

# Not Quite Child's Play: Riddles in African Orature

Helen Nde

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# What is an African Riddle?

“Riddles are mystifying, misleading, or puzzling statements or questions expressed as a problem to be solved or guessed.”

Merriam-Webster Definition

The riddle in Africa is defined as a unit of discourse externally distributed within a matrix of longer discourse introduced by a verbal formula, and internally composed of two speech units with shared semantic features and therefore a common application.

Lyndon Harries

In a general way ‘riddles’ are readily distinguishable by their question-and-answer form and by their brevity. However, a preliminary point must be made here. The popular European or American picture of a riddle is of an explicit *question* to which a respondent must try to puzzle out the correct answer. African riddles are not altogether like this. The ‘question’ is usually not an interrogative at all in form but, outwardly at least, is a statement.<sup>3</sup> An answer is expected but very often the listeners are not directly asked to guess but merely faced with an allusive sentence referring analogously to something else, which they must then try to identify. The point, furthermore, is normally in some play of images, visual, acoustic, or situational, rather than, as in many English riddles, in puns or plays on words.

Ruth Finnegan

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# Structure and Form of Types of African Riddles

# Structure and Form

## The Opening Formula

- The opening formula is a “verbal expression of the intention to pose a riddle” to which a standard response is often given.
- Establishes the contextual situation for the riddle exchange.
- Opening formulae are different from the introductory frame of the riddle.
  - Can be omitted without affecting the riddle itself.

# Structure and Form

## The Opening Formula

- Opening Formulae are almost universally found in riddles across the African continent and so are considered a defining feature of riddles from the continent.

# Structure and Form

## The Opening Formula

People	Country	Opening Formula	Meaning	Response	Meaning
Makua	Mozambique, Tanzania	Cirandani	Refers to a trap	Civire	Let it pass
Mwera	Tanzania	Nda	Short for Ndawi which means "Riddle!"	Ndakacile	A contracted form of Ndawi lkaicile which means "Let the riddle reach!"
Nandi	Congo	Tutsuke Esyondekerano	Let us pose riddles	Inga	Very well
Nyika	Kenya	Chondoni	NA	Dekeha	NA
Mbeere	Kenya	Gwata ndai	Catch this riddle	Nagwata	I have caught it
Igbo	Nigeria	Gwam Gwam Gwam!	Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!	Koazian na nti ghere oghe	Say it! We are listening!

# Structure and Form

## The Opening Formula

People	Country	Opening Formula	Meaning	Response	Meaning
Lamba	Zambia	Tyo	Guess the Riddle	Ke kesa or Ka mu leta	Let it come or Bring it
Yoruba	Nigeria	Aloooo (in a high key)	"Riddle!" Yoruba riddles are called Alo	Aloooo (in a low key)	"Riddle!"
Anang	Nigeria	Ekan nke!	Listen to us!	Ekan nke Abassi	"Listen to us who have gone to war at God's Command!"
Mano	Liberia	Bakiline	NA	Laile	NA
Gio	Liberia	Kpwole	NA	Le	NA
Kxatla	South Africa	Mpollele dilo, ompolelle gore...keeng?	"Tell me something, tell me what it is?"		
Lozi	South Africa	Ako	NA	Keye	NA



# Structure and Form

## Binary Construction

### Precedent (P)

A question or statement



### Sequent (S)

A response to **P** which can be an object, a phenomenon, a statement e.g. proverb etc

- Harries, Lyndon. "The riddle in Africa." *The Journal of American Folklore* 84.334 (1971): 377-393
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# Structure and Form

## Binary Construction

- Binary construction can take on elaborate sub forms such as the system of symbols devised by William Bassomb for Yoruba Riddles in which:
  - X is the unknown to be guessed.
  - Y and Z are other subjects.
  - a, b, c, and d are the predicates of sentences or clauses.

# Structure and Form

## Binary Construction

- Riddle structure: “Who is **X** that **a**?”

**P**: Who is it that drinks maize beer with the king?”

**S**: *A fly*

- Riddle structure: “**X** that **Ya**, **Za**, **Xb**”

**P**: Road that the people of the earth do not walk along, that the people of the sky do not walk along; smoothly is it shining.”

