

MATERIAL NARRATION OF NOSTALGIA AND MODALITY IN THE LYRICS OF SAGA'S *KUMUNZI KUBOTU*

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Abstract

Conflating the theoretical 'givings' of modality, semiotics and memory studies, the article attempts to gain insights into how material narration of affect, nostalgia and subjunctivity are constructed and transacted in song. In scholarly works that focus on the interplay between linguistics and musicology, rarely do notions of affect, especially the ones attuned to nostalgia and modality, feature in the discussion. This article assumes that the lyrical affordances in most Zambian compositions discursively unravel high level cognitive regimes of which affect, nostalgia and modality are central. This treatment uses song as its discursive and analytical material, in which nostalgia, affect and modality are seen as recursive memory and linguistic regimes in the unfolding of the artist's monologue of the sum total of self, and the double articulation of the 'subjective self' and 'objective other,' both of which are potentiated by the reimagining of self, while playing 'the plural' in the 'concealment of the subjective self' through the use of the plural 'basa kumunzi nkubotu' in Saga's Kumunzi Kubotu.

Keywords: Affect, Modality, Memory, Nostalgia, Reimagining, Self, Semiotics, Subjunctivity

Introduction

Zambian contemporary popular music has become part of the many voices that seek to narrate the sociocultural, and the political-economic configuration of the society out of which they arise. In trying to test this assumption, this article conflates the theorisation of memory studies and semiotics to capture how the material narration of regimes of nostalgia and modality are accomplished in Saga's *Kumunzi Kubota*. Taken as a cognitive regime, nostalgic affects are isolated from Saga's song and discursively problematised together with different modalities in the broader context of memory studies, and general semiotic theorisation. On the basis of the aforesaid, this article assumes that the lyrical affordances in most Zambian compositions discursively unravel high level cognitive regimes of which affect, nostalgia and subjunctivity are central. This treatment uses song as its discursive and analytical material in which nostalgia, affect and subjunctivity are seen as recursive memory and linguistic regimes in the unfolding of the artist's monologue of the sum total of self and the double articulation of the 'subjective self' and 'objective other', both of which are potentiated by the reimagining of self, while playing 'the plural' in the 'concealment of

the subjective self' through the use of the plural 'basa kumunzi nkubotu' in Saga's *Kumunzi Kubotu*.

Contextualising the Study

It is rare to conflate musicology, modality and memory studies in one academic undertaking. These areas are traditionally seen as autonomous and theoretically unrelated fields. However, in recent scholarship which has dominated the post-structuralism era, mixing and blending of theoretical strands has become a norm. And it is common knowledge that humans do not stay confined within one theoretical lane; we live unscripted lives predicated on mobile identities and flux affiliations to institutions, including belief systems and locality. This is based on various notions such as the proximal and distal principles and the contact phenomenon (cf. Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2007). We use the proximal principle to point out that naturally, things which are in close proximity are seen to produce heterogeneity rather than homogeneity, as this principle presupposes comingling of social actors with the use of such linguistic tokens as: 'here', 'now', 'us', 'we', and 'ours'. Similarly, those subject to the contact phenomenon naturally lead to the production of complexities such as blended forms of speech; complex and unedited sentences; multiple identities, as well as complex compositions (cf. Blommaert, 2010). On the other hand, we argue that elements subject to the distal principle are better seen as mediated with the associative physical and psychological distance, which invariably bears on affect, and is linguistically realised through the use of the following words: 'there', 'tomorrow', 'yesterday', 'them', and 'theirs', among other linguistic tokens (cf. Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2007).

The context being framed above feeds directly into the appropriated theoretical underpinnings of this article to the extent that they lead to the formulation of various regimes one can apply to or glean from a song as one of the forms of discourse. For the purpose the current article, we focus on language regimes and cognitive regimes. Regime is basically a set of constraints on individual language or cognitive choices 'consisting of habits, legal provisions and ideologies' (both local & global ideologies) (cf. Yao, 2020); or put differently, 'a 'regime' is a set of rules, norms, or procedures that affect what people expect to happen and rely on in making decisions' (Bradford, 2023). Thus, we take Saga's song '*Kumunzi Kubotu*' as discourse text loaded with both language and cognitive regimes. As will become apparent in the analysis section, language and cognitive regimes in song discursively narrate the materiality of nostalgic affect and modality.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Nostalgic Affect and Memory

