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# “My Story Bursts Forth...”: Re-visioning Female Subjecthood in Gendered Folktales in Northern Ghana

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“The struggle for/the right to be is the/only/folktale that is/told.”

Ama Ata Aidoo, After the Ceremonies

**Zusammenfassung:** Der Aufsatz untersucht die Praxis gegenwärtigen Wiedererzählens von ghanaischen (Kasem) Volkserzählungen, die sich kritisch mit sozialen Rollen- und kulturellen Wertvorstellungen in den traditionellen Versionen auseinandersetzen. In den überlieferten Versionen werden übersinnliche Mächte angerufen, um Frauen zu bestrafen, die zu selbstständig handeln; damit wird weibliche Identität streng reguliert und begrenzt. In den neuen Versionen wenden die weiblichen Protagonistinnen das Prinzip des *nantandia* an, ein lokaler Kasem-Begriff, der Intelligenz, Initiative und Mut beinhaltet, und damit gleichzeitig den Einfluss der übersinnlichen Mächte beschneidet und die weibliche Individualität und Handlungsfähigkeit bestärkt.

**Summary:** This paper examines contemporary retellings of Ghanaian (Kasem) folktales that engage critically with the social roles and cultural values in the traditional corpus. While in traditional folktales supernatural forces are unleashed to punish females who pursue their own strivings, thus regulating gender identity, in the retold tales female protagonists deploy *nantandia*, a local Kasem term which encompasses intelligence, initiative and courage, to thwart the power of the supernatural and assert their own subjecthood.

## 1 Introduction

In this study I look at ways in which contemporary oral retellings of northern Ghanaian (Kasem) folktales reinterpret previously told narratives to reflect the women narrators' felt realities and articulate their female protagonists' desire for subjecthood. The tellers at once draw on the cultural assumptions preserved and

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disseminated through the folktales and critique the gendered discourses in the narratives. Contemporary storytellers view the traditional corpus of folktales as a patriarchal inheritance which their retold tales must critically engage by foregrounding women’s perspectives. Central to this focus on gender is the way protagonists in retold folktales challenge the traditional view that a Kasena woman is ‘a dog of two houses,’ an allusion to her status between two worlds – her father’s and her husband’s – and her lack of freedom to exercise agency in either. In this in-between space, female protagonists launch their struggle for the right to be.

In the folktale universe this in-between world often corresponds with the space between the everyday and the supernatural, and sometimes between life and death. In the traditional Kasem folktale realm, female characters who challenge patriarchal authority by articulating and acting on their own strivings are punished by supernatural forces that appear in forms such as dwarfs and ghosts. The gender-specific nature of this punishment suggests that the supernatural ‘naturalizes’ and thus reinforces existing patriarchal constraints on women. Yet because these constraints belong to *folktale law*, which is outside the ordinary or the natural world, the lore of the fantasy world also foregrounds the regulation of gender identity, which is as oppressive and capricious as the ghosts and dwarfs. The protagonists’ plight is exacerbated by their liminal status physically, emotionally or socially (e. g., as pregnant or nursing mothers, childless wives, widows and changelings). In the retold tales, females deploy *nantandia* – a Kasem term which encompasses intelligence, initiative and courage – to assert their own subjective agency in thwarting the power of supernatural law over their lives.

## 2 Background to the study

The female storytellers involved in my investigation have minimal or no literacy. This situation however is changing now with urbanization and the spread of modern technology, and with more girls staying in school (Mensch et al. 1999, 97). The women live in and around Nogsenia village, a largely rural area that surrounds central Navrongo, the small district capital, where they earn livelihoods through subsistence farming and petty trading. Their access to the radio and television, the cinema, concerts, and women’s organizations such as the *31st December Women’s Movement* ensures that they are not isolated from new ideas and institutions, contrary to claims by scholars such as Alex Nazzar et al. (1995). The women’s hunger for growth and mobility propels them to merge individual wish for articulation and recognition with cultural justice, that is, their collective claims for gender equity in particular aspects of conjugal and community

life. Their folktales thus reveal the connection between the cultural dimension of power relations and the political dimension of cultural activity.

The folktales I examine are some of the narratives I have collected over the past two and a half decades (1995–2016) from my native Kasem culture. Some of these were retold by adult females to an adult female audience and others by teenage girls to a mixed adult audience. It has been rightly observed that “a determination of the context of communication must be a precursor of any serious analysis of oral forms” (Goody 1992/1993, 52). All the tales were told at night during indoor farm-related activities such as plucking or cracking groundnuts or sorting cobs of millet – activities that begin after dinner has been cooked and eaten and children have gone to bed. The Kasena usually tell folktales after dark, and such evening farm activities, which can last till the early hours of the morning, typically provide a suitable context for storytelling. Children often share in the creativity of the community by participating as storytellers or audience members. The absence of children on both occasions meant that the performers could feel at ease to recreate narratives using more complex plots that might be difficult for children to grasp. As Goody (1992/1993, 51) has pointed out, adults may adopt more complex modes for communicating among themselves, while for communicating with children they may use simpler levels of interpretation.