**S**: *The mid rib of a palm frond*

# Structure and Form

## Binary Construction

- Riddle Structure: X, X, YaX Xb, ZaX Xb
- P: Ancient well of my father, ancient well of my father; if a child gets into it, it reaches his neck; if an elder gets into it, it reaches his neck.
- S: *A Gown*

# Structure and Form

## Binary Construction

- Riddle Structure: They tell **X** to a, **Xa**; they tell **X** to b, **Xb**; they tell **X** to c, **Xd**.

**P**: They tell him to sit by the fire, he sits by the fire; they tell him to sit in the sun, he sits in the sun; they tell him to bathe, he says, "Death comes".

**S**: *Salt*

# Structure and Form

## Semantic Fit Between P and S

- Semantic Fit refers to the logical or language framework in which the **Precedent** relates to **Sequent**.
- In the riddling tradition of many African peoples, semantic fit depends not only on analogies of meaning or imagery but also of rhythm, sound, or tone.

# Structure and Form

Semantic Fit Between P and S - Rhythm

- A rhythm-based Thonga (Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland) riddle goes:

P: Over there smoke goes up, over there smoke goes up.

S: Over there they mourn over a chief, over there they mourn over a poor man.

# Structure and Form

Semantic Fit Between P and S - Sound

- Sound-based riddles rely on acoustic images like onomatopoeia and ideophones. For e.g. a Kamba (Kenya) riddle simply states:

P: Aaa!

S: An old man drinking milk in the dry season.



# Structure and Form

## Semantic Fit Between P and S - Tone

- Tone-based riddles are common among people in whose language tonality is a significant feature. In such cases, the question and answer are marked by identical or similar tonal pattern.
- The Efik (Nigeria), call their tone riddles Ukabadeke which means “speech/word change”.

# Structure and Form

## Semantic Fit Between P and S - Tone

33. Q. nsó ínyenē mbókòk óko  
who shakes sugarcane that?

\*R. nsó ítiē nte eka ówo  
who is like mother of person?

A proverb meaning a man's best friend is his mother. If a servant says the query to his employer it informs the employer the servant is unhappy with the treatment he receives.

76. Q. éyop émi adade iba enyé ádá itá  
palm tree which stands two it stands three

R. ékpe émi ókímdé uka enyé ókím usó  
leopard which slashes your mother it slashes your father

# Structure and Form

## Exchange Formula

- Response given if the answer (**Sequent**) provided is wrong or not known.
- Among the Mbeere (Kenya), the Exchange Formula, if the response is wrong, is: Rete mburi (also Inde mburi, Ikia mburi) which means “Bring Goats”.
- The riddling partner responds: Cukia Mburi which means “Take Goats”.
- The riddler accepts and blesses the goats before sharing the answer.

# Structure and Form

## Exchange Formula

- A: *Aanake aakwa mateng'eranite*  
male youths my they are running after each other  
My young men are running after each other but they  
*na mateng'igwatana.*  
and they cannot catch each other  
cannot catch each other.
- B: *Kiruru.*  
shadow  
A shadow.
- A: *Ikia mburi.*  
bring goats  
Bring goats.
- B: *Ni miruri ya riua?*  
is rays of sun  
Are they the rays of the sun?
- A: *Ikia mburi*  
bring goats  
Bring goats.

# Structure and Form

## Exchange Formula

In several societies of Bantu Africa, including the Venda, Tlokwa, Kxatla, Zezuru, and Kalanga, metaphors of buying or exchange are connected with riddling. Typically, in these groups, one participant metaphorically “buys” the answer to a riddle he cannot solve by posing another insoluble riddle; then, when the first riddler is stumped by a riddle from his antagonist, the first answer is given, as if bartered for. The first riddler then obtains the answer to the second riddler’s insoluble riddle only by posing another insoluble riddle. In this kind of reciprocal exchange, one wins the answer to a riddle through bartering another insoluble riddle. For the Mbeere, however, as for the Nyanja and Taveta,

# Types of African Riddles

- There is no one agreed upon way to classify African riddles.
- Categories based on the information contained in either the **Precedent** or the **Sequent** are used to classify riddles e.g., comparisons and references to animals, plant, household items, body parts, natural phenomena, indigenous culture, etc.

