed and I don’t want my laughter to be accompanied by bad emotions which can lead to crying.” Dusenge alluded to these heroic poems to test the knowledge of the groom’s family. These allusions also imply that bravery is an important characteristic for the groom’s family to possess and serve as a challenge to the groom’s family to share their own heroic poetry.

The audience is familiar with the same repertory of images, symbols, and themes, a heritage that according to Scheub, “provides a rich context for the unfolding drama.” The military allusions work as a mythoform, which Hamlet defines as a body of stories that “communicate basic values and attitudes, preserving links to the past, thereby providing a cultural history.” Metaphors typically define difficult concepts or emphasize important concepts, but the military metaphor calls into the minds of the audience members a set of shared “bits of behavior” to attribute to their sons and daughters.

At a kwirega ceremony in Kibungo, the baby babbles contentedly in my arms as I glance over at the young mother who sits next to the baby’s father, both their heads bowed, avoiding eye contact with the large gathering of her family, friends, and community members seated in the yard facing them. This ceremony, called kwirega (illegal union), requires the groom’s wedding speaker to make an apology on behalf of the young couple who have set up a household and had a child without completing the required rituals of engagement, introduction, and dowry. Sara (serving as my interpreter

today) carried the baby in her arms as we made our entrance with Oliver, the young
couple, and the groom’s representatives. At the last minute, no one seemed to want to
carry the baby as we filed past the large group, perhaps because the baby served as such a
visible reminder of the couple’s transgression, so Sara carried her in, and now I find
myself making goofy faces and gently bouncing the baby on my lap while simultaneously
trying to follow the progression of the ceremony.

“Nta nzoga itagira ijambo.” (no speech without beer)

I glance away from the baby’s face as Oliver moves from his chair in the corner to
the center stage area accompanied by a woman from the groom’s side carrying igiseke (a
large basket). Oliver prompts her to open the basket and she removes a litre bottle of
Diet Coke. He announces that this is “juice for the ladies in the house” and then he takes
out a bottle of Uganda Waragi, a type of gin with a strong chemical smell and a potent
punch like pure grain alcohol, from the basket. Standing to my left, facing the large
gathering, Oliver explains, “In our culture, when you visit people and you have an
important message for them, you must bring some beer with you. After giving them beer,
they know that it can’t come without a message. And then they ask you to tell them the
message you have brought.”¹¹³ I wonder if Oliver provides this explanation for my
benefit, yet because he faces the main group gathered to my right, the words appear to be
directed to them.

¹¹³ Inzoga is sometimes used to refer to beer, and at other times it is used for stronger spirits. In
the past, homebrewed beer was most often brought to wedding ceremonies, so even when alcohol or soda
pop is used in the ceremony, the wedding speakers will refer to it all as inzoga. In the past, some
variations of beer consisted of inzoga y/ubuki (beer made with honey), urwagwa (beer made with banana),
or ikigage (beer made with sorghum).
Not just for my benefit, the cultural explanations by Oliver were directed to the bride and groom because they had challenged cultural norms by starting their family without marriage. But Oliver spoke with his back to them, alternating between facing the bride’s family wedding speaker and the family, friends, and community members in the audience. In addition, these explanatory comments were not limited to the ceremony for the “illegal marriage.”

The explanation that beer brings a message was stated at nearly all the wedding ceremonies that I attended. For example, at one gusaba no gukwa, when the groom’s family offered their beer, the groom’s speaker said, “I did not come empty handed . . . we are not just begging so let me present my beer. . . . In our culture in Rwanda, you do not just ask for a bride. That drink I have given you is asking for the bride.” At another ceremony where Oliver was the speaker for the bride’s side, the speaker for the groom’s side said, “According to our culture . . . we cannot continue to discuss without giving you something.” The MC at one gusaba no gukwa also reiterated the idea that beer brings a message while welcoming the guests when he called for drinks to be served to everyone because “we never talk with empty hands.” These examples show that the wedding speakers engage in metacommunication, an important rhetorical feature of gusaba no gukwa that allows them to step outside the role of bride negotiations to explain why the drink is offered while the drinks are being poured. One unmarried 29-year-old man told me there are no ceremonies that could happen without beer. In the Adventist gusaba no gukwa, Fanta was substituted, but the speakers still referred to it as inzoga. The general opinion seems to be that beer serves an important purpose in Rwandan culture.
Barbara Babcock defined metacommunication as what occurs when speakers use verbal and nonverbal devices to frame or “categorize and comment upon the communicative event.” Most often in Rwandan wedding ceremonies, metacommunication occurs between the wedding speakers and between the wedding speakers and the audience. As important as the content of what was said, whereby my focus applies to the narrative event, is the communicative event, the context in which the communication takes place. Both must be examined for their contributions to meaning-making. Drawing on the work of Bateson and Goffman, Babcock suggests that when we focus our attention on the process of communicating, moving away from and back to the message, the process of communicating supplies a frame, “an interpretive context or alternative point of view from within which the content of the story is to be understood and judged.” Whether the wedding speakers are telling a story or performing a ritual, when they pause to comment, they frame portions of the ceremony in particular ways and reveal the interactional elements of the performance.

I noticed as I attended more wedding ceremonies that the wedding speakers often step out of their roles as ritual doers to explain the cultural significance of the rituals, as Oliver had done with regards to the beer. Sometimes they also stepped out of their roles as ritual doers to comment on the process or to prompt or correct the other speaker or the audience members. Through their metacommunication, the wedding speakers affirm cultural practices not only through enacting rituals but also through underscoring the meanings behind the rituals.

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“It’s very good that we have our culture as Rwandans and we preserve it.”

An example of metacommunication between the wedding speakers occurs when the bride’s family speaker prompts the groom’s family speaker if he does not follow the ritual practice of offering a drink before introducing their message. At one ceremony, the speaker for the groom’s family asked for the bride without offering beer first and the speaker for the bride’s family said to the speaker for the groom’s family, “Is that how you ask for brides in Masaka? You do not even offer some beer?” The speaker for the groom’s family replied that he was old and forgetful. Berger and Del Negro assert, “the reflexive metacommentary by which a performer signals her awareness of herself as a participant in an interaction---and by which she signals her awareness of the audience’s attention to her---colors and informs all of the primary communication in the performance.”

A close examination of the reflexive metacommentary of the wedding speakers reveals their continual monitoring of audience attention and subsequent modification of their performances. Metacommentary, defined by Babcock as “any element of communication which calls attention to the speech event as a performance” occurs throughout *gusaba no gukwa*; I often heard the wedding speakers commenting on what they were doing and why they were doing it. As illustrated by the previous examples, the speakers often prefaced these explanations with phrases such as “According to our culture” or “In Rwandan culture” or “As we have done for many years.” As an outsider, I appreciated hearing these explanations, but the benefit such commentary served for Rwandans is two-fold. Most likely they already knew that beer...
brings a message. The repetition of beer drinking in a variety of contexts functions as a
cultural ritual that repeats and re-inscribes what the participants already know and
believe, namely that inzoga (beer) paves the way for a message.

All of the wedding speakers I interviewed highlighted the importance of their
knowledge of umuco (culture). Goffman notes, "to the degree that a performance
highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs, we may look on
it, in the manner of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, as a ceremony--as an expressive
rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community." When they use
metacommentary, they serve as teachers and enforcers of culture, thereby continually
rejuvenating and reaffirming cultural values. Whatever parts of the ceremony become
framed by metacommentary provide insight into the cultural values emphasized. When I
interviewed the wedding speakers, I asked them to tell me about how they got started
speaking at weddings. All of them explained that while they were growing up, they were
recognized for their interest in and respect for Rwandese culture. Dusenge proclaims,
“Ukunda umuco: I am a Rwandese who likes my culture and its values.” He added that
Imisango (ceremonial speaking) is the foundation of culture and it is responsible for the
growth of men and women. He recognizes imisango as an action that plays a key role in
forming identity among men and women in Rwanda.

Consider, for example, that at the kwirega wedding ceremony I attended with
Oliver, in addition to explaining why they introduce important messages with beer, he
also provided three reasons the speakers from each side drink together. The first reason,
according to Oliver, is to ensure that one side does not poison the other.

At the time of the ceremony, I did not know the *Kinyarwanda* word for *poison*; besides, I was blissfully unaware of any trouble because my attention was mostly focused on the babbling baby I was still holding in my arms. The yard in front of the bride’s family home had been transformed into a ceremonial area. Reed mats mounted on sticks and *umuyenzi*, a type of hedge, fenced in the area, and over our heads was a roof made of tarp and banana tree fronds. I was seated on a thin wooden bench and sitting low to the dirt floor while my back rested on a tree trunk that stood on that side of the enclosure. To my left was a line of chairs in which the groom’s wedding speaker, two groom’s family elders, the groom’s best man, the groom, the bride, and the bride’s matron of honor sat. Across from me were the wedding speaker for the bride’s family and an elder representing the bride’s family. We were separated by a small space of about 10 feet. To my right were family and friends seated on benches like mine arranged in several rows. Young children stood at the open gate watching. We were sitting close to one another, and yet I was very aware that I did not know anyone there with the exception of my interpreter, Sara, and the wedding speaker, Oliver, whom I had just met 10 days ago. Had I known they were talking about poison, I might have been reluctant to eat the food that was offered!

I now know that the distrust that poison suggests occurs in other contexts in Rwanda. When visiting a home or eating in a restaurant, I noticed that drinks are not poured in the kitchen and brought out to the guests as we would do in America. Rather the host provides sealed, unopened bottles for each guest and opens the bottle as the guest holds it in his hands. As some American college women watch their drinks to make sure no one slips GHB in them, Rwandans keep a close watch on their drinks to avoid what
they perceive is a very real threat of being poisoned. The practice of family-style eating, all serving from common dishes was also practiced in the homes I visited. Sometimes two of us even shared the same plate or took portions of the same fish or rabbit. One young woman I talked with told me that her parents forbade her from eating in her playmates’ homes when she was growing up. She interpreted their rule as protection against getting poisoned. Another young woman told me a story of a funeral that she attended for a murder victim. Although she was given a plate full of food to eat, she gave it away without tasting anything because, “I did not know who had prepared it. It could have been prepared by the murderer to poison me.” While some genocide survivor stories tell of being poisoned, the fear of poison can be traced back in Rwanda’s history. For example, the second to last monarch, King Mutara Rudahigwa died in 1959. Despite the official hospital report that he died of a cerebral hemorrhage, popular opinion says he was deliberately poisoned by the Belgians. In pre-colonial days, when traditional healers practiced widely, they gave special medicine to the brides before they went to the groom’s home to protect them from poison and to ensure they would be loved in their new homes.119

The ritual of speakers who represent both sides taking a drink from the same bottle as a fixed element of *gusaba no gukwa*, in order to demonstrate or prove that one side has not poisoned the other may in fact reflect both a general distrust that lingers as a result of the genocide of 1994 as well as a long standing practice of using marriage to make friends with enemies. Naomi recalled that in the past, wedding guests had to leave their walking sticks and weapons at the gate because “in the olden days, when the bride

exchange took place, they would get too emotional and sometimes fight.” So why might the wedding speaker feel the need to remind the audience that one reason the ritual drink together takes place is to ensure the drink is not poisoned? What might he accomplish through emphasizing the meaning of the drinking ritual at this particular ceremony? Perhaps he is saying, you can trust us, we have brought good beer that will not poison you and by extension, we are good people, genuinely trying to make up for “stealing” your daughter.

The second reason Oliver stated they taste the drink is to “make sure it is suitable for men.” This comment seems like a stretch since I never witnessed any speakers at the weddings rejecting alcohol because it was not suitable. At one ceremony I attended with Oliver, he did poke fun at the pink champagne, and another wedding speaker commented on the odd wrapping of the bottle of whiskey because it looked like “your daughter’s handbag.” Oliver said his father told him that when men share strong beer, they cannot hide anything from each other and “they become very close friends who can risk anything for each other.”

The third reason, according to Oliver, that they taste the drink is “for sharing.” Oliver told me that in the days before automobiles, when people traveled to weddings on foot, the bride’s family expected the groom’s family to arrive with half empty calabashes of beer because they were meant to share the beer with people they passed along their journey. A family that arrived with half empty calabashes demonstrated that they are generous and thus a good family for their daughter. Drinking from a common cup is a ritual practiced in many cultures. One example is the communion service practiced in the Catholic Church. At the Kweriga ceremony, Oliver offered me drinks from a common
cup twice. First, when he poured the Uganda Waragi (the strong drink meant for men), after the two wedding speakers shared their drinks from the bottle, he walked back to his seat and offered me the glass he had drunk from. At first I said, “no thank you.” I did not like the taste and I had seen plenty of people suffer terrible hangovers as a result of taking too much. But he insisted. In front of all those people, I felt pressured to take it and sip. So I did. I made a grimace because of its strong taste. Everyone laughed and the speakers resumed talking. This was the first ceremony I went to with Oliver. I think he was testing me in some way. Women don’t drink alcohol in public, particularly not strong drink “meant for men.” He had brought a bottle of Diet Coke for these women and had already made that clear. He gave me the drink meant for men to joke with me.

Later, after the bride’s side had accepted the request to forgive the groom’s side and had given their approval, sorghum beer was brought out for all the participants. I was handed a calabash with a single straw. I sipped and passed it on to Oliver. He asked if I liked it. I said, “Yes, it is good.” This time there was no ambiguity about whether or not I should drink this. The alcohol content is weak, and even children can drink it.

The rhetorical feature of pausing to step outside during the ritual to explain the meaning behind the ritual reinforces the cultural value of trust. The bride’s parents and relatives need to know that they are giving their daughter to a trustworthy, honest, and generous family. The ritual emphasizes the importance of not engaging in deception or parsimony by poisoning, providing poor quality drink, or hoarding the beer. And the wedding speaker punctuates these rituals with explanations to communicate the cultural significance of these actions.
Oliver promised that he would tell us why he “decided to start by those who are inside the house and not you who are here,” but he never got back to the juice for the women inside the house. He may have been alluding to the need to provide a drink gift to the bride’s mother and aunties because this was a special wedding to ask forgiveness. I never saw a gift of “juice” given by the wedding speaker to the women in any of the other ceremonies I attended. “Good” women, as a rule, do not drink alcohol in public in Rwanda because women who drink are considered by many to be immoral women of questionable virtue. However this attitude is changing, especially among the youth. But I once watched a woman in her twenties at a wedding reception painstakingly pour red wine into a juice container so as to conceal the fact that she was drinking alcohol. Since women do not consume alcohol in public, they do not appear to speak important messages or form bonds rather, in the public context of gusaba no gukwa, the women participate vicariously through the men. There are a few exceptions to women drinking alcohol. At the wedding, the bride and groom will toast each other with a glass of champagne. And often women who have just given birth drink beer because they believe it will enhance milk production. I did see the occasional grandmother or elderly auntie drinking beer at the wedding ceremonies. However, the vast majority of women and girls chose a bottle of soda (pop) or water.

Another form of metacommunication occurs when the wedding speakers comment on the process of the ceremony itself. For example, at one gusaba no gukwa after the bride’s family agreed to give the bride to the groom’s family, the bride’s family speaker acknowledged,

We have agreed to give [the bride] to you but you will not take her to your place
today... you are allowed to call her yours, but we need to follow our traditional wedding steps. You remember you came here for the parents’ blessing; today you’ve come to ask for the bride; the next step you are going to tell us whether you brought a dowry.

Once again, as with explaining why they drink together, the wedding speaker reviews the process of marriage by stating three phases, gufata irembo (parents’ blessing, gusaba (asking for the bride), and gukwa (offering the dowry). Oliver also listed these three phases during the kwirega ceremony (for the illegal marriage), followed by the comment, “we jumped these steps.”

Another example of the wedding speaker stepping outside his role to comment on the process comes from a gusaba no gukwa where the pseudo-ceremony was a birthday party. He announces, “I am invited [to the birthday party], I contributed, I offered, and I accepted to participate in the party, but I will say something before we continue with the actual ceremony.” He gives the beer as a gift for the birthday party, it is opened, and the speakers from each side share a drink, so he is using this summary to introduce the topic of asking for the bride. But the bride’s family speaker replies, “The speech that I will not accept is the one which is far from today’s topic.” Summarizing what they have done and discussing the process of the ceremony serves a narrative function, helping the listeners to follow the process. Babcock calls this type of performance metanarration, defined as “any of the factors constituting the speech event.”

Sometimes the wedding speakers will use metanarration to correct what they perceive as incorrect behavior on the

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120 Babcock, “The Story in the Story,” 68.
part of the other speaker. For example, during the asking part of a *gusaba no gukwa*, the bride’s speaker asks the groom’s speaker to tell about the lineage of the groom.

   BFS: Dear Ndayishimiye, I know you and even I know your age, so I would like to know who is the groom, and also know his origin, because I know your children are still too young to marry.

   GFS: Dear brother Nsengiyumva, I came representing the family of Mahoro Peacemaker as you too are representing Iradukunda’s one.

   BFS: Which means he is the son of Mahoro?

   GFS: Yes the son of Mahoro Peacemaker.

   BFS: That is what I wanted to hear.

   GFS: And me too, I thought I have kids but those are not the ones I am here for, I am here to ask for a bride whose groom is Shyaka Jean d’Amour.

At this point in the ceremony, the groom stands to come forward to be introduced to the audience. But the bride’s speaker stops him, saying, “ok, I wanted to know his origin only; it is not yet time to see him.” A much repeated phrase, “We don’t like to mix things,” is used frequently in the early part of *gusaba no gukwa* when the bride’s speaker informs the groom’s speaker about the pseudo-ceremony that is in progress when they arrive. The warning about mixing things reminds the groom’s speaker that he cannot ask for the bride right away.

   At other times, the speakers speak directly to one another to challenge and correct each other’s behavior, such as “what you said was a bit confusing to me” or “why are you standing? [to the groom’s family speaker] You are an old man; you are my age; you might fall down.” To which the groom’s family speaker replied, “Okay, if you tell me to
sit down, I will because you are the one in charge.” In this instance, the bride’s speaker, acting as the host, tells the groom’s speaker to sit down. He, as the guest and representing the groom’s family who hope to get the bride, acquiesces and sits. Later, the same speaker again corrected the groom’s speaker, reminding him as they were preparing to leave, “You forgot to say that you want to leave.”

Or as a way of toasting the drink, the groom’s speaker says, “kubuzima bwacu (to our lives) to which the bride’s speaker responds, “You better leave our lives to God and say bitugere kunyota (to our thirst).” At the same ceremony, the bride’s speaker corrected the groom’s speaker, saying, “You said you got the news about the bride from your son. Remember, culturally, there should be umuranga [a go-between] for your family to learn about our daughter.” At the same ceremony, which had progressed with many of these types of corrections toward the groom’s speaker, the bride’s speaker finally gave in, saying to the groom’s family speaker, “I see you are really overwhelmed and I don’t want my laughter to be accompanied by bad emotions which can lead to crying. So I will allow him to say his speech.” The metacommunication between the speakers plays an important role in the battle of wits, which will be discussed further in the next chapter, because the one who does the correcting takes the upper hand in the battle and the response of the other speaker determines who possesses wit. Often times, the challenges to the process go unanswered because the process is fairly rigid. For example, as a guest, the groom’s family speaker should demonstrate good manners by sitting when the bride’s family speaker asks him to. At the same time, as the bride’s family speaker recognizes the groom’s family speaker is “overwhelmed” he simultaneously challenges him while moving the process along, because ultimately the
bride’s family speaker cannot continue to challenge the groom’s family speaker indefinitely; they would never get the bride.

The speakers also speak directly to the audience, again illustrating metacommunication because they demonstrate awareness that they are performing.

BFS: No applause, no impundu, are you asking for a bride with a bare hand?

GFS: Hey women! Give impundu!

*Impundu*, defined as “acclamation, shout of joy.” Also known as *ululating*, the sound is a high pitched cheering that is used during the ceremonies to show agreement or approval. At another ceremony, the master of ceremonies admonished the audience: “You [BFS] said a nice sentence that you agree to give them the bride but they did not thank you. There were no claps, no sign of pleasure in their eyes!” The audience responded with claps, laughing, and *impundu*. Narrating the event, the groom’s family speaker says, “here are impundu!” and the bride’s family speaker observes, “their impundu are not bad.” Some other examples of the wedding speakers communicating directly with the audience are “I would like that person who is whispering to you to stop and do it later,” “she sang seated; we want her to stand up where we can see her,” and “you, cameraman, give me space so that I can see [the groom’s speaker].”

The order and processes during the ceremonies are very important. At the start of my interview with Dusenge, one of the wedding speakers, I asked a question about the significance of cows and milk because I had spent the day prior to our interview writing about these important symbols. But the wedding speaker refused to answer my question explaining, “You cannot jump to the conclusion before the introduction.” He proceeded

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to introduce four occasions for speaking, of which weddings one, and he also talked about each ceremony of which there are five associated with weddings, before he would answer my question. By way of explanation he said, “We cannot start with point F before you cover points A, B, C, and D.” This respect for order also applies to the speaking at *gusaba no gukwa*. The metacommunication aspects of *gusaba no gukwa* demonstrate the complexity of the ceremonies.

**Silence**

Another significant rhetorical feature of *gusaba no gukwa* centers upon my observation that neither the bride nor groom speaks during the entire *gusaba no gukwa* ceremony. As demonstrated by the previous discussion, the wedding speakers do most of the speaking during the ceremony. Their voices are supplemented by the MC and the occasional interjection by a member of the audience. Their performances are also joined by the cow praise poets and the musicians. This is quite different from what audience members at an American wedding might expect. Usually, there is a point in the ceremony when the bride and groom will recite their vows. I did see Rwandese wedding couples reciting vows at the church wedding ceremonies, but it is significant to note that I never saw either the groom or the bride speak at *gusaba no gukwa*.

Their silence does not automatically imply a problem. Olson suggests, “Silence and speech should not be reduced to a simplistic opposition in which silence is negative and speech is positive, if only because there are liberating deeds done in eloquent silence and talk can conceal a significant silence.”

However, one groom that I interviewed described how helpless he felt when the wedding speakers started ordering him around.

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First the speaker on his side told him it was time to go to the center stage area. Then the bride’s family speaker told him to go back and sit down because it was not yet time. The wedding speakers are sometimes referred to as ababyeyi (parents). The wedding speakers of the past were revered community elders, older men known for their speaking ability. The rhetorical feature of silence reflects the patriarchal hierarchy whereby the wedding speakers sit at the top, as elders who possess the talent of speaking well, the elder aunties who sometimes speak and who historically played an important role in preparing the brides for marriage, sit above the grooms, who are seen as youth for a time even after they marry; and followed by the brides who do manage to obtain a greater status as married women, rank below all these others. Olson also emphasizes that speech contains some element of power because “speech and other uses of language, by implication, represent freedom, visibility, and life.”

Youth, as a rule do not speak before elders.

**Kwinenga (Evaluation)**

The first kwinenga (evaluation) I attended was an extremely short, very informal activity such that had someone not told me that kwinenga is an important part of every wedding, I might have missed its significance. On that particular day, I had attended the civil ceremony and gusaba no gukwa earlier in the day with a friend who had volunteered to accompany to help with translation. It was after dark by the time we arrived back at the groom’s house for kwinenga and I was exhausted. We sat outside on plastic garden chairs in a small group consisting of three aunts and two uncles of the groom, the brother and sister of the groom, and two family friends. When a family member came to us and

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asked what we would like to drink, I noticed that the aunties asked for beer. Relishing a cold beer after our long day and looking forward to relaxing, I also asked for beer. Once our drinks had been served, I wrapped my shawl around my shoulders and suddenly noticed the groom’s brother stood up in the dark (there was a dim porch light nearby, but I could only see the faces of the women sitting on either side of me) and began to speak. *Kwinenga* is conducted in Kinyarwanda, and other than telling me that they were evaluating the *gusaba no gukwa*, my companion did not say much. I think she was also exhausted after our full day of ceremonies and traveling. When the groom’s brother had finished speaking, one of his uncles said a few words, followed by the auntie sitting next to me. The groom’s brother responded, and that was it. Over within a matter of minutes!

The groom did not speak. In fact, I do not even think he was sitting with us. The bride did not speak because she was not there. She would not come to live at the groom’s house until after the church ceremony. At the time, I was thinking this ceremony must only be for the older people because none of the groom’s attendants or friends were sitting with us, either.

The word *kwinenga* comes from the noun *inenga* which means “imperfection, fault, or stain.”¹²⁴ Most participants refer to *kwinenga* as an evaluation or debrief. The word *kwinenga* is also applied to government practices, known as “collective social audits,” which offer a method of “social accountability.”¹²⁵ *Kwinenga* occurs after every part of the marriage process that involves the speakers. I attended three *kwinenga* for the

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¹²⁴ Kinyarwanda-English Dictionary, s.v. “inenga”  

¹²⁵ Wellars Gasamagera, “The Role of Parliaments in Setting Priorities: Rwanda Perspective,” *Political and Good Governance Committee and Rwanda Parliament ICT Steering Committee*  
same couple, the first after *gufata irembo*, the second following *gusaba no gukwa*, and the last after the church wedding and reception. The bride’s family separates from the groom’s family and each group holds a separate *kwinenga*. I discovered that the length varies from a few minutes to a few hours. One I attended commenced at midnight and did not finish until after 2 a.m. Location also varies, although it is customary for *kwinenga* to be held at the bride’s parents’ home and the groom’s home. However, I know of one *kwinenga* that was held in a van after *gusaba no gukwa* as the groom’s family and friends traveled home. I also attended one *kwinenga* that was held at the home of friends of the brother of the bride because her parents were deceased and her brother’s home was too far out of town.

Characterizing *kwinenga* as an evaluation lends itself to the idea that participants must be measuring their performance against a set of explicit or implicit rules. For example, at one *kwinenga* I attended, after the groom’s representatives left, the bride’s speaker announced, “Now we are starting another step of looking back to the way we behaved, seeing what was good or seeing where we have gone beyond the limit.” Determining whether their behavior is “good” or exceeds “limits” relies on explicit and implicit communication rules. Rules, according to Shimanoff, share three assumptions about communication. First, we must share the assumption that communication is governed by rules. Second, the rules tend to be context-specific, and finally, communication rules vary from culture to culture. Rules indicate “what behavior is obligated or preferred or prohibited.”

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follow them because we have internalized them. In fact, people may only become aware of a rule once it is broken.

The content of the kwinenga as well as who speaks varied greatly from one gathering to the next. However, I observed that when the wedding speaker is present, he is the one who begins the evaluation. Thus, we might surmise that one rule governs who speaks and in what order. With the exception of the Master of Ceremonies, the two wedding speakers are meant to do the majority of speaking. Youth, especially unmarried ones, and women are not meant to speak unless specifically directed to do so. At one kwinenga, an unmarried 30-year-old man was chastised by the bride’s speaker for suggesting during gufata irembo that they speak in English so the groom’s representatives could understand since they were from Uganda. He also told the groom’s speaker the bride’s name when he could not remember it. During the debrief, the bride’s speaker said to the young man, “You shouldn’t have intervened to tell them the name! You shouldn’t. How can you explain someone who is asking for a girl’s hand and he does not know her name?” Unmarried youth, even if as this particular young man was in his 30s, do not possess the status that comes with age and experience to speak on these things. Had this young man’s suggestion for speaking English and his subsequent telling of the bride’s name been made by one of the older men, I think it would have been considered and maybe even accepted. During kwinenga, the father of the bride stated, “I think we should have interacted with the guests, spoken to them in different languages that they use.” He was not chastised or challenged as the young man was when he made this comment.
After the wedding speaker offers some remarks to begin *kwinenga*, he will designate one of the older male relatives to speak. One wedding speaker evaluated the behavior of the audience, critiqued his performance, and then told the brother of the bride, “allow me to give you back the speech in this house; welcoming also your comments and criticisms them being bad or good.” The rule for this is that the wedding speaker not only speaks first at the debrief, but he also decides who should speak and in what order. However, at another *kwinenga* I attended, the bride’s brother spoke first and then gave the microphone to the bride’s speaker’s assistant as the bride’s speaker was not able to attend *kwinenga*. That particular ceremony lasted 2 hours, beginning at midnight. The brother went around the entire room, saying a few words about each guest and his or her contributions, then in turn, asked each person present, including myself to say a few words.