The adult female narrators were my mother, Abaakaane Yitah, who is in her mid-70s, and Akula Amangeyem, who is in her late 60s. Though both married into my native Nogesenia, the latter grew up in rural Kologu, a small town about 20 miles from the district capital, Navrongo, while Abaakaane grew up in rural Vunania, three miles away from her marital home. Both are accomplished storytellers and musicians; Abaakaane is a dirge singer and Akula a leader in *linle*, a female genre of Kasem dance music. In addition, Abaakaane is a traditional crafts-woman who makes local mats and baskets. It is common for Kasena master storytellers to be skilled in other traditional arts, and for such skills to be deployed in folktale performance. For example, both women tend to retell folktales in which songs are integrated into the narration as a means to illuminate theme, create suspense or enhance plot development. Both have also told folktales that require a deep knowledge of Kasem culture, e.g., the rites surrounding family shrines and care of ancestors.

Of the adolescent female storytellers, Nyaabama Apoya and Kadua Atagye, both of Nogesenia, told many stories between them. Both are primary school drop outs, but their youth places them among their school going peers, from whom they learn about the rule of law, and with whom they watch movies about subjects such as modern technology, which they then incorporate into their retold folktales. Therefore their retold stories feature, for example, an avenging wife

who wields an AK47 and a ghost wife who demands divorce in a law court. However, all four narrators are critically engaged with the cultural assumptions and complex gendered discourses of their community.

### 3 Literature review

The importance of African women’s oral expression, especially as it counters predominant male visions of social and gender relations, has received scholarly attention. The relationship between women’s verbal art, power and gender noted about India in Gloria Goodwin Raheja’s edited book, *Songs, Stories, Lives* (2003) has been observed in several African cultures. Writing about the verbal art of women from Niger, Mali and Senegal, Aissata Sidikou observes that in their performance women construct their own space in which to create opportunities for renewal. This space, according to Sidikou, is

a visual and aural environment where women demand to be seen and heard. It is a space that mirrors truth and untruth, reality and fantasy, thus challenging traditional knowledge and power that has constructed their existing feminine condition [...]. Oftentimes, the space not only reveals a feminine condition but a human condition [...]. West African women rely on their verbal art and rituals because these events provide a site for presenting the daily internal struggles aimed at subverting the authority that oppresses them as girls, sisters, wives, and mothers, and mothers-in-law (2001, 171).

This view is shared by Omar Sougou in his study of folktales told by young Senegalese women, in which he finds “an empowering language constructed within an androcentric discursive practice and its strategies of accommodation and subversion.” Such strategies, observes Sougou, involve a temporal relocation of the folktales to reflect the women’s present experiences as rural folk who seasonally migrate to the city to work as housemaids (2008, 27–28). Like the Ghanaian women whose retold folktales are the subject of this paper, these Senegalese women are, to cite Harold Scheub, “living the present by reliving the past,” for “that is the way we make sense of the world” (Scheub 2002, xi). Isidore Okpewho, who has written extensively on oral literature in Africa, confirms this point when he asserts that “[n]o storyteller can hope to succeed in his [her] performance of a fantastic tale unless he [she] brings it into conversation with contemporary reality” (Okpewho 2003, 14). In this sense, folktales provide a context for women storytellers and their audience to make sense of both the collective memory and traditional discourse implicated in the folktales and women’s innovative strategies for challenging this discourse in their retold narratives.

Thus, some scholars have focused on the resources that African women's verbal art offer for facilitating critical thinking against the grain of stereotypical representation and controlling images. Rachel Fretz's work on Chokwe women's storytelling in Zaire is instructive in this regard. Fretz uses a tale about one young woman's encounter with a masked figure. Having repeatedly borne and lost several children, the woman seeks the help of a healer who deals with her childlessness by confining her to her hut. She however defies his orders and goes rat hunting, where she unearths the masked figure, who kills her by cutting off her head, then kidnaps both mother and child. Unbeknownst to her people, the masked figure is a king of the spirit world, into which he takes her, marries her, has many children by her before returning her to her matrilineal village.

According to Fretz, this story, told by a Chokwe woman, plays with her society's storytelling conventions by, for example, making the woman stay out late alone hunting for rats and yet escape punishment by the masked figure, thus creating an ambiguous tale. Through the use of ambiguity in their storytelling, says Fretz, Chokwe women invoke themes set forth in earlier performances and counter previous storytellers' views. For instance, she notes that "the parallels between [a female storyteller's] tale and an earlier performance by [a male storyteller] suggest contrasting and gendered interpretations about a woman's judgment when caught in an ambiguous situation" (Fretz 1994, 234). Likewise, a study of Kuranko storytelling in Sierra Leone reveals ambiguity and reversals of expected behaviour as listeners explore the possibilities in their universe (Jackson 1982, 40–54).

Although many scholars agree that in African oral genres "performances are often overtly concerned with deconstructing dominant ideologies and expressive forms" (Bauman/Briggs 1990, 66), there is little research on this subject with regard to Ghanaian folktales. The few studies on Akan folktales in southern Ghana include Kwawisi Tekpetey (2006) and Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang (1995) on the trickster Ananse. Opoku-Agyemang (1995, 10) takes an interesting perspective on Ananse's role in Akan society against the backdrop of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery. In his view the trickster is "a figure of strict moral injunction. His life is a lesson, a model of behaviour and conduct." Ananse, who uses his wiles to overcome powerful adversaries, is considered an appropriate figure for demonstrating the logic of escape from captors.

Naana Opoku Agyemang (1999, 116) has examined how the folktale is drawn from the past to represent present realities, and how remarks by storytellers such as "I was a witness to this even" or "You should have been there to see this for yourself" supplement the improvisatory element in the folktale. Opoku Agyemang observes that narrators can use their creativity to modify existing tales or create new ones altogether:

The tale’s narrator has the added option, apart from fleshing out the details of a known tale, to create an entirely new tale [...] Thus the number of folktales in a given culture has the potential for expression and for tuning the content of the tale to meet current realities (Agyemang 1999, 117).