# Types of African Riddles

- This can pose a challenge to African riddles since the **Precedent** and **Sequent** are not always classifiable objects or phenomena.
- Often, they are statements which could be related or mutually contradictory, incongruous or impossible e.g. Efik tone riddles.

# Them's Fightin' Words Prof. Finnegan!

...minor and childish  
interest...?

It may be surprising to find riddles included in a survey of oral literature. However, riddles in Africa have regularly been considered to be a type of art form, albeit often of minor and childish interest, and have long been included in studies of oral literature. There is some reason for this. As will be seen, riddles often involve metaphorical or poetic comment. This indeed was pointed out long ago by Aristotle when he remarked on the close relation of riddles to metaphorical expression (*Rhetoric* iii.2 (1405b)).<sup>1</sup>



# Uses of African Riddles - Didactic Tool

# Didactic Tool

“[Riddles equip] children with the cognitive processes needed to make sense of their immediate environment.”

- Stanley Madonsela

“Riddles are teaching tools which facilitate children's education and participation in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of their communities.”

- Johnson M. Ishengoma

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- Madonsela, Stanley. "Riddles, meanings and cognitive development of the African child in the siSwati tradition." *African Journal of Rhetoric* 12.1 (2020): 44-64.

## O-Kukoikya

- Among the Haya of Tanzania riddles are called “E-kikoikyo” and riddling activity is referred to as “O-kukoikya”.
- O-kukoikya was mediated mainly by women and so this was a way by which women contributed to community knowledge and growth.

### *Riddling and story-telling among the Haya*

In traditional Haya society, mothers and grandmothers told stories and riddles to children and youths (6–14 years old). Riddling and story-telling usually took place together before supper, which was customarily taken between eight and ten o'clock in the evening. In traditional Haya society, members of the household were generally not allowed to have supper until the head of the household had returned from his evening stroll. As a result, the female adults passed time with riddles and story-telling, partly to keep children occupied and awake. Story-telling and riddling took place around a cooking hearth located in the innermost part of a Haya traditional grass-thatched round house, known as a *mushonge*.

# Didactic Tool

## O-Kukoikya

Riddles are used to:

- Promote appropriate social communication skills

- Riddlers start by saying **Koi** to which the participants respond **Lyaa**.
- The riddler cannot start without this response which establishes mutually respectful communication.

- Teach cultural norms and acceptable social behavior

- Nyamutaigutwa** (That which people are never contented with)
- **Malwa** (Beer)
  - **Maela** (Money)
  - **Itunga** (Wealth)

# Didactic Tool

## O-Kukoikya

Riddles are used to:

- Promote conceptualization and critical reasoning
- Teach comparison and contrast
- Distinguish between objects and phenomena
- Nurture mastery of Ki-haya (the Haya language).

**Obutabarwa** (That which cannot be counted)

- **Nyanyinyi** (Stars)
- **Maizi** (Water)
- **Binyomo** (Black Ants)
- **Bunyasi** (Grass)

# Didactic Tool

## O-Kukoikya

Riddles are used to:

- Teach about work ethic, agriculture and animal husbandry.

Akashaija butege kashanga nindima  
tikangiza mahyo (A small bow-legged  
man found me working on my farm  
but passed without saying Mayho)  
- A black ant.

Zatula zasiga omubisha ahanamire  
(The cows have gone to the pastures  
leaving behind their enemy hiding in  
the ceiling)  
- A Kilasho

# Didactic Tool

## O-Kukoikya

Riddles are used to:

- Educate about modern cultural and scientific developments.

Just as the content of riddles has changed to incorporate new objects and allow new interpretations in accordance with socio-economic, cultural, political, and technological changes, so, too, are new Haya riddles created to familiarize children with new objects and changes in culture. For instance: *Bibili bishushana – Pasi n'emeli* (Two identical objects – An iron and a ship); *Bibili bishushana – Kikere n'evoksiwajeni* (Two identical objects – A frog and a Volkswagen Beetle); *Kyandeba kyatendela – Picha* (It is gazing at me without blinking – A photograph); *Ayabaileo atazairwe – Adam* (The one who came into existence without being born – Adam) (this riddle incorporates the Biblical story of human creation); *Nkombeka enju yange mpango kyonka tegira idirisha – Iuli* (I built my big house but it has no window – An egg). (Prior to the arrival of Europeans in Hayaland, the Haya lived in windowless, round, grass-thatched houses. These houses were replaced a long time ago by modern houses with windows and roofs made of corrugated iron.)



