

Contextual Elements of Vicious Performance: Focus on a Category of Audience-Orientated Physical Contest

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Abstract

In the process of researching the Fulani¹ cultural performance of *soro* (flogging contest) in Nigeria, I discovered that this performance presents certain contextual elements that qualify it as a participatory performance; as an example of cultural theatrical practice; as a form of extreme and gruelling performance in which spectators enthusiastically encourage contestants to intensely inflict the maximum amount of physically damaging force (i.e. whipping) by stipulated means on their opponent; is enjoyed as a form of entertainment by the community and serves as an important rite for the male youths who voluntarily partake as contestants. These qualities that I have found existing within *soro* also apply to a number of other performances such as boxing, *dambe*, (a Hausa bare-knuckle kick-boxing) and *ipia-agba* (an Igbo ceremonial flogging contest), whereby the nature of the physically damaging force allowed can range from boxing, to kickboxing, and whipping respectively. Consequently, this study assesses these common qualities which exist within a variety of performances under the categorisation of vicious performance. Hence, the major concerns of this study concentrate on the discussion of what the term vicious performance as an analytical frame conceptually represent and how to apply this concept in order to examine the subsumed notions in the following question about a *soro* flogging bout: 'Why would anyone want to go through this ordeal?'

Introduction: 'Why would anyone want to go through this Ordeal?'

Two important points drew my interest to the question above which was asked by a young female first-time foreign spectator during a *soro* bout that took place at Bauchi State, Nigeria in 2000. The first point that arose

from her question is the implied categorization of *soro* as an ordeal, while the second point is her questioning, albeit metaphorically, of the rationality of engaging in such a gruelling performance voluntarily. To discuss these questions I shall draw on the concept of 'vicious performance' (Aniago, 2009), as an analytical frame. The term vicious performance is an analytical frame which classifies a certain category of participatory performances (describable as extreme and gruelling) which exist in a variety of forms but are characterized by certain common peculiarities. As a common peculiarity, vicious performances are forms of audience-orientated performances in which the focus of the spectators is mainly on evaluating and appreciating the quality and nuances of the contestants' responses to the pain ensuing from the physically damaging force inflicted during the performance, and in some forms, the contestants' display of skill and strength in their attempts to impair their opponent alongside the quality of their defensive skills.

Drawing on this concept, this paper aims to examine some realities and manifestations that may lead to the perception of *soro* as an ordeal on one hand, and on the other, as a gruelling physical test according to the indigenous participants' perspective, informed by their culturally informed conceptions. In order to demonstrate a clear understanding of the Jafun Fulbe ladde (nomadic Jafun Fulbe) concepts of manliness and a male youth's embodiment of a warrior-like spirit of fearlessness, which he is expected to exhibit through participating in a *soro* bout as a *fiyetedo* (a strike recipient in the language of the Fulani 'Fulfulde'), this study analyses *soro* as a 'gruelling physical test'.

My case-study, *soro*, is a male youth ceremonial flogging-meet, called *bacchii mobgal* by some Fulbe ladde exponents of northern Nigeria, such as the Jafun, which, according to the occasion, is practised either as a rite-of-passage (*furtuki danki*) or as a sport (*fijirde*). To the Jafun Fulbe ladde, *soro* is a form of cultural entertainment which offers the opportunity for a public exhibition of courage and the ability to endure pain (*munyugo naungol*) by the male youths of their society, demonstrated through receiving whiplashes mainly on the bare chest in a manner that betrays no visible signs that could be interpreted as evidence of weakness or pain in a *babal fijirde* (public site of performance). It is useful to state here that I have personally witnessed a considerable number of *soro* meets staged in different parts of northern Nigeria, both as a child and as an adult. All of the *soro* bouts that I have witnessed strictly adhere to the same fundamental performance practice (i.e. that at any given time in a bout, one of the performers will assume the role of a *fiyowo* (the Fulani term for striker or flogger in a *soro* bout) who inflicts the strokes intermittently upon mainly the bare chest of the other performer, who is referred to as the

fiyetedo (the Fulani term for strike recipient). The primary role of the *fiyetedo* is to receive the strokes whilst attempting to conceal all reactions that could be interpreted as weakness or an inability to sufficiently endure pain.