To illustrate this claim, however, she does not turn to tales told in the immediacy of oral performance, but to written adaptations of a common folktale that represent different perspectives on gender roles.

Of northern Ghanaian folktales, Balsa folk narratives have received some attention in the work of scholars such as Rüdiger Schott and Sabine Dinslage since the mid-1960s, mainly with regard to collection and categorization into motifs and themes. In their separate essays on the folktales, the main focus has been on how reality is reflected in the fictional narratives (see also Goody 1992/1993). Schott (1992) finds that the dead, as ancestors, are integral to daily Balsa life, but do not feature much in their folktales. Kasem folktales seem to contradict this claim, as they frequently feature ancestors in the form of ghosts, fairies and other kinds of revenants. Dinslage (1995, 243) claims that erotic folktales among the Balsa “demonstrate and explain the natural attitude of the Balsa towards sexuality and their uncomplicated and permissive manner of handling sexuality.” This claim suggests that Dinslage conflates folktales with reality. It illustrates Lutz Röhrich’s (1956, 117<sup>1</sup>) observation that “the fairytale is taken [...] to a large extent as a description of factuality and as believed reality” (translation by Schott 1992, 753–754).

Scholars on northern Ghanaian folktales are not the only ones to have considered the relationship between the folktale and reality. Notable scholars of European folktales, including the Grimm brothers, have looked at this issue from various perspectives. Wilhelm Grimm has drawn attention to the complementary nature of the mythical forces in folktales (such as darkness and light, evil and goodness) and its power to restore harmony. Similarly, Bruno Bettelheim points to the consolation in folktales that allow good to triumph over evil (1977, 9). Writing on Italian folktales, Italo Calvino considers the ‘realistic’ aspects of folktales as merely “a sort of springboard into wonderland, a foil for the regal and the supernatural” (1980, xxxii), while Max Lüthi, in his study of the nature of fairy tales, points to their sublimating qualities that transform reality (1976, 15 and 93). Yet as can be seen, such scholars recognise the “wonderland” of the folktale rather than conflate it with lived reality. Indeed, in her book *Off with Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of*

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<sup>1</sup> The original text by Röhrich is in German and reads “daß das Märchen [...] weitgehend als Schilderung von Tatsächlichkeit und als geglaubte Wirklichkeit hingenommen wird“ (Röhrich 1956, 117).

*Childhood*, which charts her search for parallel didactic trends in early children's literature and European folktales, Maria Tatar recognises this 'unreal world' when she declares that "no fairy tale is sacred," calling on fiction writers and storytellers to generate their own creative versions of the tales (1992, 229–230).

While it is important to consider whether what is depicted in oral fictional narratives has any counterpart in social life, I am more interested in the narrative strategies that storytellers employ to challenge the male orientation in traditional folktales. Also, though these studies illuminate important aspects of Balsa folktales and culture, they cannot be said to speak for other northern Ghanaian cultures, especially the Kasena whose folktales have received no scholarly attention. Urbanization and modern technology have helped the spread of popular music and dances around the country, especially among teenagers and young adults, yet in many ways traditions have remained distinct. As James Koetting (1975, 23) has noted in his paper on Kasem music, in northern Ghana, despite similarities in architecture, farm crops, dress, religious and social institutions and forms of traditional government, people understand as little of each other's oral genres as they do each other's language. Similarly, in a study of characters in stories among the LoDagaa and the Gonja of northern Ghana, Jack Goody (1992/1993, 46) notes that the two societies are different in many respects, though he finds a similarity "in range and subject matters" in their "oral narratives." In view of these differences, and in order to give attention to retellings of traditional folktales that engage critically with the social roles and cultural values in folklore, this study examines how four retold tales reinterpret gendered discourses in the light of changing trends in Kasena society.

## 4 The Kasem folktale tradition

A brief review of the Kasena and their folktale tradition will help to highlight the substantive changes which have been made in the retold stories and, through such alterations, introduce scholars to the workings of Kasem oral tradition. Among the Kasena, folktales are told by everyone regardless of age, gender or social status, although it is also common for old women to tell stories to groups of young children in the evening. Sometimes older children and adolescents compete with adults in their mastery of the storytelling art, and in such cases there is more concern than usual with keeping the attention of the audience and winning their approbation.

Audience attention is summoned via the opening formula: "Asinsola kampo!" ["My story bursts forth," sometimes shortened to "Kampo!"], to which

the audience responds “Kandiŋ!” [“Let it be intact”]. This is an important part of the framing of the folktales that not only speaks them into being but also affirms their cultural authenticity and hence their role in the conservation of the oral lore. Each story “bursts forth” with the authority of tradition to spread its message to the community. Storytellers may end their narratives with comments like “this is what I witnessed and wanted to share with you,” or [especially in the case of aetiological tales] with a statement of the moral of the folktale: “That is why our elders say/it is said ...” The full ending formula is however more elaborate and depicts the kind of androcentric assumptions in traditional stories that are being challenged in contemporary retold versions:

Kasem	English Translation
Mo amo sinsɔla mama	That is the end of my story
Ka gya zo Aya diga	To be taken into Aya’s [my mother’s] living quarters <sup>2</sup>
Aya diga ye kali’ ka di	In my mother’s living quarters [where one can engage in] <i>kali ka di</i> <sup>3</sup>
Ye kali’ ka di zuŋ’ siŋa	<i>Ye kali ka di</i> in a “red” calabash <sup>4</sup>
Zuŋ’ siŋa kabɔɔɔ diga	Red calabash in a green mamba’s room [hole]
Kabɔɔɔ diga ye a vwe	Green mamba’s room in which I snuggle
Ye a vwe yuɔɔɔ loin	I snuggle with a bald pate
Anu nii ban a tii m’	Mother, look, they have insulted you
Ba tii m’ ba we m’ bɛ?	How did they insult you?
Ba tii m’ ba we m’ yuu ne nanjua mo sare ka yela se ka maa di mun’ sao <sup>5</sup>	They said your head looks like a fly that has sharpened its teeth in preparation to eat millet flour

<sup>2</sup> See R. S. Rattray: *The Tribes of the Ashanti and the Hinterland*, vol. I, 247–255, for a description of the family compound (Yiri). Although Rattray is describing a Nankana [Nankansi] compound, this is not different from the Kasena compound, a fact that he acknowledges in vol. II 539.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Ka kali ka di’ is an idiomatic expression used to describe the habit of cleaning the calabash with one’s fingers while eating, usually also permitted when one is eating with close friends or family. It is common during famine to ensure that food is eaten up and thereby prevent waste. In this text the focus is on the love shown by the mother in providing food for others under trying circumstances, thereby cultivating in them love and trust for each other.

<sup>4</sup> There are several different kinds of calabashes in Kasena culture, each used for a different purpose such as drinking or holding water or pito (a local alcoholic drink made from guinea corn and/or sorghum malt), serving food, winnowing and storing grain. The red [reddish brown] calabashes are used for serving cooked food.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Mun’ viire,’ which is millet flour kneaded with shea butter and mixed with water is a staple Kasena meal. ‘Mun’ sao’ is flour that is completely dissolved in the water, to be distinguished

The narrator typically begins reciting this formula, with the audience joining in on the second or third line, usually accompanied by hand clapping. It originated from the practice whereby children sit around their grandmothers at night to listen to folktales. As is characteristic of many genres of Kasem songs, the incremental repetition that pervades the chant accentuates its musical quality, but it also reinforces conventional images and symbols about the mother figure in the culture: as nourisher [‘red calabash’] and nurturer [‘green mamba’] in whose quarters we ‘snuggle,’ feeling safe and secure as we share in the bounty of her love [ye kali ka di]. The calabash is closely associated with women because they perform the tasks that require its use. It also has a metaphorical connection with a woman in the Kasena patriarchy, so that it is common for a suitor to tell the parents of the girl that he “wants a calabash to drink water with,” making an allusion to the services and satisfaction he expects from his bride to be.

Yet the formula also reproduces a version of a common trope: the monstrous feminine, evident in the last line. This trope takes various forms, including the general perception that old women are witches. It seems insensitive to insult a woman that everyone calls ‘Aya’ [‘mother’], especially one who wears on her body the signs of her labour of love for her ‘children.’ In this particular case, the woman referred to is deemed to have developed a ‘baldness’ on the top of her head, which is easy to notice with the stooped posture that old women typically assume while sitting on a mat on the floor, hence the comparison with “a fly poised to eat millet flour.” Such ‘baldness,’ common among older Kasena women, is caused by frequent carrying of heavy loads on the head, especially over long distances to and from farms and water sources, among others. One way to interpret this ‘insult’ is to relate it to the grandmother figure and her joking relationship with most young people in the clan and beyond. Joking is a socially sanctioned medium, and partners can say things to each other that would not be permitted under different circumstances. In this regard, like the green mamba, this insult can be considered a harmless one. However, by ascribing to ‘Aya’ the status of both nurturer and monstrosity, the song places her in the kind of in-between space that the Kasena woman is perceived to occupy.

In this sense, such joking is grounded in gendered discourses in the society, and it is not surprising that some female tellers of retold stories consciously declined to deploy any of these closing formulas (though they used the opening ones), thus foregrounding their retellings as reinterpretations and reinforcing the

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from ‘mun’ kulu’ which contains lumps of flour deliberately left in the water. The water called ‘mun’ na,’ is drunk up before the flour is eaten. In Kasem tradition, it is considered discourteous for a host to let a guest leave without at least drinking ‘mun’ na,’ no matter how brief the visit. Also, ‘mun’ na’ is the basic and the most common form of sacrifice made to the ancestors.

open-endedness of their narratives which subvert the close-ended traditional plot. At least one narrator said that although the insult is socially accepted in the joking context, it offends other’s sensibilities.

## 5 Women in traditional Kasem stories

The perception of a Kasena woman as a person “betwixt and between” has a central place in traditional folklore. This view is summed up in the proverb, “a woman is a two-house dog,” which refers to her status as a daughter in her father’s house, which she must leave upon marrying, and as a wife in her husband’s house where she is expected to live thereafter, but where she is also faced with constant reminders that her father’s house is “where she comes from.” The man’s place has always been assumed to be with his father, through whom he will “theoretically trace [his] descent and determine [his] rights to hold traditional office and inheritance” (Owusu-Sarpong 2000, 75–76). In her review of Albert Awedoba’s anthropological work on Kasem proverbs, Christiane Owusu-Sarpong refers to this system as the Kasena “proverbial representation of patrilinealism” (2000, 75).