Speakers may offer a critique of themselves or the audience members, and they may invite the audience to speak as well. For example, one wedding speaker said, “I would like to thank you for the way you behaved: you showed respect, discipline, and nobody has tried to talk when it was not the right time. All showed you knew when and how to talk.” The same speaker said on another occasion, “I would like to start thanking [the bride’s] family. Thanks for this time of evaluating what we did and what we planned. I would like to thank [the bride’s brother] on behalf of the bride’s family. As a critique of himself he said, “I was assigned a task of being the one they were asking for the bride, and we did it in a cultured manner, and we conversed as noble people.” As demonstrated by the previous examples, Rwandans have a long history of rhetorical performance governed by explicit and implicit rules.
One of the most important rules I observed could be stated thus: Challenge the
visitors, but if they falter, help them along. There is continual tension between
demonstrating verbal prowess to challenge the visitors and being a good host, which I
witnessed on several occasions being mediated by offering help. This reflects the *Ubuntu*
philosophy in practice. For example, after a series of challenging moves by the bride’s
speaker, I could see that the groom’s speaker was at a loss for words. In fact he was
rescued by his brother, who admonished the bride’s speaker to “help me and let us talk as
noble men.” The bride’s speaker responded with allusions to three warriors, the last of
whom, *Inkataza kurekera,* “does not fear to confront the first” as if to remind the groom’s
speakers that the challenge was a necessary battle and they must not give up so easily.
The groom’s speakers continued to struggle so the bride’s speaker finally extended an
invitation to go ahead and state his reason for coming. He said, “I see you are really
overwhelmed and I don’t want my laughter to be accompanied by bad emotions which
can lead to crying. So I allow him to say his speech.” This example illustrates how the
bride’s speaker watched carefully, pushed gently, but knew exactly when to relent. He
explained to me that the speaker must know whom he is speaking to so that he can speak
to his opponent’s level. He must provoke without going too far. In another *kwinenga,*
the bride’s family censored the speaker for going too far.

When the father of the bride’s turn to speak came up, he said, “I did not like the
way you harassed their main speaker.” Another man said,

> We have our ways of doing things. We have our way of respecting the culture.
> But remember we have a principle of respecting guests in our culture. Those
> people are not Rwandese. They did their best to fit in the Rwandan culture You
should have given them some respect. There might come someone who is even
less experienced than the one they brought today! What will you do? Will you
chase them away?

Even the mother of the bride added her thoughts, saying, “When they fail, you have to
help them.” Like the metacommentary rhetorical feature, kwinenga presents an occasion
for the speakers to step outside of their performance and offer commentary or criticism.
Imisango is a noun used to describe public speaking. It is significant to note that the
word comes from the verb gusanga which means “to join with people” or “to encounter
others” or “to arrive at the same time as an event takes place.” Imisango is one aspect
of Rwandese culture that predates colonialism.

Six other key rhetorical features are discussed in greater depth within the context
of gusaba no gukwa in Chapter 3. They include indirection, more commonly referred to
as “beating around the bush.” I have termed the prominent features of gusaba involving
indirection, Trick Ceremonies and Hindrances. Cummings and Roy indicate that
“indirection has been well-documented in African rhetorics.” Such rhetorical behavior
“arouses listener interest and participation.” Repetition, used by both bride’s family
speaker and the groom’s family speaker, is found throughout and appears to function so
as to emphasize key parts of the ceremony. Double entendre and irony, used creatively
by the speakers on both sides offer a humorous, entertaining aspect to the speeches.

Finally, the performance of Ubuntu implies what Collins terms “rhetorical obligation”

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127 Kinyarwanda-English Dictionary, s.v. “gusanga”
128 Melbourne Cummings and Roy Abhik, “Manifestations of Afrocentricity in Rap Music,”
Howard Journal of Communications 13, no. 1 (2002), 141.
129 Daniel F. Collins, “Audience in Afrocentric Rhetoric: Promoting Human Agency and Social
Change,” in Alternative Rhetorics: Challenges to the Rhetorical Tradition, ed. Laura Gray-Rosendale and
defined as “a kind of social relation between rhetor and audience that emphasizes sense of obligation to one another regardless of divergent outlooks.” Each of these rhetorical features is used to varying degrees by all three of the wedding speakers, Dusenge, Jean Pierre, and Oliver.

Chapter 3: The Performance of Gusaba (Introduction)

In Rwanda, a young couple desiring to marry will begin by privately introducing each other to their respective parents and immediate family members. In the past, marriages were often arranged by the parents. I did not meet any recently married couples who had been part of an arranged marriage. They all chose mates for themselves. However, family approval is paramount. If the family approves, a date will be set for the ceremonial introduction called gufata irembo. Gufata irembo marks the ceremonial performance of the private introduction to immediate family members. If all goes well with gufata irembo, then a date is set for gusaba no gukwa. While gufata irembo marks the private introduction of the couple, gusaba no gukwa marks the public introduction.

Unlike the religious marriage ceremony, which may be conducted wherever it is convenient for the majority of guests, gusaba no gukwa must be conducted in the town of the bride’s parents. The emphasis on the family as a group is ritualized immediately upon their arrival at the bride’s parents’ house. As the groom’s friends and family arrive, they gather outside on the driveway or in the yard, waiting for some time before they enter together. They file past the bride’s family and friends who are already seated. The ceremony is usually conducted outside under several tents with seats are arranged in rows facing the center stage area. On one end is a special seating area reserved for the bride and groom and their attendants. The bride’s family and friends sit on one side of the stage area facing the groom’s family and friends. The groom’s family and friends’ entrance as a group and the segregated seating arrangements emphasized to me the ritualization of the ceremony as a negotiation between two groups, as did the absence of the bride during
a large part of the ceremony and the position of the groom, who sits in the back row on his side of the stage.

The two wedding speakers, on the other hand, sit in the center of the front rows of their respective sides, and each has a microphone. One of the most important parts of gusaba no gukwa involves the discourses between the families. The bride’s family and the groom’s family each procure the services of a professional speaker to orchestrate gusaba no gukwa. The wedding speakers are skilled rhetors who engage in a ritualized series of verbal fencing matches that are both aesthetic and rhetorical. In his thesis about the Rwandan marriage process, Serge Gatsinzi, translating from Bigirumwami, described the wedding ceremony as a “drama-like situation created to teach and entertain as a reflection of the traditional cultural values of the Rwandan society.”[131] The speakers engage in a dialogue of exchange with each other and with select members of the audience. They are dramatic performers, but their purpose is not simply to entertain; they must also be persuasive. Ultimately, the groom’s speaker must persuade the audience that the family is a good match for their daughter. Although I never witnessed a wedding speaker’s failure to persuade, one of the wedding speakers I interviewed said that were such a thing to occur, they would just find someone else to speak, to help out the speaker who was not doing well. Gusaba, the first part of the ceremony, centers upon the rhetorical performance of the wedding speakers. But the wedding speakers’ influence goes beyond the immediate task at hand.

The fact that the wedding speakers make use of stock stories, repeated as part of *gusaba no gukwa*, produces memory and reinforces social roles and relations. Carey suggests we “first produce the world by symbolic work and then take up residence in the world we have produced.” The social implications of the wedding speakers’ words and actions constitute culture. Oral stories may share certain stock phrases or even characters that community members are familiar with, but it is the storyteller who decides how to arrange and build them so as to have a particular influence upon the audience. The deliberate efforts of the wedding speakers to influence through the choices they make are why I characterize their performances as “rhetorical.” *Rhetoric*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains, “is the study of all the processes by which people influence each other through symbols, regardless of the intent of the source. A rhetorical act, however, is an intentional, created, polished attempt to overcome the obstacles in a given situation with a specific audience on a given issue to achieve a particular end.” Since the speakers’ performance is polished and intentional, I emphasize it as a rhetorical act. In addition, the oral performance of the stories is constitutive of culture because, like rhetoric in Campbell’s view, it potentially “creates virtual experience, alters perception, explains, formulates belief, initiates action and maintains action.” The rhetorical performance demonstrates a high level of sophistication as the speakers manage the tension between formulaic ritual and spontaneous creativity. They maintain a delicate balance between meeting audience expectations and demonstrating skill and dexterity with language.

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134 Ibid., 13.
Yet, while a thematic analysis of the stories told during gusaba no gukwa presents one framework to examine Rwandan culture, ritual presents another framework through which to view cultural influences upon the ways we socially construct and reconstruct our worlds. Bell notes that ritual performance brings synchrony and diachrony together. She suggests that ritual opens up a framework for understanding meaning in the present context together with meaning in its historical context, making visible the “invisible process of homologization” between thought and action.\textsuperscript{135} In this chapter, I seek to “open the space between analysis and action” through my discussion of ways the speakers’ words communicate themes and ritually do things as well.\textsuperscript{136} Drawing on A.L. Austin’s idea of “performative utterances” which go beyond description, expression, and statement, words also do something. For example, in a Western marriage ceremony, when the bride says, “I do” she is not “reporting on a marriage: [she is] indulging in it.”\textsuperscript{137} When the bride’s family speaker says, “we give you our daughter,” he is acting, not just speaking.

“Game of Wit”

Over lunch one day in the summer of 2009, in Kimironko, Rwanda, I listened intently as a Rwandan university student explained his memoir (capstone paper for undergraduates). He described how he was inspired by his sister’s recent marriage to write about Rwandan “traditional” wedding ceremonies. He showed me photographs and video on his laptop computer and then began to explain to me something about how two

\textsuperscript{135} Bell, \textit{Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice}, 21.
\textsuperscript{136} Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” 145.
\textsuperscript{137} Austin, \textit{How to Do Things with Words}, 6.
speakers at the wedding engage in “debate.” “No, no,” insisted his faculty advisor. “You need to think of a better English word to describe it.”

Three years later, back in Rwanda for six months doing my fieldwork, friends invited me to their home for dinner and unexpectedly, that university student, now a teacher was also a dinner guest. We were treated to a feast of chicken, rice, beans, beef, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, and boiled cassava root. Since the food literally covered the entire dining table, we filled our plates and went back to the sitting area to eat. Then my friends brought out their wedding photos and as I looked through the albums, one for gusaba no gukwa and the other for their church wedding, the conversation turned quite naturally to weddings. I remember thinking how fortunate I was to have friends who knew my research interests and were so willing to help—to open their own lives to my research.

Eventually, I took the opportunity to ask the former university student what word he finally selected for his paper. “Game of wit,” he replied. “I used game because I was trying to capture the playful, friendly nature of the exchange.” The student’s characterization of gusaba no gukwa as a game emphasizes the entertainment aspect of the verbal exchange. The word game also captures the performative nature of the speaking that occurs at Rwandese wedding ceremonies as well as suggests a competitive aspect. However, since the outcome is a foregone conclusion (permission to marry the bride will be granted), the competition is more about demonstrating verbal wit and skill than winning or losing.

Paul, a 12-year-old boy at one ceremony I attended, explained, “They tell lies, but it’s sweet.” Audience members know the performance is largely a verbal game. The
speakers may be playing a game, but it does not diminish the importance of the wedding event. Even though we are accustomed to see play as the opposite of seriousness, Huizinga notes, “Play can be performed in the most perfect seriousness.” After attending my first wedding in Rwanda, I wrote in my notebook, “Weddings are serious business in Rwanda!” Huizinga explains that play creates “a feeling of being ‘apart together’, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world.” Playing together in this way promotes social bonding. A Protestant minister I interviewed explains the purpose of the oral wedding exchange as “for amusement; to make the ceremony more enjoyable.” However, he also indicated another important purpose, echoing what many people I talked to suggested, that gusaba no gukwa, builds “good relationships between families.” Consequently, the performances of gusaba no gukwa are perceived by some as more than just entertaining play.

“Test of Wit”

Others characterize gusaba no gukwa as a “test of wit.” In an NPR interview, Charles Karachi, a wedding speaker, explained, “They [the parents searching for the best husband for their daughter] want somebody who has a lot of wits, who should be able to have a lot of, you know, skills and tactics to be able to meet the challenges of the world.” A Rwandan university professor affirms the “test of wit” concept, explaining that the family of the bride wants to ensure that their daughter is going to a family with patience. He observes, “I, myself, might get so angry if I were the groom; however, the

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139 Ibid., 12.
gusaba is a test of my patience and how serious I am about this girl.” The concept of a
test was echoed by the husband of an older couple who explained that the groom must
“defend” himself in a “clever way” because the bride’s family wants to “know whether
the family they are going to give their daughter to is a good family.” Imagining the
gusaba performance as a test helps to illustrate how it can build good relationships
between families. The groom’s family must demonstrate they possess the wit necessary
to deal with challenges creatively and calmly as they arise. If they pass the test, they
form a kind of alliance with the bride’s family.

Characterizing the gusaba performance as a “test of wit” also demonstrates how
the words spoken constitute actions. As Strine suggests, “performance-centered
scholarship remains uniquely suited to exploring the dynamic features of literary forms as
a complex interplay of pleasure and power having far-reaching social consequences.”141
The complex interplay reflects a turn characterized by Conquergood from thinking about
performance as a “distinctive art” of culture to performance as an “agency” of culture as
well.142 Conceptualizing the gusaba portion of the performance of gusaba no gukwa as
entertainment reflects its pleasure aspect whereas thinking of it as a “test” or a
“challenge” illustrates its social consequences as a powerful agency of culture.

Some of the “tests” come in the form of stories. In an interview I conducted with
a recently married Rwandan couple, Alice explained that the stories told during gusaba
“are just stories. They [the bride’s side] say such stories for challenging the family [of the
groom]. No real things. If the family has a good explanation, they can agree with them,

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141 Mary Strine, “Mapping the ‘Cultural Turn’ in Performance Studies,” in Future of Performance

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and give them their daughter.” As a member of the audience, Alice recognizes that the stories are made up, but she also draws attention to the fact that the stories serve a purpose, or play a role, in challenging or testing the family. The manner in which the groom’s family responds illustrates how they interpret cultural norms. One cultural norm that people I talked with repeated frequently was the taboo against public displays of anger. “Igifura is a word we use to call someone who gets too angry,” explains Theophile, recently married. The tests at gusaba, he clarifies, function as “a kind of insult” to see how well the groom’s family can refrain from getting angry. Americans might recognize in this kind of verbal challenge elements of “playing the dozens,” more popularly known as “yo momma” joking. Smitherman explains, “The dozens taught you how to chill—Black folk could ill afford to be hot. It’s a lesson in survival by one’s verbal skills and adeptness at rhyme, rhetoric, and reason.”

Dusenge, one of the wedding speakers I interviewed, uses the word guhubuka, which means to rush into something without thinking, to explain that gusaba no gukwa teaches the importance of thinking before you act. The wedding speaker for the bride’s side tries to provoke the groom’s side so they can demonstrate their ability to think before they act. However, unlike playing the dozens, there are no direct verbal attacks. The stories are told to demonstrate a problem or a characteristic behavior that is deemed inhuman or impolite, and the groom’s side must acknowledge the bad behavior and explain it away using words. They do not fire an attack at the bride’s family in the confrontational manner that participants in “playing the dozens” might do. Subtle, creative redirection is prized above all else.

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Alice surmised that there are two important reasons why the groom’s family is challenged through the ritual telling of stories. First, the test in general ensures that the groom’s family is good enough, or worthy of the bride, and second, the particular challenges posed ensure that the groom and his family cannot get angry; to see that he can think of a way out of the problem with wit and skill to get out of a bind. Nick, Alice’s husband, interjected, “Patience and the ability to talk your way out of a bind is important in our culture. We have a saying, *abanyamusozi igifura*, which we use to refer to people who are short tempered and quick to become angry.” The Kinyarwanda word *abanya* means people, while *musozi* refers to mountains, and *igifura* is used to denote an oven or kiln for preparing bricks. He went on to explain that the proverb characterizes people who are quick to anger, who are unable to respond well to a verbal challenge as mountain people who, as a result of their isolation, take joking literally and become angry (hot tempered as connoted by *igifura*, which is a very hot oven). As an example, he told the story of a wedding he attended where a German man was marrying a Rwandese woman. During the *gusaba* part, a story was told that during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis, the *muzungu* left Rwandans to die. At that point in the ceremony, he stood up and stormed out refusing to participate any longer. The families were forced to cut short the performance, calm the groom down, and finish the wedding quickly. The German groom’s behavior illustrates his inability to see the playful joking nature of the challenge. By showing anger, he failed the test. This example also illustrates the realistic details of the stories that are told. Whites did vacate Rwanda in massive numbers at the start of the 1994 genocide. However, the German probably became angry because he did not wish to identify with the foreigners who abandoned Rwandans at that time. He missed the
opportunity for his speaker to use his wits to offer a plausible story to answer the difficult accusation. Certain topics, such as genocide, might be taboo, but they have a way of cropping up in the stories anyway.

The preceding observations illustrate a common thread among many Rwandese, who tend to view the performance of the gusaba portion as a challenge to the groom’s family and an opportunity for the groom’s family to demonstrate their oral acuity as a valuable skill in and of itself, as well as a marker of a patient family, of a “good” family. In the precolonial itorero schools, students were taught to speak well. Taylor observes, “Performances are not merely reflections of everyday communication but also a means of shaping and generating communicative practice.” The performance of gusaba no gukwa demonstrates the cultural art of entertainment, reinforces and creates culture, and illustrates admirable communicative practice. My fieldnotes and transcripts from the gusaba no gukwa I attended and my interview discourses exemplifies the ways Rwandese culture shapes and is shaped by the performance of gusaba no gukwa. During the gusaba portion of the ceremony, I observed three phases of games or testing, which for the purposes of discussion, I have called Trick-Ceremonies, Hindrances, and Accusations.

**Trick-Ceremonies**

One test of wit I observed occurs when the groom’s family arrived. At the gusaba no gukwa I attended, the bride’s family welcomed them to participate in some other ceremony such as a baptism, birthday, or anniversary. The test of wit comes in skillfully turning the discussion away from the trick-ceremony to ask for the bride. The rules for

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the groom’s wedding speaker, Jean Pierre explains, require him to “accept first” their invitation to whatever ceremony they describe and then “agree to participate.” After doing these two things, the speaker can try to introduce the real reason they have come. The examples that follow from my fieldnotes illustrate this pattern of acceptance, agreement, and turning.

As we travel to gusaba no gukwa in Rwamagana, in the Eastern Province, Oliver instructs our driver to turn right down a narrow dirt road. Many parked cars and SUVs line either side of the road. The cars reveal two things to me; first, the participants in this wedding are wealthy. At other weddings I attended, the bride and groom’s family would hire cars for transporting the wedding party and perhaps the parents, but few wedding guests owned their own cars. They either walked, took taxi buses, or motos (motorcycle taxis). I count over 30 cars as we drive along the road leading to the wedding location. Second, the sheer number of cars indicates the likelihood that this will be a large wedding since the groom’s friends and family have not even arrived yet. Oliver predicts, “This will be the best wedding!” elevating my anticipation.

We exit the car and walk toward the opening in the fence. A temporary reed fence encloses a large field upon which the gusaba no gukwa will take place. Two gentlemen in dark suits wearing tags with the word PROTOCOL written on them greet us. One of them leads us to our seats. As we walk, I whisper to Sara, my translator, “What does PROTOCOL mean?” She replies, “They are the ones who make sure everyone does what they are supposed to, like sitting in the right place.” Oliver sits behind the table in the front row designated for the wedding speakers. We sit in the second row behind him. Two older gentlemen sit beside Oliver. The protocol greeters
serve an important role during *gusaba no gukwa*, making sure people do what is expected of them. Bloch observed ceremonial speech acts among people in Madagascar and what they might imply both in terms of speaker intention and in terms of the implications of the type of speech which they employ. He notes that often times the procedure is as important as, or more important, than the content. Procedure plays an important role in *gusaba no gukwa*, and the wedding speakers are the head of protocol in a sense because they guide the ceremony from start to finish. What the wedding speakers say as well as what they do reveals much about culture.

After the groom’s group enters and takes their seats, and the MC welcomes them and instructs drinks to be served to all the guests, I hear drumbeats and singing as a dance troupe made up of six older women dressed in hot pink silk *umushanana*, looking as though they are all over 60 years of age, glide gracefully into the center stage area. They dance while the drummers sing, “distinguished guests, you are welcome here. We greet you all.” The MC continues, “These people who are here know how to dance. They are really good at it! Can we clap for them?” Enthusiastic applause precedes the MC’s announcement:

This is a troop from Buganza known as *Umuco* [Culture] and there is a lot that they will show us today. After officially welcoming our guests that was done by the chief of our family, the dancing troop’s performance, and drinks, Mr. Bugabo sir, I was asked by Mr. Bazatisinda, who is the chief of the delegation that is here from Mayaga, to give him some time to talk to us.

By using the old precolonial names for regions no longer known as Buganza and Mayaga, the MC encourages audiences to think, perhaps nostalgically, of historical times before the disruptions caused by colonialism occurred. He continues:

[The leader of the groom’s delegation] said we have welcomed him and he is so happy that he wants to express it by the words of his mouth. For that reason, Mr. Bazatisinda, you are given time to talk to us. However, before you start talking you should remember that we had a program we were following when you came. So, please, I would like to remind you that whatever you want to say, you do not have to go out of our program. If you need that I remind you about the program, you have seen the cultural troop dancing. That is because we have gathered here to talk about how we can preserve our dignity. We were talking about Agaciro Development Fund and I hope you know what that is all about. So please when you speak give us some ideas on Agaciro Development Fund and nothing else.

Two of the ceremonies I attended announced the trick-ceremony as an Agaciro Development Fundraiser. The government-initiated Agaciro Development Fund aims to increase Rwanda’s financial autonomy from Western countries, encouraging Rwandans to make voluntary donations to fund Vision 2020 projects to “drive their own development...giving the entire Rwandan population a higher level of direct ownership in the nation’s projects.”\textsuperscript{146} As of the middle of 2013, the fund had raised Rwf28 billion ($43 million).\textsuperscript{147} The word \textit{agaciro} can be translated as dignity. In the discourse quoted

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above, after summarizing the events up to this point, the MC reveals the trick-ceremony as a fundraiser for the Agaciro Development fund and invites the groom’s group to participate. He also gives them permission to speak but only after reminding them twice not to go off topic. His reminders are ironic in view of the fact that everyone knows going off topic is exactly what the groom’s speaker must do.

Notice how the groom’s family speaker, in response, acknowledges the trick-ceremony and agrees to participate, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for changing the topic to asking for a bride.

Thanks Mr. MC. You really speak good Kinyarwanda, and you are a real child from Buganza. Dear siblings, Mr. Bugabo Francois, as that young man (MC) said, with my companions, we are from Mayaga, with Mr. Habineza Herve’s family who come from Ruhango district in Kinazi. As Masabo sang, people from Mayaga are peacemakers! We also bring peace for you. I heard that you are in the middle of an Agaciro [Dignity] program, and we will discuss it together, but first of all let me and my family thank you and your family as people from Buganza for how you cared for us until now.

After introducing the family he represents, Mr. Habineza Herve, where they come from, and reassuring the bride’s family that they are “peacemakers,” the groom’s family speaker acknowledges the Agaciro (Dignity) Development fundraiser and agrees to participate, carefully following the procedures of the ritual. The last part of his speech, where he thanks them, also skillfully opens the way to offer a gift of beer as an expression of their gratitude. At this point, the audience responds with thunderous applause. Perhaps as a way of showing agreement with the speaker, perhaps as a way of
demonstrating their gratitude, or perhaps in anticipation of the next move the groom’s family speaker will make.

In the first line of the next part, the groom’s family speaker ties the trick-ceremony together with offering the beer that will allow him to turn the topic to asking for the bride. I saw this approach, making the beer a gift for the trick-ceremony, used with varying degrees of success. The groom’s family speaker continues:

According to our culture and what that young man [MC] said that we must keep our agaciro [dignity], we cannot continue to discuss without giving you something. As you see, Herve told me that in the past when he came to visit you, he brought beer so that you may pass a wonderful party, the same as you did when you came to visit our family! Today, before we continue our discussions, let me give you a beer from Mr. Habineza Herve, and then we can go ahead with our discussions.

Here the groom’s family speaker offers the gift of beer as a donation for the Agaciro (Dignity) Development fundraiser, knowing that if the bride’s family speaker opens the bottle and they share a drink, he will be able to introduce the message (asking for the bride) that comes with the beer. This is a gamble on his part because if the bride’s family speaker accepts it purely as a donation to the fund and does not open it so that they can share a drink, then the opportunity to turn the topic will be lost. This happened at another gusaba no gukwa I attended where the trick-ceremony was a wedding, and when the groom’s family speaker offered the beer as a gift for the wedding, the bride’s family speaker took the bottle and handed it off to an assistant to deliver directly to the pseudo married couple. In this way, his actions forced the groom’s family speaker to come up
with another excuse for offering yet another bottle. However, at the current ceremony, the bride’s family speaker accepts the bottle and opens it so they can share a drink. As he accepts the bottle, he says, “Maybe this is peace you bring for us!” To which the groom’s speaker responds:

We, people from Mayaga, we are peacemakers! According to history, we depended upon you; today, we are again going to depend upon you. Someone told me that the first cow called Rutahe is from you, which means that you are good people. As you are good at offering, I hope you will give me a cow and a bride also.

The groom’s family speaker carefully connects with the bride’s family speaker’s comment by affirming that they are indeed peacemakers, offers a compliment, and then seemingly effortlessly, he switches the topic to asking for a bride. What work does this initial part of the gusaba do? What is accomplished by setting up a trick-ceremony and then seeing if the groom’s family speaker can successfully introduce the real reason for being there? About the bride’s family, Grace explains, “You have to show you are tough. You cannot let them just take your girl.” So in one sense, the bride’s family also demonstrates their worth by setting up a good challenge for the groom’s family.

At another gusaba no gukwa ceremony I attended, the bride’s family speaker announced that they were celebrating three parties and invited the groom’s family to participate in all of them. As they worked their way through each party, first a birthday, then a naming, then Agaciro, there were ample opportunities for the bride’s family speaker to challenge and insult the groom’s family speaker. With regards to the groom’s family, Theophile explains, “If they really want her, they will work hard.” The bride’s
family creates a problem to be solved, a kind of riddle that the groom’s family speaker must use spoken words to solve. As I trace the movement of the performances in the transcripts and my fieldnotes, I think of a chess game because the speakers plan a series of moves to get from the beginning to changing the topic. The groom’s family speaker cannot directly announce their desire for a bride when they arrive. Instead, the speakers must map out a plan to get from the trick-ceremony to asking for the bride through a series of carefully orchestrated steps.

**Hindrances**

If the beginning appears like a series of carefully orchestrated steps, the next phase that I call *hindrances* usually goes quite quickly as demonstrated by the short, quick exchanges by the speakers. Once the groom’s side reveals the real purpose of asking for the bride, and states her name, it is customary for the bride’s side to deny that she is available. Continuing the challenges, according to Jean Pierre Akimana, a wedding speaker, reveals if the groom’s family is patient, “to see how they behave in a difficult situation.” He speculates these impediments are additional challenges that show “that the girl has great importance” because they “have to struggle to get her.” At some of the *gusaba* ceremonies I witnessed the same impediment, namely that the bride they were asking for was not there so they offered other girls or women in her place. The bride might be away studying in the Seychelles, off in Rome preparing to become a Catholic nun, or already married. If the bride’s family offers other daughters in her place, the groom’s speaker must respond without offending but must also show that they will not sway from the bride they have asked for. At one *gusaba no gukwa* I attended, two young girls were offered as the only two daughters they had. The groom’s family speaker
thanked them but said they were much too young to get married. He reiterated that the bride they were asking for “was old enough.”

Another hindrance presented is that the bride is too young to marry. The bride’s family speaker says, “I would like to tell you that Umwari is there but she is twenty years old and Rwandan law states that women can only marry when they reach the age of 21.”

The groom’s family speaker responds that in special cases, the Attorney General Minister of Justice can authorize the marriage.

At one gusaba no gukwa I attended, the bride’s family speaker alluded to those other two hindrances and then introduced one of his own. He declared:

I will not use those unwise words telling you that our daughter is still too young to marry or that she is not around because if she were not around I should have told you when you came the last time for gufata irembo [the engagement]. Our daughter is here. But I’d like to tell you that though she is around, I don’t know whether you passed by a crowd on your way here, people came at 3:00 to ask us for the bride have just left here! So I don’t know how you will proceed.

The bride’s family speaker set up a challenge whereby they had already given their daughter to a group who had come at 3:00, and suggested the error had been made because the groom’s family was supposed to come at 3:00, so they thought the people who came were the groom’s family. He also suggested that the groom’s family go find the people to see if they could come to some agreement. However, the groom’s family speaker replies, “No, I cannot. I came to see you and I cannot go looking for somebody else. How can I go discuss with that other family? I could do it if I do not trust you, but as I really do, I am sure that you cannot change the decision you took last time when we
came for her parents’ blessing [gufata irembo].” The groom’s family speaker calls into question the bride’s family’s integrity by reminding them that they had already promised to give the bride and set the date for gusaba no gukwa at the gufata irembo ceremony. Thus, even if they had mistakenly given their daughter to the wrong people, they were honor bound to keep their promise to this family. That creates a new challenge for the bride’s family because they must show they are trustworthy. The bride’s family speaker tries to defend by simply saying it is not their fault because the groom’s family arrived late. The groom’s family speaker counters: “No! We did not arrive late! We reached the gate on time. We were just waiting for you to welcome us in. The ladies you sent to welcome us told us that the sun had heated our seats too much for sitting so I had to obey until they gave us the go ahead to enter.”