In trying to underpin notions of nostalgia and modality in Saga's *Kumunzi Kubotu*, we borrow extensively from Yao (2020) as we turn to memory studies in order to explore linkages between memorialisation, experience and remembrance as creative cognitive regimes that come to bear on one's present experience. In recent scholarship, which conflates space and language, particularly those attuned to multilingual memory (Blackwood & MacAstair, 2019; Jimaima & Banda, 2019), the place of memory in problematising the ways in which public spaces are constructed is

revealingly rewarding. It is often the case that the public space or things that get to be remembered are negotiated by those who wield the power to bring the past alive in places of collective memory. We have taken musicians as powerful actors for the enactment of collective memory in song. For this particular reason, we turn to Connerton (1989), *How Societies Remember*, in order to bring to the fore, the dialectics of forgetting and remembering in forging a present social order and invariably allude to two aspects of memory: social memory and commemorative memory. In both kinds of memory, he shows how the past social order gets foisted on the present social order. Invariably, collective memory continues to be undergirded by a shared historical memory – one arising from the social memory. Thus, taking the materiality of song as discourses of commemoration and social memory, the study draws on the argument that:

Our experience of the present, very largely, depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context, which is causally connected with past events and objects, and hence, with reference to events and objects, which we are not experiencing when we are experiencing the present...because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present (Connerton, 1989:2).

What Connerton (1989) is putting across is the fact that the past almost always comes to be read together with our present experience. In discussing the memorialisation of the history deposited in Livingstone Museum, Jimaima and Banda (2019) explain how understanding language presentation in the permanent gallery replicate the colonial language policy in which only four local languages are represented. They note that selective remembering potentiates erasure and downscaling of certain historical facts and implicates the material narration of the past, particularly, language and cognitive regimes.

Thus, the regimes – habits, regulations and ideologies – are subject to collective memory as these elements become stronger based on shared sociocultural knowledge and histories. And we think that cognitive regimes play a fundamental role in the rematerialisation of nostalgic affect. In discussing nostalgia, we recognise the etymological aspects of the word: ‘nostos (a return to home) and algia (pain), hence, longing and desire for home, family and friend or past’ (Nostalgia, 2019). As noted by Yao (2020), nostalgia is a critical component of self-continuity, and has become an integral part of escape from the unpleasant today to the idealised past (May, 2017).

While nostalgic affect is seen as a ‘set of embodied practices, emergent from the context, and thus, non-representational of the mind’ (Thrift, 2008), we think that nostalgic affect should manifest at both mental and physical level. This is important as one recognises the spatial and temporal orientation of nostalgia (Yao, 2020). The two forms of nostalgia can be occasioned mentally, rematerialising the cognitive regimes, but also physically, by the provisionality of the available linguistic tools such as semiotics and modality. We demonstrate this aspect in the analysis section. What seeing nostalgia as both mental and physical processes does is that it also allows us to read song as a text with cognitive and linguistic ramifications.

And song, whether seen as a semiotic artefact or purely an act of expression, the study of music ‘has been linked to wider questions concerning social structure, stability and change...the

emotions, the body, and organisational ecology’ (Denora, 2004: 35). No doubt, this ‘reinforces cognitive habits, modes of consciousness and historical development; and its degree of conventionality, interrelation of voices, the arrangement of consonance and dissonance – could serve as means of socialisation’, for the expression of both language and cognitive regimes (Denora, 2004:35. As we demonstrate later, problematising song as discourse allows us to unearth elements such as nostalgia, modality and alterity.

