

03

Symbols and metaphors in
the life of a Tarok girl from
birth to early marriage

03

Symbols and metaphors in the life of a Tarok girl from birth to early marriage

Selbut R. Longtau

1 Introduction

The Tarok people live in Langtang-North, Langtang-South and Wase Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Plateau State, in central Nigeria. They also live in large numbers in all the contiguous LGAs of Plateau, Taraba and Nasarawa states.¹ A slice of how the life of a maturing Tarok

girl played out until she becomes a young married woman is subjected to a close look. Interpretations of the symbols and metaphors connected with that life are proffered. Many of the symbols can be studied *in situ* but some are cited here only for their historical value. A semantic analysis is undertaken for each Tarok terminology of the symbols in their present

¹ Tarok population in 2006 was estimated at about 400,000 based on populations of electoral wards according to the Federal Republic of Nigeria: Legal Notice on the Publication of the Details of the Breakdown of the National and State Provisional Totals of 2006 Census. Official Gazette, 2006, 24 (94): B176-98. The estimate took cognisance of the Tarok population in Wase LGA and Diaspora.

cultural settings. In the hill enclaves traditional Tarok life is still the norm of a sort. However, it is under severe threat but not completely replaced by modernity.

Fitzpatrick (1910: 35) who was considered the official ethnographer of the colonial office of northern Nigeria in that era provided this rather inaccurate information on Tarok marriage that warrants a paper like this one:

Some of the Yergum² have a more informal method or procedure. A youth suggests marriage to a girl. If she agrees to the proposal, the youth kills a chicken, and taking this and his bed (a mat), goes in the evening to the compound of the girl's father. He gives the chicken to her mother, and is presented to her father, who shows him to a hut within the compound, where he places his mat. He and the girl pass the night there. In the morning the lad returns to his father's compound, leaving his mat where he slept. He spends the night at the house of the girl as and when he likes, and, at the end of four months, either marries her, or leaves her. A child born out of wedlock is regarded as being the property of the mother's father.³

A complete and formal Tarok ethnography has remained non-existent. The colonial sources as Temple & Temple (1919) and Meek (1925) are not only unprofessional but shallow. Some aspects of Tarok social life are mentioned in Famwang (1980, 1999), Dashe (1999), Galam (1999) and Longtau (1999). They provide some useful information on Tarok marriage systems, childcare and burial rites. However, none employed any



formal ethnographical methodology. Shagaya (2005) is a huge work but it lacks ethnographical depth since it is expected to be a history. Lamle (2010) is an ethnography on Tarok that covers only joking relationships and laughter as a conflict management tool. This paper is a transition compilation meant to fill only the lacunae that exist in the understanding of symbols and metaphors associated with the life of a Tarok girl from birth to early marriage. Our approach is also not according to any formal theory but an outcome of experiences and observations by a member of the community.⁴ Moreover, a further aim is to provide descriptive data that may inform comparative work. Therefore, our references are Tarok-centric on purpose.

2 Symbols at birth

2.1 Placenta and umbilical cord burial site

The birth of a child in the Tarok society is an occasion for much joy even though it is not celebrated. It carries with it a sense of responsibility that the family and society are expected to fulfill. As soon as a child is born, the *agurum* 'placenta' is evacuated, the *agúl*⁵ 'umbilical cord' is cut and both are put in a pot and buried.

² Yergum and its variant of Yergam is a derogatory reference to the Tarok people.

³ Repudiating these generalizations at this point will be a diversion from the topic of this paper.

⁴ I have been a participant observatory and member of the Tarok community for over 65 years.

⁵ Tones are marked in the fashion: ´ for high, mid unmarked and ` for low as found in Longtau (1993).

The observance of this custom brings good luck. It is also a symbol that brings about corporeal connection to mother earth. This symbolism is to reinforce the love of maternal uncles and aunts. For a girl, the burial is done at the *nsim-nzhi* 'backyard' of her mother's quarters which is made up of a group of huts. For a boy the afterbirth and cord are buried at *anung-abwang* 'frontage', an open space leading to a fort like compound. This custom makes the baby a *bona fide* member of a family.