The groom’s family speaker sent a similar, but more subtle reminder to the bride’s family to keep their promise in another gusaba no gukwa:

The last time I was in this family to take the gate (Gufata irembo) for a bride, I was well received. The bride’s name is Kamariza Jose Lyne. I got the gate easily, without any complications… [you told us] “go back home and come back on the 2nd February. At that time, we will be able to receive you better and the family will be ready for you.” This is reason why I return today. I am well received with my family. For that, I would like to tell all people here (Abakwe and abasangwa) to thank you because what you say is what you do.

Each of these hindrances sets up a challenge for the groom’s side to show they are trustworthy people who keep their word. The repetition of similar impediments which test the integrity of the families suggests that they want to know that their daughter will
go to live among people who possess *inyangamugayo* (integrity). At the previous ceremony, *gufata irembo*, the families have agreed to the marriage of their son and daughter, approving the engagement or betrothal of the couple. If the groom’s family accepts one of the other daughters who is offered, they will show they are not serious about the bride they are asking for, that they cannot keep their promises. In a similar way, if the family of the bride does not present the bride they have agreed to at the previous meeting, they show they are deceptive. While an individual might be called out for being deceptive, his or her behavior is perceived as being representative of the entire group. Appiah notes, “To understand how values work, you must see them not as guiding us as individuals on our own, but as guiding people who are trying to share their lives.”

Once the groom’s family speaker has demonstrated skill at moving past all the hindrances, the bride’s family gives conditional approval pending any accusations which might call into question the groom’s family’s values. At this point in the *gusaba* portion of the ceremony, a call is usually made for accusations against the groom’s family.

**Accusation Stories**

In 2011, at the first *gusaba no gukwa* I attend in Muhanga, in the Southern Province, Mama James and I sit in plastic lawn chairs behind the groom’s family speaker. Mama James and I met the previous day and today she helps me to follow the *gusaba no gukwa* by translating what is said. At this *gusaba no gukwa*, we are with the groom’s side. The plastic lawn chairs are arranged in orderly rows and we sit facing the bride’s family and friends. The disc jockey stands on my left with his music, speakers, and other equipment arranged on the porch adjacent to the house. I see the special area reserved for...
the bride and groom and their attendants to my right (see Figure 3). That area sits empty now. The groom and his attendants sit behind me in the back row while the bride is still inside the house.

The welcome has been completed, along with the drinks from the bride’s side to

![Diagram of Gusaba no Gukwa seating arrangements.]

Figure 3. *Gusaba no Gukwa* seating arrangements.
welcome us, the beer that brings the message has been shared by the wedding speakers, the name of the groom has been revealed, and we have asked for the bride by her name. I watch our speaker inch up to the edge of his seat, a look of anticipation on his face. He parts his lips as if to speak, but stops to continue listening to the bride’s family speaker standing across from us, speaking as he gestures to his right as an older woman stands up slowly. Dressed in a silk green, pink, and black umushanana, her face etched with lines that come with old age, her eyes seem to twinkle with a knowing glance as she looks across at our speaker. He stands while speaking, pulls the older gentleman sitting next to him to his feet, and together they run across the stage area, greet the woman, and she and the older gentleman embrace as the audience laughs and claps. Their laughter is infectious.

I laugh and clap along with them. At the time, I did not understand the words being spoken, but the performance communicated to me that something had been worked out by these two elderly people. I knew their embrace, followed by the laughter, signaled something important. Writing about the anti-structure associated with communitas, Edith Turner explains, “collective laughter does not require a differentiation between speaker and listener/audience, in which one ‘actively’ speaks and the others must ‘passively’ listen in order to understand. Through the blurring and blending of voices in collective laughter, the sound of equity is achieved.”149 The collective laughter generated during the accusation stories creates and reinforces social bonds. Even as an outsider, I feel connected to these families, especially when we all are laughing. I lean over toward Mama James and ask her to tell me what has just been said. She tells me the bride’s

149 Edith Turner, Communitas, 28.
family speaker said, “Many years ago a man from your family asked for our daughter but then you never came to complete the marriage. She has lived as a widow all these years patiently waiting for him.” She went on to say that our speaker acknowledged that he had not returned, but explained that “the man from our family had gone to study overseas and had acquired many degrees. He has been working hard so that he can provide a good home.” When he grabbed the old man sitting next to him, he shouted “here he is!” Coupled with the performance, and our common laughter, the translation of the story told adds more to my understanding of the event and the way in which ritual can build social bonds.

“Never say, ‘I never did that.’”

The wedding speakers told me that the speaker who responds to the accusation must not deny the story being told, but must add details such that he turns it into a plausible explanation for the behavior. In this instance, he acknowledged that the man had not yet returned to marry the woman but explained that he had been working to prepare a good home for her. In addition, he brought him to her suggesting that the marriage would finally take place. Like the impediments, this story demonstrates the importance of keeping your word, even if it is done after many, many years. This story, with some variation, has been told at other gusaba no gukwa ceremonies. The bride’s family speaker might say,

That man you are together with once came like you to ask the hand of that old lady you see there [pointing at the person], we accepted to give him the bride then
he went and never returned back for his bride, so do you want to do the same again and make another girl from our family be a widow before marriage?  

Someone from the groom’s side might stand and reply,

I accept I asked for the hand of your daughter and never came back for the rest of the process, but this was not really my fault; you know what happened in this country, the day I was ready to bring my very beautiful cows as dowry, our country befell in war and the battle started the very day. After getting peace, I looked everywhere for my only and unique love but I never found her until today. All I want is that you accept to give our bridegroom your daughter and tomorrow or after tomorrow I will come to take mine too, I refused to marry any other because I believed that a miracle will show her to me.

As with the response I witnessed, the accused in this example acknowledges the bad behavior, explains that war had prevented him from coming back, then he lost track of her, but he has never married, so now he can finally complete the marriage. Another version I heard about responded to a similar accusation by saying that the groom had been studying overseas for many years and had only recently returned to Rwanda. The speaker for the groom’s response allows the family to save face. They are still people who keep their word; it is just that events they could not control prevented them from following through for many years. Each of these stories and responses emphasize the important cultural value of integrity. Rwandese tell me they do not like people who do not keep their promises.

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151 Ibid.
In addition to emphasizing the cultural value of integrity, the storytelling dialogues serve to alleviate the tension brought about by the unequal relations between the bride-takers and the bride-givers through playful accusation. The accusation is playful because how realistic is it to think that an 80-something woman has really been waiting around for 60 years? And what a coincidence that her intended just happens to be present suddenly after a 60 year absence? Maurice Bloch suggests balanced relations are upset by the groom’s group when they take the bride. He explains, “Except in the case of systems with direct exchange, it is an asymmetrical transaction in the short term and therefore introduces an element of hierarchy conflicting with equality.”¹⁵² In traditional agrarian-based societies, the number of children significantly offsets the need for help cultivating crops and raising cattle. In its most basic sense, the groom’s group is gaining a laborer while the bride’s group is losing a laborer AND all her future offspring. Bloch argues that the ritual offering of cows to the bride’s family helps to eliminate the tension and imbalance, and I assert that story-telling during gusaba no gukwa helps to relieve the tensions as well.

Alternatively, someone from the audience on the groom’s side can stand and state that he is not part of the groom’s family. He is a stranger who just happened upon the party. In this way, he disassociates himself and his bad behavior from the groom’s family and the marriage can continue. The man from the groom’s side might say something like

I accept that I did it, and there is a reason, but don’t blame that family and the bridegroom because I am not with them. Me, the man you see here, I like beer. If

I don’t have money to pay for my bottle, I put on my suit, I stand in front of my gate to see if there is a marriage ceremony around and where I see one I enter, those people you see here I don’t know them, I am here for this tasty beer . . .  

This response can be a source of great entertainment for the audience as the speaker essentially admits to being a drunk who shows up at weddings to get free alcohol. At the same time, the problem posed by the bride’s family speaker is deflected by the audience member when he identifies as an outsider, thereby removing the threat of bad behavior from within the groom’s family. The question of insider/outsider status arises frequently, as evidenced by the exchange below, where I was called upon to explain my presence.

Oliver: I cannot refuse to give Shyaka a bride but before I do pronounce my agreement, I would like the inzobe [word for person to mean skin color is light brown] young lady called Shannon who came with them to stand up and say why she is here. If she does it I will allow you to get the bride.

BFS: Ok, try to do it quickly and show the way to that mukabyagaju [word for person to mean skin color is very brown] over there, and when it gets difficult for her to say it just help her.

Sara leans over to me and says “He wants you to explain why you are here.” Everyone sitting in front of us turns around to look our way.

I whisper to Sara “What should I say?”

She replies, “I don’t know. Just stand up and say something.”

“But what? What should I say?” My mind races…do I tell them I am doing research about gusaba no gukwa? Or am I meant to say something funny? It seems like

time has stopped while everyone stares at me. I am in a panic because I need to say something, consequently my mind is blank. Suddenly a man sitting a few rows in front of me stands up and speaks. Everyone turns away from me to look at him. Sara informs me that he is telling them that I have brought 5 million dollars to give and that is my reason for being here. The moment passes and the ceremony continues. I feel relief that the attention on me has passed, but I also wonder what I could have said in the spirit of the ceremony. Because the bride’s side makes the accusations, Gatsinzi asserts, “it is impossible to prepare what to say because the dialogue and accusations are usually spontaneous and unpredictable.”¹⁵⁴ Later, when I read the transcript, I realize the dialogue went like this:

GFS: Shannon is with me, we have same reasons to be here.

Oliver: Are you here to preach?

Many whites come to Rwanda on mission trips, affiliated with various Christian churches. On the one hand, this appears to be an offer of help, a suggestion for my being present at the ceremony. But after several conversations with Oliver, I know he is skeptical of Christianity. He told me once that God has always been in Rwanda, even before the whites came as evidenced by the Kinyarwanda word *Imana*, which usage predates colonialism. Knowing Oliver’s playful nature, this appears to be a trap for a joke. But the groom’s family speaker buys a bit of time as well as opens up the possibilities by saying, “Yes, we are here to preach with a very nice gospel. And there is his brother who can speak on her behalf.” The man who came to my aid responded:

Dear elders, I think you know that recently many western countries stopped their aid to Rwanda and that we established Agaciro Development Fund, to keep the good wellbeing of our country, and this young lady came here to fund it like other Rwandese and friends of Rwanda with 5 million dollars. [clapping. ]

I thought at the time this must definitely be a joke because I could never possibly donate $5 million to any cause regardless of how worthy it was! When I met people in Rwanda, they often assumed I was wealthy. There is a general stereotype that a muzungu is rich. And in many ways we are, especially when I think about how the average Rwandan must survive on less than $1 a day. Even university professors make just $500-600 per month, and they are considered wealthy. Since wealth is commonly associated with abazungu, the audience member’s story seemed plausible to the bride’s side, created good feelings and laughter on all sides, and the moment was over before I had much time to think about it further. Oliver accepted his explanation and offered the following comment: “Yeah, we thank her by the way, as she came… here in our sector, she is one of us that’s clear, and so we thank her.” However, there is much more to this story that I have not yet told you.

Oliver did not use the word muzungu to refer to me. He said three things which revealed that he knew me and suggested that he considered me an insider rather than an outsider. First, he used the word inzobe to describe me. The Kinyarwanda-English Dictionary defines the word inzobe as “person with brown skin” or a marshbuck, which is a species of antelope. When I was walking with Oliver one afternoon, he pointed to a light-skinned but very much Rwandan woman and told me that she would be called

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155 Kinyarwanda-English Dictionary, s.v. “inzobe”
inzobe. It is not a term used exclusively for half-caste or mixed racial identity. But surely it was a gift to me with my pale white skin. It was an inclusive label so as to differentiate me from the outsiders who would simply be called muzungu as I witnessed at two other ceremonies that had whites in the audience. In addition, he called me by my name, Shannon, showing to all that I was not a stranger but someone whom he knew by name. People who are accused during gusaba are rarely called by name. At one ceremony the bride’s side asked “the man with the yellow tie” to defend himself, not calling him by name and at another they pointed to “that man in the back.” Oliver’s closing remarks, “she is one of us that is clear,” represent the most obvious attempt at claiming me as part of the bride’s group. Why might Oliver want to claim me? One possible reason is simply because we were meant to be on the bride’s side with him, but had sat on the groom’s side.

Oliver had told us to pick him up at 9:00 on that Saturday morning for the gusaba no gukwa in Rwamagana. Driving to Rwamagana from Kigali takes a little over an hour. We phoned Oliver to let him know we were running late. He told us “late-comers sit on stones.” We were supposed to sit on the bride’s side, but because we arrived after the ceremony had begun, we slipped in and sat in two chairs in the back on the groom’s side. Oliver motioned for us to come over to the bride’s side. But I was embarrassed and did not want to draw attention to myself by crossing across the central stage area to the bride’s side after the ceremony had already begun, so we turned down his request. Perhaps when he asked me to defend myself, he wanted to put me on the spot as well as make some kind of public declaration that I was with him. He may also have been
punishing us for not following protocol. In a sense, putting me on the spot was my “stone” for being a “late-comer.”

When the ceremony ended, I made my way over to Oliver. I shook my finger at him and said, “Oliver, you really surprised me!”

He laughed and smiled as he replied, “Yes but why didn’t you speak?”

I told him, “I wasn’t prepared! If you had warned me ahead of time, I could have prepared something to say. If you do that at the next ceremony, what should I say? What would be a good response?”

“Tell them you are a drunkard who has come to get some alcohol and since there is no alcohol, you are leaving!”

We laughed, but Sara protested, “She cannot say that!” But I had heard the story about the stranger who likes to party, so I immediately recognized it and agreed to do that next time. Although we attended several other ceremonies where Oliver was speaking, he never called me out again. He could not because we always made sure to sit on his side!

The performance of *gusaba no gukwa* constitutes an epideictic form of rhetorical ritual communication in the Aristotelian sense of its being a public ceremonial speech that strengthens shared beliefs. Yet, the accusation stories, clearly persuasive attempts on the part of the bride’s family to express their concerns regarding the groom’s family, and the groom’s family’s attempt to illustrate they are worthy of receiving the bride, also function as legal or forensic speech because they albeit symbolically, make judgments about past actions. When I asked Grace about the accusation stories, she speculated that “Originally the challenge was to see how strong they were. But now they are just going
through the motions. Do you have anything on these guys? And they will say yes, once I was walking on the road and . . . But in the olden days they were really serious. They had to make sure these guys are capable of taking care of their daughter.”

The accusation stories, like the pseudo ceremonies and the hindrances, present an oral challenge that the groom’s family speaker or a member of the groom’s group must respond to in a believable, clever, and entertaining way. Gatsinzi explains the rhetorical challenge provides an opportunity for “a real man” to demonstrate his ability “to get himself out of any trouble no matter how tricky. Challenging someone and how he answers reveals, to some extent, his capability to solve problems.”

The fact that the groom does not speak at the ceremony, rather the chosen speaker speaks for him, or other family members speak for him, shows another way that the behavior of one is attributed to the entire family.

Not all ceremonies had accusation stories although most did call for accusations. Either the MC or the bride’s family speaker said something like “I would like anyone who has an objection against giving our daughter to this family as a bride, please this is your time” or the family members “are going to check in your family to see if there is any mistake maker” or “check in their family and tell me if they deserve the bride or not. If not, you will tell us the reason why.”

Another accusation story that was similar to mine, because the audience member was asked to stand and explain himself, ended very differently because the audience member, referred to as “the man with the yellow tie,” did not have a story of his own to tell. He, like me, was caught off guard. However, unlike me, no one else stood to offer

help. The bride’s family speaker began the story with these words: “I accept you, but what about the people you came with? Are they normal? Are they criminal? There is a man seated in that corner. That man with a yellow tie. We used to be neighbors but he went to Uganda to look for money. We were supposed to go together but he left without telling me. Can you explain that?” The bride’s family speaker set up a story accusing the man in the yellow tie of breaking a promise.

GFS: He came back last night so I think he can explain himself. He can tell you everything. His name is Felix.

[They exchange greetings.]

BFS: Normally I know you as a good person. But did you come with the other person called “Commander”? Maybe you don’t remember that person who is asking. Maybe those guys just come for drinks and you don’t know them.

The man with the yellow tie did not play the part. He did not acknowledge that he went to Uganda, did not keep his promise, and then offer an explanation. So the bride’s family speaker tried to help him by hinting, “Maybe you don’t remember that person. . . .Maybe those guys just come for drinks and you don’t know them.” Like the story of the drunkard that Oliver suggested I should have told when I was called out, the bride’s family speaker was urging the man with the yellow tie to proceed with that story. However, he did not know the story. Instead he said, “No. All these people you see beside me are family and I know everybody.” The man with the yellow tie’s inability to perform his story as expected set him up for one trap after another. First, the bride’s family speaker offered help saying, “so tell Commander to stand up.”

Yellow Tie: Okay that is Commander, and his father is seated beside him.
BFS: But he changed.

GFS: That is a lie because if he changed, we would not have recognized him.

[Laughter.]

The reason why you did not recognize him is because he has grown to be a man. The man with the yellow tie did not respond to the bride’s family speaker when he questioned the identity of the one he says is Commander, so the groom’s family speaker interrupted, and the audience liked his response as demonstrated by their laughter. But the bride’s family speaker was not done with the man in the yellow tie yet. He seemed to be fishing for the “right” answer, a story from Yellow Tie including acknowledgement of his bad behavior and details to explain the behavior. The bride’s family speaker drew everyone’s attention back to the bad behavior when he said, “Oh, but he has bad manners.”

Yellow Tie: I swear to God I don’t know anything about him and what you are talking about.

BFS: So we are lying? Do you think we are creating something that is not there?

Yellow Tie: I am not quite sure. I do not know anything about what you are trying to implicate me about. [Laughter.]

The audience’s laughter at this point seemed to suggest that they, like the bride’s family speaker, want the man with the yellow tie to tell his story, but he continued to give the “wrong” answer. The bride’s family speaker prompted, “Maybe you cannot remember but I know that guy sitting next to you is an honest man. He can tell you exactly what you don’t remember.” At this point, the bride’s family speaker offered help by suggesting
that the man sitting next to the man with the yellow tie might be able to offer a story.

However, the man with the yellow tie continued to talk.

Yellow Tie: I know you we used to graze cows together so why don’t you just tell me exactly what you think it is that I did? Before we discuss other issues, why can’t you just give us the bride? [Laughter.]

BFS: You are wearing sunglasses to try to pretend you don’t remember anything.

Yellow Tie: Ok. I know you are not a liar, but just tell me what I did.

BFS: So you want me to tell it in front of everyone? Do you want me to say everything?

Yellow Tie: Okay, whatever you have to say, just tell me that you have given us the bride. [Laughter.]

This exchange illustrates three key points about gusaba. First, the procedure for the accusation story part is both open for innovative performance and yet restricted. The accused is expected to acknowledge his bad behavior and retell the story adding details to show why his behavior is not so bad. The space for creativity lies within the story details he adds. However, he is not meant to deny the behavior or refuse to offer a story. The bride’s family speaker tries to prompt the accused to tell the story, but the accused simply asks for the bride and continues to deny any wrongdoing. The audience laughs each time the man with the yellow tie asks for the bride because they know he is not following the procedure. Second, the bride’s family speaker must achieve balance between accusing the man with the yellow tie and offering him help when he appears unable to reply. They accuse him of having bad manners and of trying to hide behind his sunglasses, but when the man with the yellow tie hesitates, the bride’s family speaker offers him two life-lines,
first hinting that maybe he is not part of the family group, and then suggesting he get someone else to speak, saying, “tell Commander to stand up” or “that guy sitting next to you…can tell you what you don’t remember.” Finally, the exchange illustrates how the emphasis on certain cultural values such as this accusation story meant to teach the importance of integrity, of keeping one’s word, is dependent upon audience participation.

Another version of a story where the groom’s family is accused of not keeping their promises was a story told by Abdullah. Although I did see Abdullah serve as a wedding speaker at a different gusaba no gukwa, at this one he was just sitting with us in the audience. However, when the call for accusations against the groom’s family came, he stood and told a story of a woman who rejected him. He said:

Thank you! There behind Mr. Bugabo, there is someone; we grew up together, I proposed to her to marry me, and she accepted. After a while, she rejected me and married another one. And now, she is looking down when our eyes meet! I want you to ask her if I am an ugly gentleman to the extent she decided to reject me! She is called Aisha. May you ask her why she rejected me to marry Musa?

[Laughter.]

GFS: I’ll speak on her behalf. She loved you with such a condition that you would change the religion, as she is Muslim, you should became Hadji too. But you, you refused and she rejected you!

The speaker from the bride’s group, Abdullah, set up the accusation story against a woman from the groom’s side who agreed to marry him and later married someone else. This is yet another story that illustrates the importance of keeping promises. The groom’s family speaker acknowledges the bad behavior, and adds details to the story
suggesting that the reason for the rejection was because she was Muslim and he was Christian. However, Abdullah continues the story by saying, “no, that is not the real reason why, she rejected me because I am called Abdullah!” The audience appears to signal their pleasure at his reply with applause and laughter.

GFS: Me, I think there is no problem because you can regain your lover!

Abdullah: And what about Musa?

GFS: Musa is Muslim and he can look for another wife! [Laughter.]
The groom’s family speaker tries to solve the problem by giving the speaker from the bride’s side permission to take the woman who rejected him. The audience responds with laughter. But the response doesn’t really get at the accusation to explain it in a way that makes the woman’s behavior acceptable. I do not know how such a solution could proceed without input from Aisha or Musa. Perhaps the absurdity of the suggestion is what prompts the audience’s laughter. Aisha might tell the story quite differently were she given a chance to speak. Were she to speak, she might offer a more plausible response as to why she rejected Abdullah. Perhaps the bride’s family speaker realized the complexity of this story because he interrupted the exchange with the following dismissal:

BFS: Mr. Bugabo, even though Abdullah still has a problem, these affairs of you, Abdullah, Musa and Aisha are large and so we will take another time to solve them. But, instead of losing the bride whom you are asking for, can’t you chase Aisha and get your bride? [Laughter.]

GFS: But Abdullah is allowed to come and greet her, there is no problem!

BFS: Mr. Bugabo can I save you? Let me beg Abdullah to come and greet Aisha.
GFS: Yes my dear! Save me!

During this portion of the exchange, the bride’s family speaker seems to want to move on because he both dismisses the story saying, “we will take another time to solve” Abdullah, Musa, and Aisha’s problem and he offers to “save” the groom’s family speaker. He then goes on to reiterate his call to deal with this problem not only at another time but in another venue and agreed to give the bride.

BFS: Let’s transfer Aisha’s crime to another court. I will talk to Abdullah and Aisha so that we will solve their problem in this right way of legal marriage. Let me ask Mr. Basatisinda as our leader to listen to you after hearing that you are with good people and gives you the bride as he accepted it to you. [Applause.] May they clap for you! They talk on your behalf, they begged mercy for you, and I forgave you. I realize that you don’t have strong mistakes to make you lose the bride in our home! So, the whole family also gives you the bride, but there is another thing you know well that we deserve. It’s up to you to accomplish it. [Applause and ululations.]

All four accusation stories—the one about the man who left his bride, the one asking me to defend my reason for being there, the one about the man with the yellow tie who was supposed to take another with him to Uganda, and the one about Aisha who rejected Abdullah—show a character who lacks integrity. The responses by the accused or by someone speaking for the accused, reveal a variety of ways that audience members and the groom’s family speakers try to address the challenge presented to them.
“He refused to help”

Another accusation storyline that I saw at most all of the weddings I attended involved the narrating of an incident whereby a member of the groom’s family refused to offer help to a member of the bride’s family. Bigirumwami explains they are “imaginary accusations” such as: “The day my wife was about to give birth to that girl, we met one member of your family who refused to give us a lift to the hospital. How dare you come to us and say you want the very girl as your bride?” or “Once I was out watering the cows of my father and that man over there [showing a person who came with the family of the groom] beat me saying that the place was his as if water was not created by our God to be given to everybody, those people are crazy and I cannot accept to give them my sister.”

In each of these examples, the focus of the story rests upon the bad behavior. Details about the behavior itself are included and sharpened while details about the individual responsible for the bad behavior or the effects of the bad behavior upon the bride’s family are omitted. Spector-Mersel identifies six mechanisms of selection used by narrators in the telling of stories which can be used to illuminate the identity narrators claim. She analyzes how these mechanisms are used to reveal ways narrators shape the endpoint of their stories through choosing, filtering and selecting facts. Spector-Mersel defines sharpening as when the narrator elaborates and exaggerates certain parts of the story, omission as when the narrator leaves out facts deemed irrelevant, and flattening as when the narrator reports facts but reduces their importance. Although Spector-Mersel worked with personal narratives and life histories, and my study focuses on stories that

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159 Ibid., 179-180.
are sometimes third person narratives, the mechanisms of inclusion, omission, sharpening, and flattening are particularly useful because they show how the stories told during *gusaba no gukwa* consistently focus on the behavior of individuals and flatten all other details about their identities with the exception of whether they are inside or outside the group.

Behavior is of greater significance in these stories because they question whether a person has *Ubuntu* or not. You will recall from Chapter 1 that *Ubuntu* is an African Philosophy that refers to both a state of being in the world and a way of behaving in the world. Thaddeus Metz and Joseph Gaie explain, “The only way to develop one’s humanness is to relate to others in a positive way. One becomes a person solely ‘through other persons’, which means that one cannot realize one’s true self in opposition to others or even in isolation from them.”\(^{160}\) Furthermore, according to the concept of *Ubuntu* as it is understood in South Africa, “If one harms others, e.g. by being exploitive, deceptive or unfaithful, or even if one is merely indifferent to others and fails to share oneself with them, then one is said to be lacking” *Ubuntu*—“literally lacking in personhood or humanness.”\(^{161}\) Lack of helping behavior as depicted in these accusation stories shows indifference to others and thus puts the personhood of the groom’s family in question. In the first example, a member of the groom’s family is accused of refusing to give a ride to someone from the bride’s family. In the second example, the member of the groom’s family is accused of refusing to share water. Both examples represent a refusal to share available resources, which, under the *Ubuntu* philosophy, constitutes bad behavior.  

\(^{161}\) Ibid.
the *gusaba no gukwa* ceremony, the groom’s family speaker or someone from the groom’s family must offer additional details to the story in order to re-establish their *ubumuntu* or humanity.

The following accusation story illustrates first how the bad behavior is described, followed by two different attempts by the groom’s family speaker to reassert their *ubumuntu*.

Man from audience on bride’s side: I have a very challenging situation that might cause you to lose Francine as a bride. One day I went to Tanzania. On my way back, I ran short of money and had to ask for a room to sleep that night. I went to the house of one of the people who are with you there and he refused to offer me a guest room.

GFS: Can I please know who that person is? Tell me at least his name. I normally do not have such people in my family.

The man from the bride’s side narrates the story sharpening the bad behavior, namely a refusal to provide a room when a member of the bride’s family needed a place to stay. All other details about the man’s identity are omitted. The narrator does not tell us when this occurred, where the house was, who lived there, what the man does for a living, he did not even state the accused man’s name. The groom’s family speaker first tries to distance the accused by suggesting he may not be a member of the family. As with the previous stories, one successful response can be to admit the accused is a stranger not connected to the groom’s family. However, the man from the bride’s side does not accept this response. He reiterates the accusation and refuses to give the bride, as evidenced below:
Man from the bride’s side: He is hiding there at the back. I will not utter his name here but it does not mean what he did to me was good. We can’t tolerate it here and give you Francine.

GFS: Here is the problem. I can’t believe I can have such a person among my children. If I knew who he is, I would personally deal with him in front of you. I do not tolerate such a bad thing, either. However, since you said he is sitting there at the back, maybe he is not part of us. He is one of those people who attend ceremonies without being invited. That means we do not know him even though he is sitting among us. Unless you point on him and tell me who exactly he is, I can’t accept that thing was done by someone from my own family.

Man from the bride’s side: Do you want to mean we do not know our hosts? He is not a host; he came with you as guest.

The groom’s family speaker repeats his call for the accused to be identified and again suggests that the accused must not be a member of the family. But the man from the bride’s side refuses to relent, asserting that since he is not with the bride’s group, he must have come with the groom’s group. In effect, he is forcing the groom’s family speaker to tell the rest of the story in a way that re-establishes the groom’s group’s umuntu.

GFS: Ahhh, thanks a lot for reminding me. I remember someone telling me about that some time back. I had really forgotten. It’s not good becoming old, really! It can even make you forget such a thing. My son told me about that. He told me “there was a passer-by who was asking for a shelter at night and I refused to open for him. I want to tell you why I didn’t open the door for him. I had sheltered other guests before he came. When they arrived they were taken by cholera.
When I saw that man, I said if I let him in he, will be contaminated with the disease and he can risk his life, That’s why I didn’t open for him.” Thanks be to God you are safe today, just because my son refused to open for you that night.

[Applause.]