We use the notion of alterity to implicate modality, particularly, as noted by Clerk and Cook (2004), the subjunctive mood to illustrate the forbidden but desired, including the spatial and temporal orientation of nostalgia in Saga’s *Kumunzi Kubotu*. Modality, which is seen as a mood that represents an act or state (not as a fact but) as contingent or possible, comes alive as a ‘grammatical category, which expresses the attitude of the speaker towards the action or state indicated by the predicate verb from the point of its reality or unreality’ (cf. Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2007). The various types of modality are expressed at lexical and phonetic level. The lexical level provides modal verbs and expressions such as ‘surely’, ‘no doubt’ including lexicogrammatical tokens expressed as modal verbs such as ‘should,’ ‘ought to,’ ‘must and so on. While the article does not exemplify the phonetic aspects of modality, we acknowledge the influence of intonation, stress, tone and length on modality. For the focus of this discussion, we illustrate the following moods: the indicative mood, which represents the actions or states as real actions that do not contradict reality and can be viewed from the past, present and future; it states facts in the form of statements, opinions or questions; the imperative mood which expresses commands; and the subjunctive mood which expresses a demand, wish, doubt or imaginary situation, and represent actions or states as unreal or imaginary(cf. Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2007). Hurford et al., (2007) remind us that the mood is borne by the predicate verb in the principal clause, and such predicate verbs include but not limited to those that express ‘wish’. In what follows, we briefly discuss the methodology used in this article.

Methodology and Description of the Data

The non-ethnographic nature of the study meant that the method used for data collection and analysis was purely qualitative, oriented towards desk analysis and description. The choice of Saga’s *Kumunzi Kubotu* was purposive predicated on its material affordances with respect to nostalgia and modality. The material narration of these aspects in the song qualified as the most appropriate discursual material for analysis.

Written around the early 2000 by Che Mutale, performing under the name Saga, *Kumunzi Kubota* is an embellishment of the rustic lifeworld, one praised for abundance, play and rich relational ties. While the song sparked controversy, as it was seen as an affront to the Tonga people of Southern Province’s sociocultural knowledge and practice based on loaded symbolism of derogation, the song has recently been re-enacted by Green Mamba and others and has revived the collective memory of the early 2000.

It is also important to mention that while the song does not in any way mention the part of the rural being sung about, the reference to prototypically construed Tonga materiality, including

the use of Tonga as the mode in which the song is sung, persuasively makes us think that the kind of village depicted in *Kumunzi Kubotu* is that of the Tonga village.

In what follows, the lyrics of the song are presented as transcribed data with the English translation equivalent.

Lyrics of *Kumunzi Kubotu*

Uye uye uye (go, go, go)

Twakali kusobana kumunzi kwaba kapa (We used to play in the village at grandma's/pa's place)

Twakali kusobana ciyenga (x2) (We used to play ciyenga)

Tobasoonto bana (we the young children)

Twakali kusobana kumulonga ... iye, iye, iye... (We used to play at the stream ... yes, yes, yes... ?nostalgic affect onomatopoeia)

Chorus

Bacembele bakalima inyemu (grandma cultivated/planted groundnuts)

Basa kumunzi nkubotu (you people the village is beautiful)

Ndayeye mbotwali kusobana kwaba kapa (I remember how we used to play at the grandma's place)

Ndayeya mbotwali kulila ... iye... iye (I remember how we used to cry... iye, iye...)

Kumunzi nkubotu (x2) (the village is beautiful)

Atwiinke ...iwe... aisha (let's go, you; uncle)

Kumunzi nkubotu

Wajata ng'ombe (x4) (he/she has held (handle) the cow/bull)

Ndiyanda icoong'edwe kumunzi (x6) (I want the ticked one in the village (Nike))

Narration of nostalgia

The Material Narration of Nostalgia in Saga's *Kumunzi Kubotu*

As intimated in the section about the theorisation, with respect to the notion of nostalgia, a careful review of the data above suggests that Saga deploys both the spatial and temporal orientations of nostalgia in the song. We note the dominance of the spatial orientation of nostalgia in the song *Kumunzi Kubotu* in which there is perpetual oscillation between the old homeland and the undisclosed spatialised host society predicated on the use of the past indicative mood (continuous) in the line: '*twakali kusobana kumunzi kwa bakapa*' (we used to play in village at grandma's/pa's). The creation of the two spaces or worlds is predicated on both the language and cognitive regimes (cf. Yao, 2020). The language regimes are well crafted in the purposefully selected modality that makes factual the state of affairs. As mentioned, the use of the indicative mood in the predicate verb, which demonstratively shows the subject marker [twa], tense marker with its progressive aspect [ka-li] and the infinitive marker in the main verb [ku] and verb root and vowel end [soban-a] together with the locative phrases [kumunzi] and its complement expressed by the locative

phrase [kwa bakapa], descriptively offers the linguistic material for the narration of the spatial orientation of nostalgia.