The woman’s place, unlike the man’s, is neither with her father nor with her husband – hence the proverbial “two-house dog” image. In her ambiguous place in traditional Kasem society, the woman has no rights to political office or inheritance, although she is expected to fulfil productive, reproductive, and cultural roles in whichever social unit she finds herself. For example, she is expected to bear male descendants for her patriline where there are none, although such children would have limited rights in the clan (see Schott 1992). Within marriage, the woman is expected to live under male control and to act according to male expectations. These cultural systems and practices inform the traditional corpus of folktales in Kasena society, and they may help to explain why heroines in the retold folktales reject the male orientation that characterises Kasena marriage and pursue their own desires.

In traditional Kasem folktales females are portrayed as helpless creatures who must always be saved from crises by males. Invariably, such crises arise when ‘disobedient’ women challenge patriarchal restrictions and pursue their personal interest. In the absence of males, such “disobedient” acts are perilous for female characters – a situation that is usually compounded by the presence of supernatural figures. Examples include the story of a young girl whose nightly indulgence in dance and revelry brings her into a fateful encounter with a bereaved dwarf. The dwarf, who has just lost a child, is digging a grave while singing a dirge. The

girl's mimicry of the dwarf's singing infuriates the latter, who pursues her to her house, into the innermost chamber where she has hidden in a big pot, and kills her. Such gender-specific punishment tends to naturalize traditional gender roles and constraints on women, and by placing 'crime and punishment' in the supernatural realm, which is beyond the reach of ordinary people, the folktales also focus attention on the regulation of gender identity.

Female storytellers subvert such ideologies in many of the folktales they retell by making substantive changes to the stories and by deliberately drawing attention to such changes. In this sense women's re-created folktales demonstrate the tellers' *nantandia* regarding questions of power relations between men and women and women's demonstration of agency. *Nantandia* is a Kasem concept that encompasses courage, daring, risk taking, innovative drive to confront the unpredictable, especially when such courage and daring destabilize the sense of order, logic and reason in the society. The term also connotes perspective, how one sees or feels, what one reckons, where one stands based on what one knows, sees or feels.

When applied to oral tradition it refers to the ability to detach oneself from a plenitude of cultural meanings, to commit ethical transgressions against a tradition, to exploit a genre's propensity for differing interpretations and appropriations, to revise the known by thinking of possible new forms. In short, by releasing women's *nantandia* the storytellers signal the transitions in Kasena society that are clinched in the common saying, "times have changed, and everything has changed with them." Through *nantandia* the female storytellers place their recreated folktales in 'conversation' with the traditional versions, thus inviting a close examination of the ways in which the latter have been re-visioned and what new possibilities of understanding and action the retold versions reveal in the lives of the main characters.

## 6 The retold stories

One of the stories retold by Kadua is *Mother and Pumpkin Child*. A teenage mother herself, Kadua reinterprets this folktale about a young mother who had been held in bondage and repeatedly beaten, raped and abused by an older man for resisting his advances. Having earlier escaped from him with her child (a product of her abuser's rape), the protagonist now sits on an airplane and points an AK47 at the man. So strong is her desire for revenge that she remains undeterred after she learns that her abuser has become the king of his village and is also her husband's uncle (or his 'father' in the Kasem context). In the traditional version of this tale

the protagonist is a childless woman who suffers abuse from her husband, a king. She runs to her father's house, but is greeted by taunts from relatives that she does not belong there. Unable to bear the pressure in her father's house; with nowhere else to go; and having been warned that the king has demanded her return, she goes back to her marital home. The king then resumes abusing her, until she is rescued by an orphaned son of the royal clan who kills the king by trapping him in a pumpkin.

The recreated version however rejects the traditional story's model of an obedient and longsuffering woman rescued by a benevolent male. Instead, the narrator portrays a woman with agency who articulates and acts on her desire to escape with her daughter from the king on her own terms: "I will find for myself and my child a life outside this cruelty," she soliloquizes. "First, we will leave this house; then I will return to exact my revenge. Anger does not produce excreta, so I will remain calm for now."<sup>6</sup> Just before bedtime, under the pretext of visiting the restroom, she jumps over a wall and places a ladder by the window of the room where she is being held. When everyone else is in bed, she asks permission to see her daughter, but instead takes the child and leaves by climbing down her window. An additional change made to the traditional plot is that the protagonist meets and marries her abuser's son after she migrates to a different town, but she does not find out her husband's identity until she is holding up the king with her AK47. The gun, being of foreign origin, is an interesting detail introduced by the adolescent narrator, a phallic symbol that emboldens the heroine to pursue her desire for revenge.

The protagonist liberates herself by recognizing, articulating and carrying out her own desires, thus trading domestic servitude for a stable marriage and economic security from a prince. The plot however becomes complicated when her two year old daughter, the product of the king's rape, descends from higher up on a magic mat and challenges her own mother to battle, with two pumpkins as her only weapons (in Kasem folktales, it is common for a child to confront a malevolent force by wielding a pumpkin with supernatural powers). She is on the verge of fulfilling personal vendetta and poetic justice, but she cannot exact revenge without ruining her relationship with her husband and her child. The pumpkin child, with her links to the supernatural world, suggests that the protagonist's desire and anger are ultimately trapped and tamed in that world – a situation which, ironically, is redolent of the dwarf-punishes-young-girl narrative.

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<sup>6</sup> This proverb is used in contexts where to act in anger would be pointless if not counter-productive. It is said to have been created during famine when food was a most precious commodity. But in this story the proverb also suggests the natural order of things: just as excreta is the result of eating food, rebellion is the logical consequence of abuse and violence.