Just as when spectators cheer and clap during a sprint race in response to the contestants' exceptional talent and ability to run very fast, thus demonstrating their enthusiasm for and appreciation of the winner's ability to out-run the other contestant(s), the spectators of a vicious performance such as *soro* applaud the contestant's ability to courageously endure the pain ensuing from the physically damaging force (the whiplashes) without displaying any obvious visible signs of discomfort. A contestant's claim to superiority in courage amongst the various competitors in a *soro* bout is based on the evident quality and nuances of his displayed response(s) to the pain ensuing from the whiplashes received, such as standing in a very calm and still manner, in combination with his choice of significant symbolic gestures such as holding a mirror and gazing at it nonchalantly, stroking his chin audaciously, or smiling throughout the duration of the inflicted pain. While in *soro* a contestant is not required to defend himself against the whiplashes as part of the performance process, but rather to stand still on a fixed spot, in *dambe*, another form of vicious performance practised by the Hausa people of Nigeria, contestants are required as part of the performance practice to defend themselves against each others' physically damaging force (i.e. punches and kicks) as they attempt to defeat each other by throwing punches and delivering kicks. Clearly in this particular example of vicious performance, the spectators' focus of interest is not solely on how a contestant courageously endures the inflicted physically damaging force, but also on how they comparatively appropriate the acquired skill of defending themselves against the physically damaging force (i.e. punches and kicks) directed at them, whilst at the same time attempting to deliver their own application of physically damaging counter force on their opponent.

Coming back to the question: 'why would anyone want to go through this ordeal?' Just as modern military institutions put their recruits through daunting and rigorous training in order to ensure their ability to undergo possible future challenges, likewise *soro* is a means of psychologically preparing young Jafun Fulbe ladde boys towards managing life as a nomad who should not be easily frightened if he hopes to survive the wild and its attendant challenges. Consequently, a successful show of courage and the physical mastery of the act of pain endurance in a *soro* bout signify the *fiyetedo*'s authentic transition from boyhood to manhood, if it constitutes his initial performance, or forms the re-attestation and

affirmation of his courage and endurance if he has competed before. The first *fiyetedo's* contest demonstrates his transition (rite of passage) from the status of a 'boy', who is considered by his community to be timid and filled with *yeso* (fear) to that of a 'man' who is able to face and withstand pain. This attainment, which is perceived as the embodiment of a warrior-like spirit of fearlessness, in turn projects the individual's persona and identity which, for a Jafun Fulbe ladde male, is the direct product of his society's worldview as embodied in his clan's concept of *pulaaku* (the Fulbe code of behaviour). *Pulaaku* has similar attributes among all Fulbe clans, but is not exhibited through the same cultural event by each of the Fulbe ladde clans), and it can be described as the Fulani or Fulbe code of conduct from which they, as a clan, derive an awareness of their unity and uniqueness. Consequently, it is accurate to say that the persona and identity that the Jafun Fulbe ladde strive to project whilst engaging in *soro* is embodied in their concept of *pulaaku*, and that *pulaaku* is culture-specific. As mentioned earlier, an important characteristic of a vicious performance is that its practice is governed by unambiguous ideology and ethical standards which are first and foremost widely acknowledged by those individuals from the practising communities, and to varying levels by non-indigenous individuals who have accumulated enough knowledge of the event and the community's cultural specifics to provide them with an insider-perspective. In the case of *soro*, *pulaaku* specifies the code of conduct for both the contestants and spectators. *Pulaaku* involves attributes that govern every aspect of Fulbe ladde life, both in public and in private; it is their ethical standard, morals and etiquette and is embodied in such concepts as *munyal* (patience, perseverance), *semteende* (shame, reserve or shyness), *cusal* (self-control), *deftinido* (autonomy), *neddaaku* (dignity), *ngorgu* (bravery) and *hakkiilo* (manners, forethought, common sense), which together are referred to as *laawol pulaaku* – the Fulbe way, or 'the Fulani-Way' (Stenning, 1994: 55), or that which defines one's 'Fulaniness' or 'Fulbeness' (Virtanen, 2003: 25). Paul Riesman observes that *pulaaku* denotes 'the qualities appropriate to a Fulani' (1977: 127). According to Mogens Mogensen (2000: 72), when asked what *pulaaku* means from their own cultural perspective, the Fulbe will often present the following three definitions: '*Pulaaku* is Fulfulde, it is *barkeehi*, (the tree of blessing), and it is *hakkiilo* (good sense), *munyal* (self-control), and *semteemde* (reserve).' In concordance with Mogensen, *pulaaku*, Catherine Vereecke (1986: 98) argues, 'specifies the actual rules or guidelines for appropriate behaviour and the presentation of self, as well as a series of virtues and personal attributes, which may be viewed as rewards for behaving like a *pullo*'. Martin Zachary Njeuma (1997: 7) accordingly defines *pulaaku* as a concept that 'embraces Fulbe traditions and all that is

worth striving for in a Fulbe home and society', which are those virtues that are transferred from the old to the young informally, as well as those acquired in the course of socialization.