Apart from that meaning of the symbol, the pot marks the spot where contact can be made with her physical being by a medicine man in an event of sickness. That is the case when she cannot be physically present. The spiritual equivalence of this is the marking of burial sites in the same manner with pots. Libations can be poured at these sites throughout the life of the individual even in death as the herbalist would dictate.

The symbolism of the burial site of a baby boy is more prominent than that of a girl. It is a reference point in the life of a lad. He is taught that his progress in life is tied to an arrow that will be found at that site if his umbilical cord were to be exhumed. The arrow is expected from his maternal uncles. This symbolism is to reinforce the love of uncles and aunts on the mother side. An arrow is a symbolism for self-defense, security and a survivalist instinct for the defense of the land. The actual physical arrows and quiver of the man later in life are returned to his maternal uncles.

2.2 Earlobes straw

About eight days or so after birth, the ear lobe of a baby girl is pierced with a symbolic meaning apart from marking her as a girl.

A thread is fixed and the hole is treated with mahogany oil. After the proper healing of the wound, the thread is replaced with a broom straw (*igisàr*). This symbol reminds her that one day the straw will be replaced by a more permanent wooden ear piece (*akunchwáng*) at marriage. To many, marriage is expected to be the dream and pride of every Tarok girl.

2.3 Leather strip and leaf dresses

In those days of no dresses, her tiny body would be decorated with a strip of leather called *mpata* which also serves as a reminder that one day at puberty she would graduate to wearing leaves (*azang*) to cover only her buttocks. Only a married woman is permitted to wear fresh leaves to cover both her buttocks and frontal private parts. This preserve of married women was called *azang-apyâl* 'private parts' leaves'. In the case of a girl, its absence marked her as unmarried. The leather strip remained with the girl till she would start receiving courtship gifts from prospective suitors. After the nuptial night she becomes qualified to start wearing the frontal leaf 'dress' to mark that transition.

2.4 Courting/marriage symbols/metaphors

The occasion and place for courting and marriage in traditional Tarok society varies from area to area. However, the ultimate decision of who a girl will marry is her exclusive preserve. The process are playouts of a series of dramas that will be enacted by a legion of participants. Galam (1999: 13-25) is a useful outline:

One very interesting aspect of the Tarok culture as opposed to what obtains in most other

African traditions [sic] is the way a young lady chooses her life partner [...]. Factors that play major roles in the selection of a life partner by a young girl in the Tarok society include the right of the girl to make a decision on her own, peer and parental influences.

We shall look at the symbols and metaphors connected with her right to choose a husband.

2.4.1 Inter-village group dance

If her choice is at the inter-village communal dance called *ñkwòk*, it is a straightforward matter. Young men from one village will arrange the formal dance for the purpose of finding potential wives from another village. Dance steps, dexterity, mannerism and costumes of the male dancer are the determining factors of who a girl will marry. A good dancer can have more than one girl falling in love with him. During the dance, girls of the hosting village would stand aside to observe how the young men are performing. The dance ground is called *aginting*. The girls will join in one by one in front of the young man each has chosen as a potential suitor. She will remove parts of his costumes and drapes them, or his stick or dancing tail and so on. This is symbolic of her choice of a husband. At the close of the outing, the young men will go round to the homes of the girl or girls under the pretext of retrieving parts of their costumes, sticks and so on. This symbolic gesture marks the start of a relationship that may end up in marriage. The choice by the girl will be respected by her parents. However, if investigations by her parents will reveal any adverse findings on the young man and his family, she would

only be advised against marrying the man but the final decision rests with her.