The man from the bride’s side was my colleague from the university where I was teaching. He knew of my research interest in *gusaba no gukwa* and invited me to several weddings. This was the second one we attended together. He took a seat next to the bride’s family speaker while Sara and I sat in the row behind him. He may have been motivated at least in part to tell this story for my sake. That may be why he kept pushing the groom’s family speaker to tell a story rather than giving him the easy way out by distancing himself from the accused. As you can see, the details that the groom’s family speaker narrates emphasize the bad behavior and offer additional details that show why what initially looks like bad behavior was actually good behavior. He explains that his son refused to open the door because the people inside were sick and he did not want the man from the bride’s side to get sick. So what appeared to be bad behavior was actually aimed at protecting the bride’s family. Details about who the sick guests are or where they have come from are omitted as are any details about the man who refused to open the door, thereby sharpening the focus on the behavior. The story continues:

Man from bride’s side: Oh, now you even scare me more. You said you had cholera in your family and you want us to give you our daughter? Do you want her to die of cholera?

GFS: Oh, do you remember when you last went to Tanzania? It’s a very long time ago and there is no way we can be having that problem until now. The proof is
some of the people who were suffering from that disease are safe now and are here with us. My son did that to protect you, not with any bad intentions.

Man from bride’s side: If that was really the reason, I forgive him.

GFS: Thanks a lot. Can you clap for him, please?

“He did not help my child”

At one of the few gusaba no gukwa ceremonies where I saw a woman speak, one of the accusation stories told by the bride’s family was told with the help of the bride’s aunt. She accused a member of the groom’s family of refusing to help with her sick child. She said:

One day my child was so sick I had to take her to the hospital. When I arrived at the hospital, they refused to give my child medicine the doctor prescribed because I did not have the required insurance papers. My daughter had a high fever, so they gave her a container of cool water and a rag to put on her forehead to bring her temperature down. But I saw one of your family members working at the hospital and I want to know why he did not get me the medicine I needed for my sick daughter. Because my child has been treated very badly, I cannot agree with you that our daughter can be given to you because one member of your family is not a good person because he didn’t help my child while she was very sick.

The woman from the bride’s side uses this story to ask the groom’s family to explain the accused’s behavior. In this way she is asking for the motivation behind the actions. She wants to understand why the groom’s family member did not help at the hospital. As with the previous refusal to help story, specific details are omitted. The narrator does not tell us the age of the child, the illness she had, or the medicine that was prescribed. The
lack of personal details helps the audience to focus on the bad behavior. We are told she did not have insurance for the prescription and the groom’s family member did not offer to help even though he worked at the hospital.

The groom’s speaker begins by acknowledging that the groom’s family member at the hospital did not help with the medicine. But he suggests that the mother should know how important it is to have insurance for her child. She should know that all hospitals expect parents to have insurance for their children and the hospital is required to refuse treatment when the parent does not have the insurance card. He goes on to explain,

It is the responsibility of each child’s own mother and father to pay for insurance. However, our family member searched for another way to help you. It was he who provided the water and water has many healing properties. Because water is known to cleanse the body it is ultimately the best medicine for whatever ails you. Because the water contained some medication, it is the reason why he ordered the mother to use this water because inside the water there is something that may help the child. And they let the mother use this water from the hospital. That means even if the mother does not have this insurance, they let her use this water knowing that the child must become in good health because of the water.

And the mother said, “Oh, I didn’t know this water is helpful also.”

Overall, the bride’s speaker is meant to ensure the bride is going to a good family by making playful accusations against the groom’s family. In this instance, the hospital story sets up a challenging framework for the groom’s speaker. Not only must he pay close attention to the details of the story, but he must also find a space in the story where
he may enter in with his own story to offer a plausible explanation for the bad behavior of
the groom’s family member at the hospital.

Although the groom’s speaker’s over-arching purpose is to obtain permission for
the groom to marry the bride, as this story illustrates, he must achieve this through an
effective response to the accusations made by the bride’s speaker. He acknowledges that
the groom’s family member at the hospital did not help with the medicine because the
mother should know how important it is to have insurance for her child and then goes on
to show another way that the groom’s family member helped. Thus the speaker has
restored the good standing of the groom’s family. Of utmost importance, the groom’s
speaker must use his story-telling ability to demonstrate that the groom’s family is
worthy to receive the bride. Needing help with medicine and needing a car ride
demonstrate a need of the bride’s family to which the groom’s family can demonstrate
how they offered help. Thus, the details added by the groom’s speaker vary from
wedding to wedding, but are entirely dependent upon the bride’s speaker’s story
situation. The bride’s family’s storytelling always sets the scene for the response.

The story and response illustrate an everyday example of Ubuntu. As I needed
help with my car battery, so the mother in the story needed help to get medicine for her
child. However, unlike my story, Ubuntu also covers instances where one does not even
ask for help. Rather, the person, because he or she is human and possesses Ubuntu,
should recognize need of another and help even when not asked. Had the mother in the
story directly asked for help with medicine and the groom’s family member had refused,
it would be more challenging for the groom’s speaker to come up with a plausible
explanation that could restore Ubuntu to the groom’s family.
As this is one of the few examples of a woman speaking at *gusaba no gukwa*, it is important to consider if there are other ways that women participate in the ceremony. As some of the examples mentioned above illustrate, women do serve as actors in some of the stories even if they do not speak. Alice explains, “They [the aunties] have to agree if their daughter should be given or not. Mainly the father’s sisters but also the mother’s sisters can intervene.” The women also show their approval by ululating. Conversely, silence or the lack of ululation communicates disapproval.

Another variation of the helping story is sometimes told at weddings. It centers upon a member of the bride’s family who needs a ride and a member of the groom’s family owning a car but not offering a ride to help the member of the bride’s family who needs a ride. The story also demonstrates a similar kind of agency between the bride’s family needing help and the groom’s family giving help. However, once the car has passed by, it is difficult to imagine how the groom’s speaker will offer a response to get out of this mess!

One response acknowledges, “Yes, we did drive past you; however, it was during the time of war and we were carrying dangerous explosives in the back seat that would endanger your life.” Sometimes, they add the line, “As soon as I could I contacted my brother who also has a car and he went to fetch you but you were no longer on the road.” “Help” offered in this story comes first of all with the explanation that by preventing entry into the car with explosives, he “helped” the bride’s family member stay away from danger. Second, “help” offered comes in the sending a ride later. However, the bride’s speaker must tell a story questioning the *Ubuntu* of the family member, presenting a scenario where help could have been offered but was not. The groom’s speaker must
always show a way in which help was given, thereby restoring *Ubuntu* to the groom’s family.

**Accusation Story as Representative Anecdote**

One overarching motivation for the story accusations demonstrates *Ubuntu* and encourages audience members to live the principle of “helping” as emphasized by *Ubuntu*. Viewed as a representative anecdote, the accusation story’s greater cultural significance can be illustrated. A representative anecdote, according to Burke, acts as a lens or filter through which we can study and reconstruct the discourse. Burke suggests that a representative anecdote refers to a word which functions as a “reflection” of reality.\(^{162}\) *Ubuntu* is the representative anecdote in this story. The act of “helping” as depicted in the wedding story illustrates *Ubuntu*. By offering a different version of the story and showing how the groom’s family member was not indifferent to the child’s suffering, their personhood is restored. Thus, the story functions as a representative anecdote of *Ubuntu*.

Other variations of the story exist but “helping” is the thread that winds throughout. For example, at another ceremony, the bride’s family speaker told a story about a time when he was in Kigali and it was too late to get transportation back home and the groom’s family knew this, yet they did not offer to give him a ride in their car or let him spend the night with them in Kigali. The groom’s family’s speaker replied that it was “during the time of trouble” when they could not let people stay in their homes and it was unsafe to drive after dark. This alludes to some kind of situation which precluded or prevented their helping; thus, even though the groom’s speaker could not show a way in

which the bride’s family member was helped, they alluded to a barrier which prevented them from helping showing they were not indifferent, just unable to help.

“It is somehow good for life.”

In the context of gusaba no gukwa, the purpose of the accusation story is to determine whether or not the groom’s family are good people, and the groom’s family must demonstrate that they are worthy to receive the bride. Yet the storytelling is just a performance, an opportunity to demonstrate “helping” in its many forms because the ending is already a foregone conclusion. When asked if a wedding was ever cancelled because the groom’s speaker did not respond well to the accusations of the bride’s speaker, people tell me that would not happen. In fact, one interviewee indicated that if the groom’s speaker is having trouble, the bride’s speaker will offer help. The speaker will say something to give the groom’s speaker an idea about how to respond. This practice demonstrates another performance of Ubuntu not revealed through the theme of a story, but rather through the interactions between the speakers. Mucina remarks that the act of story-telling “is about engaging our relational selves. To know our relational selves is to be curious about our interconnectedness.”

The wedding ceremony in Rwanda is more about this interconnectedness as demonstrated by the emphasis upon building bonds between families and communities, rather than about the two individuals getting married. John Mbiti stresses, “For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. . . . It is the point where all members of a given community meet.”

Because behavior of the characters dominates during the story-telling component of the Rwandan

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wedding ceremony and two kinds of behavior, helping and integrity are most often the subject of the accusation stories, the performance of the gusaba part of the ceremony ensures the perpetuation of these cultural values.

At the same time, the rhetorical performances of the wedding speakers demonstrate their verbal acuity and creative use of language. One indicator or verbal acuity, indirection, a classic form of communication found in many African American communication practices such as playing the dozens and signifying, according to Jackson and Richardson, reflects a common belief that direct communication is “confrontational and intrusive.” Indirection is often a strategy used by the trickster character in trickster tales to outwit a physically stronger, more powerful opponent. Whether the use of indirection as the base for the pseudo ceremonies, impediments, and accusation stories in the Rwandan context reflects polite communication, patience, strategy, or wit on the part of the wedding speakers, Rwandan audiences expect and enjoy this kind of performance as evidenced by their laughter and applause during the performance itself and during discussion of such parts in our interviews. As one young woman reflected, “It is somehow good for life.”

In addition to highly ritualized verbal performances, gusaba no gukwa contains nonverbal embodied performances. When the audience applauds as individuals and a group, they endorse and approve the verbal performances of the wedding speakers. Conquergood notes one way to conceptualize performance involves “braiding together

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disparate and stratified ways of knowing.”166 Rituals are embodied by the speakers, the audience, and eventually the bride and groom. Each participant has a specific part to play. During gusaba no gukwa, the speakers play an entertaining verbal game of wit and dexterity, while simultaneously communicating the intensity of the groom and his family and friends’ responsibility for the welfare of the bride. These rituals demonstrate what Kuper observed in Swaziland, that marriage is “essentially a linking of two families rather than of two individuals.”167 I left the ceremonies thinking that the bride and groom do not just answer to themselves if their marriage doesn’t work out because they must answer to all the wedding guests present.

In the next chapter, I explore several key symbols associated with the gukwa portion of the ceremony and the variety of associations they invoke. I continue with my examination of how the ceremony perpetuates the emphasis on interconnectedness, the linking of two families, and the core values of Ubuntu—helping and integrity. I will also discuss the brief part the bride and groom play in the ceremony.

166 Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” 152.
Chapter 4: The Performance of Gukwa (Dowry)

Once the request for the bride has been approved by the bride’s family, the groom’s family speaker offers the bride’s family speaker another bottle of inzoga and they share a drink. Within the context of gusaba no gukwa, this bottle serves as a symbol of gratitude given to the bride’s family from the groom’s family. Often, one of the wedding speakers will announce the significance of the bottle when it is presented. For example, at one ceremony that I attended, the bride’s family speaker said, “I am happy that you gave me a beer to show your gratitude.” When the two speakers share a drink from this bottle, their action also signals the second half of the ceremony, and gukwa commences. Imisango (speech-making) continues during the second half of the ceremony involving dowry, accompanied by amazina y’inka (cow poetry) recited by abamurika inka (cow poets) and the introduction of the groom and bride. Sometimes musicians and dancers perform and the bridal party and the guests share a meal during the second half of the ceremony but not always.

“What she deserves”

Most everyone I talked with in Rwanda uses the English word dowry as a synonym for gukwa; however, gukwa is a verb meaning “to pay dowry” whereas inkwano is a noun referring to the “item given as dowry.” More importantly, the word dowry as used in the Rwandan context does not refer to goods or wealth that a woman brings into a marriage as it often does in the West. Coontz, using the word dowry in the Western connotation, explains, “In Europe, from the early Middle Ages through the eighteenth

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century, the dowry a wife brought with her at marriage was often the biggest infusion of cash, goods, or land a man would ever acquire.”¹⁶⁹ In the Rwandan context, *gukwa* or *dowry* refers to goods or services moving in the opposite direction, from the groom to the bride’s family. *Gukwa*, then, refers to the giving of something that more closely resembles the practices some scholars call *bridewealth*. *Bridewealth* is a term coined by anthropologist Evans-Pritchard in the 1930s to describe the transfer of property from the groom or his family to the family of the bride as a way of legitimating the marriage.

Ten years ago, when I was teaching a university class about the history of southern Africa, I asked a student from Zimbabwe to come speak to our class. Siglieter told my students about the education system in Zimbabwe, sharing examples of students’ experiences in Zimbabwe while weaving her own educational experiences in the USA into her story. She concluded her story by informing my students, “Because I will have a university degree at the end of the year, my parents will get more money for me.” Pressed by my students for more details, Siglieter explained that in her country, *bridewealth* used to be given in cows but now most people give money. She added that the parents of a bride educated in the USA might get $1,000 whereas brides with a primary school education might only bring $500.

Evans Pritchard and others who have used the term *bridewealth*, as opposed to the term *brideprice*, attempt to introduce another way of thinking about dowry practices as compensation given to the bride’s family for the loss of their daughter. Barber suggests that cows were part of a system of equivalencies whereby “cattle stood in for human

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beings, filling the gap left by the outgoing bride or the deceased kinsman. In an agrarian economy based upon subsistence farming, women provide labor through both work they do and the children they produce. This interpretation of *bridewealth* may diffuse the idea that husbands and fathers buy and sell women. But because Siglieter framed *bridewealth* in terms of her cash value, at that time I thought of it as buying a wife and I wondered how much, if any, my husband would have paid for me. I also noted that while Siglieter saw her value as increasing, all I could see was that her value seemed cheapened by the exchange of cash. Regardless of whether I use the word *dowry* or *bridewealth*, these words conjure up ideas in American minds associated with property and buying and selling. They also allude to the widely accepted notion of marriage as a contractual agreement.

On the other hand, my experiences with Rwandese wedding ceremonies have shown me that *gukwa* is much more complex than either a buying or compensating perspective reveals. One complication centers upon the fact that the dowry exchange often marks the beginning of many exchanges between the two families. Coontz deflates two popular American beliefs about marriage; first that marriage came about so men could protect women, and alternatively that marriage came about so that men could exploit women. She explains that marriage came about to meet the needs of the extended family group by converting “strangers into relatives and extended cooperative relations . . . by creating far-flung networks of in-laws.” No more apparent is this concept than with the dowry system in Rwanda. During *gusaba no gukwa*, the wedding speakers often speak of the relations between the families as though they were established long ago. For

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example, as a preface to asking for the bride, the groom’s family speaker might say, “I think you remember that our friendship is from long ago and that children from both our families get married.” Or he might say, “From long ago, people from Buganza and those from Mayaga are friends; we give cows and brides to each other.” They use their words to invoke the specter of long-term relationship traversing generations. The places denoted by Buganza and Mayaga are no longer called by those names. When the speakers use those place names, they summon regions from precolonial times. The giving of the dowry cow may signal the beginning of a bond between families, or it may signal one exchange among many over the course of several generations. Gifts of cows “signify social fabric,” explains de Lame, because “cattle, as it breeds, creates ties of friendship or alliances extending beyond the generation that concludes them.”

Historically, gukwa was not just about a single one-time exchange of a cow. Rather, it signified an extended series of exchanges meant to continue. For example, with the practice of indongoranyo (gifting the calf born to the dowry cow), Rwandese brides, grooms, and other family members do eventually benefit from the dowry cow given at the wedding.

Just as the oral performances during gusaba no gukwa function as communicative processes that produce, maintain, repair and transform reality, the gifts exchanged during gukwa act as powerful symbolic objects. The ritual performance of gukwa is an example of what Bell refers to as an “orchestrated event that constructs people’s perceptions and interpretations.”

How wedding guests perceive of the bride and the dowry exchange depends upon the symbolic associations they have with the items used for the dowry.

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The practice of *gukwa* is built upon many varied associations with cows, some regional, some generational, and some simply personal. All Rwandans do not share a single monolithic narrative when it comes to *inkwano* and the giving of the dowry. In this chapter, I explore some significant symbols associated with the performance of *gukwa*. Cultural anthropologist Katherine Stewart notes that culture is “an engagement . . . like music or a play” it is a performance rather than an exegesis.\(^{174}\) My exploration does not aim to provide a simple decoding of meaning; rather, I explore many symbolic associations with cows within the context of the performance of *gukwa*.

Cows are the most common form of property given as dowry in Rwanda. In some regions such as Gisenyi and Kibungo, small livestock such as goats or sheep were substituted for cows in the past.\(^{175}\) The custom of giving goats or sheep is not well known among all Rwandans, and some people I interviewed deny this practice ever existed, even in the past. Sometimes if the groom’s family does not have cows, he can give his labor to the bride’s family. The labor service was referred to as *gutenda*. According to Ndekezi, when *gutenda* was practiced, if the groom’s offer of his labor was accepted, the marriage was officially recognized and the groom was allowed to live with his wife and their children belonged to him.\(^{176}\) When I asked one of the wedding speakers about the practice of *gutenda* or offering labor as dowry, he told me he had never heard of such a practice, which may suggest that it is primarily regional practice or one that is not practiced often. But at one ceremony I attended, the speaker for the bride’s family did mention *gutenda*, referring to it as the *blood* of the groom:

\(^{176}\) Ibid., 22.
BFS: If you don’t have cows, you can even pay your own blood as a dowry. How old is the groom?

GFS: Old enough to be married.

BFS: And strong?

GFS: Very strong.

BFS: Yes, he can come and help us to rebuild some destroyed parts of our house for six months. That can also be a dowry.

Ndekezi also writes of instances whereby the bride might be given without a dowry. He describes the following case with regard to a boy from a poor family who was unable to afford a dowry. The father of the boy went to the bride’s family outlining the following terms: “I ask the hand of your daughter without dowry because I do not have cows but my son is still young; he can pay it in rendering services. Dowry will be given with the first cow we get.”

Hoes for tilling the soil might be offered in lieu of cows, but there remains a social contract of sorts that should such time arise as the groom or his family gets cows, one would be given to repay the dowry debt. Bigurumwami also writes about gutenda, explaining that marriages without dowry tend to be very insecure arrangements because if another man comes along and offers a cow to the wife’s parents, they can give her and any children to the man who has given dowry. The children of a marriage without dowry were called inkuri according to Bigirumwami and could be adopted by his in-laws at any time. When I mentioned some of these practices that I had read about, some people did not think these things were possible, contending that cows are and always have been the only acceptable dowry among Rwandans, a claim that leads me to

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177 Ndekezi, Ubukwe Bw’abanyarwanda, 22.
178 Bigirumwami, Imihango N’imigenzo, 116.
believe they are not practiced much in contemporary weddings. In addition, the continued prevalence of cows in the *gukwa* performance attests to their importance in Rwandese culture. Although cows were not always physically present at the ceremonies I attended, they were consistently discussed by the wedding speakers, and audience members were asked to imagine that they were present even when they were not.

“*The women’s ululations were like trumpets of joy.*”

Today, at *gusaba no gukwa* in Rwamagana, laughter and applause often punctuate the lively back and forth discussion between the bride’s family speakers and the groom’s family speakers. Yellow and sea-foam green ribbons adorn the three tents packed with wedding guests. Even the overflow tent looks filled to capacity. The special chairs where the bride and groom will eventually sit stand empty for now as suddenly another round of applause begins accompanied by the high-pitched *ayiiiii* coming from the women. Beside me, Sara joins in with her own half-hearted *ayiiiii* as I clap along with her and the other women. Audience laughter, according to Okpewho, serves to “encourage the artist to give fuller life to his description.”

Similar to laughter, the women’s *ululating* plays an important role during *gusaba no gukwa*. One might be tempted to dismiss *ululating* as a decorative addition to the performance. However, *ululating* is used by many cultures to accomplish certain actions.

The *ayiiiii* sound, *impundu* or *ululating*, is a very distinct vocalization. The first time I remember hearing ululating was when I lived and studied in South Africa in the mid-1980s. I recall the anti-apartheid marches I participated in as an undergraduate

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student at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) in Johannesburg which were led by male students toyi-toyi-ing\textsuperscript{181} and chanting “hey, hey hey, hey” in a deep vocal register punctuated by the higher-pitched ayiiii from the female students. Those sounds communicated the unity and determination of the protestors powerfully. “Hey, hey hey, hey. Ayiiii.” We felt invincible. We did not need words. The sounds had a message all their own.

Similarly, in Rwanda the ululating ayiiii communicates a message. It consistently signals approval from the women during gusaba no gukwa. Called impundu in Kinyarwanda, this vocalization was sometimes given freely and sometimes called for by the wedding speakers. Impundu is one of the few overt ways that women express themselves at gusaba no gukwa. I learned about impundu at the first gufata irembo ceremony I attended, where I sat on a mat on the floor in a side room with several women. Because we sat in a separate area off the main room where the ceremony was taking place, I was able to ask several questions during the proceedings. At one point, after I had heard dowry discussions, I asked if they had agreed, but the women told me they had not yet heard what they wanted to hear and that I would know it when they expressed their approval. Shortly after that, they began to ululate and clap their hands. Sara explained to me that they had heard the dowry offer they agreed with and were showing their approval.

Today, at gusaba no gukwa in Rwamagana, I infer from attending previous ceremonies that this clapping, ululating, and drinking of the third drink signals the

\textsuperscript{181} Toyi-toyi-ing is a marching dance marked by rhythmic foot stomping used during the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa to intimidate South African government troops during protest marches.
beginning of *gukwa*. My inference is confirmed as the bride’s family speaker says, “Because you are a cattle-breeder, I think you came here ready. Can you show us your dowry?” The groom’s family speaker replies, “My friend, it is better if you ask me what you want as the dowry and I am ready to pay it. You may send your veterinarian to come and check my cows…we have Rwandan cows, foreign cows and *Inyambo*. [*Inyambo* are the long-horned cattle historically owned by kings]. Which ones do you want?” Rather than offer a direct response, the bride’s family speaker asks, “I wonder if you know [the bride] so that you may know what she deserves?” This comment, like Siglieter’s assessment, seems to suggest that the rate for brides fluctuates depending upon their perceived value. However, when actual numbers were mentioned at some of the ceremonies I attended, eight cows were always requested, and from one to three were given regardless of the differing educational attainment of the brides. The number *eight* connotes “perfection and happiness” and “power” according to Taylor.\(^\text{182}\) An inheritance was also called *umunaani* (eight) because Taylor explains, “a father would leave eight possessions to each of his children.”\(^\text{183}\) Notice too, the phrase “what she deserves” not what she is worth, but “what she deserves” as though announcing that the cows will benefit the bride as much as her parents. In the past, with the custom of *indongoranyo* (gifting a calf born to the dowry cow) the bride did benefit as upon the birth of her first child, this calf was given to her to help feed her child. But the needs of the bride may also go beyond cows and milk. Lines from the play *Mariya* echo the importance of considering what the bride deserves as the character Tereza admonishes her husband, “Instead of focusing on the child, your main interest is in dowry-cows and the status and

\(^{182}\) Taylor, *Milk, Honey, and Money*. 44.

\(^{183}\) Ibid.
wealth of your future in-laws. Now that is the kind of self-interest that provokes unwarranted bad luck.” Concern for the bride’s future was also expressed on more than one occasion when the bride’s family speaker called upon someone to stand and sing a song for the bride so she would feel welcome in her new home. Discussion of what the bride deserves and concern for how the bride will be treated illustrate that she is more than a commodity to be exchanged for cows.

Back at gusaba no gukwa in Rwamagana, two men, one each from the bride and groom’s side, playing the role of veterinarians, meet in the center and head out the gate to go choose the cows. Soon they return herding three cows into the center stage area. The man from the bride’s side exclaims, “It was a long journey, but we saw cows and they are beautiful!” Two women from the bride’s side take some grass to the center and light a small fire near the cows. Smoke billows quickly up and out toward the guests seated on the groom’s side. Sara tells me the fire is for “cleaning the cows.” Later, I discover that cow herders light a fire each night when the cows come in from grazing in the fields. The smoke is meant to chase away the insects that have gathered on the cow’s hide. The cows take a few steps, lower their heads to graze, and then take a few steps more while the ceremony continues around them. Dancers come out, forming their lines seemingly unperturbed by the cows meandering around the space while the singers sing a song in praise of the cows. I grab my camera to video, my first and only time to see cows center stage, playing such a direct role in gukwa. The literal presence of the cows helps to solidify in my mind their significance in this part of the ceremony.

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People told me I might see cows because in the old days they always brought the dowry cows to *gukwa*. But now most people are afraid the cows will “cause trouble,” according to some Rwandans I interviewed. They also told me that since it is difficult to transport cows to Kigali, because it is such an urban area, I would probably not see them at any ceremonies I attended in Kigali. However, the speakers at all ceremonies I attended spoke of the cows as if they were present. Sometimes there were cows nearby grazing on a hill in the distance, and once two cows were tightly tethered to a trailer parked at the gate. On another occasion, I was completely fooled into thinking a cow was nearby when the disc jockey played a recording of a cow mooing. When I heard the cow mooing, I looked around beside the house and over toward the gate where we had entered from the main road but I did not see a cow. My initial excitement was dampened when I realized I had been fooled by the disc jockey’s recording, which sounded so realistic. Today, the cows walking around center stage are quiet, but as at the other ceremony, the disc jockey periodically plays a cow recording.

*“Amasho!” (May you have many cows!)*

Time after time, when any conversation turns to cows, someone will tell me, “Rwandese love their cows!” or “We love so much our cows!” A common greeting in rural areas, *Amasho!* (May you have many cows!) is used by older people to greet the youth. The youth respond *Amashyogore!* (There should be many female cows among them). This greeting may reflect the importance of cows as evidence of wealth and success, particularly females, because they provide milk which can both provide nutritional sustenance and generate daily income. Indeed, cattle “played a principal role” in political structures and social relationships in the past, according to the National...
Museum in Huye. Two of the wedding speakers I interviewed talked extensively about the social, economic, and political significance of cattle.

Many expressions link women and cows together. In the play, Mariya, Muco greets his wife, “Good evening, my lovely heifer,” and calls to his daughter, “Mariya, my gentle calf, come here.” A man might compliment a woman’s beauty with the words asa n’inyana mu ruhongore, meaning “she looks like a calf in a cowshed.” The expression afite amaso y’inyana, meaning “she has eyes of the baby cow,” may also be used by a man to compliment a woman. Aline, a university student, explained to me “maso y’inyana can be used by a boy to talk to a girl to say she is so cute!” Bernard, another university student, confirmed Aline’s interpretation in his explanation of the metaphor saying, “maso y’inyana means a beautiful girl who has good eyes like a cow. Those words are used when the boys try to tell their girlfriends that they have good eyes and look well.” Another university student, Alain, indicated that in addition to describing a “lovely woman,” the words may also “be for a baby girl. Remember that a cow is meaningful in our culture.” When I asked an unmarried high school teacher in his late 20s about the metaphor, in addition to explaining that it is a phrase used by men to talk to women, he offered:

Why consider inyana as a person? In Rwandan culture they used to consider a cow as wealth. So now when you look at the calf you find, it is amazing; that’s why in Rwanda they choose to say that the woman who is beautiful has the eyes of the calf. Hence, that group of words is in terms of what we call imitoma meaning the sweet words said by the gentlemen to the ladies so as to attract them.

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185 Kalemba, Mariya, 10.
in love. For example urasa nk’izuba rirashe which means “you are like the sunrise.”

When prompted by me for a similar expression that women might say to men, he responded, “Thank you. For the women, when they want to say that the boy is handsome in Kinyarwanda they use the term ihoho. But in Rwandan culture, it is not easy to find a girl who can talk to the boy telling him that he is handsome. They find a way to express it indirectly.”

Names also link people with cows. For example, Ndengeyinka and Mushumba are names for boys that refer to those who take care of cows—to the cattle herder. Kimasa is a name for a man that means a strong bull. Masoyinyana can be used as a name for a girl. Another name, Kabanyana means one day the daughter will be married and bring inkwano (dowry cow) to her parents. The high school teacher told me that these names speak to the cultural value attributed to cows. But not every Rwandan sees value in cows, and not all women with cow names appreciate such names. One woman by the name Kabanyana announces her Rwandese name with a dismissive laugh, preferring to use her English name, Florence whenever possible. She told me she feels embarrassed about being named for a cow because she does not share the same reverence for cows that those from her parents’ generation do. While she feels ambivalent about her symbolic connection to cows, other Rwandans still feel a cultural connection to cows even when they did not grow up in a rural area with a family that kept cows, and those who still own cows may think of them the way their ancestors did.