Theatre and performances, in the process of representing the social consciousness and worldview of the participants, 'reflect the respective historical journey each society' has made as well as their 'abiding and contemporary concerns' (Okagbue, 2007: 13). Thus the 'mutual affectivity' between *soro* and *pulaaku* typifies the dialectical nature of the relationship between the two. On the one hand, *pulaaku* – as the communal codes of conduct – provides the material and guiding framework (in the form of appropriate behaviour) required of participants during *soro*, while on the other hand, through the enactment of *soro*, *pulaaku* becomes a way of life rather than mere ideas and consequently provides the society with the opportunity to reassess how it reflects their aspirations and views.

Although every Fulbe person has a claim to *pulaaku* as a common cultural identity and heritage which stipulates behaviour that is considered appropriate (both in public and private), the concept of *pulaaku* is not perceived by all the Fulbe clans in exactly the same manner and they do not exhibit its attributes through the same cultural events; rather, each Fulbe clan defines their *pulaaku* through their *al'āada* (customary behaviour). For the Jafun Fulbe ladde, the ability to endure the whiplashes in a *soro* bout is an exhibition of the *pulaaku* attributes *ngorgu*, *cusal*, *neddaaku* and *munyal*, which project the *fiyetedo* as a 'man' because he has publicly proved himself as proficient and capable of facing the reality of pain and adversity courageously on any day or at any time. The Jafun Fulbe ladde consider their life as nomads to be one that involves situations and circumstances that challenge an individual's ability to embody fearlessness in order to succeed. Consequently, a Jafun Fulbe ladde, in line with the dictates of his *pulaaku*, is expected to be able to stand his ground in the face of fear-inspiring circumstances, such as being able to defend himself against cattle rustlers and wild animals; enduring long transhumance under harsh weather conditions; being in control of a large group of cattle; enduring all forms of pain without showing any visible reaction suggesting distress; and being ready to take part in war to defend the communal interests of his clan. Consequently, each young male individual needs to train his mind and body through practising cultural traditions such as *soro* in order to adapt to these socio-cultural circumstances and succeed in his life as a nomad.

Another common characteristic of vicious performances is that they are not drama or the portrayal of a predetermined text, rather they are actual real-time physical contests whose action sequence, highlights,

climax and eventual end can be speculated upon but are not expected to be pre-known by either the spectators or the contestants.

The term vicious performance when applied as an analytical frame defines a certain sub-category of 'extreme performances', of which *soro* is a prime example, as those forms of audience-orientated events in which a performer, in a performance by himself (i.e. self flagellation) or in a contest with another, voluntarily self-inflicts or allows another individual to inflict a physically damaging force to his body (which he may or may not return). This is aimed at publicly exhibiting his ability to withstand, contain, suppress or disguise the ensuing pain, and in some instances is also aimed at exhibiting a certain individual's mystical prowess. The context of physically damaging force in a vicious performance is a reference to the fact that the quality of action demonstrated through the pain inflicted on a contestant's body has reached or is at a level of intensity which is clearly recognised by the spectators as having the capacity to cause bodily pain, harm or injury. This demonstrates how *soro*, as a vicious performance, embodies the reality of pain and physical aggression to varying degrees. During a *soro* bout, the *fiyowo* inflicts the strikes with as much strength as possible meaning that the *fiyetedo's* wellbeing may be adversely affected or threatened; this clearly indicates the element of viciousness of the action in a *soro* performance. Consequently, due to the viciousness contained in a *soro* bout, or a *dambe* contest, or a boxing match, the physical aggression which the contestants apply, may, at certain points, appear to teeter on the edge of disaster, or be getting out-of-hand, or be reaching a level of intensity which suggests that the contestants' actions appear to be non-rule bound, however, this viciousness will mainly remain 'on the edge, but not over' because the performance actions are contained within strict performative boundaries and rules of engagement, much in the way in which 'a bloody hockey game barely but reliably remains a game' (Schechner, 2002: 65). The performative boundaries of any such event define the adherence to rules that stipulate the location of the performance site; the size of the performance space; and the restrictions and limitations applied to the contestants in terms of only directing the physically damaging force generated upon the agreed opponent thus ensuring the physical safety of the audience. A vicious performance requires appropriate and effective management at every stage, starting with the period of organizing a meet, then disseminating the information decided about a meet such as the proposed date of the meet, the strict adherence to the use of appropriate performance costume, kits and props, the time the meet will begin, the likely contestants to perform in the meet, the organisation of crowd management during the meet, refereeing the contest, declaring the contest open and declaring the