In a sense, by deploying the indicative mood in the manner shown above, Saga creates a believable state of affairs and makes alive the existence of two polar societies. One is the old but desired space and the other the undesired spatialised host society. It is interesting to note that the indicative mood has been transacted using a generic expression in which no specific village is mentioned. While one could infer the host society, which the singer abhors by the mere principle of proximal, the distal principle which is being implied in the utterance '*Twakali kusobana kumunzi kwa bakapa*', enlivened by the use of the locative [kwa] and the past tense [ka-li], shifts the spatial orientation of the two worlds – placing the village in distance past at the temporal level, as well as in a distant place at the spatial level. It is here that we see the conflation of both the physical and mental occurring representation of nostalgia. Few would deny the fact that the locatives [ku] and [kwa] denote away from the speaker, hence, a discursively spatialised distant place, which can only be wished for.

Arguably, therefore, in Saga's *Kumunzi Kubotu*, the temporal dimension of nostalgia is both physical and mental as can be seen in the utterance '*twakali kusobana*'. We notice first the cognitive regimes that foist upon the narrated material of an imaginary golden age predicated on shared sociocultural knowledge and histories, which have been appropriated by the tense (past [progressive]) as material for the narration of the temporal nostalgia. The song rematerialises a past lived experience of the rustic life by the appropriation of the past tense. Notice also the cognitive regimes of memory, which are actuated to give the nostalgic affect in the song. The expression '*twakali kusobana*' is not just an expression of the temporal dimension of the memorialisation; it is also an expression, which confirms just how memory – social and commemorative memory – comes to bear on what Saga longs for in as far as his dwelling is concerned. This connects him to the memories of the beautiful village.

Further, by carefully isolating events, places and personalities, captured in such expressions as 'stream', 'play', 'grandma's place' and 'groundnuts' as semiotic resources, Saga potentiates in the song what constitutes the ideal homeland. In the lines '*bacembele bakalima nyemu*' (grandma cultivated groundnuts), Saga wishes to descriptively assign attributes of the homeland. Notice that the utterance '*bacembele bakalima nyemu*' is immediately followed by an indicative sentence of affirmation: '*basa kumunzi kubotu*' (friend, the village is nice). It is instructive to thus, note that the semiotic potential of words, especially those that name actual entities in the real world such as 'stream', 'groundnuts' and 'grandma', provide a semiotic transactional force for the material narration of nostalgia, and belonging. In fact, in an adapted version of the song by Green Mamba, Real Jay and others, the song starts with the bleating of sheep and lowing of cows to signify the rustic life; and drawing on theoretical lenses of semiotics, one sees such an assemblage of artefacts from a collective past to evoke nostalgic responses for those whose lives have had strong ties with the rural lifeworld.

While still on this thought, it must be underlined here that this recollection of the past, in a way, prefigures the ways in which memories materialise the nostalgic affect. By inserting the

nostalgic affect in the song, Saga is playing on our spatial and temporal orientation of nostalgia in order for us to consider his composition as an authentic experience of our past, especially as one considers the mood he deploys in the following utterances presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Showing Modality

| | Tonga Utterance | Literal Translation | Mood |
|---|-----------------------------|---|-------------|
| 1 | ‘Basa kumunzi nkubotu’ | (friend, the village is nice/beautiful) | subjunctive |
| 2 | Ndayeya mbotwakali kusobana | I remember how we used to play | subjunctive |
| 3 | Atwiinke (iwe/aisha) | Let’s go (you/uncle) | imperative |
| 4 | Ndiyanda icoongedwe kumunzi | I want the ticked one at the village | subjunctive |
| 5 | Baceembele bakalima inyemu | Grandma cultivated groundnuts | indicative |