2.4.2 Straw game

Relationship between a girl and boy can be started through a straw game. Boys from the same village or elsewhere would have been observing a girl reaching puberty and becoming a damsel who is matured enough for marriage. They would observe the kind of chores and responsibilities the mother has been delegating to her to execute. A young man who wants to start a relationship with such a girl would have been making advances and proposals to her. He may meet her returning from the stream carrying a pitcher. He would metaphorically say to her that he likes her beautiful pitcher. She would simply smile and go her way. Another young man may see her on a different occasion and say he likes her bangles, ear-straw, firewood load etc.

The news will be filtering out in the community about the proposals being made to the girl. In order not to allow potential suitors from other villages to snatch her away from them, the young men would hold an informal meeting and spy on her. Once they knew her movements, they would signal each other and would line up in wait for her. Each will hold a straw and stretch it out for her to grab as she passes by. If she doesn't fancy any of them, she will just pass without making any choice. The young man whose straw is picked would later follow her to the house. The acceptance of the straw marks the beginning of a relationship that may culminate into marriage. This choice is entirely the decision of the girl. This symbolic straw is called *avivik*.

2.4.3 Gifts after outing by the living dead called oRim

The living dead are the departed ancestors that continue to interact with the living descendants. Every cropping season, these entities observe a festival called *ikaka* 'festivals of ancestors'. They go round villages in a given region where their relatives live. They distribute blessings and goodwill to such loved ones. When they enter a house where a girl who has attained the age of marriage, she would be requested by the ancestors for her to inform them about which of the young men of the village she would like to marry. If she was not in a relationship, they would prod her to make a choice from among the young men in the village or neighbouring villages. She is expected to comply and not to disappoint them. The Tarok people believe that the ancestors care much about the welfare of their descendants.

A day after this matchmaking, the young man or his parents are expected to take gifts as trinkets, traditional beauty lotions and so on to the girl and her parents. The gifts are symbolic that the wishes of the ancestors have been honoured. If a girl should suggest the names of more than one man, she would be guided by her mother to make up her mind. In that way, gifts will be received from just one man. However, the potential suitor who is rejected will still provide a token to show that he is not hurt.

The above scenario can play out with girls and boys as young as six to nine years. In this case the major players are the mothers of the children. The gifts are tokens or symbols of pledges and commitments. For this age bracket, food items as beniseed, traditional cakes, meat etc. are the main gifts to prove that the family of the boy is capable of taking care of their poten-

tial wife. A formal declaration is made by the family of the young man that they are in-laws at the appropriate time. This is called *ñjing-nggyá* 'pledge to own up to courtship obligations'.

2.4.4 Symbolic engagement and in-lawship gifts of nggyá and igwàr

Courtship is a phase that suitors bring gifts upon gifts to a girl. Such are kept away by the mother of the girl until after a formal engagement. A suitor that was not finally selected by the girl may demand for a refund of all the gifts *iyám-nggyà* 'things for courtship', showered on the girl. A wise mother should store the gifts for likely refunds but a sensible potential in-law would take over the responsibility of all the refunds. So in the end the girl will always have surplus gifts.

The formal engagement gift that will permit a young man to meet up the obligations to in-laws is a symbolic gift called *atiba* 'tobacco'. This may be the literal chewing tobacco or roasted chicken. It is a symbol that has to do with hearing from the mouth of a girl who she wants to marry. The 'tobacco' seals a covenant between two families. Once the tobacco has been accepted from the hand of a suitor and symbolically chewed, she is expected not to bring another man to the parents as a suitor.

After the formal engagement, the young man and young men of his age group are supposed to work on the farm for about three consecutive cropping seasons. A symbolic crop that is cultivated every year is the *izhin* 'beniseed'. It is not only a critical practice in shifting cultivation but a symbol of fertility among the Tarok.

A further symbol in Tarok marriages is the *adír-abwà* 'bride price hoe'. The bridal hoe was a currency. The young man gives a set of 20-50

pieces each to the girl and uncle. It shows that the in-law will be able to take care of the girl. On the day she would elope with the young man to become a wife, she will drop her set of hoes in the courtship room. Once her absence is noticed, the mother would check that room to confirm her suspicion. That is in itself a symbolism.