# Didactic Tool

## O-Kukoikya

- Riddling sessions are age-appropriate venues for peer-led sex education.

### *Social rules governing riddling*

Certain riddles – especially those alluding to sexual organs – are not told when there are adult participants in the riddling session. The age and gender of participants are the most important criteria for which the riddler has to show consideration. Children below the age of fourteen, regardless of sex, are not allowed to tell riddles that allude to sexual organs. The purpose of this rule is to prevent young children from uttering obscene words and to protect them from moral decadence. There follow some examples of riddles that allude to sexual organs: *Ngila omushaija wange omoi ayegorola kabona ekyakulya – Mboro* (I have my man who stretches himself when he sees food – A penis); *Kyechunda kyeleta ekyo omugumba – Kigosi ky'omuhesi* (It swings back and forth, the huge thing of a barren man – The huge testicles of the blacksmith); *Emiziyo etera Mujagiso agenda nayo – Mboro n'amagosi* (Mujagiso always carries short small sticks which beat him – A penis and testicles); *Entobe tefunda murwabya – Mboro omu mana* (*Entobe* will always fit in the *rwabya* – A penis inside the vagina). '*Entobe*' is one of the several varieties of cooking banana. It is short and large compared to other varieties of cooking banana. A '*rwabya*' is a traditional food storage bag made of a type of tree bark. The bag is elastic and can hold many items.



## Uses of African Riddles - Entertainment

# Entertainment

## The Gbaya Sumgba

- Among the Gbaya (Cameroon, CAR), riddling sessions are called Sumgba and are a nonphysical way to “battle”.



# Entertainment

## The Gbaya Sumgba

Something of mine, they travel together from morning to evening, they never brush against each other.

I went to visit my in-laws, only the dead greeted me.

The Cameroon lion cub died on the battlefield.

Cows Horns

Dead Dry Leaves

Marc Vivien Foe

# Entertainment

## The Kikuyu Art of Gicandi

- A Gicandi is a competitive yet collaborative riddlelike dialogue poetic exchange.
- The term “Gicandi” refers both to the dialogue poetry and to the musical instrument that accompanies the performer.
- Different from the Ndai which is a Kikuyu riddle in the conventional sense.



A Gicandi (Photo Credit: Njenga Wa Muthaka)

## The Kikuyu Art of Gicandi

[Kang'ethe:]  
Ngwambĩrĩria mũnyoori ũkwĩnga  
Njookerere marũri a ngingo  
Ino nĩ njĩra ya agendi  
Na ĩno nĩ njĩra ya thaama

[Gĩtaũ:]  
Iĩ mĩthiru noguo  
Rĩĩrĩ rĩngĩ tũrĩ o nawe  
Cooka wĩgeithĩrie neeyo  
Ngeithi nĩ hĩrĩrĩ nyingĩ  
Kũrĩ ikĩgĩĩ kũrĩ irũngĩĩ

Kũrĩ ituramĩire iria ingĩ  
Reke nyumagarie ciothe  
Reke thathaũre ciothe  
Reke twambĩrĩrie wega.  
(1992: field notes)

[Kang'ethe:  
Is the child greeted so that I may greet it?  
Let me be told if he is not greeted

Gĩtaũ:  
Yes, loved one, the child is greeted, greet it  
If it is not greeted you'd be told  
So that sunset doesn't find you at the gĩcandĩ bag  
Where the mweethia seeds were kept

Kang'ethe:  
I'll start with the swinging chain  
Then I move to the neck decorations  
This is a public path  
And this is the way of migration

Gĩtaũ:  
Yes, that is the way it is  
I am still with you  
Greet through that one once more  
Greetings have many layers  
Some are horizontal some are vertical  
Some face each other  
Let me escort all of them  
Let me separate all of them  
Let us start properly.]