end of the contest. The successful organisation of this whole series of actions ensures that a meet is properly managed in terms of public safety which defines the performative boundaries. Any clear disregard of stringent adherence to the performative boundaries such as an instance whereby a contestant directs physically damaging force upon any member of the audience who would be unprepared to receive it, or the inability of the umpires to maintain strict adherence to the principles of the performative boundaries, will make the whole activity less ceremonial and less of a theatrical event. Hence, the inability of an audience-orientated activity to guarantee to the potential audience the clear separation of performance space from spectators' space, with the attendant restrictions of the performance action only taking place within the performance space, are factors which indicate that such an activity does not belong to my categorization of vicious performance.

The notion of *soro* as an audience-orientated performance, containing actions that tend to place it 'on the edge of disaster', enhances the perception of the quality of such actions being that which only well indoctrinated, trained and fortified individuals can attempt to undergo. This indicates that, in some cultures, vicious performances are viewed as promoting exclusivity, in other words it is only those able and trained individuals who can sufficiently and successfully participate in them without running into extreme difficulty, including severe harm to health, and/or life usually compete. It is therefore appropriate to refer to *soro* as fierce and severe or an extreme and gruelling event that is performed within strongly guided protocol and rules of engagement in order to maintain the performative boundaries which secure its context as a theatrical event. Such protocol includes rules and regulations that apply to the time, ethics, props, protective gear, location of the strikes (upper back and chest only), the prohibition of any unexpected strikes being inflicted to the *fiyetedo*, the performance space being clearly separated from the spectators, the function of referees or umpires, and the sanctions incurred for non-adherence to the rules and regulations. It is these qualities that qualify *soro* as a form of vicious performance.

Another common peculiarity found within this category of performance is that the central performative element is the contestant's voluntary acceptance to undergo the infliction of a physically damaging force (as stipulated in a particular vicious performance form's rule of engagement) either by him/herself or by another individual (who is performing voluntarily as well) on him/her with or without the use of appropriate apparatus, (also as embodied in the event's rules of engagement), which is primarily aimed at exhibiting the recipient's ability to conceal and/or withstand pain, for some potential reward and/or benefits. As part of the

integral aspect of a vicious performance, this physically damaging force, which could be punches as in the case of *dambe* and boxing, whipping or flagellation as in the case of Jafun Fulbe *soro*, *ipia-agba* practiced by some Igbo clans or shin kicking as in the case of indigenous English *purring*, is usually expected (by the informed spectators, as enshrined in the performance rules of engagement) to be dealt with as much intensity or aggressiveness as possible in order to determine the quality of the recipient's endurance of physical pain.

The potential reward and/or benefits for the contestants who have successfully undergone a *soro* bout (depending on the specifics of the individual circumstance) could be to achieve admiration and appropriate status amongst peers and respect from the community. In some contests, competitors also intend to win the heart of their would be bride, while in other contests it might be about raising individual self-esteem by being recognized as the most courageous young man of his time. In modern day boxing the reward for competing is strictly about the prize money, which is far more significant amount than the wage paid to the losing competitor. A vicious performance may involve a participant being expected to win within the terms of the contest or just pass a test of courage.