2.4.5 Symbolic appeasement of family guardian spirits – iyám-bár

The adjoining walls of the Tarok house called *abar* are guarded by spirits. When a young man elopes with the girl, the security of the fortress is said to be breached. The young man would pay a fine of grains called *iyám-bár* for brewing beer to appease the guardian spirits. If not, calamity would befall the family and the girl may become barren.

2.4.6 Symbolic announcement of marriage through gift of a chicken – ìrugù

Early in the morning after the nuptial night, an emissary of the bridegroom will be sent with a slaughtered chicken, *ìrugù*, to his in-laws to formally inform them that their daughter is not missing. This is a symbolic wellbeing gift.

2.4.7 Symbolic homecoming of the bride – ntur-ùchà

Two weeks after the marriage festivities, the bride goes back to her parents in the company of her husband accompanied by a thank you gift called *ntur-ùchà* 'public revelation of the bride'. Hitherto she has been in seclusion. The gift is a slaughtered goat. From this point on the couple can freely have sexual intercourse and have children.

2.4.8 Symbolic significance of ntìmchir ceremonies

A married woman would stay with the parents for as long as the husband has not fulfilled all the marriage requirements called *igwar*. The children given birth to will belong to the parents of the girl on behalf of the maternal uncles. So, the earlier he completes the *igwar*, the cheaper it will be for him to redeem the children.

However, a mutual agreement can be struck by the couple for the wife to move to her matrimonial home before *igwar* may be completed. The movement is called *ntìmchir* (derived from *ntìp achir* 'setting up the hearth'). In the ceremony two symbolic meals are prepared by the bride *uchàdāp*.

In her first evening in her matrimonial home, she will prepare a tasteless meal called *akiri-adalkàn* (tasteless draw soup) for her husband, in-laws and neighbours. This symbolically marks the last time they would eat such a tasteless meal as long as she remains in the family. The next day she will spend the whole day preparing delicious dishes *akiri nggòl* (delicious soup) to entertain her husband, in-laws and neighbours. This is to symbolically announce to them that as long as she remains in the house, the meals will be delicious.

2.4.9 Symbolic significance of the courting room – ìjini

The Tarok houses have a courting-hut called *ìjini* in the quarters of each wife. This is where the girl would meet privately with a suitor. The door is an empty space and it faces the room of the mother. The floor has only *ndàkal'* 'a mat' for the man to sit on. There is also a short stool

itok in the room for the girl to sit. This kind of architecture promotes high moral standards. The stool is the most symbolic of the scanty furnishings in the courting room. It is a weapon of defence she is free to use should the man be tempted to have carnal knowledge of her. Sexual relationship before marriage is a taboo. Therefore, the figure of speech that announces the death of an elder as him lying in the courting room is apt. The suitor must exercise self-control as a corpse that has no feelings.

2.4.10 Gifts of children to a father –*nà-ikùr*

Authority over the control of children and all the benefits children can bring to a family is the exclusive preserve of the maternal uncles of the children and not their father. However, if a father desires to redeem his male children he will negotiate that with the maternal uncles. Payment is made in goats to redeem the children. This applies only to male children. However, a token and show of love for harmonious relationship with in-laws is through a symbolic gesture on the part of the representative of the maternal uncles. He is expected to give a relief to the father not to pay a ransom for one male children and not to collect the bride price on one female. This custom is called *nà-ikuè* 'giving out sorghum'. This symbol is to bless the in-law with sorghum which the Tarok take as the means of sustenance.