The late Gicandi poet Joseph Kang'ethe. (Photo Credit: Kimnani Njogu)

# Uses of African Riddles - Indigenous Cryptography



# Indigenous Cryptography

Nyamiyonga's Riddles from the Bunyoro-Kitara (Uganda)

The narrator says **Koikoi** and the listener responds **Rukwebe**.

## Nyamiyonga's Riddles:

1. That which proclaims the dawn.
2. The rope that binds water.
3. That which makes Isaza to turn to look behind.
4. One who knows no duty or responsibility.
5. The one who is devoid of understanding.
6. The door that shuts out poverty.

# Indigenous Cryptography

Nyamiyonga's Riddles from the Bunyoro-Kitara (Uganda)

## Kazana's Answers:

1. A crowing cock.
2. Dough made of millet flour mixed in boiling water.
3. A calf which utters a cry and thus caused the king to turn to look behind.
4. A dog which is was given a smoking pipe but just stared at it disinterestedly.
5. A baby placed on the Kings lap, where upon it scratched his face and wetted his clothes.
6. A request by Nyamiyonga for a blood pact.



# Indigenous Cryptography

Initiatory Language - Ikano of the Makua (Mozambique, Tanzania)

Song-riddles occur among the Makua (Harries 1942a), a form said to be unrecorded elsewhere in Africa (though see Raum 1940: 221 (Chaga); Ghilardi 1966: 183–5 (Kikuyu)). These riddles (*ikano*) differ from ordinary ones in that they are in the form of action songs accompanying a dance and have a didactic purpose closely connected with initiation rituals. An expert improviser leads the singing, and the solution of some of the song-riddles are known only to him; it is forbidden for initiates who have learnt these riddles to tell them to the non-initiated. Many of these song-riddles include sexual references or allusions to the initiation rituals. In 'The handle of the

# Indigenous Cryptography

Initiatory Language - Ikano of the Makua (Mozambique, Tanzania)

(3) R. *Akinotukela*<sup>1</sup> *mikopwe, kinooŵa anu-  
mwaninyu ukiloo.*<sup>2</sup>

I shall not unfasten my head-dress, I am  
afraid your mother will bewitch me.

A. *Ikoca.*

The *ikoca* tree.

In the girls' initiation rites (*ciputu*) each girl receives a coloured head-band made of beads, and various decorative pieces are fastened on the inside of this band giving the appearance of a coloured thorn-crown. The *ikoca* tree is thorny: The girls are forbidden to undo this head-dress until about a fortnight after coming out of the rites. As it is taken off it is forbidden for the girl to look at it; she must hand it to someone behind her. The reason for this is that it belongs to the old life to which the girl cannot return again. The head-band itself is called *ŋkuruco*.

# Indigenous Cryptography

Initiatory Language - Milayo of the Venda (South Africa, Zimbabwe)



Venda Boys and Girls Undergoing Initiation (Image Credit: *Dr Peter Magubane* from [southafrica.co.za/venda-initiation.html](http://southafrica.co.za/venda-initiation.html))



# Indigenous Cryptography

## Initiatory Language

How does a long and unexciting first frame of worship, such as Devotion, serve to induce trance or spirit possession? Data from Brazil and Africa help supply an answer. During the induction and training of mediums in the Brazilian Gege-Nago *candomble* cults in Bahia—which derive almost entirely from the Fon and Yoruba—anomalous speech and song, in the form of riddles and lined chants, act as catalysts to disorient neophytes during initiation. The disorientation makes it easier both to instruct the neophytes in the sacred and arcane lore they need to achieve spirit possession and to teach them how to control their behavior during the trance to conform to proper cultural patterns.<sup>36</sup> Verger suggests that a somnambu-

# **Riddles and Social Media (The Fine Art of Subtweeting)**

# Riddles and Social Media

Tell me without telling me...

- **Opening Formula**

“Tell me you are X without telling me you are X.  
I’ll go first...”

- **Binary Construction**

Precedent → Sequent

- **Semantic Fit**

Logical, Language, Visual (pictures, gifs, memes)

# Thank You!



**Mythological Africans**

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Questions? Comments?