We isolate five utterances as shown in Table 1 to implicate the ways in which Saga’s *Kumunzi Kubotu* authenticates the argument that modality, particularly the subjunctive mood, is intricately conjoined to nostalgia. In utterance 1, ‘*Basa kumunzi nkubotu*’ (friend, the village is nice/beautiful), we read the utterance as one constructed to express the subjunctive mood, which Saga wishes to express a demand, an offer, and a wish. While we do not wish to implicate prosody, particularly tone, there is a sense in which the utterance ‘*basa, kumunzi kubotu*’ orients towards the mood to offer, demand and wish. In the song, there is a noticeable pause between the word ‘*basa*’ and ‘*kumunzi kubotu*’. This alone is indicative of a vocative case expressing the subjunctive mood. Of course, depending on one’s preferred reading of the situation, there are those that might read the utterance as expressing the indicative mood because it is seen as stating an opinion. While that might be so, the overall framing of the song, its subject and the treatment of it, all conspire to create the subjunctive mood in the song - the desire for the past.

Similarly, utterance 2, ‘*Ndayeya mbotwakali kusobana*’ is thought of as a statement of wish. Therefore, it is seen to be expressing the subjunctive mood. Notice how the use of the verb ‘*ndayeya*’ (incorporating the sub-marker, tense marker and verb root) orient towards the cognitive regime and memory. The predicate verb ‘*yey-a*’ drives the cognitive regime of nostalgic affect in the utterance and spreads its semiotic ripples throughout the song about going back to the childhood lived experience at the village. We wish to aver that the conflation of the language regime and the cognitive regime expressed by the actual linguistic tokens such as the predicate verb identified above and the actual mental realities of remembering actuated by the verb ‘*yey-a*’ (remember) enliven the material narration of the spatial and temporal orientation of nostalgia.

In utterance 3, ‘*Atwiinke (iwe/aisha)*’, we recognise the combinatory signification of motion and urgency. Saga draws on the imperative mood to transact his offer that he has been constructing about the beauty of the homeland with his assumed audience. Notice that his audience has been described in two generic phrases: *iwe*’ (you) and ‘*aisha*’ (uncle). We think that the use of these phrases – a second person pronoun ‘*iwe*’ and a kinship term ‘*aisha*’ – is semiotically rewarding as these phrases do not limit the range of the referents. In the pronoun ‘*iwe*’, Saga localises the invitation of movement towards the homeland by making the call informal and, therefore, up-close

and personal. Similarly, the use of *'aisha'* is dynamic and, therefore, potentiates ethno-musical effects orienting towards a particular ethnicity. In the method section, we mentioned how the song evoked negative feelings among a named section of the society. In the Lusaka lingo, especially around the early 1990 and the 2000, the kinship term *'aisha'* gained much currency as a referring expression targeted at Tonga men. It is instructive to thus assume that Saga's evocation of the kinship term *'aisha'* is highly ideological. The ideology arises from translocal trade in which men from the south were assigned the label *'aisha'* to evoke a rustic identity. However, in Saga's song, we see that the kinship term *'aisha'*, when used together with 'grandma' among other kinship terms, has been exploited to transcend its derogative use to authenticate the rural warmth, which arises from the collective sense of belonging and consanguinity. Therefore, the material narration of nostalgia is not only crafted on modality, spatialisation and time; it is semiotically accomplished by a careful deployment of kinship terms, which are packed with ethno- and translocal ideologies. And these seen together actuate the combinatory signification of motion and urgency, as well as authenticating the idealised homeland.

In the case of utterance 4, *'Ndiyanda icoongedwe kumunzi'*, we propose that Saga does not only use the subjunctive mood expressing 'wish' to narrate nostalgia, but also to insert in his narration of the homeland he seeks, to describe corresponding sociocultural knowledge and histories that informed the rise of the 'Nike' culture of the 1990s to 2000 among the social actors in Southern Province. That Nike has become equivalent with authenticity, it is critically important to extend the argument that Saga deploys this Nike culture in the song to symbolise the village as the place of authenticity, which sharply contrasts with modernity as a place of artificiality. Thus, the imagery of Nike in Saga's song corresponds to the descriptive adjective *'kubotu'* in the title *Kumunzi Kubotu*.