The proverb, agasozí kamanutse inka kazamuka umugení also speaks to the connection between women and cows. Translated it means “when people go up a hill
with a cow, they return with a bride.” Clearly, audience members at gusaba no gukwa do not all share the same symbolic meanings; however, as these cow metaphors, names, and the proverb demonstrate, the connection between cows and women remains deeply embedded within Rwandese culture.

Symbols cannot be seen simply as units of meaning, as might be suggested by Saussure, Turner, or Bettelheim; rather, they must be seen within the context of the ritual in which they are enclosed. Most likely, various bits and pieces of these attitudes about what the cow symbolically invokes during gusaba no gukwa are juxtaposed within each audience member.

Leeds-Hurwitz notes, wedding rituals are made up of many “individual symbols, often drawn from different social codes, into a coherent whole, as a way to convey multiple, complex messages.” As a member of the audience, I was totally enthralled by the performance of the three cows. I even romanticized the importance of those cows. But maybe others were just hoping they did not make a mess, especially the bridal party who would have to walk across the space to make their grand entrance and deliver gifts and hugs to family members, or the dancers who had to dance around the cows and might have feared the cows would chase them. Bell suggests that many scholars focus on analyzing how symbols do what they do assuming that all people share the same basic symbolic understanding, an approach leading to a kind of “sociocultural solidarity,” but she suggests that symbols are “fundamentally ambiguous.”

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186 Bloch “Symbols, Song, and Dance,” 55.
188 Bell, Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice, 184.
telling as the words spoken by the wedding speakers that were the focus of the previous chapter on *gusaba*.

For some audience members, the cow may be viewed as a commodity, a possession to be bought and sold, symbolic of wealth. In this respect, when offered for a bride, it is easy to see the transaction that occurs as the purchasing of a bride. One unmarried university student confided that she did not care to have dowry when she marries because she believes the ritual encourages gender-based violence. Dowry encourages men to think of their wives as “playthings,” she explains. Because they think of their wives as playthings that they have purchased with a cow, men might find it justifiable to beat them whenever they feel like it. I asked if she felt her parents would support her decision and she said yes because they had both attended university in Europe. Her attitude is shared by others, including legal analyst Charles Ntampaka, who indicates, “Criticism of the *inkwano* has not led to its abolition although it serves to perpetuate the power of the husband and the inequalities within the family.”189 If guests view the cow primarily as a commodity to be bought and sold, they may very well think of women as commodities to be bought and sold because in a sense, one is exchanged for the other. Taylor writes that “commodity logic” emphasizes the monetary value and accumulation of objects.190 Some dowries are paid in cash, which perpetuates the application of “commodity logic” to the bride. “Nowadays everything is counted in money,” explains Marie Paul, lecturer of sociology at the Catholic Institute of Kabgayi.

Everything you could need is quantifiable in monetary terms.” A cow might cost anywhere from 300,000RWF to 400,000RWF ($460-600), but if the family already owns cows, the initial financial investment is much less. But when the dowry is paid in cash rather than cows, the amount may vary considerably. I attended one wedding meeting where the groom gave 1,000,000RWF ($1,500) for dowry. The conversion to cash has stimulated some families to request very large dowries for their daughters, sums that can lead to tensions between and within families. One Rwandan man explained:

I was planning to marry the girl I loved. I was earning 32,000RWF [$50] a year, but the family of my bride-to-be was asking for 300,000RWF [$450]. I could not find such a sum without help so I decided to take out a bank loan of 400,000RWF [$600], and so we got married. When my wife discovered my debt, she started screaming, asking me what it was for. Until now I haven’t been able to tell her.192

As this example illustrates, tensions are created when young men must struggle to come up with cash just so that they can marry. Add to that the feeling that some men may have when they use cash that they have bought a wife, and it becomes clear how the shift from cows to cash can influence the symbolic associations people might have about dowry.

Alternatively, some may view the dowry as an opportunity to demonstrate their wealth. For instance, Bakina writes, “sometimes the payment of a large dowry can act as an opportunity for a family to rise to a challenge and show off.”193 One 45-year-old married man explained, “It’s a matter of great pride to pay what you’re asked for, no

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192 Qtd. in Bakina, “In the Market for a Wife,” n.p.
matter the amount. It’s a way of showing that you’re strong and able to provide for your future family.” Seen in this way, the dowry has social value because it functions as a visible token of the strength and capacity of the groom’s family. Like the verbal tests during gusaba, the dowry provides an opportunity for the groom’s family to demonstrate their merit.

Similar to compensation, discussed previously, the dowry may be seen by some as a reward for parents. According to Bakina, “This exchange serves to recognize the bride’s family’s efforts in raising its daughter and preparing her for marriage.” The husband of an older couple I interviewed echoed this view, characterizing dowry as “a token of appreciation” given to the parents of the bride. One unmarried university instructor in his 30s told me he did not agree with the idea of giving dowry. He explained, “Some people say dowry is compensation to parents for the loss of their daughter but my parents also lose me when I marry. Why shouldn’t they be compensated too?” Even if dowry is seen as a reward for raising a good daughter, he wondered, “What reward do my parents get for their efforts in raising a good son?” On the one hand, he may have been trying to justify getting married without investing in paying dowry, but even if sincere, his questions do interrogate gender differences, which may hold less significance to the generation of youth confronting marriage in Rwanda.

Whether compensation, reward or something else, just because exchanges have “economic implications,” says Comaroff, it “does not necessarily mean that they are commercially or economically motivated.” Others may see the dowry as a necessary

\footnote{Bakina, “In the Market for a Wife,” n.p.}

action to legitimize the marriage. According to Ntampaka, “In traditional law, the dowry, *inkwano*, is an essential condition of validity of a marriage and of the legitimacy of children born of the union.”\(^{196}\) However, the Rwandan Civil Code identifies the civil marriage ceremony as the one that makes the union legal, ensuring protection of the wife and children under the law, especially with regards to inheritance. In the Rwandan Civil Code, Ntampaka explains, dowry acts only as “a condition of the celebration of the marriage” and does not ensure its legal validity.\(^ {197}\) Despite the law, the perception that dowry payment legitimizes the marriage persists, as evidenced by a news article published recently in a local Rwandan newspaper in which its author writes, “Marriage is legalized by payment of the bride wealth.”\(^ {198}\) It is significant to note that the majority of Rwandans who marry complete all three ceremonies, *gusaba no gukwa*, the civil, and the church, so they may very well perceive that each ceremony legitimates the marriage in a significant way. Or not. Comaroff writes about an anthropologist from the 1960s who saw the exchange as the way to marry, but the people he studied, the Melpa and Wiru, tended to view marriage as the vehicle for exchange.\(^ {199}\) In other words, with the first view, I might think of the exchange as the action that facilitates marriage; however, with the second view, I would see marriage as the action that facilitates exchange. Regardless of which perception makes most sense, both ways of perceiving marriage facilitate the development and support of social bonds.

In the past, cows were part of an elaborate system of gift-exchange, so some wedding guests may see dowry as symbolic of the bond created by this elaborate system.


\(^{197}\) Ibid.


The gukwa ceremony was not just about a single one-time gift of a cow. Rather, it signified an extended series of gift-giving meant to continue over a lifetime. Taylor contrasts “gift logic” with “commodity logic” suggesting that when “gift logic” predominates, an exchange of a gift creates social bonds. For example “food is both substance and symbol, nourishment as well as a meaningful gift.”

In the context of gusaba no gukwa, we can see how this principle of “gift logic” operates when it comes to inzoga (beer) as discussed in Chapter three. The gift of inzoga indicates various social obligations. The hosts of gusaba no gukwa offer inzoga to welcome guests to their home and quench their thirst from the journey. In this instance, the gift of inzoga operates primarily as nourishment. But it is also symbolic of social obligation in that by giving inzoga, the hosts welcome the guests. This principle becomes clearer in the absence of inzoga. It is said that if the host does not offer inzoga, it is tantamount to a social snub. Later, when the guests offer their gift of inzoga, because it is said that it comes with a message, the hosts, in accepting the gift, also accept the obligation to let the guests speak and to consider their message.

Whether audience members at gukwa think primarily in terms of “gift logic” or “commodity logic” will influence how they view symbolic associations with cows during gukwa. “Gift logic” emphasizes the relationship or obligation implied between the giver and the recipient, whereas “commodity logic” tends to see the monetary value of the object as symbolic of the giver. Rather than the value of the object, the act of giving and its social obligations are emphasized in “gift logic”. The object is distinct from the person giving it. In the inzoga example used above, audience members viewing the

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200 Taylor, Milk, Honey, and Money, 6.
world primarily though “commodity logic” would focus on the monetary value of the alcohol given rather than the social obligation of listening to the message the guests may wish to share. De Lame explains:

Like drink in Rwanda, cattle embodies an order of significations and relations, representing a social universe . . . In Rwanda, cows like drinks, serve as both commodities and gifts. They unify the production and exchange processes, reproduce the social universe and embody an order of significations.201

Thus, there exist many layers of meaning understood by the audience at gusaba no gukwa tied to the act of giving dowry as well as to the object given, which may be cash as discussed previously or most often still consists of a cow. When tied up with gift exchange, cows take on additional significance.

One additional significance of the dowry cow centers upon the idea that it serves as a visible reminder of the lasting alliance between family groups. Taylor speculates that “maintaining the orderly flow of gifts was a prime concern of social life in precolonial Rwanda.”202 Taylor’s observation was bolstered by what I saw at the Ethnographic Museum in Huye. The Ethnographic Museum is one of six museums in Rwanda governed by the Institute of National Museums in Rwanda. During my interviews, several people advised me to go to the museum in the Southern Province so one afternoon I took the bus from Kigali to Huye. Built in 1987, the museum contains seven sections displaying historical, ethnographic, artistic, and archaeological artifacts. The marriage exhibit listed several gift exchanges that were given in the past. For

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201 De Lame, A Hill Among a Thousand, 349.
202 Taylor, Milk, Honey, and Money, 206.
example, the groom gave a cow at the engagement and again on the day of the wedding to the bride’s father, and he gave cows to male and female blood relatives of the bride.

The dowry cows were in addition to various amounts of beer, hoes, sorghum flour and sometimes, goats. In the past, a dowry cow used to be given at gufata irembo to serve both as a sign of the couple’s engagement and to provide nutrition for the bride to prepare her for marriage.\textsuperscript{203} Although I did not witness the giving of an actual dowry cow at any of the gufata irembo ceremonies that I attended, Oliver, one of the wedding speakers, expected the groom’s speaker to give him an envelope with money inside meant to signify a dowry cow. Once a ceremony was delayed for quite some time because the groom’s representatives did not realize this dowry money was what he was waiting for. Even the bride was getting worried because she walked around outside trying to hear what the problem might be.

The father of the bride was responsible, according to Taylor, for giving household items and a goat, sheep, or sometimes a calf, and beer to the groom at various points following the marriage. It was also customary for the father of the bride to give a cow (indongoranyo) to the groom’s family after several years of marriage and after each child’s birth (guhemba).\textsuperscript{204} Guhemba is still practiced today, although it is unusual to see a gift of a cow. The ones I attended were similar to a baby shower for both parents, consisting mostly of gifts for the care of the baby. But such wide-spread gifting of cattle in the past led de Lame to assert, “At present, circulation [of cattle] between owners and non-owners through deposits, or the hopes of obtaining custody or a gift, alleviate the

\textsuperscript{203}Ndekezi, \textit{Ubukwe Bw’abanyarwanda}, 19-20.
\textsuperscript{204}Taylor, \textit{Milk, Honey, and Money}, 218.
frustrations born of inequality.” Gifts given during gukwa may act to redistribute goods, but they also express and confirm the alliance between families. Wealth, alliances, social obligations, and distribution of goods all may be tied up in how audience members think of the symbolic significance of cattle.

It may seem crucial for a common understanding of the symbolic implications of dowry giving and the cow in order to create cohesiveness among the audience. Leeds-Hurwitz elaborates that symbols allow “complex ideas to be communicated relatively quickly, and with minimum of explicit explanation for those who share an understanding of the symbol.” Furthermore, shared understanding of the symbol fortifies their sense of belonging leading to moments of communitas. At the gusaba no gukwa in Rwamagana, after the cows were introduced into the center, a song was sung by the cultural troupe inviting the audience to like the cows. The words of the song encouraged audience members to share a set of similar thoughts about cows. However, Bell suggests that the activities of the ritual may be just as or more influential than beliefs associated with the ritual. Differing beliefs are not as socially cohesive as membership in group because group membership is emphasized over and over during gusaba no gukwa. All members of the audience are segregated based upon whether they represent the bride’s family and friends or the groom’s family and friends. The segregation is maintained throughout the ceremony from the moment the groom’s group enters together and are instructed to sit together. The groom’s group also leaves together after the ceremony. Sometimes, if a meal is offered to both sides, there may be a little crossing over into the

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other groups for socializing, but often food, if served at all, is done after the groom’s
group leaves.

“Ntakirut’inka.” (*Nothing surpasses the cow*)

After the dowry discussion, two men dressed as cow herders (*abamurika inka*)
recite praise poetry (*amazina y ‘inka*). Gatsinzi explains *amazina y ‘inka* are “poems
recited to praise cows especially showing how fruitful a given cow is, how brave a given
cow is and some other small elements of beauty.”\(^{207}\) The performance of *amazina y
‘inka*, according to Gatsinzi, serves to remind the audience of traditions and to make
people proud of their Rwandan heritage.\(^{208}\) Similarly, de Lame suggests that *amazina y
‘inka* represents a kind of nostalgia for the past; however, she also indicates that the
poetry may have operated as a type of social control in the past.\(^{209}\) De Lame cites
Nkunkiyimfura, who details how *amazina y ‘inka* can be traced back to the late 18\(^{\text{th}}\) and
early 19\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries and came about to create support for Mwami Kigeri Rwabugiri’s
ruling dynasty.\(^{210}\) *Amazina y ‘inka* was one of several “complex, diversified art forms”
that were, according to Barber, “harnessed to consolidate the Mwami’s power and to
elaborate the aristocracy’s privileged aura.”\(^{211}\) There were the *itorero* schools where boys
learned to battle with weapons and words and the *ubwiru* poets who recited poems
detailing royal rituals that were closely guarded secrets. It is said that the poets had to
memorize the texts of these poems verbatim and those who made mistakes while

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\(^{209}\) De Lame, *A Hill Among a Thousand*, 347.
\(^{210}\) Ibid.
performing were put to death. Another complex, to the point of incomprehensibility, oral art was the *igisigo* or praise poetry of the royal family; this genre was made up of a sequence of deliberate moves away from the initial idea through synonyms, homonyms, and metonyms. While poets could master the performance of these poems, due to the complexity, they rarely understood them. Three additional oral art forms can also be traced back to precolonial times: *ivugo* (warrior praise poetry), *ibiteekerezo* (historical narratives), and *imigani* (popular tales). Barber suggests that the differentiation among these genres, of which *amazina y ‘inka* was one, was not merely a reflection of the hierarchy and solidarity found in the kingdoms, but also the means by which they were created and sustained. The words of the cow praise poetry help create an aura of mystery about the cows. Taylor explains that Rwandans believe “cattle were celestial *Imana’s* [God’s] gift to terrestrial humanity. . . cattle mediate between sky and earth, just as rain passes from sky to earth. As with rain, the circulation of cattle has to be socially ordered.” Leaders in some regions of Rwanda capitalized on these beliefs, invoking an elaborate system of patron and client relationships collectively called *ubuhake*. Through *ubuhake*, people formed alliances with kings and wealthy cattle owners in exchange for “ownership” of the milk and fertilizer produced by cows but the cattle owners maintained “ownership” of the cow’s offspring.

The complexity of *amazina y ‘inka* is a challenge even for native Kinyarwanda speakers to interpret. Time after time, audience members told me they admired the poets because they knew how to use “old iKinyarwanda” so well. The complexity of the

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212 Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, 60.
poetry, the use of old iKinyarwanda, and the speed of delivery, require that any meaningful study of the poems would need another dissertation entirely.

At the gusaba no gukwa in Rwamagana, a second song is sung by the cow praise singer dressed as a herd boy, holding a walking stick and clump of grass as he performs. He sings about the beauty of each cow, calling each one by name, and about the importance of cows in Rwandan society. De Lame surmises, “In Rwanda, now cosmopolitan in its own way, cattle, like beer, is a ‘middle term’ with a universally comprehensible semantics, articulating the past and the present, the cosmopolitan and the local, models for circulation and for accumulation.”215 Like the wedding speakers, the cow praise singers combine past and present elements to create a sense of culture and values that Rwandans hold dear during the performance of gukwa.

Following the performances of the cow poetry, a third song about cows is sung and danced by the cultural troupe. Women and girls extend their arms in long, graceful movements above their heads. Sara tells me they are mimicking the movement of the cows. The arm and hand movements are meant to be the horns of Inyambo (long-horned cattle associated with royalty).

Introducing the Groom and the Bride

After the dance by the cultural troupe, the wedding speakers pick up the threads of the ceremony again. With dowry taken care of, it is time to introduce the groom. Up to this point, the groom has been seated with his attendants in the fourth row among the groom’s family. Sara and I watch when the groom’s family enters, and we try to identify which young man is the groom. Usually the groom and his attendants are dressed exactly

215 De Lame, A Hill Among a Thousand, 352.
the same. Today they all wear black suits with white dress shirts. The four attendants have yellow ties and two, whom we guess to be the groom and his best man, wear blue ties. Yellow and blue are the national colors as represented on the Rwandan flag, and seem to be a favorite color choice for many couples this season. Sometimes I think I can identify the groom because of the huge grin that seems to go from ear to ear. I speculate that he is happy to be getting married on this momentous occasion. But Sara chooses the one who looks unsure and nervous. Sometimes she guesses correctly; then we attribute the huge grin on the best man’s face as either reassurance or relief. When they go take their seats under the special tent, I see I have chosen correctly because the one smiling sits beside the empty chair designated for the bride.

Sometimes we can easily identify the groom because he dresses differently from all of his attendants. For example, at one wedding, the attendants all wore gray suits and white shirts while the groom wore a beige suit with a purple shirt. At another ceremony, the groom and his attendants were dressed in ivory colored Indian sherwani trimmed with gold but the groom had more gold around his waist and a turban on his head. These details set him apart from the others.

Next, the bride makes her entrance. Up to this point, she has been sequestered inside the house with her attendants. As in many weddings in America, the bride’s attendants enter first, followed by the bride’s matron of honor (she is always a married woman, most often sister or sister-in-law of the bride) and the bride. The bride always stands out. Today she dresses in a sari made from fabric a shade of blue resembling the national flag. Adorned with gold jewelry around her neck, in her ears, and hair styled in an “up do” a few curls cascading down her back, she makes her way slowly to the groom
as he walks out in front of the tent to greet her. They hug but there is no kiss as we expect at American weddings. He places a ring upon her middle finger and then holds her hand high so that the audience can witness the moment (See Figure 4). I shiver as I do at all gusaba no gukwa. When her hand goes up, I feel a powerful sensation at seeing this visible symbol of marriage displayed high in the air for all to witness. More than any other, this moment, for me, signifies the marriage. It reminds me of my own wedding when the pastor held my wedding band in his fingertips for all to see as he spoke of the never ending circle as representing our commitment to each other. The moment my husband placed the ring on my finger, I felt the permanence of our vows. I remember

Figure 4. Couple displaying the ring. Photograph by Kigali Today May 25, 2013
thinking at the time how the rings mark my husband and me as “off limits” to others, just as the bride’s ring today marks her as taken. My favorite photograph from my own wedding displays our rings on our left hands, fingers touching one another resting upon an open bible.

When I asked about the significance of putting the ring on the middle finger, people told me that was the place for the engagement ring and that the wedding band would go on the index finger during the church wedding. Long ago, a garland of a vine known as umwishywa (momoridica foetida) was placed on the bride’s head and used in a similar way to display to the public that she was married. In fact, the symbolic power associated with the umwishywa garland was so strong that it is said in the past a woman could become married even against her will if a man was able to set umwishywa on her head. A plain band of leather replaced the garland of umwishywa for daily wear and served to easily identify married women. Sometimes women wore them at the gusaba no gukwa ceremony, but I did not see women wearing them every day.

Sometimes the brides adorn their grooms with some item to also identify them as married. Once, at gusaba no gukwa in Kigali, the bride surprised her groom with a ring, and he too, raised his hand for all to see. At another gusaba no gukwa in Kigali, the bride removed a string of beads that hung around her groom’s neck and replaced them with a necklace with a large, flat medallion. Capes and hats were often used in Muhanga. At one gusaba no gukwa, the bride entered carrying a small shoe-sized box. When the bride and groom met in the center stage area, he sat on a stool and she opened the box, took out a feathery hat, placed it on his head, and then draped his shoulders with an animal-print cape. Later, I asked the groom about the cape. He told me that his wife put
it on him as though to say, “He is the one.” At another *gusaba no gukwa*, also in Muhanga, the bride draped a gold cape around her groom’s shoulders and placed a bedazzled red fedora hat such as one might see at a nightclub on his head to match her red veil and *umushanana*. After placing the hat upon his head, the bride took out a small packet of tissues, the groom sat on a stool, and she kneeled at his feet, removed his sandals, and wiped his feet. She took another tissue from the packet and wiped his brow. This modification occurred at an Adventist *gusaba no gukwa*. The foot washing, brow wiping, and absence of alcohol were influenced by Adventist religious beliefs.

Sara told me the bride’s actions reminded her about the sweat of your brow scripture, Genesis 3:19, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” This represents the voice of God after he threw Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden when they disobeyed His commandment. Many see brow wiping and foot washing as exemplifying a woman’s role to take care of her husband while he goes out into the world to provide for her. But in the Catholic Church, when Pope Francis washed the feet of the juvenile offenders, he was perceived as showing humility. When the bride made as if to wipe the groom’s feet, I thought of another scripture telling the story of Jesus washing the feet of the twelve apostles. John 13: 3-5 states, “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.” Most Christians interpret foot washing as an act of humility. Some might see significance in
that the bride washed the groom’s feet but he did not reciprocate. This performance could be seen as a subservient act signifying a woman’s place to serve her husband. Yet I discovered that it is not uncommon for children of both sexes in Rwanda to rub or wash their parents’ feet. Sara’s 70-year-old mother sprained her ankle and her nephew, who is 22-years-old, massaged her ankle several times a day. Sara also traveled home on the weekend so she could rub her mother’s ankle. She explained to me that she or one of her brothers had always rubbed their mother’s feet because youth are supposed to take care of their elders. It is also possible to see this action in terms of *Ubuntu*. Viewed from this perspective, the bride’s action communicated her willingness to take care of her husband’s needs simply because he is a human being. Of course, since the ceremony did not portray the husband wiping his wife’s feet and her brow, I am curious to know if a husband will apply the principle of *Ubuntu* and rub his wife’s feet at the end of a long day.

Back in Rwamagana, after the groom places the ring on the bride’s finger, they go first to his family to greet them and the bride gives her mother in-law a hug and a gift, she gives her father in-law a hug and a gift, and the couple greets and shakes hands with the wedding speaker. After this the wedding party makes its way over to the bride’s group, and repeats the behavior (See Figure 5). The word *gusaba* is often translated as *introduction*. Each of these rituals accomplishes an introduction of one sort or another. First the groom’s family is introduced to the bride’s family and friends, then the groom is introduced to the bride’s family and friends, then the bride is introduced to the groom. Then they go together to greet their in-laws and exchange gifts.
Figure 5: Groom presenting gift to mother in law.

Milk: the Most Precious Possession

Story told by Oliver during a *gufata irembo* ceremony:

There was an old man who once fell sick. One day he went to the hospital and the doctor found he had a liver problem. When the doctor told him to stop drinking milk for water, the old man replied if he couldn’t find life in milk he could not find it in water! He immediately left the hospital!

Milk, as an extension of the cow symbolism, also plays an important role in Rwandese culture. Milk provides nutrition and sustenance in a way that water cannot. The story speaks to the old man’s belief that milk is the very source of life and as such, is more important than water. He believed he would die without milk. We might say that milk is his lifeblood. During the time of royal monarchies, the king presided over a fertility ritual involving the mixing of milk whereby the resulting butter was meant to symbolize
the creation of a baby.\textsuperscript{216} Thus, for many Rwandans, milk retains associations with fertility.

On a visit to the Ethnographic Museum in Huye, I learned from our guide that in the old days, the King and Queen had a close family relative to spend the night with the milk to watch over it. *Ibyansi* (milk jugs) were made of wood with a woven wicker lid. Butter was made in large gourds with a narrow neck, called *igisabo* in Kinyarwanda. The family’s *igisabo* was closely guarded because seen as a symbol of fertility; it was believed that to break one’s *igisabo* resulted in bad luck and sterility.

The model of the King’s home at the Ethnographic Museum in Huye features a variety of milk containers. Beside the containers, the description reads, “Farmers treated milk with care. Milk, considered the most precious possession, occupied a place of honor on a shelf in the main hut, or a special hut for receiving visitors” (See Figure 6). In response to my question, why milk is considered “the most precious possession,” one young man affirmed that its value comes from its association with cows. Cow meat, of course was valuable, but the milk provided daily sustenance. In fact, he indicated that they used to believe that a woman who could wash the milk containers well was a good woman. The husband of an older couple I interviewed explained that offering milk is “an expression of hospitality.” Rwanda is known as the land of milk and honey.

Milk may be associated with fertility and abundance, the Promised Land, and blessings of heaven. The importance of the ritual drinking of milk is emphasized by the repetition of drinking together before and after each ceremony. At the end of *gusaba no gukwa*, the bride and groom will drink milk. After they have been introduced to both

\textsuperscript{216} Taylor, *Milk, Honey, and Money*, 45-46.
families and gifts exchanged, the groom is invited into the bride’s parents’ home sometimes to eat, and sometimes to take photographs; however, there is always the milk drinking ritual, during which the bride’s mother serves first the groom, then the bride a large glass of milk. Then, before the church ceremony, the bride and groom will drink milk again. After the church wedding ceremony and reception, the bride and groom will be escorted to their new home with a small delegation. There the newly married couple will again drink milk during the gutwikurura ceremony. If people see milk as symbolic of fertility, then the ritual serving of milk to the bride and groom acts to ensure the couple’s fertility.
When I played the role of mother of the bride at one *gusaba no gukwa*, I entered the home in a formal queue behind the bride’s matron of honor, followed by the bride and groom and the rest of the attendants. The bride and groom sat side by side in two chairs while one of the attendants poured two glasses of fresh milk from a pitcher into two large glass mugs. I was then instructed to give the milk to the groom. I handed him the glass. Then I was told to take the glass back and lift it to the groom’s lips and pour. After lifting the glass to the groom’s lips, I gave him the glass and repeated the sequence with the bride. They continued to sip the milk. All the while, the photographers were snapping photos and recording video for the DVD. When I asked someone about the significance of this part of the ceremony, I was told that usually the bride and groom then give the milk to the young children and it is meant to represent their desire to have children of their own.

With regards to the story Oliver told, the old man believed he could find life in milk. Associations with fertility do exemplify the idea of finding life in milk. But milk also offers daily nutrition and excess can be sold. Whereas the cow may offer a one-time feast of abundant meat, or a single infusion of cash if sold, the milk cows produce offer sustenance and income every day. There also seems to be some cultural emphasis on the health of drinking milk and a simultaneous de-emphasis on eating meat. De Lame observes, “the average peasant family eats meat, and beef in particular, less than three times a year.”

I sat next to a woman on a bus ride one day who indicated that in her position working for the division of agriculture she was in charge of a campaign to teach locals the nutritional value of eating meat. Up to that point, I had incorrectly assumed

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that the many goats and chickens I saw along the countryside were a source of food for the farmers and their children in the rural areas. However, she told me that the chickens were kept for the eggs they produced, which the farmers in turn sold at the markets, and the goats served a similar purpose to be fattened up and sold for cash at the market. Many restaurants and bars serve goat meat so their market was probably to those who could afford to drink and eat in restaurants and bars, mainly men and foreigners, rather than families. For what, then, I asked, does she think the families use the money earned from the sale of the eggs and goats, if it is not for eating? She responded that most families lived on beans, cassava, and bananas that they could grow themselves and used the money to pay health insurance, school fees, and rent. Sometimes fines are imposed as a motivational incentive to get rural populations to do what is deemed good for them. Known as “obligations,” tasks that people must fulfill include building pit-latrines, creating compost pits, having a table for drying dishes, and buying a cooking stove, clean clothes, and national health insurance. Sommers estimates the annual cost for these “obligations” averages about $200 per year.

However, financial reasons are not the only reason people might prefer milk to meat. Sara did not serve meat more than once or twice a week because she believes too much meat to be unhealthy. Her dietary preference may be a reflection of what Taylor notes historically, “Tutsi prided themselves on being able to consume a diet rich in liquids, especially milk and beer. Although they would occasionally eat beef and solid vegetable foods, their diet was more liquid than solid.”