Yet the story resists such closure. Like mother and daughter, listeners are left suspended in mid-air, no closer to a resolution of this multifaceted conflict than they were before the battle lines were drawn. However, in narrative terms, not only is the grammar of emotion in this tale much subtler than a simple proposition regarding discipline and punishment, but also there is an underlying rhetoric of social criticism: If rulers are so great and so powerful, why are they so abusive and so ruthless as to be almost demonic in their wickedness? And why do such kings get support from innocent victims of their callous acts who should be seeking redress?

A similar “politics of redress” (Yoneyama 2003, 71) informs the retelling of *The Ghost Wife*, retold by Nyaabama. This story is about what I would term “unpermissible desire” on the part of the female “ghost” as suggested in the request she presents to her husband: live with me or divorce me in a court of law. In both the traditional and the retold versions the man marries a second wife after his neglect compels the heroine to return with her children to her father’s house. There, like the protagonist of the previous folktale, she becomes the object of ridicule among adults and children alike, who claim that she has no place in her natal home. Belongingness is thus gendered because of the role of structured social regulation.

In her ‘ambiguous’ position, the ghostly wife in this story is ill at ease in her father’s house but knows there is no place for her in her husband’s home. Her plight is similar to that of rural women in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ireland as Angela Bourke (1995, 574) describes it: women assumed a “floating position [...] in the status hierarchy” and were bartered and exchanged “like the cows which accompanied them as dowry.” The dimension of social place captured by Bourke is important to assessing the predicament of the changeling protagonist who is treated by her husband like property to be disposed of at his will. She believes her husband and her community have failed her because they do not fulfil the minimal obligations of the marriage contract, which is to protect and ensure the wellbeing of all parties.

While at her father’s house she falls ill and dies, and her husband remarries. From this point the two versions differ. In the traditional version, on his wedding night the husband falls asleep in a chair in his inner yard. Upon waking up, he sees his ghost wife standing over him. He calls out to his new bride to bring a basket in which he can trap the ghost and dispose of it, but it flees. Although in this version the appearance of the ghost wife to her husband can in itself be seen as an unspoken or unspeakable desire to be loved even in death, she seems helpless and passive; a fleeting shadow that vanishes as quickly as it appears. Although there is no punitive supernatural figure in the story, her ‘life’ as a phantom is brief and without any of the power or agency typically wielded by

such figures. Little wonder that her husband, whose neglect culminated in her death, threatens her with what amounts to a second death. Nyaabama's reinterpretation of the traditional story is more nuanced in its rejection of helpless passivity, and in its refusal to nullify the protagonist's marital and social status upon her entry into the supernatural world.

Before 'ghost wife' makes her demand for either co-habitation or divorce in court, she approaches her husband while he lies asleep in his inner yard and sings to him about his betrayal: *mage se a bɔɔlo biina, a bɔɔlo ke ne leero* [play the music because my lover is coming; my lover has betrayed me]. The narrator then puts this proverb in the mouth of the character: *Ba ligese wudiiru duura yela mo se ba ba ligese wodiiru doora* [When teeth are picked, it is to remove new food particles, not old ones]. What is implied here is that her husband, in his newly married bliss, seems to have forgotten about her. In the retold folktale the heroine demonstrates consciousness regarding inequitable domestic arrangements, is credited with subjectivity and given a voice. In this version she gains *nantandia* partly through her awareness about modern concepts like the rule of law, which she understands enough to know that her 'ghostly' presence will not stand up in court. Yet she seeks justice by reinserting herself into the marital home from which she was forced out, thus challenging the restrictive model of marriage that the traditional folktale offers for viewing everyday experience.

In the retold folktales the marriage plot, which is depicted in the traditional corpus as fixed and homogeneous, is open-ended, more complex and more nuanced, and narrators introduce changes in plot and characterization that foreground female desires, a situation that amounts to re-creating the oral narratives. *The Childless Woman and the Shrine* narrated by Akula features a woman who establishes her own shrine when she thinks a family shrine has failed her. In the traditional version the woman, herself a liminal figure physically, emotionally and socially, is the only one who heeds the pleas of a lone supernatural being for water at the village river. In gratitude, the creature, having learned that her deepest desire is to have a child, promises her one but warns her to keep the child's origin a secret. The creature gives her a fruit that turns into a male child three days later. Her life is a happy one until one night when her husband, having had too much to drink, throws the boy's origin in his face, whereupon the child, in tears, returns to his maker. The story makes it clear that her husband considered the child as hers and not his, so his act of betrayal comes as little surprise to the audience. Even in its traditional version then, this story invites us to interrogate the trope of biology as destiny in Kasena society where, as with other African contexts, to be childless is to be a tragic figure, derided and disrespected by others, especially close relatives. It is therefore not surprising that the childless female protagonist in this folktale is on a quest to fulfil her utmost desire.

In the retold version of this folktale the protagonist is placed in a polygynous patriarchal marriage. She goes by all the rules laid down for her by her husband, serving him in all. She makes the prescribed offerings and sacrifices to the family shrine, presided over by the family head. The village soothsayer urges her to be patient, and although her yearning for a child intensifies with every passing day, she heeds his advice. Years go by and she enters middle age, but her tears, prayers and sacrifices do not bring the desired result. Her situation is exacerbated when she develops a canker sore on her leg. By this time her husband has all but abandoned her, so she must seek a cure on her own. This latter quest takes her on a perilous journey across many rivers and dark forests, into the world of shamans. There, she meets a half-woman who has been kept in bondage by fearsome monsters. She tells the protagonist that the *taloŋa* [herbal cure] is guarded by the monsters but shows her how to outwit the dangerous creatures, and the two females manage to escape with the cure.