The Dialectics of 'Subjective Self' and 'Objective Other'

Notice the shift from the collective 'we' in stanza 1 expressed in the subject marker *'twa'* (*twakali...*) vs *'ndayeya'* (*nda*) of stanza 2; then a shift back to the plural expressed in the predicate verb in its imperative form *'atwiinke'* (let's go). We thus, see the application of the notion of alterity: forging 'unassailable category of self' and other. The subjective singular first person pronoun in *'ndayeya'* attempts to signal the unquestionable individualised memorialisation of the homeland, while the plural in *'twakali kusobana'* represents the questionable collective memorialisation as it can be rejected or denied unless those that form part of the 'we' are called to prove the claim. No wonder he does not mention the persons with whom he played, while in the village. On this account, it is plausible to see the juxtaposition of the subjective self and the generic other as means to pattern the opposition of the lived experience and the imagined experiences; the host society and the past homeland (village), by which the song seeks to claim legitimacy as experiences of the beautiful homeland were not only experienced by the subjective self and also by the generic other.

This duality of presentation of self and the generic other can be implicated as categories of alterity in which the song attempts to describe the 'forbidden but desired' movement. As the song

indicates, he longs for the rustic lifeworld, but circumstances cannot allow him to go back and play at his grandma's place (perhaps the grandma is late, therefore, no groundnuts; the stream could have dried up due to climate change; the said friends could be enemies or late). As a matter of conjecture, it could also point to the fact that what one enjoys while a child, might not be enjoyed as an adult. He longs for that transactional moment between childhood and adulthood.

Discussion and Conclusion

No doubt, the lyrics of Saga's *Kumunzi Kuboutu* as contemporary Zambian popular music provide material for the narration of nostalgia and modality. As illustrated, taking song as discourse allows for the articulation of language and cognitive regimes in ways too apparent. Firstly, it has been demonstrated that the language regimes, particularly, those that have been used to express modality capture nostalgic affect by using different moods. Notable among the moods discussed are the imperative, indicative and subjunctive moods. In Saga's *Kumunzi Kubotu*, we notice the exploitation of these notions in utterances that are constructed to discursively undergird the spatial and temporal orientation of nostalgia. Secondly, the data analysed revealingly demonstrate the synergies between language regimes and ideologies. In the case of words, including modal words and kinship terms, the song analysed enlivens the ideological undertones of selected lexical regimes to the extent that one sees that no word is deployed in song without a careful consideration of its semiotic and ideological effect. The deployment of kinship terms such as grandma and uncle together with such collective nouns like '*basa*' and corresponding pronouns like '*iwe*', all work to recreate an unquestionable idealised homeland. By extension, this creation of the homeland, not only authenticates the rustic life, but also transactionally underpin ways in which the material narration of nostalgia is accomplished.

The careful narration of cognitive regimes of the memorialisation and the collective memory, as well as commemorative memory seen in predicate verbs such as '*yey-a*' (remember) crystallises the dual deployment of nostalgia as both physical and mental. The physical representation is actuated by the language regimes that carefully express cognitive regimes. The mental representation is realised by thinking of ways in which we remember. It has, therefore, been instructive to see the conflation of memory studies, modality and nostalgia in the analysis of song as a discourse type. In the song analysed, it is easy to see Connerton's (1989) theorisation about the dialectics of remembering and forgetting in actuating nostalgia. His discussion of public memory – social and commemorative memory – Connerton demonstrates how our past experiences come to bear on the present interpretation. In the song *Kumunzi Kubotu*, we notice how the past, that is, the lived experience of the homeland, implicates the construction and consumption of the song. Saga's song proves that the past comes to inform – sometimes in a destructive way, ways in which we remember, desire and long for the past. However, as seen through the notion of alterity, the desired past is always forbidden as we cannot go back into time. It would seem, however, the available linguistic affordances to talk about the past, the distal principle can only take us back to the past, the homeland, through the cognitive regimes and

language regimes. The ‘here’ rather than the ‘there’ is the only possibly achievable cognitive affect as a physical walk into the past, however, nostalgic we may feel, is impossible.

Finally, the implication of the subjective self and the generic other as captured by the systematic oscillation between the first person singular and the third person plural is semiotically revealing in as far as the song *Kumunzi Kubotu* is concerned. The interchange seeks to authenticate the claims made in the song about the beauty of the rural lifeworld, which can be corroborated by the subjective self and the generic other. Whatever else can be said about this, the centrality of modality and nostalgia in the song, *Kumunzi Kubotu* makes the song as an amenable semiotic material for analysis.

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