Another way of thinking about the significance of milk ties in with its relationship to the cow. If cows are symbolic of

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wealth and bonds between families, then cow milk represents a daily expression of wealth and a constant reminder of the bonds. Since the milk drinking ritual is repeated several times during the marriage ceremonies, and is still included in *gusaba no gukwa*, milk also plays an important part in Rwandan culture.

Clearly, the symbolic associations with cows, dowry, rings, and milk may vary widely from person to person in attendance at *gusaba no gukwa*. However, despite Bell’s point that symbols are “fundamentally ambiguous,” the fact that the *gukwa* portion of the ceremony continues to ritually celebrate cows, invokes the historical bond-building significance of cows first through the rhetorical performances of the wedding speakers, narrating and carrying us through the event, followed by the ritual giving and receiving of the dowry, the performance of the cow praise poetry, the drinking of milk, and the songs sung about cows and the dances mimicking cow movements by the cultural troupe. Bell explains, “ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities.”\(^{219}\) The *gukwa* portion of the ceremony functions as a ritualization of historical ways of creating bonds.

Even though many Rwandans no longer keep cattle, cattle still occupy an important place in Rwandan social fabric, as demonstrated by the dominant role they play in *gukwa*. Money may be given behind the scenes in lieu of actual cows, but no reference to money is made during the performance of *gukwa*. Prior to 1954, the custom of *ubuhake*, a form of pastoral clientage was practiced in Rwanda. De Lame notes that colonial administrators referred to *ubuhake* as “loyalty contracts” and suggested the

\(^{219}\) Bell, *Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice*, 74.
practice created “family-like relations resulting in reciprocal obligations.” De Lame points out that relations involving the exchange of land use and labor also set up reciprocal obligations, both of which may have been a part of *gusaba no gukwa* in the past, but it is only the cattle that continue to play a large part in the ceremonies I witnessed.

Oliver explains cow-gifting and marriage are two remaining of six rituals that were performed to create bonds of friendship. He described the ritual of *Abiru*, keeping the secrets of the kingdom to ensure the bond between king and subjects that ended when the kingdom was abolished in 1959. He also explained the ritual of blood brothers, who drank each other’s blood to signify “true and endless friendship,” attributing its demise to diseases like HIV/AIDS. Christianity challenged the third ritual, practiced as part of the *Kubandwa* religious beliefs, that according to Oliver, “was the most powerful” because “you would swear (with a sword upon you) that you will never betray your friendship.”

The fourth ritual involved loyalty between soldiers and may still be practiced today. The last two involved cow-gifting and giving each other brides and grooms for marriage. The *gukwa* ceremony invokes, through the giving of cattle, the two rituals that produce, maintain, and as many believe, possess the potential to repair the social fabric for Rwandans.

Cow-gifting, sans the marriage ceremony, if not practiced literally, is still practiced symbolically. If I give you a cow, it is tantamount to saving your life because the act symbolized by the words represents a bond between us that is meant to continue over our lifetimes. Just as saving a life creates an obligation, receiving a cow sets up an

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implied obligation between the giver and the receiver. As an example, one person I interviewed explained that if the cow giver calls you in the middle of the night, you are obligated to go help. If the cow-giver, for example, wanted help to pay for his son or daughter’s education, and you possessed the means, you would be expected to help. When the cow-giving ritual is enfolded within *gusaba no gukwa*, the resulting ritualization symbolically invokes the social bond and accompanying obligation of loyalty between families. Just as the words spoken during the *gusaba* portion of the ceremony emphasize the importance of social interconnectedness and building bonds between families, the rituals performed during the *gukwa* portion of the ceremony accomplish a similar effect.

Finally, as the next chapter will demonstrate, *gusaba no gukwa* is a rite of passage that continues to emphasize social interconnectedness and builds social bonds as it transforms youth into adults, single people into husband and wife, associates into family, and a single story about Rwanda into many stories.
Chapter 5: Transformations

“What knowledge is here?”

The first few times I put on umushanana (Rwandese “traditional” formal dress), I felt extremely uncomfortable. Like an imposter. I just knew I looked like a foolish muzungu trying to fit in when my skin color, my whiteness brands me an outsider. In this photograph, the cloth covers my legs, thighs, and torso but my shoulders and arms are exposed (see Figure 7). I imagine I look like one of those “misfits” Stirrat writes about who think of development work in countries like Rwanda as a way of “escaping from the modern world and who dream of a world based on a nostalgic view of the past.” I cannot help but feel this photograph resembles a “curio postcard” depicting me as what ethnographic performer Conquergood denotes as the “curator’s exhibitionism” that he

Figure 7. Mama Friday and the author. Photograph by the author, February 25, 2011.
describes as someone “suffused with sentimentalitity and romantic notions” of the “exotic” Other. This stance is one of four “ethical pitfalls” that he identifies that ethnographers face when viewing the Other. The other pitfalls, according to Conquergood, are “the custodian’s ripoff” fueled by extreme selfishness marked by “appropriation” and “plunder”; “the skeptic’s copout” marked by a refusal to engage motivated by focusing on difference, and “the enthusiast’s infatuation” evidenced by naïve superficiality that trivializes the Other. Each of these performative stances fit on a continuum of degrees of commitment and detachment that interferes with dialogic performance, which facilitates genuine conversation. I continually interrogate myself and wonder if my interest in Rwandan culture reveals sentimental romantic notions to rescue/defend/glorify oral art forms. Compared to my friend who looks beautifully elegant with her mahogany skin, dark hair and radiant eyes, I feel that I look fat, pale, too white, out of place. The temptation to avoid cultural exchange permeated my initial efforts. Like Conquergood’s skeptic, if I fixated on the differences, I would not be able to achieve anything close to dialogue. At the same time, I cannot step back and gaze without some level of engagement as Conquergood’s curator. The moment I put on umushanana, I move toward engagement. In a sense, my representation of Rwandese weddings, like my photograph, consists of a hybridization that cannot cover up my story, which continues to weave in and out of what I see and experience.

As I prepared to travel to Muhanga for my first gusaba no gukwa, I put on my exotic orange fabric with a swirling pattern of black, red, and yellow. My friend tied the

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222 Conquergood, “Performing as a Moral Act,” 5-8.
part around my waist very tightly, knotting the ends. I envisioned the entire swath of fabric coming undone suddenly to reveal my pale legs and white underwear. Just before the ceremony began, the groom’s sister gave me a string of orange plastic beads to wear around my neck. During *gusaba no gukwa*, a little girl came to sit on my lap for part of the ceremony. She made me feel comfortable . . . less of an outsider. The child simply accepted me as a person to sit with, a curiosity to touch, experience.

During the photo session after the ceremony, they called out to me, *umushyitsi wacu* (our guest, visitor, stranger) to be in a photograph. I walked over to pose between the bride and groom. This “posing” too felt awkward. The bride probably feels awkward about having *umuzungu* in her photographs. I was a guest on the groom’s side and had not even met her yet. Perhaps a photograph of a *muzungu* in *umushanana* was as exotic for them as it felt to me.

At one ceremony, an elder said to Oliver, “tell her if she wants to learn Rwandan culture, she has to learn the language first.” At the time, all I could say was, “Ndagerageza” (I am trying). I did study *Kinyarwanda* prior to arriving here, but by no means do I possess the fluency necessary for in-depth conversations or for a comprehensive understanding of what the wedding speakers say. In that respect, I am entirely dependent upon a circle of people willing to talk, translate, and explain what the *ubukwe* ceremonies mean to them. Indeed, I acknowledge that this fieldwork would be better undertaken by a native Rwandan. Certainly, a study carried out by a Rwandan would enable her to explore subtleties of language and culture that I can only begin to touch. But does that mean that I should not search for knowledge where I might find it?
Conquergood stresses that “refusal to risk encounter” is more reprehensible than naïve enthusiasm or exotic exhibitionism. I wholeheartedly engage in this encounter, knowing my cultural and linguistic limitations. Just as I was instructed to wear the exotic orange umushanana selected for me, and I did what I was told despite my uncertainty, I harness my cultural curiosity and wear the theoretical underpinnings of communication theory despite my uncertainty. I acknowledge the limitations imposed by my life experience as an educator, as a white, middle class, American woman. As much as I try to remain open to encounter, to instruction, to local knowledge, this, after all, is my story of Rwandese wedding ceremonies; a story influenced by my biases.

So, during my summer trip to Rwanda in 2011, when I was seriously exploring the possibility of studying weddings for my dissertation, I asked the same young woman who gave me the orange plastic beads to take me shopping to buy umushanana because, well, I would need it if I were going to attend wedding ceremonies. My attitude was simply that I would wear it out of respect for the Rwandans and their culture. It would be my uniform. I picked the fabric; she negotiated the price and arranged to have the two pieces cut and sewed. Within a week, I received an unexpected invitation to attend gusaba no gukwa. The university professor who invited me to his niece’s wedding offered to pick me up in his car. So we arranged that I would walk to the gas station on the main road near where I was staying to wait for him at noon on Saturday.

On that arid August morning in 2011, I dress carefully for my second gusaba no gukwa. This time I do not have someone to help me dress. I put on the umushanana, tying it as tightly as I can. I hope I have tied it across the correct shoulder. I walk down

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the stairs of the apartment out into the courtyard toward the gate. I greet the guard and watch him look approvingly at my umushanana. Okay, that helps me to feel a little less self-conscious. I cross the street hesitantly and walk slowly, self-consciously toward the gas station. I choose a small patch of shade, face the street, and wait for my ride. Again, the feelings of being an imposter invade my entire body. What if the women are offended that I am dressing in umushanana? What if they think I look foolish? People are walking past; it is a Saturday and they are dressed in an array of casual t-shirts, skirts, and denim jeans as they do their shopping. I see a few women wrapped in colorful fabric. I see a woman wearing umushanana zoom by on the back of a motorcycle taxi. I think, “She must be pretty brave to trust all that fabric around the moto tires. Maybe she is also going to a wedding.” Are they looking at me, the muzungu in umushanana? I can feel Conquergood’s skeptic emerging as I begin to regret agreeing to do this. The thought of bolting back to hide in my apartment does cross my mind. Why do I think I can dress up and go to a wedding with a guy I just met yesterday? Maybe he just invited me to be polite and never thought I would agree to go!

I take out my phone and call my friend, Flo. I chase away the skeptic as I explain to her that I am standing at a gas station dressed in umushanana feeling like a fool and ask her to talk to me to take my mind off it. She chats with me for a few minutes until I see the guard from the apartments striding purposefully across the street toward me. I tell Flo I have to go. He greets me (in Kinyarwanda) and I respond (in Kinyarwanda). He stands beside me. I tell him I am waiting for a ride (in English). I doubt he understands me. But I am comforted by his presence. I am no longer alone with my uncertainty. He
waits silently with me until my ride arrives. I believe he saw fear etched on my face and came over to comfort me. I am grateful.

This experience is actually my second encounter with silence in Rwanda. They say a blind person develops a keener sense of hearing. Perhaps this works for those temporarily bereft of language. In this country where I cannot always understand the language, I have learned to listen to silence in a new way and to pay attention to my other senses. One night in 2010, on a previous trip to Rwanda, staying in a guest house alone, I did not want to be alone in the dark after the lights went out, so I went to a nearby church where people were singing. They did not seem bothered by the fact that the electricity was off. I sat on the ground outside under the window to listen to their soulful voices in the night air. Soon the guard from the guest house came and sat a respectable distance away from me and began to sing along with the people inside the church. We never said a word to each other. I did not have Kinyarwanda then and he did not have English. But I took great comfort in being together in the dark, in just not being alone. To understand these feelings, I note Walter Ong's coinage of the term “sensorium” to refer to communication involving all the senses.224 Because written words dominate our literate world, according to Ong, we have a tendency to conceptualize even silence as “speaking silence” and to limit our thinking of communication to words rather than to include other sensory contextual elements such as touch, taste, or smell.225 In both these instances, in Rwanda, words were not present. The primary mode of communication occurred with the placement of our bodies. In the first story, the guard and I also communicated with

our eyes. No words, just emotion: fear in mine and peace in his. In the second story, the women were singing, but because I could not make sense of the words, I heard the melody and the emotion in the sounds of their voices that communicated a sense of peace that added to the peace I felt at that moment, in that context.

Communication may take many forms. Just as it is in my stories about waiting at the gas station and listening to music in the dark, silence is noticeable between the bride and groom during the entire performance of *gusaba no gukwa*, and that silence communicates several aspects about social relations in Rwanda. In formal public contexts, social relations appear very hierarchical. Older men known for their speaking ability do the talking. Young men do not say much nor do women in the rhetorical performance of *gusaba no gukwa*. I observed how the older, experienced wedding speakers often delighted in confusing the younger wedding speakers before they offered them help. But there are also additional ways to communicate. The women use *impundu* or ululating (*Ayiiiiiiiiiiii!*!) to communicate approval. Also audience members, regardless of age or sex, use laughter and clapping to signal their approval. If the audience members do not laugh or clap, they may be communicating disapproval. About these issues, Chawla and Rodriguez note that “the nonspeaking body is profoundly rhetorical. It is laden with meaning and purpose. In these meanings it resists and enacts agency—the body speaks without speaking.” Just by being present at *gusaba no gukwa*, the youth and the women in the audience who do not speak still demonstrate their approval. The youth and women approve the match, the transformation from youth to adult, and the social bond between families, and they reinforce cultural norms about who

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speaks and who is silent. Bell explains, “Specific relations of domination and subordination are generated and orchestrated by the participants themselves simply by participating.”

Many single youth I spoke with affirmed that they would choose their future husbands or wives, but they would not proceed without the approval of family members because they could not bear to forego *gusaba no gukwa* in the presence of family. Choices about whom one consents to marry reflect one way that the marriage rite is “experienced as a negotiated appropriation” that Bell explains as the individual participant’s way of using the ritual to construct a view of reality that “gives one some sense of relative dominance in the order of things.”

It is possible to view my own choice to wear *umushanana* as “negotiated appropriation.” During my field work trip to Rwanda, when we began attending wedding ceremonies, Sara wore pants and I wore *umushanana*. It occurred to me later that it appeared strange that the foreigner was wearing *umushanana* while the local was wearing a pant suit. My clothing choice communicated my desire to fit in, while Sara’s was boldly communicating her efforts to resist cultural norms for young Rwandese women.

Around the eighth ceremony, I convinced my friend Flo to wear *umushanana* and go with me (See Figure 8). We went to a small shop in Kisimenti and after fingering half a dozen fabrics, she chose the gold one. I love this photograph! We look so beautiful!

For another *gusaba no gukwa*, we decided to rent matching *umushanana*. In this way, we

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227 Bell, *Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice*, 207.
228 Ibid., 208.
communicated relationship to each other. In a typical ceremony, sisters, aunts, and the
bride and groom’s attendants tended to wear identical clothes. Making decisions about
which umushanana to wear made me feel as though it were my second skin. I also felt
more comfortable when I realized most people were not really looking at me. As with
American weddings, the bride and her bridesmaids outdo all the guests with their
carefully selected clothes, jewelry, and hair styles. And everyone dresses up for
weddings in Rwanda. At gusaba no gukwa, where the majority of women wear
umushanana, I was just one among many.

The last day I wore umushanana was different because it was a special gift I
received when playing the role of mother (See Figure 9). My adopted daughter and new
son in-law gave it to me during the gift-giving part of *gusaba no gukwa*. They chose a shade of green silk that complimented my white flesh and reddish blond hair. But, more importantly, it signified my insider status as a participant in the ceremony rather than just an audience member.

Dressed in my attire as the mother of the bride, I am traveling from Kacyiru to Ruyenzi alone today because Sara is working out of town this weekend. As I walk to the main road planning to get a taxi, people comment. Three young women smile and say “*Wambaye neza*” (*beautiful clothes*) as I pass by. “*Murakoze cyane,*” (*thank you very much*) I reply. I feel light on my feet as if I am floating across the dusty red earth. I feel
like a beautiful princess. When I reach the main road, there are no taxis to be seen. No
time to wait since I had arranged to meet with the ICK instructor at Nyabugogo taxi park
at 9:00 so we can travel to the gusaba no gukwa he has invited me to attend. I hike up
my umushanana and climb into the taxi bus as the conductor shouts, “Nyabugogo,
Nyabugogo.”

The drive to Nyabugogo takes just a few minutes as there is not much traffic on
the road this early in the morning. At the taxi park, I hand my fare to the conductor, hike
up my umushanana so as not to trip as I exit the taxi bus, and stride purposefully across
the taxi park toward the exit. Sure, there are many stares as I pass by drivers, passengers,
street hawkers, and beggars. It is not every day you see umuzungu in umushanana at
Nyabugogo, but unlike that first time many months ago when I felt like an imposter,
today feels different. I know where I am going. I know what I will see. I know I have
tied the top swath of fabric across the correct shoulder. I have prepared a speech that I
will recite at the reception this evening. I am reminded of last weekend when, dressed in
my umushanana on my way to another gusaba no gukwa, I watched as a moto taxi driver
turned his motorcycle around and rode over to greet me. I responded in Kinyarwanda.
He complimented me and thanked me for respecting Rwandese culture.

The moto driver’s actions validate my efforts to “fit in” in spite of my obvious
outsider status. Of course, I have no illusions about my white privilege. I had a peaceful,
happy childhood. I have a well-paying, secure job. My children will never go hungry.
Strangers, as a general rule, do not perceive me as a threat. By virtue of my skin color
and my nationality, I “fit in” just about anywhere I want to go. Moreover I feel entitled
to go wherever I want to go. But I have also become a strange hybrid compelling some of my Rwandese friends to remark that I have a Rwandan heart in an American body.

As cliché as it may sound, the outward transformation in my dress reflects an inward transformation in my thinking—disputing, in a way, the sense of a mind, body, and material divide. Conquergood challenges this Western view when he writes of a dialogic performative stance that “struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so they can have a conversation with one another.”229 This stance “resists conclusions” and as Conquergood emphasizes “is more a hyphen than a period.”230 My external appearance presents a visual symbol of my dialogic performative stance. As a result of my short sojourn in Rwanda, I now see many threads of many stories emerging. Dusenge, Oliver, and Jean Pierre, the three wedding speakers, spent many hours talking with me about their craft and how they view its place in Rwandan culture. The older married couples I interviewed gave me insight into their wisdom, experience, and memories of the past. The young married couples spent hours answering my many questions as they reflected upon what gusaba no gukwa meant to them. My students at the Catholic University (ICK) shared thoughtful discussions about culture. I feel privileged to have been embraced by a circle of thirty-something unmarried women alternately referred to as spinsters, lesbians, or prostitutes by curious neighbors who struggled to find a place for single women in a marriage-dominated society. Ultimately, I think about the venerable old woman who questioned why I came to Rwanda to look for knowledge when they send their sons and daughters to America to learn. “What knowledge is here?” she asked.

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230 Ibid.
Such a question is indicative of who has power to define knowledge. Tuhiwai-Smith notes that “the globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the center of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge.” The woman’s question may be indicative of a colonial education that taught her little about the value of her own culture, of her own life. Writing of the hegemonic view perpetuated by predominantly white male anthropologists of the 20th Century, Trinh describes, “Here, where she lives, each door revolves like a mirror of his mirror... she will then remain silent, looking at him looking at her. Or she will, with the enthusiasm of the blind leading the blind, walk in his footsteps chanting R-adical-evolution.”

The woman’s question directed to me reflects the pervasive hegemony still present in Rwanda, a double oppression that local knowledge gets displaced by knowledge emanating from the West, and secondly, that in a patriarchal system, women’s experience is not worth knowing unless a man tells it.

Her question may also reflect a dichotomy between book knowledge and everyday life knowledge. Little scholarship about Rwanda by Rwandans has been published in the international arena. I found just two local authors, Alloys Biguriwami and Simon Ndekezi, who have written about marriage in Rwanda. But only a fool would think that knowledge cannot be found in Rwanda. The woman who asked that question was no fool. She was present at a marriage meeting for her granddaughter when she asked that question. Her presence alone shows the importance she bestows on the series

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232 Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), 47.
of marriage ceremonies that would transform her granddaughter from child to woman, to the privileges of adult participation in the community. Perhaps her question was not translated well. Maybe what she really meant was “what knowledge would outsiders care about?”

What knowledge, indeed?

First, there is the knowledge that wedding ceremonies in Rwanda are transformative on several levels. On an individual level, wedding ceremonies are rites of passage that transform youth (the bride and groom) into adults. On a communal level, weddings signify community membership and social bonds. On a cultural level, weddings mark vital transformative liminal spaces or thresholds that Victor Turner advises are “seedbeds of cultural creativity.” And on an international level, Rwandese wedding ceremonies transform a single story about Rwanda into many stories.

“Marriage is the focus of existence.”

In Rwanda, marriage is a significant indicator of the transformation of individuals from childhood to adulthood. When it comes to marriage, Mbiti notes, “for African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence . . . it is a duty . . . a rhythm of life . . . it is the point where all members of a given community meet.” A wedding is an important rite of passage involving the symbolic crossing of a threshold and entering a new world. Yet it retains an importance lost to most Americans. As Coontz explains, in most parts of the world prior to the late eighteenth century, “marriage was the most important marker

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235 Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, 20.
of adulthood and respectability as well as the main source of social security.”  

Since then, many other markers of adulthood have emerged. In America, a man or woman can achieve adult status through various means such as bearing children, getting an education, or developing a successful career; however, in Rwanda, marriage is still arguably the most important rite of passage because a man or woman’s success is measured by starting a new family unit. The emphasis upon marriage and its subsequent parenthood often disturb single female Americans when they visit Rwanda. When meeting someone for the first time, polite conversation often turns quickly to questions such as “are you married” and “do you have children?” The American women tell me how curious they find the Rwandan condolences they receive when they answer “no” to both questions.

Marriage sits so firmly at the center of Rwandese culture that there is no word for an unmarried adult. People are referred to as *youths* until they marry. The daughter in the accusation story whose husband had not come to get her for many, many years was referred to as *umukobwa*, meaning “girl,” even though she was an eighty-year-old woman. Linguistic markers of this tendency can be found in the *Kinyarwanda* words *umugabo*, which is synonymous with both *man* and *husband*, and *umugore*, which refers to a married woman. Getting married transforms a person into an adult. Without it, a grown person sits on the periphery of the community.

*“When girls reach the age of 25, you start throwing guys at them.”*

It is significant to note that the average age at marriage in Rwanda has increased in recent years. The legal marriage age is 21 for both men and women. As of 2010, fewer than 4% of married women were under the age of 20 and less than 1% of married

men were under the age of 20. The majority of women tend to marry around age 21, while the majority of men tend to marry later, at about age 25.\textsuperscript{237} University education may delay marriage another four or five years for both men and women. Recently, the Rwandan Parliament discussed lowering the legal age for marriage to 18. A 30-year-old businessman in Kigali wonders whether parliament is copying western culture, “If the bill becomes law it will not consider only girls but even boys. A girl at 18 can get married but what about a boy of 18 taking someone’s daughter and starving her?”\textsuperscript{238} People who do not support lowering the age believe that youth are still psychologically young at 18. Many youth are still in high school and dependent upon their parents at 18. They fear lowering the marriage age would lead to increases in divorces and family conflicts.\textsuperscript{239} Nevertheless, pregnancy presents a significant stigma for unmarried women so some people support lowering the age so that they can marry and ensure some social and financial security for themselves and their children. However, an unmarried female university student supports lowering the marriage age to 18 because “girls grow faster than boys and by the time a girl is 21 she is too old and not attractive.”\textsuperscript{240} When I read this comment, I found it difficult to believe that a woman would say this. Thinking that a male journalist might be a man putting words in her mouth, I checked but the journalist is also a woman. Her comment reflects a widely held belief that women are valuable only for their bodies, youthful, beautiful bodies. Most disturbing of all is the way that this

\textsuperscript{237} Coontz, \textit{Marriage, A History,} 7.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{240} Mutimura, “Might Rwandans Marry at 18?”
young woman has internalized and normalized the sexist, self-deprecating attitudes about herself and other women.

In an interview with Naomi, a married woman in her 40s who has just finished orchestrating her niece’s gusaba no gukwa, she tells me, “People won’t let you be single; they harass you. I harass them. When girls reach the age of 25, you start throwing guys at them.” We are sitting in her office. Naomi, a successful businesswoman who has recently returned from a ten-year-long sojourn in New York, feels strongly about maintaining Rwandese marriage customs. When I ask how important marriage is in Rwanda, Naomi and I suddenly remember that we are sitting with her niece, Grace, my friend, who helped arrange this interview. Grace is single and over 30. She and her younger sister get harassed by their aunt. “I ask Grace all the time, ‘where is the guy?’” Smiling at me and glancing toward Grace, she continues, “I was talking to my daughter today; she is 26. She had some problem with a contract at work. And I was telling her, you see if you had a husband, you would be sharing these things, you would be building together. And she replied, ‘Oh mother, not again!’” Talking to Grace, Naomi comments, “I think your generation won’t be rushed.” Grace acknowledges that marriage is important to her generation but “at the same time, you just want to make it your decision.” A single college student told me she feels many of her friends marry just to please their parents and are often ill-suited to each other. So while there seems to be some space opening up for single women to choose when and whom to marry, they still get a great deal of pressure from family and friends.

Influenced by the Cairo Convention of 1994 to marry at older ages, couples have also been encouraged by government authorities to limit family size. At the civil
ceremonies I attended, the couple was advised by the local official to limit family size to three children. This policy contradicts the neo-Malthusianism concern that unchecked population growth of African countries is largely the cause of poverty and starvation that permeates much development work in Africa. Rather, marriage signifies much more than just a sanction for procreation because girls in Rwanda do not marry as soon as they are able to bear children.

The cultural emphasis on marriage is reflected in the high numbers of married Rwandans. According to the *Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey of 2010*, approximately 70% of women in the 25-39 age group are either married or living in an informal union, whereas men of the same age range from 62-89% either married or living in an informal union. Rwandans tend to marry for life. While the number of men over 40 married or living in an informal union increases to 92%, the number of women over 40 married or living in an informal union decreases to 61-66%.\(^\text{241}\) The difference in these numbers reflects a high percentage of widowed women, many of whom lost their husbands as a result of the 1994 genocide. Women rarely remarry, whereas men do at much higher rates. Divorce is fairly infrequent. In the 15-49 age group, the average number of women who are divorced is 4.7%, while the divorce rate for men in the same age group is 1.1%.\(^\text{242}\) The relatively high rates of marriage coupled with the relatively low rates of divorce illustrate the social importance of marriage as well as a cultural taboo against divorce.

\(^{241}\) National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) [Rwanda], Ministry of Health (MOH) [Rwanda], and ICF International. *Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey 2010* (Calverton, MD: NISR, MOH, and ICF International, 2012), 53.

\(^{242}\) National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) [Rwanda], Ministry of Health (MOH) [Rwanda], and ICF International. *Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey 2010*, xxii.
“Only women are gusaba’d.”

Although men do transition from boys to men, gaining higher social standing through marriage, most elements of gusaba no gukwa emphasize the girl’s transition to woman and her role as wife and daughter-in-law. Van Gennep divides rites of passage into three phases—rites of separation that remove a person from a role; rites of transition that manage the in-between role stage; and rites of incorporation that move a person into a new role. Each of these phases occurs within Rwandan wedding ceremonies. Upon completion of the first ceremonial meeting, gufata irembo, the bride is now engaged or betrothed, entering the separation stage of the wedding rite of passage. The groom’s family has, as one wedding speaker translated it, “made the booking.” Those who use this phrase may be thinking of the old custom of marking the gate to signify that a daughter in the household is engaged. From a critical standpoint, using the term booking can be equated with conceptualizing the bride as a commodity to be exchanged for the dowry cow. Patriarchal hegemony permeates the ceremony. Unlike her single friends, she is no longer available. But those who use the word engaged to refer to both the bride and the groom may simply think of gufata irembo as the ceremony that makes the engagement of both the boy and the girl official.

In the past, during the betrothal, the bride might go live with an aunt who would provide abundant quantities of milk and food to prepare her and to teach her about the responsibilities of a wife. Called gutinyisha, such a formal arrangement now happens rarely, although sometimes aunts will invite their nieces over to talk about marriage. One “auntie” I interviewed told me she planned to have a gathering at her home for her niece who was getting married but that “you could not really tell girls these days anything they
do not already know.” A recently married woman told me she learned about marriage from her friends at school and at work—as in many parts of the western world.

During *gusaba no gukwa*, the bride enters a liminal in-between space. She is no longer part of her family, and she is not yet incorporated into the groom’s family. Sometimes years, months, or a few weeks might pass after *gusaba no gukwa* before the bride travels to the groom’s home. Usually the bride is escorted to the groom’s home after the church wedding and reception. Most of the weddings I attended scheduled the church wedding one week after *gusaba no gukwa* or held both on the same day. Sometimes I heard of the bride staying in her new home with the groom immediately following *gusaba no gukwa* but she will still be officially escorted there after the reception.