Back home, with guidance from the half-woman, the protagonist uses the *taloŋa* to heal her sore, but her deepest yearning is not assuaged. In despair, she tells the sky god [*baŋa we*], his wife the earth goddess [*Katiga*] and the family shrine [*tangwam*] that since they have all failed her she should not be blamed for discarding them. “I will never again call my mother’s lover my sire,” she fumes, deploying a proverb that underlines the disappointment and betrayal of trust that she feels towards these power wielders. She adds: “Second fool is a fool, first fool is not a fool,”<sup>7</sup> indicating her determination not to stay on to serve her husband or his family again. Thereafter she leaves her marital home, establishes her own shrine nearby and invites the half-woman, who had been transformed into a shaman after escaping from the monsters, to serve as priestess. The retold tale thus rejects the ‘false’, short-lived sense of happiness that the traditional story accords the protagonist, because after she loses her only child her powerlessness, loneliness and remoteness are palpable, despite her proximity to family.

This version is the most elaborate retelling of the folktale that I have recorded, for unlike the others, in which mainly the ending is altered, in this story new characters are introduced (other members of the polygynous family, the shamanistic half-woman and the monsters who kidnapped her, the sky god – often identified with God, the lord of the sky or the heaven – and the earth goddess, the family head who doubles as traditional priest, etc.). New elements of plot such as the dynamics of polygynous relationships, the perilous journey and the motivation for it, the protagonist’s abandonment of gods and shrine – and her

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<sup>7</sup> This utterance, spoken in English while the rest of the narration was in Kasem, seems to be an idiosyncratic manoeuvre on the part of the storyteller. This kind of codeswitching is uncommon during traditional storytelling.

husband's neglect of her, are also added. A victim of both supernatural forces and her community, the protagonist is imbued with courage, intelligence and initiative to subvert patriarchal authority. Even for an accomplished storyteller, this re-visioning of the folktale would have taken a high level of *nantandia* that would likely have been attained alongside the changes in Kasem society and daily life.

The woman's action of establishing her own shrine in the folktale should also be viewed from the point that it is the duty of Kasena lineage elders to consult a soothsayer when there is hunger, sickness, death, or infertility, whether of the soil or their wives, to find out whether the ancestors have been wronged and what sacrifices need to be made. Thus ancestor worship plays an important role in the daily life of the Kasena. The ancestors are offered water, millet flour water or pito, which is beer brewed with guinea corn or sorghum. Sometimes animals are sacrificed to ancestors. The living in turn expect the ancestors to fulfil their demands for good health, long life, children and wealth. If their wishes are not granted, the living may rebuke their ancestors for not fulfilling their demands, although they do not typically replace an ancestor for failing them. It would seem that by confronting or affronting divinity, the female character has demonstrated *nantandia* regarding the highest authorities in the land. She has altered and re-aligned agency and power in the mythical and spiritual realm. By establishing her own shrine she commits the ultimate insult that can be directed at a Kasena god or ancestor.

As mentioned, the protagonist in each of the selected folktales is a wife in a liminal state, physically, emotionally or socially. The young mother in *The Wild Children*, though a nursing mother, also represents a different kind of liminality as a mother of 'abnormal' children. Her position is reinforced by her being associated with other in-between situations such as escaping with her children at midnight when the barrier separating the spirit and human worlds is weak and it is considered unsafe for humans to be outside – a blurred boundary that is brought to the fore when she encounters ghosts on the bus on which she travels away from her marital home. Her liminal state is also captured in her position between her husband's family home and her own: when her children are in peril from their own father she cannot find refuge in either home, but she searches in vain for a safe 'third space.' *The Wild Children* is thus probably more about the female protagonist, the mother, than it is about her children.

In both the traditional and the retold versions of this story the woman gives birth to fraternal twins with unusual powers that enable them engage in activities typically carried out by adults. Each day, when their parents go to the farm and leave them with a care taker, they bind the latter up and lock her in a room. The boy then takes charge of the home. He goes into the millet barn, fetches a basket of millet-on-the-cob for his sister and orders her to thrash the grain, grind it and

prepare food for both of them. While they carry out their elaborate plan of activities the children take turns to look out to make sure their parents do not catch them in the act. As they cook and clean, they sing the following song:

<b>Kasem</b>	<b>English Translation</b>
Nta la nta la zon limsi nso Zon limsi	My sister, my sister, Go up and look out for my father
To si wa zom limsi nso Zom limsi	Take this millet, then go up and look out for my father
ɔbira si la lam maama ya lam maama	Eating millet with testicles that are fresh from the womb
Fom ɔɔ ka niire la nyu toligiri yaa Nyu toligiri	Are you not grinding millet with umbilical cord dragging?
Ta baase lage taaba yaa Lage taaba	When food is ready we shall both eat
Te yeti ɔɔgbilma ya, ti ɔɔgbilima	And we will dance joyously

It would seem like a curious detail that in performing the household chores these siblings appear to play the roles of husband and wife. This role play, coupled with their matter-of-fact references to genitalia as they taunt each other, might be viewed by a non-Kasena audience as an indication of an incestuous predisposition, and therefore as scandalous. Yet such an interpretation would be misleading, given the Kasem cultural context in which the apportioning of chores in a household tends to be gendered, and where it is common to hear a female adult or child playfully comment on the ‘fresh’ testicles of a new born baby, even if it is her sibling. In general, although Kasena are not averse to jokes that make allusions to sexual themes, this is one of a few instances in daily life where direct reference is made to sexual organs. Thus, the “natural attitude of the Bulsa towards sexuality and their uncomplicated and permissive manner of handling sexuality” (Dinslage 1995, 243) cannot be said to apply in the case of the Kasena.