2.5 Babysitter

Babysitting amongst the Tarok is both physical and symbolic. A young wife who has formally moved into her matrimonial home in the process called *ntim-achir* 'setting up the hearth

stone' is usually accompanied by a young girl. She is called a babysitter (*ùyèn ùgà òkpán ùyèn*), who will take care of the children of her sister. It is a phase in the life of a girl which is the bedrock for her informal education. Dashe (1999: 39-40) is a summary:

A stage in child training and upbringing is between 8 and 12 months. Her assistance as a babysitter is employed in helping her mother in teaching the baby how to sit, crawl and walk. This is to allow the mother to attend to other chores. In training a child, it is not only the parents of a child who are involved, but the entire family and the entire community. Female children are taught by their mothers how to do women's work, while the male are taught by their fathers how to do men's work. Boys are taught activities as building, thatching, hunting and farming.

A female child's training starts at the age of two as children play together and learn what their parents do, e.g. cooking, fetching water, keeping the house neat, carrying babies on their backs, etc. At the age of five the girl is expected to be able to fetch water from the stream. From the age of 10 years the girl is expected to know how make to fire to prepare food for the little ones at home in the daytime when the parents when parents are out for farm work.

At this stage, she can start going out to look for cornstalk and firewood on her own. She can grind guinea corn in quantities commensurate to her age. She is also engaged in pounding and grinding corn for preparation of gruel for family consumption. It is her duty to give young people warm first thing in the morning to brush up. The girl will sweep the kitchen

and the outside. She will wash the hearth pots to shine as if they have been polished with oil. She takes utensils like dirty calabashes to the river or the washing place. They are properly dried on the wooden dish rack. It is wrong in Tarok land for people to be served food or drink in dirty or wet utensils. She lights fire for preparation between 4-6 pm. A late dinner is not a disgrace to a woman.

Apart from the virtues of informal training, a babysitter from the maternal home of a young wife is a psychological support to her because she has someone from 'home' to relate with in a new environment. The girl will not feel lonely because as they participate in the early morning chores, her sister would celebrate their relatives in songs and historical narratives. Invariably the babysitter is revered as a diplomat of a sort.

3 Conclusion

The above discussion is far from being a treatise on Tarok marriage system. The symbols and metaphors reveal that the language encodes a rich way of life including customs and taboos. The traditional way of life is still practised by the Tarok people who occupy the hill enclaves of the homeland. Weddings in the churches cannot be done until all the traditional requirements have been carried out.

References

- Dashe, Salome C. 1999. Child training and upbringing. In Albert Lohkap Lannap (ed.), *The Tarok Woman*, pp. 38–44. Jos: University Press.
- Galam, Lami. 1999. Courtship and marriage. In Albert Lohkap Lannap (ed.), *The Tarok Woman*, pp. 13–26. Jos: University Press.
- Famwang, Wilson V. 1980 [1978]. *The Tarok Culture*. Jos: Crossroads Publications.
- Famwang, Wilson V. 1999. Social organisation of the Tarok. In Albert Lohkap Lannap (ed.), *The Tarok Woman*, pp. 45–77. Jos: University Press.
- Fitzpatrick, Joseph Frederick John. 1910. Some notes on the Kwolla District and its tribes. *Journal of the Royal African Society* 10.37: 16–52.
- Lamle, Elias N. 2010. *Laughter and Conflict: Joking Relationships and Conflict Mediation in Nigeria: A Case Study of Funyallang in Tarok Land*. Universiteit Leuven: PhD dissertation.
- Longtau, Selbut R. 1999. Tarok funeral rites. In Albert Lohkap Lannap (ed.), *The Tarok Woman*, pp. 118–132. Jos: University Press.
- Meek, Charles Kingsley. 1925. *The Northern Tribes of Nigeria, an Ethnographical Account of the Northern Provinces*. 2 Volumes. London: Oxford University Press.
- Temple, Olive & Clive Temple. 1919. *Notes on the Tribes, Emirates and States of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*. Cape Town: CMS.
- Shagaya, John. 2005. *Tarok History: A Publication on the Historical Development of the Tarok Society*. Ibadan: Daybis Ltd.