In Remera for the reception after the church wedding, we are gathered on the grounds of a private high school. As with the *gukwa* ceremony, gift-giving constitutes an important part of the reception. Many guests from both sides speak as they present gifts to the bride and groom. During this part of the ceremony, it is common for women to speak. The speeches made by women from the groom’s family tend to be more perfunctory: they welcome the bride and give well wishes to the bride and groom as they transition to their new roles as husband and wife and set up their new home. One woman from the groom’s side welcomes the bride on behalf of the family and affirms she is “happy she is coming to join them.” Another speaker from the groom’s side explains she will pray to God asking Him to help the bride.

In terms of Van Gennep’s taxonomy, the speeches at the reception acknowledge the separation and transition and foreshadow the coming incorporation. Van Gennep
notes, “marriage constitutes the most important of the transitions from one social category to another, incorporating all three types of rites: separation, transition, and incorporation.” As previously discussed, gusaba no gukwa marks the bride’s separation from her family and friends, and the transition or in-between, liminal space before she goes to live with her husband. After the church wedding and the reception, the bride will be escorted to her new home, where the transition will end and rituals of incorporation into her new family will begin.

The bride’s sister speaks. She stands beside the bride, the groom, and his best man. She calls all her family members to join her as she speaks. Giving honor to Imana, she says, “the bride has always been umwana mwiza, [a good child], bearing good fruits for us, and we give this gift of fruit so that she can continue to bear fruit in her new life.” Other women say a few words as they deliver gifts to the bride and groom. For example, an unmarried cousin of the bride causes the bride and her sister to cry as she emphasizes separation referring to activities they used to do together that they will no longer be able to do, and how much they will miss her. A married cousin speaks next, telling a story about when she stayed with the family to help care for the bride when she was a baby. “I remember when your mother decided it was time to stop breastfeeding you. She went all the way to Nyanza to buy bread to give you. I know the groom is getting a good wife because even in primary school she was umwana mwiza, a good child who grew up well.” The tears continue.

243 Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, 116.
244 While umwana mwiza literally translated means good child, this term is frequently used to describe adults of either sex whose behavior honors their elders.
The gist of their speeches highlights the double-sided aspect of marriage for the bride. She must leave her family and move to another location. In the past, geographic distance limited opportunities for visiting; however, patriarchal cultural restrictions continue as she is not free to help her family if they need her, and she must ask permission to visit because spending time away from her husband is frowned upon. The speeches emphasize the pain of that separation while trying to reconcile the happiness she should have becoming a married woman. Married women in Rwanda may be expected to play a subservient role to their husbands, because most people I interviewed expected the husband to be in charge. But their married status also places women above younger unmarried youth of both sexes.

In my role as the bride’s mother, I have been asked by the bride’s brother to give a basket of fruit and give a speech. I sit in the front row next to the bride’s uncle, who plays the role of the bride’s father. I wait for the bride’s brother to signal it is time. He and an auntie escort me up to the bridal party who are standing in the center of the gathering and stand beside me as I begin to speak. I feel assured sandwiched in between the bride’s family members. As the microphone is passed to me, I waiver between feeling excited to be speaking for the first time at a wedding and anxious, as I have planned to say my words in Kinyarwanda. I say:

mbuto ntabwo zaremwe mu munsi umwe. No kubaka urugo rero bitwara umwanya kugirango urugo rube ruzima. Inkono ntihira ikibatsi ihira ikibariro.

Murakoze!

[Hello! Thank you very much! I am very happy to be here with all of you. My husband and I have been married for twenty-two years. I want to give two pieces of advice. First: may your marriage result in an abundance of love and prosperity which is represented by this basket of fruit. Second: A wise friend once said, “Spending time with people you love is a good choice.” Remember to take time to talk. Just as a seed takes time to grow into a tree bearing fruit; it takes time in order to build a strong family home. Proverb: Food cooked slowly over a low flame tastes best. Thank you!]

When I reach the last line, I gesture to the bride’s sister to please read the proverb. I feel as though I am butchering the words with incorrect inflection. She encourages me to continue, saying the words softly under her breath so I can mimic them. I use the proverb, inkono ntihira ikibatsi ihira ikibariro (food cooked slowly tastes best) to suggest that relationships take time to develop and strengthen. Each point I make offers advice for transition and incorporation into her new family.

The gift I give, the basket of fruit, is determined by the bride’s brother; however, my speech is left entirely up to me. He simply instructed me to give a speech. It is significant to note that the bride’s sister also gives a basket of fruit with her speech. Whereas she emphasizes the bride’s good behavior and hope for “bearing fruit” in the future, I emphasize the relationship that will grow over time between the bride, the groom, and the groom’s family.
Two concurrent thresholds are being crossed. The bride is crossing into marriage and her various roles as an adult woman in Rwanda, and I am becoming a mother and member of this family. This time I am not just wearing umushanana and sitting within the audience observing. Nor am I just playing the silent role of mother of the bride at gusaba no gukwa. This time I am speaking. The transformation from silent observer to speaking participant marks an important shift in my relationship to this family. The shift began several months ago when I attended another young woman’s gusaba no gukwa with the young lady who was to become umukobwa wanjye (my daughter). As that ceremony progressed, one of the bride’s wedding speakers asked if his friend might get the inzobe they were hiding in the back row to be his wife. Later they told me if an even exchange could be arranged where a woman from the bride’s side is exchanged for a woman from the groom’s side, there would be no need for a dowry cow. At first, as they all turned to look at us, I thought they were talking about umukobwa wanjye. She has very light brown skin, the kind that inzobe describes. But no, they meant me. Imagine that, an old, married, white woman somehow preferable to a young, unmarried, beautiful woman sitting beside me. Muzungu power? Perhaps. We laughed. The ceremony continued. As we were leaving, I saw the speaker and asked him in Kinyarwanda, “Hehe ni umugabo wanjye?” (Where is my husband?) He said he would find him and introduce us, but I left before that could happen. Commodity? Maybe. But it was fun. I enjoyed playing the role. It was starting to rain. Umukobwa wanjye, Sara, and I climbed into our SUV followed by two young men who asked if they could catch a ride with us. As on the taxi buses, we were squashed in four to the back seat, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, thigh to thigh. On my left, sat Sara, on my right, sat strangers. To relieve the tension I
felt being wedged in with these strangers, I asked them to give me an Kinyarwanda name.

“Uwera,” said the driver. “Uwera Marie,” said umukobwa wanjye. They told me uwera can mean light, angel, purity, clear. I pulled my new name out strategically over the next several weeks wearing it proudly like a badge of sorts to claim some kind of insider status. Several months later, when umukobwa wanjye asked me to play the role of her mother at gusaba no gukwa, I again became the subject of a speech.

As the kwinegura (evaluation) speeches began, the electricity went off. Our host rigged a flashlight from the ceiling and we continued in the semi-darkness. After going through the customary evaluations of the ceremony, Dusenge, the wedding speaker said, “I thank her for participating in all the ceremonies of this family, her not being the aunt, nor a descendent of yours; her being kind of strange but still not a spy. She is a stranger to Rwanda but a stranger who loves our family very much. This means love someone who loves you.” Suddenly, the lights came back on. Dusenge continued, “So now you see Shannon, is it Shannon? She became Uwera, so talking about Uwera, the electricity came back. Shannon is light. Uwera light.” Words are transformative. Spoken through the wedding speaker, words are imbued with power. They make things happen. I had been a participant observing up to this point but in a moment, I became a family member of sorts who possessed some special electrical power. It was at this moment that umukobwa wanjye came up to whisper in my ear that she wanted me to be her mother for gusaba no gukwa. Of course no one can take the place of her birth mother, a woman who succumbed to illness far too early in life. And I am still trying to figure out my role as a member of this family. But I do know when the first baby is born, I will be there. When it is time for school fees, I will share in the responsibility for the sons and daughters’
education. It would be immoral to swoop in, gather rich material for my dissertation, and fly away never to be heard of again. And I have so many witnesses to answer to. I have firmly planted both feet into this ambiguous adventure.

Thus, it is significant to note that Rwandan women are not always silent. As demonstrated by the discussion of speeches at the reception, women do speak in public. In addition to impundu, they also engage the power of the spoken word within the context of weddings. The wedding speakers’ words may be thought of as making the transformation begin whereas the women’s words make a way for movement out of the liminal space and into the new home.

Some speeches show concern rather than advice for the bride and the way she will be treated in her new home. The bride’s brother assembles six of his close friends. As they face the bride and groom, he speaks for a brief moment and then passes the microphone to one of his friends. His friends sing a song about human kindness and how people who live in an environment of warmth where human kindness abounds cannot help but be kind. Finishing the song, he tells the bride and groom that their group is very happy for their marriage and after the honeymoon, they will come and sing to them. They have ordered a guitar from Dubai to give to the groom and they will teach him how to play the bride’s favorite songs so she can continue to be surrounded by the warmth that music brings. The gift of the guitar illustrates the bride’s family and friends’ concern for her wellbeing and sending something with her that will help to ensure that her new home contains human kindness and the joy and comfort that music provides.
Concern for the way the bride will be treated in her new home was echoed in other gusaba no gukwa I attended. For example, the following exchange took place asking for a demonstration of singing:

BFS: There is a wish from one of Jane’s sisters, who is asking if they will be able to do everything for Jane that she could get in her family, like singing ibihozo? [songs mothers sing when children are crying to try to stop them from crying and to help them sleep.]

GFS: We will do the same pampering as you did to her, don’t worry.

BFS: Just show us how you will do it. Just act instead of saying words.

GFS: Ok. Hey dear ladies! Can we get one to sing that song?

BFS: Is there anybody who can sing for her baby to stop crying in all those beautiful women I see with you? Oh! I see women of your area are without manners.

GFS: These women were born in the dot-com era. [People laughing.]

BFS: Is there no one who can at least sing for Jesus, if you can’t sing for us or for [our daughter]? [People laughing.]

A woman sings: “We thank God who made us one; we could have been one on our own.” [People clapping and laughing.] At another gusaba no gukwa, the bride’s family speaker made a similar request, “As you know here in our home we have habits of dancing, of singing, of spoiling children. So to remove those doubts, I want them to look for someone who is able to sing lullabies and he or she will come here before us to show it.” A woman from the groom’s side stood and sang two songs, one in Kinyarwanda and the other in Luganda. The songs were followed by the groom’s family speaker’s reassurance as he
said, “Don’t worry! We will wipe her tears.” Both examples acknowledge the pain of separation while also calling for a promise of consolation to facilitate the bride’s incorporation into the groom’s family.

In addition to singing, speakers introduce other concerns for the bride’s incorporation into the groom’s family. At one gusaba no gukwa, shortly after the groom’s family and friends had been seated, the bride’s family speaker observed “something scary that I unbelievably found on you.” Continuing to explain, he stated:

I believed you to be updated, in accordance with our country’s development, but maybe at your place things are still out of date and still have a long way to go. This makes me worried about giving you the hand of our daughter because I don’t find it good to send her to an outdated society. It seems like you don’t realize how far gender balance is in Rwanda. How can you tell your women to sit separately from the men? Please, tell them all to come hugging us, then we will keep on conversing. Thank you!

This speech mentions “gender balance,” alluding to some of the efforts in government, business, and family life to achieve equity between men and women in Rwanda. For example, Rwandan Parliament boasts 56% women members, and many local government positions are also held by women. One of the civil ceremonies I attended featured a woman officiating at the umurenge level. She conducted the entire civil ceremony.

Women may inherit land and other property as a result of the 1999 Inheritance Law, and there has been a tremendous push for education among young women in the past few years. Campaigns also exist to decrease incidences of gender based violence. Some of these may have been what the speaker was alluding to with his reference to “our
country’s development” and his concern that they might be sending their daughter to an “outdated society.” But his speech asking for the women to move toward the front and hug them may also have just been a playful joke. I am hopeful that discussions of gender balance will bring about more equity for women in Rwanda but I also recognize gusaba no gukwa as firmly entrenched in upholding patriarchy. The rituals enact and affirm that the bride must leave her family. Her alliance must now shift to her husband’s family. Her children will belong to his family. The groom does not leave his family. The groom does the choosing while the bride is chosen. The groom makes the request while the bride is given. This reminds me of the line from my own wedding, “Who gives this woman?” My father said, “I do.” My husband was not given. As the Rwandese do, he did the taking. Patriarchy continues to permeate marriage ceremonies worldwide.

At the same gusaba no gukwa where the bride’s family speaker expressed concern about gender balance and how the bride would be treated in her new home, the bride’s family speaker also advised that women should not be relegated to the role of “helper.” As the following excerpt demonstrates, he advises that women should be treated as a “queen” because they “help God to make people.” He stood facing the audience, periodically waving his finger for emphasis, as he instructed:

Consider Francine your wife, not your helper! I know that this vocabulary rose with some new Bible translation version, where they call a wife a helper. God never created women to be helpers of men, but to be their wives. . . . She will be a parent of your descendants. Treat her like a queen. A woman is someone strong, who everyone should obey. Sometimes men make big mistakes considering their wives like their helpers. Let me give you an example; we know some renowned
personalities such as Obama, the Pope, and so forth. Every person on this world, including those high personalities and low-class people like me . . . we are born through women. Women are not men’s helpers since they help God to make people.

The use of the word “helper” as used in the biblical context to describe Eve as Adam’s “helper” has often been interpreted to place women in a subordinate role to men. The speaker’s rejection of this word raises some important points. On the one hand, some might interpret the bride’s family speaker’s advice as extremely restrictive because it identifies her primary role as reproductive and puts her on a pedestal alongside God; however, his message also admonishes the groom’s family to treat her well, to recognize her strength, and to obey her. These cautionary tales expressing concern for the bride and the behavior of the groom’s family are the focus of most of what the wedding speakers say during the entire gusaba no gukwa ceremony. The context and the details may change, but the message concerning behavior toward the bride runs through the old ceremonies too.

Songs about transformation feature prominently at Rwandese wedding ceremonies. Gatsinzi notes certain songs “give advice to the people who are about to start a new life they know little about.” They may praise the bride and groom, speak of the groom’s “happiness once he is given a bride,” or the bride’s “fear as she cries before leaving her home to join another family she is not familiar with.”²⁴⁵ A song that highlights the incorporation phase of the wedding is “Wiriweho Mwari.” Wiriweho means good afternoon. Mwari, also spelled Mwali, serves both as a general noun

describing a young woman and as a girl’s name that, according to the high school teacher I interviewed, means “a polite girl”—someone whom “everyone can appreciate.” A Kinyarwanda dictionary defines mwari as a “maiden, fiancée, or virgin.”246 One day while preparing food with Alice, the wife of one of the married couples I interviewed, I asked, “What does mwari mean?” She told me, “Umwari is a well-behaved woman.” “Oh, well what exactly is a ‘well-behaved woman’?” I inquired. She explained that a “well-behaved woman” from her grandmother’s generation around the 1940s or 1950s would be one who “speaks little, works hard, stays home, and sacrifices her own needs for her husband and children.” A proverb, nta nkokokazi ibika isake ihari, means women should not speak in the presence of men and reflects one cultural belief about a “well-behaved woman.” We talked about the possibility that mwari might be translated as virtuous, like in the biblical verses from Proverbs 31:10-31:

> Who can find a virtuous woman . . . she worketh willingly with her hands . . .
>
> She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household . . . her candle goeth not out by night . . . She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.247

Jewish translations of the first line read, “A woman of valor, who can find?” This poem from Proverbs was often performed by a Jewish husband to demonstrate his respect and admiration for his wife in the presence of their children. In other instances, family members might recite the poem on Friday evenings to celebrate both the wife and

mother. It may also be recited at weddings and funerals. The word *valor* may be closer to the notion of a Rwandese “well-behaved woman” because it speaks to her strength, courage, and moral character.

Alice added, among the present generation, a good woman is one “who is educated and can work outside the home to help make money for the family.” She also speculated that even a man without a university degree would like a wife to have a degree so she can get a good job. As an example, she referred to a friend who, as the wife of a wealthy businessman, does not necessarily need to work, but after having five children, has gone to university to study. In addition, as the many speeches made by women at the reception demonstrate, there exist some contexts where “well-behaved women” do speak in the presence of men.

“What then,” I asked, “makes a ‘good man’?” “Someone willing to take good care of his family and someone who can solve challenges,” she responded. I think about *gusaba no gukwa* and how the pseudo ceremonies, impediments, and accusations are meant to challenge the groom’s family. Solving challenges seems to be a highly prized ability. After a bit, she added, “a good man must be able to talk with his wife and work things out.” This particular quality came as a surprise to me because as I watched the performances of *gusaba no gukwa*, where male voices dominate, I made the assumption that because women are expected to be quiet in public, deferring to their husbands, they do the same at home. But at least for Alice, she expects a woman to have a voice with her husband in the private space of home.

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The song, “Wiriweho Mwari,” helps to prepare women for marriage, warning them that the transition will be difficult and giving advice about how to deal with it. The first stanza says something to the effect that the bride is going to another family who will break her limbs and won’t give her medicine. Alice explained this line is a warning that the bride will have to get used to a different life with new people. The second stanza continues with the beating analogy suggesting that the bride can still be injured. The song lyrics say members of the groom’s family will hit the new bride with their fists to make her broken bones go back together. The song warns the bride not to expect the groom’s family to help her since she is already prepared to clean out the cow stalls and make baskets, admonishing her to “go and be mature.” Brides often cry when this song is sung. The refrain mimics a crying sound with the repetition of the phrase, ihorere munyana. The final words, “Genda umenye ubwenge ubwana ubusige iwanyu” mean go and be wiser, leave childish games home. Other songs are sung, including one with the refrain bahatse bose identifying the bride as the most beautiful among all beautiful ones. Like the speeches from the women at the reception, these songs make reference to all three phases of transformation, but especially the tension between separation and incorporation. It is taboo to show emotion in public. The song “Wiriweho Mwari” expresses the sadness the bride might be feeling upon leaving her family and provides a culturally approved momentary break in the taboo against showing emotion.

I ask Alice as we continue to prepare food in the kitchen, “So women get songs and auntie’s special instructions to prepare them for marriage. What do men get?” Her husband, Nick, has just joined us in the kitchen. “Men don’t need special instructions to be married,” he explains. “They are men. They don’t make mistakes.” I cannot really
tell if he is serious or joking. But Alice agrees with her husband, telling me she cannot think of any special instructions that men get.

“A peacemaker bride.”

In the past, there were many rituals for incorporating the bride into the groom’s family. When I interviewed Dusenge, he repeatedly made the point that weddings of the past were much more complex. As he went on to describe the wedding rituals of the past, I began to see that the incorporation rituals of today have combined various elements of the rituals that were recalled by his parents and practiced in his grandparents’ lifetimes.

For instance, Bigirumwami and Ndekezi have documented some of these rituals in their books about Rwandese wedding ceremonies. Concern with the bride’s treatment in her new home is echoed in some of the rituals used to prepare her. In some regions, the *urutabataba* plant was given to the bride by her family in the belief that it would give her power over her husband and help her to “dominate her husband in the home.”249 In other places, the bride was carried on a stretcher from her parents’ home to the groom’s home. In this ritual, at first she pretends to refuse but the men carrying the stretcher are strong and overpower her. As they pass through her family’s gate, she picks up a small stick, breaks it, and gives the pieces to her parents. Breaking of the stick symbolizes her separation and incorporation as she says, “I break my own family; I am going to build another one for others.”250 During this time, the bride was escorted by family members—a brother, an aunt, and her age mates—a group collectively known as *abasangwa*. In other regions, the bride might be carried on someone’s back. Along the way, friends

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250 Ibid., 125.
gave her a stone to put in her mouth to make her strong and bread to eat to weaken the enemies who live where she is going.\textsuperscript{251}

In other parts of Rwanda, the bride’s father and mother-in-law sat at the gate to their compound awaiting her arrival. The father-in-law held a weapon known as \textit{umuheto} while the mother-in-law held \textit{igisabo}, a milk jug. When the bride arrived, the groom sat on his father’s lap and the bride sat on the groom’s. This action made the bride an official member of the groom’s family. Sometimes a messenger might say, “This is a peacemaker bride. There is no problem between our families. The one who sent me told me that he wants you to recognize this good relationship.”\textsuperscript{252} The bride’s escorts also brought many items with her such as cooking pots, food items, and her clothes and other personal items. This ritual continues today and usually occurs after the reception. At one home, I saw a long line of people leading from the truck bringing the goods up into the house. They either carried or passed the items one by one as we watched. Pots and pans were followed by 50 lb. sacks of potatoes, large bunches of green bananas, sacks of flour, sugar, and salt, cases of coke, Fanta, and beer, and \textit{ibiseke} (large baskets) filled with the bride’s clothes and other personal items.

\textit{Gutwikurira} (the unveiling) is one incorporation ceremony that is still practiced today. Usually it is the last thing after the reception. In the past, it was conducted some weeks after the bride had been escorted to the groom’s home. I attended only one \textit{gutwikurura} ceremony. This is because only a small number of people are asked to participate in this very private ceremony. The word \textit{gutwikurura} means “unveiling” and this ceremony marks the re-introduction of the bride into the community after a period of

\textsuperscript{251} Bigirumwami. \textit{Imihango N’imigenzo}, 127; Ndekezi, \textit{Ubkwe Bw’abanyarwanda}, 66.  
\textsuperscript{252} Bigirumwami. \textit{Imihango N’imigenzo}, 123.
seclusion within her new home with the groom. Sometimes the church wedding, reception, and gutwikurura are held on the same day immediately after gusaba no gukwa. Other times a few weeks might transpire between gusaba no gukwa and the church wedding, reception, and gutwikurura. However, long-ago several weeks passed before gutwikurura was held. It is taboo for the parents of the bride to participate in gutwikurura. A small group including the bride’s auntie, sister, and matron of honor and the groom’s speaker, uncle, brother, and best man go to the couple’s bedroom where the bride’s hair is cut to symbolize her new status as a married woman. Chantal Batamuriza Mrimi described this in her biography: “Another aunty cuts a little bit of my hair to declare me a married woman.” Mrimi’s reference to hair cutting as a visual indicator of being a married woman was echoed by several people I interviewed.

Next, the couple drinks milk and shares it with a young boy and girl to symbolically bless the new family with fertility. Then the bride’s family representatives leave to join the rest of the bride’s family at another location. According to Ndekezi, “the leader of the bridal procession then tells the tale of their journey: their arrival at their destination, how they were treated, the reception in their honor, and how they were accompanied.” In the meantime, the groom’s family, the groom and his new wife celebrate with food, drink, and music at their new home. As many of these old rituals attest, the focus was upon incorporating the bride into the new extended family, while the marriage itself was seen as a tool to build relationships between two groups.

254 Ndekezi, Ubukwe Bw’abanyarwanda, 68-69.
Historically, as Coontz observes, from a communal standpoint, marriage has been a vital “economic and political transaction” but since the late eighteenth century there has been a worldwide shift from viewing marriage as an institution toward viewing marriage as a relationship. However, in Rwanda, the perception of marriage as an economic and political transaction still prevails as was highlighted in the previous chapter about gukwa. The idea that marriage unifies families and that the bride plays an important role in that unification can be traced to the word gahuzamiryango that is sometimes used to refer to the bride. The noun is made up of two words: gahuza, a verb meaning “to bring together, connect, or harmonize; and umuryango refers to “family or lineage.” One of the wedding speakers played on the double meaning of gahuzamiryango as both the beer known to “unify families,” but more importantly he indicated that gahuzamiryango is the term they use to refer to the bride because she is the one who creates bonds between families. It conceptualizes what the bride does rather than what she is. One might be tempted to assume that because women and beer can be referred to with the same term, that people view them both as objects or commodities. However, the word’s association with beer is relatively recent. About a decade ago, a local brewery held a contest to give their beer a local name. The term gahuzamiryango won the contest because of the beer’s perceived ability to bring people together, to unite people. I think the wedding speaker used this play on the word during the ceremony because a new beer had just been released that had a high alcohol content called Turbo King that was rumored to

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256 Kinyarwanda-English Dictionary, s.v. “gahuza”
http://kinyarwanda.net/index.php?q=gahuza&start=0 (accessed September 27, 2013); s.v. “umuryango”
incapacitate men who drank just one bottle. It became known as the beer that breaks up families.

On a communal level, weddings are transformative by virtue of the social bonds this transaction creates between the bride’s family and the groom’s family. Viewed as an economic transaction, where the groom and his family do the taking, and the bride is the one who is taken, gusaba no gukwa does position the bride as a commodity. Some of the words spoken during the ceremonies, such as “booking” the bride and “exchanging brides” in addition to using the same word to refer to the bride’s role of bringing people together, are trivialized when used colloquially to refer to beer. Some may also see the bride’s role as simply an object to be exchanged to make friends out of potential enemies. After all, men are not given to the bride’s family to build bonds with them. But historically they did sometimes give their labor to the bride’s family.

However, I contend that the ritual concern that the bride’s family members show for the bride’s welfare as she transitions to her new home, the ritual emotional display that is sanctioned during the ceremonies, and the rhetorical testing of the groom’s family character are all actions that serve as continual reminders of the bride’s humanity. While the potential certainly exists for men to send their daughters to the highest bidder, that is not the intent of the practice of bridewealth as it is performed during the ceremony. One cow is symbolically given while eight cows are asked for because eight is a number symbolizing prosperity. Hilda Kuper, who spent years living with and writing about the Swazi in southern Africa, asserts that the Swazi see the bride as a “valued member of the community” because the wedding ceremony symbolizes her “past status” and her “future
security." Concern with the bride’s future security is evident throughout *gusaba no gukwa*. There is no test of the bride’s family to see if they will treat the dowry cow well. The rhetorical performance serves as an outlet for the tension and concerns that the bride’s family has with regards to the groom’s family. In this way, *gusaba no gukwa* changes the relationships between the families and the bride’s role in facilitating this change should not be discounted.

Performance Transforms and Performance is Transformed

From a cultural standpoint, the *gusaba no gukwa* performance, by virtue of its communicative power, may be culturally transformative as well. Dusenge, a wedding speaker, shared with me his belief in the power of *gusaba no gukwa* performances to strengthen marriage against the specter of divorce as well as serving to rebuild Rwandan communities after colonialism and genocide. He told me they have restored certain phases to the ceremonies that were “erased during colonialism” but used now to “rebuild the country back, to unite Rwandese because we are sisters and brothers with no separation due to poor and rich.” Ritualization, according to Bell, “both implies and demonstrates a relatively unified corporate body, often leading participants to assume that there is more consensus than there actually is.”

According to Dusenge, unity may be symbolized by the use of *isando*, a two-pronged agricultural tool for dowry if the suitor did not possess a cow. Even though he made a point of telling me that poor could marry rich and that class differences do not matter when it comes to marriage, I did not see *isando* offered at any of the ceremonies I attended.

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In fact, while the complexity of the rituals may have diminished, the pageantry of the ceremonies has increased, leading weddings to cost a great deal of money. As weddings become more commercialized, unity among rich and poor may be an elusive illusion, as more and more young men and women cannot afford to marry in a culturally sanctioned manner. Weddings in Rwanda have become big business. Wedding planner shops can be found in most of the bigger cities and towns. A man I met on the bus traveling from Muhanga to Kigali told me he spent $10,000 on his wedding ten years ago. Most of the weddings I attended involved couples who were university educated and might be referred to as middle class. The cost of these weddings, including all ceremonies, averaged about $7,000. The more lavish weddings might cost upwards of $15,000, but in rural areas, the spectacle is simplified. No photographer, no special decorations, simple dress, few attendants, and homemade sorghum beer or banana wine, brought the total cost to about $75.00. I bought a bottle of Uganda waragi (gin) for the groom’s wedding speaker to use during the ceremony that cost $20.00. The biggest non-negotiable expenses for the groom would be the dowry and building a home. However, in rural areas, people without the means do marry without any of the ceremonies I have written about. Dowry consists of a hoe. An umuranga (go-between), usually a woman who knows both the bride and groom, escorts the bride to the home of the groom in the evening so as to avoid attracting the attention of neighbors. The groom buys ibitenge (cloth for wrapping around the bride for everyday wear) and provides banana wine for a few guests. The next morning there will be a rumor in the neighborhood that so and so got married last night. If the neighbors are kind they come to see and greet the new wife.
Sometimes, the bride and groom do not meet until the night of the wedding; in this way, these simple ceremonies resemble those of the past.