In some forms of vicious performance, including *soro*, a contestant may be either competing in order to win a contest between himself and an opponent or, in other circumstances, he may be contesting just to pass a test through demonstrating a certain degree of endurance to physical pain because he has no opponent. In the case of *soro*, a situation whereby a contestant has no opponent usually constitutes a *fiyetedo*'s initial bout in which he contests in order to prove to his would be wife, in-laws and the whole community that he is ready and courageous enough to take care of himself, his family and his livestock whilst maintaining the harsh lifestyle of a nomad. In this instance, the *fiyetedo* stands on one fixed spot and receives an agreed number of strokes from the *fiyowo* who must be a boy from his peer group but not a friend or relative in order for the test of courage to be deemed fairly administered by all. On the other hand, if a competitor is engaging in a contest involving both himself and a direct opponent whereby the physically damaging force inflicted is expected to be replied to on the spot in the same bout, such as is the case for *dambe*, boxing, *purring* and in some circumstances *soro* involving an experienced *fiyetedo*, usually a winner is expected. However, if the contest results in neither of the contestants being able to successfully 'knock-out' their opponent and the contest becomes long drawn out, then a draw could be declared, in which case a re-match may be arranged to find an undisputed winner.

Conclusion

From my analysis of *soro*, I depict an event that embodies the following features: a performance that is unique; that is engaged in by the performers voluntarily for the advantage of a successful contest such as to prove his courage, to prove his superior ability to contain or endure pain; that is audience-orientated and therefore a form of entertainment; that involves action that constitutes a physically damaging force when dealt on the body of the *fiyetedo*; and that takes place within clearly defined and agreed performative boundaries, whereby participants can publicly exhibit their various capabilities and capacities to withstand, contain, suppress and disguise the pain generated from a physically dealt damaging force to the body.

Bravery and courage are required by a Jafun Fulbe ladde *fiyetedo* in order to endure the vicious nature of the strikes dealt by the *fiyowo* without displaying any visible signs that could be interpreted as weakness or pain. In examining the quality of the *fiyowo*'s actions, (specifically the strike delivered to the *fiyetedo*), which he is encouraged within *soro* rules to apply with as much ferocity as possible to specified areas of the *fiyetedo*'s bare chest and back, I have concluded that *soro* can most suitably be defined as a 'vicious performance'.

In looking at the context of and the rationality in engaging in vicious performances from a cultural perspective, I wish to highlight an aspect of the Jafun Fulbe ladde cultural philosophy which captures the conceptualization of their choice for engaging in *soro*, despite the fact that those who engage as a *fiyetedo* risk physical injury and pain. There is a proverb that the Jafun Fulbe ladde commonly cite which captures and expresses their cultural philosophy as embodied in their *pulaaku*: '*Pullo nastan waadde, nastataa luumo semteende*,' which means: 'It is better to die than be shamed' (Harande personal interview, 2007). A literal translation of this proverb is: 'A *Pullo* [singular for Fulbe] will enter the market of death, but will not enter the market of shame.' The word *luumo* (market) in the context of this proverb symbolizes the public domain. Consequently, this proverb can be defined in the following way: 'A *Pullo* would rather engage in activities which are risky or dangerous or that could result in death in order to prove his *ngorgu* (bravery) than shy away from them, and thereby run the risk of reducing his *semteende*' (*semteende* being the *pulaaku* attribute that defines an individual's sense of shame). A Jafun Fulbe ladde boy thus chooses to endure the pain from the whiplashes in his initial *soro* bout experience in order to fulfil his rite-of-passage from 'boy' to 'man' so as to avoid the shame of being labelled a coward by his male peers, the girls and women of his community and the elders of his

clan as this would incite the people of his community to suggest that he is not really a true Jafun Fulbe ladde, indicated in such remarks as '*pulaaku walaa*' (there is no *pulaaku*).

Notes

- ¹ In this study I will use the name Fulani which the Hausa employ when referring to the Fulbe (plural) and Pulo (singular). The Hausa also refer to the Fulbe by the name *Bafilatani* (meaning a Fulani person). The Fulbe are found throughout the arid fringes of West Africa, 'stretching from the Senegal valley to the shores of Lake Chad' (Adebayo, 1991: 1), where they are 'variously called Fellani, Fillani, Fulani, Fellata, Fulahs, Fulas, Peulhs, Peuls, or Pouls' (Brackenbury, 1915: 70). 'Fulbe ladde' means nomadic Fulbe.
- ² *Soro* (the Fulfulde name) is also called *sharo* (its Hausa name), or *sorro* (a version of its Fulfulde name as pronounced in parts of Cameroon and parts of Adamawa in Nigeria), or *shadi* (as it is called in parts of north-east Nigeria) or *shero* (in the middle-belt states of Nasarawa and Plateau). In this study, I am adopting the Fulfulde name *soro* because my main focus will be on this performance as a Fulbe tradition

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