Each day, after they have cooked and eaten, the children clean up, then they untie their caretaker and when they notice their parents approaching the house, they begin to cry. Too terrified to reveal what is happening, the caretaker remains silent and takes a beating from the children’s father for neglecting them. At first their parents do not suspect anything, but soon enough they realise all is not well in their home. One day the father leaves home purportedly to go to the farm, but instead he hides in a nearby bush. When he sees what the children have been doing he tells his wife that he plans to kill them with a red-hot spear.

From this point the two versions differ. In the traditional version the children are killed by their father as he has planned, and the story ends there. The retold version however adds another turn to the plot as their mother decides to save her children from their father. After dinner she sets her plan in motion by serving her husband *pito* (local beer made from guinea corn or sorghum) mixed with herbs that promptly put him in a deep sleep. At midnight, stepping quietly over her husband, she collects her children, leaves the house and runs with them into a bus, ready for a long ride to a safe place in a distant town. After a few hours on the road she notices that the bus is full of ghosts. In Kasem popular speech, she has “run from the light of fireflies into the fire of witches.”

The Kasena believe that the ancestors, typically referred to as *chira* [lit. ‘ghosts’], may appear to punish those who fail to follow established norms. *Chichurru* [‘monsters’] refers to twins, children born with teeth, an unusually big head or other birth defects and congenital malformations. Such children are also called *gao wonno* [‘bush/wild ones’], and often adults would ask whether a particular child or pair of twins are *woyonno* [‘good ones’] or *wolonno* [‘bad ones’]. *Woyonno* are viewed as ‘normal’ children while *Wolonno* are considered capable of treacherous acts such as killing. The latter are therefore believed to be a threat to the society and must be eliminated to prevent disaster or to restore order – hence the father’s decision to kill the twins with a red-hot spear.

Interestingly, Bourke cites similar “accounts of child-changelings being placed on red-hot shovels” in nineteenth-century Ireland. She adds that “[...] Many societies practice infanticide in such cases, often with some sort of belief narrative to absolve adults from guilt” (1995, 571). The father of the ‘wild children’ in this story may indeed absolve himself and his society from the guilt of infanticide by portraying the twins as deeply disturbing creatures from ‘the other world’ – a marginalized and alienated group that includes the depressed and individuals in other ‘abnormal’ psychological conditions, who are thought to cause an imbalance in the system that is otherwise considered ‘normal.’

Thus in the retold version, narrated by Abaakane, who is a Christian, it is not surprising that the protagonist does not agree with her husband’s proposal for infanticide. To a Christian narrator and audience, such a proposal could be seen as the voice of traditional belief in the supernatural, a belief system that can be associated with patriarchy. This point is also illustrated by elements that illuminate the father’s negative attitude to his children. For example, he is depicted as one who complains daily about his fatherly duties: about not getting a moment of rest during the day when he takes a break from farm work, or any sleep at night, and how much he resents minding the babies. An interesting aspect of the retold tales is the storytellers’ integration of proverbs into the narrative. Thus the father is said to frequently cite the proverb: *Lee na biina, yom ba tɔga* [When disaster is

coming, order does not follow], suggesting that he sees the children as a problem which requires decisive action to restore order to his life – and the possibility that infanticide might be his unconscious escape from his role as their father. What is not clear is whether the protagonist knew from the beginning that her children were of the ‘bush/wild’ kind but did nothing about it until she thought their lives were in peril.

This recreated story is quite intriguing, as it leaves the woman with her children stranded and apparently trapped in the supernatural realm. Has the woman, by preventing the ritual killing of her ‘bush children,’ acted contrary to social norms? Have her ancestors appeared in the form of the busload of ghosts to punish her for her ‘crime’? Are we to interpret this situation as her entrapment between two patriarchal forces?

The answers to these questions lie in the different worldviews depicted in the two versions of the story. The traditional story keeps within a rural, ‘traditional’ world view– including the belief in malevolent ‘wild children,’ attitudes towards them (in some traditional stories such children are depicted as killers, even of their parents), and the Kasem worldview, in which to find oneself in the midst of ghosts [lit. in ‘ghost/ancestral land’] suggests one has died. The revised story implicates a different context: a contemporary (urban?) setting that does not accommodate belief in such children, nor in malevolent ancestral ghosts and monsters. Therefore it is plausible to read the busload of ‘genderless’ ghosts as a fantasy world which provides a safe escape for mother and twins.

## 7 Conclusion

While traditional Kasem folktales represent a univocal reinforcement of models already present in the culture, their contemporary retold versions depict a polyvocal, open-ended re-visioning that seeks to challenge such models. Retellings make significant changes to the traditional stories and call attention to these changes in a way that subverts conventional narratives. Thus, like their traditional versions, retold stories ‘burst forth,’ but contrary to tradition, they do not ‘remain intact.’ The conventional outcome of Kasem folktales is that female characters whose actions threaten the patriarchal order are rescued by males if they regret their misdeeds, or punished, often by death, if they do not. Contemporary female storytellers see the past tradition anew and break its hold over women, so that they achieve subjecthood in life and after death. Their open-ended narratives challenge the inherited cultural and literary tradition by disabling the folktale’s fixity, while their female protagonists have the *nantandia* to traverse the in-be-

tween space assigned them as “two house dogs” and in the process, re-configure social/gender roles.

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