The wedding ceremonies I attended in Kigali tended to be more elaborate affairs than the ones I attended in the Southern and Eastern Provinces. One afternoon as I sat in a church guest-house drinking tea and chatting with a retired minister in the South, he confirmed he had performed hundreds of weddings, and told me he had also recently married off two of his daughters, and had begun to plan his son’s upcoming marriage. He observed, “These days things are very ceremonial. In former days it was simple. *Gusaba no gukwa* has become more sophisticated.” Recalling my conversation with Dusenge in which he asserted ceremonies of today are much more simple than in the past, at first I thought the minister was contradicting the wedding speaker. But as I continued to listen, it occurred to me that while Dusenge interpreted the loss of certain rituals to have simplified weddings of today, the minister felt that weddings of today were more flamboyant. According to his recollections about his cousin’s wedding, one of the first weddings he ever attended, the groom’s family brought a hoe “or maybe two” which served to “make a way” for the cow. Then the visitors were welcomed with drinks, some discussion occurred to determine if the groom’s family had good relations with the bride’s family, and they sang for the cow. “That’s all,” the minister said. As he continued to talk about his cousin’s wedding, I got the impression that by using “ceremonial” and “sophisticated” to describe ceremonies of today, the minister meant the items the wedding planners rent such as tents, chairs, decorative ribbons, flowers, and baskets. Such items cost several hundred dollars. Many families also rent all the clothes for the bride and groom and their attendants including jewelry and shoes. The cost for
renting a single umushanana ranges from 15,000 to 30,000 Rwandan Francs (RWF), roughly about $20-50. The groom’s family rents cars and buses to transport the guests to the bride’s family’s home for gusaba no gukwa. A single car rents between $50-100 for a day. I attended one planning meeting with the bride and her family and the budget listed 450,000 RWF ($700) for food and 250,000 RWF ($400) for beverages. This was an average wedding, not the most expensive nor the least expensive one I attended. About 120 guests were in attendance, which averages nearly $10 per person just for food and one drink. The food was a modest catered buffet featuring rice, potatoes, cassava, and beef. To spend less on food, some might offer guests a box lunch. One such box I received contained a boiled egg, plain roll, and samboosa (triangular fried dough with ground beef and onion inside). The contents of the lunch box, if purchased at a local café might run about 90 cents. Two weddings I attended rolled all three ceremonies—civil, church, and gusaba no gukwa—into a single day so as to cut down on some costs but the bride and groom and their attendants still changed clothes three times. In addition, professional photographers are hired to take photos and video. The photographers at the above mentioned wedding took over 1,000 photos and produced a wedding DVD that ran two hours.

Another big expense for gusaba no gukwa involves the performances. Most wedding speakers these days expect to be paid, as do the cow poets, the music disc jockey, the musicians, and the dancers. Gatsinzi indicates, “it is shameful to hire abamurika inka [cow poets] and abavuzi b’amagambo [wedding speakers] because in the whole family you feel no one is capable of talking well.” Oliver and Jean Pierre told me they never receive cash payment for speaking at weddings, but at the two wedding budget
meetings I attended, speaker cost was one of the budget items along with the cow poet. The going rate for Dusenge to speak was about $200. While wedding meetings are held in advance so that friends, family members, and business associates can make intwererano (contribution) to help with the expenses associated with weddings, getting married is a challenge particularly for the grooms because they must not only pay a large portion of the actual wedding expenses, they are also expected to provide the dowry and a furnished home, either a dwelling built on family owned property or a place where six months’ rent has been paid in advance.

Several single women I spoke with felt strongly that money used to pay for the pageantry would be better spent given to the bride and groom after their marriage so as to give them a good start. One bride, who had one of the most elaborate ceremonies I attended, including dancing at a popular nightclub after the wedding reception ended, told me she really did not need any of this but was primarily doing it for her mother. In an article in one of the local Kigali newspapers, Diana Mpyisi reflected, “The ten million Rwandan francs that will be poured into a 24-hour event will most likely be better utilized as down-payment for a house. Or the first injection into your son’s college education fund. Or a bakery business that will add to a couple’s combined income.”

Some of the grooms I interviewed also appeared to dislike the amount of money they needed to spend, but seemed resigned to the idea that this was the only way to get married.

Another way in which gusaba no gukwa performances create the specter of a “unified corporate body” occurs as a result of the ritualization of the speakers’

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performances. Much of what they do follows a strict pattern while the words they choose and the stories they tell possess a certain degree of fluidity to change over time. Aspects of contemporary life work their way into the ceremonies. For example, the wedding speakers incorporate mention of various technologies, especially mobile phones and social networking, as means of young people meeting and their elders keeping in touch with one another. At one ceremony I attended, the groom’s family speaker said:

Dear friends, it has been a long time. We don’t see each other, you know, everyone has been busy these days, but I hope I won’t need to provide you with many explanations about this . . . though we didn’t visit each other you know that we were communicating through new technological means. At this time, the whole of my family are thanking God that He protected our children and [we] come sitting together with you here, not talking on the telephone or any other technological means. We really praise our God.

At yet another ceremony in an extremely rural area with Oliver, his phone rang toward the end while he was still talking. He glanced down, saw the call was from his wife, and took the call. Then he said to the audience, “That was my wife on the phone. My 97-year-old mother has just arrived at our home. May we go now so that I might be able to visit with her before she sleeps and so that we might go to the rest of the groom’s family to tell them the good news about this marriage?” Seemingly without effort, Oliver worked the phone call into the scripted request for permission to leave.

In addition to mobile phones, other technologies are incorporated into the older rituals. Many ceremonies are recorded by professional photographers and videographers.
There are also many audience members who take photos with their personal cameras, iPads, or smart phones. These technologies change the very nature of the performances, sometimes to the frustration of the wedding speakers. At one ceremony, a few of the speakers admonished people not to be rude: “those people who interrupt others while speaking are not cultured!” Or during the part of the ceremony when the bride comes out to meet the groom, the MC said, “Formerly, photographers knelt down on a single knee to snap, but nowadays they keep standing and prevent people to see what is happening.” He was, of course, suggesting that the photographers move out of the way so the audience could see. I also heard wedding speakers reference current campaigns such as the Agaciro Development Campaign and the Gender Balance Campaign. As such, they offer publicity, endorsement, or criticism of current topical events. In other words, everyday life is woven into the speaking performance, showing us, in a way, that all performances are “restored behaviors” – bits and pieces of behavior that are combined together. In the mist of bits and pieces of everyday life, changes surrounding the ceremonial aspects of gusaba no gukwa occur frequently. Yet core elements appear to have withstood the test of time. Older men, perhaps elders, tend to do the speaking at weddings. Younger men, women, and brides do not speak. The resilience of the patriarchal structures merits analysis. Brian Walker defines resilience as the “capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to retain essentially the same function.”

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communities. It transforms youth into adults and creates strong social bonds among family members.

In communities where speaking and storytelling play a role in important ceremonies, the speakers are often perceived as possessing a certain power that becomes evident in their manner of speaking. Speakers may influence the audience during the live performance or through memory years later. Baumann suggests that “formal patterns . . . fix the attention of the audience” on the performer and the formulae thereby “endow[ing] the performance with the capacity to transform social structures.” For example, the griots in Mali are thought to have spirit-infused powers that make audiences wary of what they say. Similarly, stories in South Africa have been touted for their subversive potential and as a “bulwark” against 350 years of colonial and Apartheid rule as people found a safe “harbor in tradition.” In Rwanda, people like the wedding speakers and the parents who encourage, even demand that their children marry with the ceremonies such as *gusaba no gukwa* may harken back to a precolonial time when expectations and roles were simpler and weddings really did make friends out of enemies.

During *gusaba no gukwa*, the communicative power of the wedding speakers’ rhetoric demonstrates their ability to influence the actions, feelings, and beliefs of audience members. Mathonsi notes that oral arts “ridicule socially undesirable and unacceptable things as well as create and affirm the positive social actions and ideas. It, for instance, punishes anti-social individuals and ridicules transgressors against the

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264 See, for example, Scheub, *Uncoiling Python*; and Hofmyer, “Not the Magic Talisman.”
Mobile phones ringing, photographers blocking the view, expectations for the way women should be treated, youth not respecting authority—these subjects among others are gently rebuked by the wedding speakers while they describe and endorse the core values of patience, discipline, integrity, helping, and problem solving. These lessons are largely taught by the wedding speakers in the carefully orchestrated, strategic performances of *gusaba no gukwa*. Dusenge tells me, “*gutera ibuye mugiho ushaka ikiumbka,*” which translates to meaning that wedding speakers must know whom they are talking to and structure their challenges according to their opponents’ level. As Dusenge emphasizes rules for speaking that include people who sit lower in the political and social hierarchies, Egyptian Maat, an ontological view that emphasizes social relations and the interconnectedness of people, teaches what Lipson calls “rhetoric of accommodation.”

Ptah Hotep articulates a father’s instruction to his son on how to be a good leader and how to make a good speech, based upon an Egyptian principle of Maat: “be not proud because though art learned, but discourse with the ignorant man as with the sage.” Dusenge’s rules for speaking also reflect the African philosophical concept of *Ubuntu*, discussed at length in Chapter I, which teaches that a person’s humanity depends upon how s/he treats others. While the rhetorical skill and competitive aspects are shared with African Americans “playing the dozens,” the similarity stops short with a close examination of how the rhetorical opponents treat one another. In “playing the dozens,” no insult, no matter how severe, is spared. However,

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the role the speaker plays in *gusaba no gukwa* determines how much challenge he may offer his opponent; according to Dusenge, *umukwe mukuru* speak for the groom and as guests at *gusaba no gukwa*, must provoke no more than about 40% of the time, while the *umusangwa mukuru*, who speak for the bride, must provoke at least 60% of the time.

Live performance presents a significant area for study that cannot be replicated in the study of a text or recording of the performance. Perhaps the transformative nature of a live performance can be illustrated by a story from *The Iliad* that Gerry Philipsen uses in order to explain the concept of “winged words.” Philipsen defines “winged words” as the “rapid exchange of intense, even harsh words, that have a tautness, power, and movement that makes them whir and beat like the motion of a wing.” In *The Iliad*, Homer tells the story of Achilles and the old Trojan king, Priam. Achilles has killed Hector, Priam’s son, in a fierce battle and kept his body in retaliation for Hector’s attack on Patroclus. Broken-hearted over the death of his son, he finds his grief is compounded by the fact that he lacks his son’s body for burial rites. Thus, grief-stricken, Priam goes to Achilles to beg for his son’s body. After kneeling at Achilles’ feet and kissing his hands in supplication, Priam asks for his son’s body. Achilles suggests they must first eat and talk, but Priam pleads, “I have endured what no one on earth has ever endured before—put to my lips the hands of a man who killed my son . . . give him back to me now, no more delay.” Caught up in the moment and perhaps reminded of his own father, Achilles becomes “overpowered by memory,” and “both men gave way to grief.” The sharing of such an intimate moment by arch enemies does not last long, for Achilles

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retorts, “Enough of endless tears . . . don’t tempt my wrath.”

Priam’s winged words are infused with power that comes from the context of the event in which they occur.

If “winged words” refers to motion, it can be argued that the term serves as a metaphor for the power of the spoken word as well as the view of words as phenomena associated with orality. To people in a primary oral culture, Ong notes, words are “occurrences, events.” The metaphor of “winged words” illustrates the performativ aspect of words, what Austin referred to as “perlocutionary acts,” speech acts that have consequences. Whereas Austin laid the ground work for the idea that words do things, Searle notes that words fit the world but they also constitute it. Derrida advocates that the intended meaning of the author is irrelevant while Butler took up this strain to suggest that not only do words do things but they also construct the very phenomena they “regulate and constrain.” In this way, both context and audience influence the power of the spoken word. One might imagine how the outcome might have been different had Priam penned a letter, sent it to Achilles, who read it silently in isolation. Much of the power of the context would be lost in the time lag between writing and reading and from the absence of face to face interaction. The outcome would most likely be different.

“Winged words” gain their power through the interplay between speaker, audience, and the context, just as the meaning of the words spoken by the wedding speakers at gusaba no gukwa are transformed through both context and audience. The greater significance of context to text drives Mikhail Bakhtin’s term heteroglossia. He explains, “at any given

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270 Philipsen, “Coming to Terms,” 13.
272 Austin, How to Do Things with Words.
time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions.”

Although ethereal, meaning communicated at that particular moment in that specific place lends itself to valuable analysis. As Hoffman asserts, language by its rich polysemous character creates context-dependent meaning; “it is not the term itself that wears different hats depending on context, but the actors in context who maintain a wardrobe of possible meanings ready to fit the word depending on how they interpret that context in the light of relevant past experiences and information they have access to.”

Wedding speakers, like the griot and jeliw Hoffman writes about, must be sensitive to and skilled in using the “social ambiguities that discrepancies of time and place make possible.”

Historical associations as well as global influences comingle in the minds of audience members, all individually creating their own memories, each a unique story of the event.

In the past, wedding negotiations were handled by umuranga, a kind of matchmaker or go-between who often served the dual purpose as wedding speaker. In some regions, selection was handled between parents, while in other regions, the groom had more say in the selection. The married couples I spoke with made a point of telling me that they “chose” their partners. One young man told me that he could not trust his parents to choose because they might choose a “cultivator” (farmer) when he preferred a university educated wife like himself. However, choosing does not discount the

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275 Hoffman, Griots at War, 21.
276 Ibid., 21.
277 Bigirumwami. Imihango N’imigenzo, 112.
importance of familial approval of the partner selected. Almost everyone I talked with had a first-love story where the choice of the boy and girl was rejected, often by the girl’s parents, and the relationship abruptly ended.

Sitting in a room full of women at one ceremony, I asked what had changed over the years. The oldest woman, the grandmother of the bride, told me that brides today have a choice, but in her day they had to submit to arranged marriages and sometimes they did not even know their husbands until *gusaba no gukwa*. The grandmother told me that she felt this was a good change. But another woman said this was a bad change because in the past, if the groom’s family accepted a woman and her husband treated her badly, his family was still obligated to take care of the woman. It was an affair between families. They might take the woman back to her family but not in an angry way. Before someone could get married in the past, the family would send someone to get to know the other family and you would know about that person based upon which clan they belonged to and that would give them some idea of the kind of person the prospective spouse is. She explained, “nowadays when people meet at church or in a bar or at school, you don’t know who their clan is. Clan lineage is traced through the father and the grandfather, which tells you a lot. In the past, the *umuranga* could converse with other people and learn about the clan the prospective bride comes from.” As an example, she cited the *Abashingwe* clan members who are believed to bring bad luck. She continued, “If only the level of education counts, bad luck could be brought through the bride’s clan.” Another woman agreed, adding her own concern that “men who choose their brides based upon facial appearance only find out later that their behavior is bad.” Although the
women seemed to agree that “current customs” are better than “ancient customs,” they were clearly divided on the issue of choice.

One of the women told a story about a bride who came from Uganda. The other women seemed to be familiar with the story because they added details as she spoke. The woman from Uganda, according to the storyteller, was a “very brave woman, a soldier who fought in the war.” She was also very beautiful. However, “when their cousin married her, all the persons in the village were surprised. The woman was a stranger, and she drank more milk than a cat.” *Ukunda amata nka nyirahuku* (you like milk as a cat) is an insult suggesting that her affinity for milk was unnatural. “She was the first to get up in the morning, long before any of the other women in her compound. She did all her work and did it well. Her father-in-law loved her so much.” But her husband was jealous whenever he found somebody talking to her. He did not let her leave home alone. They had to walk together. After she gave birth to their daughter, the husband chased his wife away.

At first, I had trouble making sense of why they told me this story until it finally dawned upon me that while the women considered it to be rude to contradict what the old woman said about choice being an improvement, they did want to share with me some of their concerns about problems associated with choice. I imagine, as was the case with Naomi’s daughters and nieces, mothers and aunties still help to choose husbands and wives for their adult children. Almost all the people I talked with indicated that family approval is extremely important and that it is rare for a marriage to proceed if the family on either side do not approve. The power of family sanction also affects divorce rates because if the family sanctions the marriage, it is less likely to break up than if the family
does not approve. I heard of cases where the family members actively do things to try to chase the spouse away.

While many scholars might easily agree with Bynum’s assertion that oral arts’ “capacity for rhythmical speech and narration . . . was the world's first great medium of communication for complex ideas,” my efforts have been to demonstrate the ways oral arts continue to be a conduit for complex ideas about Rwandan identity, community, and culture. Because the rhetorical performance at gusaba no gukwa demonstrates a stylistic manipulation of words for impact and effect, the ceremony and its accompanying ritual and symbolic associations serve a didactic function. The repertory of core images, symbols, and themes can be “manipulated and juxtaposed” to create new stories that connect the past with the present. Furthermore, as Mathonsi explains, “even the simplest oral performance was regarded as a very special event to shape the minds and hearts of children, and to create that 'culture of the feelings' which would remain even when what one had learned was forgotten.” This “culture of feelings” that remains long after the gusaba no gukwa performance has ended is what I have attempted to explore. The performance of gusaba no gukwa is a “social drama” offering both “entertainment and metasocial commentary on the lives and times of a given community.” It is also a communicative event that “produce[s], maintain[s], repair[s], and transform[s] reality.”

279 Schueb “Fixed and Nonfixed,” 267.
282 Carey, Communication as Culture, 10.
Marriage sits firmly at the center of Rwandese society. It is only through marriage that youth become adults and achieve full membership in the community. The performance of *gusaba no gukwa* tells a powerful story about carefully orchestrated rhetorical performances and ritual practices imbued with the ability to transform lives. My focus has been primarily on the wedding speakers and the power of their words to create cohesion. Sometimes they refer to the bride as a “peacemaker.” The idea of peace infuses the ceremony. Upon their arrival, the groom’s family speaker assures the bride’s family that they come in peace, that they are peaceful people. The frequent invocation of peace during *gusaba no gukwa* appears to some as invoking peace after the trauma of the past. However, this reverence for peace goes back many years. One of the first greetings I learned was *amahoro* (peace). Related to that is a kind of farewell I learned, *mugire amahoro* (may you have peace). Just as the repetition of the references to peace permeate *gusaba no gukwa*, the stories told emphasize the importance of core values that when practiced lend themselves to peace: honesty, integrity, helping, and recognizing our common humanity. The stories challenge and test the wit of the groom’s family and their ability to remain cool under pressure. The tropes or ritual practices associated with key symbols of beer, cows, and milk demonstrate how strong ties of friendship and family are achieved through powerful communicative acts that present daily reminders of social bonds. In the Rwandan context, *gusaba no gukwa* transforms youth into adults, creates bonds between families, and unifies communities, while simultaneously transforming a single story of Rwanda’s genocide into many stories about Rwandese creativity, resilience, and joy.
Bibliography


http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html


Appendix A: Method and Timeline

I used methods from communication studies, performance studies, and anthropology, to craft an ethnographic portrait of *gusaba no gukwa* and its significance in Rwandese culture. I used an integrated qualitative research design that combines participant observation, in-depth interviews, and rhetorical analysis of themes, tropes, and forms. I attended thirty wedding ceremonies, thirteen of which were *gusaba no gukwa* ceremonies, conducted formal interviews with three wedding speakers, three married couples, a retired Methodist minister, a Kigali business woman, and I had numerous informal conversations with Rwandans about weddings.

Sara, my interpreter, attended ten of the *gusaba no gukwa* ceremonies with me and translated periodically during the ceremony to help me to follow along because the entire ceremony is conducted in *Kinyarwanda*. I studied isiZulu for two years at Ohio University and took private *Kinyarwanda* lessons for two years so I have a limited listening, speaking, and reading knowledge of the local language. At two of the other ceremonies, I was assigned an English-speaking guest by the wedding party to explain things to me. At one ceremony, I simply followed along without benefit of an interpreter. I wrote brief scratch notes during all the ceremonies. “Scratch notes” according to Sanjek, “precede fieldnotes, and other forms of writing in the field are arranged around them.” On the way home or in the evening before going to bed, I fleshed out my scratch notes into fieldnotes.

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I also made audio recordings of the *gusaba no gukwa* ceremonies and employed three Rwandan university graduates who had studied literature and linguistics to translate and transcribe the recordings from *Kinyarwanda* to English. I had initially planned to employ a single research assistant to attend the weddings with me, interpret, then translate and transcribe the recordings together; however, I soon discovered that what made Sara an invaluable asset, being able to get to the gist of a conversation quickly in a face to face moment, made for challenges with transcribing because she overlooked most of the repetitions, stories, and figurative language that feature prominently in the speaking performances associated with *gusaba no gukwa*. Hence my decision to employ translators for the transcription arose of out necessity. When possible, they also attended the *gusaba no gukwa* they transcribed and translated. Of course, translation has its own inherent difficulties, which is why I chose to rely on a combination of participant observation, fieldnotes, headnotes, and transcriptions of the speaking events. I also viewed two professional DVD recordings and hundreds of professional photographs from two *gusaba no gukwa* in addition to my own photographs and short video recordings.

In-depth interviews with *abakwe bakuru* speakers (*bakuru* is a term of respect given to one’s elders and *abakwe* denotes the ceremonial occasion and in this context, the phrase indicates the importance and skill of the speakers.), provided necessary foundational information as well as access to other performances of *gusaba no gukwa* and enabled me to compare differences in how the wedding speakers conduct their performances and perceive their roles.

All of the interviews were conducted in English with the exception of one with Dusenge, during which Sara and Augustine translated from Kinyarwanda to English as
we went along. Interviews offer the precise words of my informants. Sometimes my formal prepared questions transformed into lessons led by my informants, especially when I interviewed the wedding speakers. They quickly assumed the role of teacher while I became the student. For example, Dusenge, in response to my question about the dowry cows, indicated that we could not go to the “conclusion without first discussing the introduction; we cannot start with point F before we cover points A, B, C, and D.” I recorded and transcribed all the interviews.

When I had five transcripts of gusaba no gukwa, I began to review them, looking inductively for patterns and themes. I located twenty-eight themes that I narrowed and combined to the ten rhetorical features I ultimately discuss in the dissertation. In addition to my analysis of the transcripts of the speaking events, I relied on participant observation, fieldnotes, photographs and wedding DVDs, interviews, museum artifacts, books, and articles to piece together my tapestry of the performance and the attendant discussion of the forms, structures, tropes, and conventions of speaking that make up the rhetorical features of gusaba no gukwa.

Rwanda Timeline
2008
June, First Visit to Rwanda
People to People English Education Delegation
Initial meeting of faculty at Kigali Institute of Education (KIE)
2009
August, Second Visit to Rwanda
Study Abroad – Shawnee State University ENGL3999- Special Topics African Literature
five Shawnee State University students, two faculty (I was the instructor for the course) and administrator traveled to Rwanda for a ten day visit.
We spent one day meeting with the Literature faculty and students at KIE, some of whom we had been blogging with prior to our visit.
**July – August, Third Visit to Rwanda**
Volunteered with SANEJO and YGAP working with teachers and students at Ntenyo Primary School in Southern Province. Visited KIE faculty.

**2011**

**January – May, Language Study**
Studied isiZulu at Ohio University. Both isiZulu and Kinyarwanda are in the Bantu family of languages.

**February, First Wedding in Rwanda**
02/24-27 - Couple 1: Civil ceremony and gusaba no gukwa and meet wedding speaker 1 in Gitarama. Kwinenga, Catholic church wedding ceremony and reception.

**June, Preliminary Research Visit to Rwanda**
Public Deliberation. Guest lecture at National University of Rwanda (NUR), Kigali. Met Great Lakes Media Center Director and Director of School of Journalism and Communication to discuss my research plans and possible affiliation with NUR.

Met with contacts in Literature and Linguistics Departments, Vice Rector and Director of Research at KIE to discuss feasibility of my research plans. Access to books and BA Theses in KIE library, meeting with a wedding speaker, and invitation to attend gusaba no gukwa of Couple 2 in Kigali, originated with my contacts at KIE. Also arranged for 2 weeks of daily, intensive Kinyarwanda language instruction through contact at KIE.

**2012**

**January – May, Language Study**
Received FLAS Fellowship to study isiZulu at Ohio University
Arranged for private language lessons to study Kinyarwanda

**September, Fieldwork in Rwanda**
09-02 – Couple 1: interview in Kigali
09-08 – Couple 3: gusaba no gukwa and interview with Couple 9 in Kigali
09-14 – Couple 4: interview, watch wedding DVD, view wedding photographs
09-19 – Wedding Speaker 2: interview in Rwamagana
09-22 – Couple 5 and 6: Civil Ceremonies in Rwamagana, Couple 6: gusaba no gukwa cancelled due to rain
09-26 – Wedding Speaker 2: second interview in Rwamagana
09-29 – Couple 7: gufata irembo, interview with grandmother, mother, aunts, neighbors of the bride, and kwinenga in Rwamagana
09-30 – Couple 8: Kwirega in Kibungo

**October 2012-January 2013, Visiting lecturer for the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies at the Catholic Institute of Kabgayi (ICK) in Muhanga, Rwanda [http://uck.ac.rw/](http://uck.ac.rw/)**
ICK is a small private university that offers four year degrees in Journalism, Public Relations, Social Sciences, and Business Management. I taught courses for
third year public relations and journalism majors in Organizational Communication, Health Communication, Theories and Practices for Advertising and Marketing, and Introduction to Communication Theory for freshmen students. Three invitations to wedding ceremonies and one interview with wedding speaker originated from my contacts at ICK. I also conducted one formal interview with a teacher who had written an article about marriage in Rwanda and numerous informal discussions with students face to face during my time at ICK and later during writing via Skype and Facebook instant message.

**October, Fieldwork in Rwanda**
10-5 – Couple 9: *gufata irembo, kwinenga*, and informal interview with Wedding Speaker 1 in Ruyenzi
10-6 – Couple 7: *gusaba no gukwa* in Rwamagana
10-7 – Couple 10: *gusaba no gukwa* in Rwamagana
10-13 – Couple 11: *gufata irembo, kwinenga*, interview wedding speaker 1 and father of the bride in Kigali

**November, Fieldwork in Rwanda**
11-10 – Couple 11: *gusaba no gukwa* in Kigali
11-17 – Couple 12: *gusaba no gukwa* in Kigali
11-18 – Couple 13: *gusaba no gukwa*, Adventist church wedding, and reception in Muhanga
11-24 – Couple 14: *gusaba no gukwa* in Kigali

**December, Fieldwork in Rwanda**
12-01 – Couple 9: *gusaba no gukwa* in Ruyenzi
12-16 – Couple 15: Adventist Church wedding, reception and *kwinenga*

**2013**

**January, Fieldwork in Rwanda**
01-04 – Interview retired Methodist Minister, Huye
01-13 – Wedding Speaker 3: Interview in Muhanga
01-19 – Couple 16: *gusaba no gukwa* in Muhanga
01-28 – Interview Eva

**February, Fieldwork in Rwanda**
02-01 – Couple 9: Wedding preparation meeting
02-02 – Couple 17: *gusaba no gukwa* in Ruyenzi
02-02- Couple 9: Catholic Church wedding, reception, *gutwikurura*, and *kwinenga* in Kigali
02-06 – Wedding Speaker 1: Interview in Kigali

**March – August, Writing in Ohio**

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Appendix B: Glossary of Kinyarwanda Terms

*abakwe* – weddings; used to refer to the whole group on the groom’s side; may also be plural for speakers on the groom’s side as in abakwe bakuru.

*abavuzi b’amagambo* - wedding speakers

*abukwe bakuru* (plural) *ubukwe mukuru* (singular) – wedding speakers for the groom’s side

*abasangwa* – the hosts; at weddings, used to refer to whole group on bride’s side

*abazungu* (plural) *umuzungu* (singular) – white person; foreigner; wealthy person

*gufata irembo* – the engagement; private introduction ceremony

*gusaba no gukwa* – introduction and dowry ceremony

*gutwikurura* - bride’s introduction to new home; reintroduction after a period of seclusion

*inkwaano* – bridewealth; dowry

*kugenza* - to demonstrate or show

*kwinenga* - the evaluation; debrief held after a ceremony

*kwita izina* – naming ceremony

*inzoga* – beer; alcohol

*imisango* – speaking performance

*ubugali* - a dietary staple made with ground cassava and water

*umugenza* (plural: *imigenzo*) refers to ritual, custom or habit, and derives from the verb *kugenza* meaning to demonstrate or show

*umuhango* (plural: *imihango*) - to perform or create; comes from the verb *guhanga*, to perform or create

*umukwe mukuru* – wedding elder; at weddings, used to refer to the speaker for the groom’s side

*umusangwa* – the host; at weddings, used to refer to the speaker for the bride’s side

*umushanana* – ceremonial dress for women made up of 2 pieces of cloth, one wrapped around the waist and the other draped over the right shoulder

*umwishywa* – flowering plant momordica foetida. In the past, groom could place a garland made of umwishywa upon a woman’s head in effect to say “I marry you.”
Appendix C: Institutional Review Board

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Tales, Tropes, and Transformation: The Performance of Gsaba no Gukwa in Rwanda

Primary Investigator: Shannon Lawson
Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Devika Chawla

Department: Communication Studies

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

Approval Date 7/9/12
Expiration Date 7/8/13

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 6 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Tales, Tropes, and Transformation: The Performance of Gisaba no Gukiwa in Rwanda

Primary Investigator: Shannon Lawson
Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Devika Chawla

Department: Communication Studies

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

Approval Date: 7/9/13
Expiration Date: 7/8/14

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.