Grammar of Loss

A Study in Liminal Linguistics

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First published 2026

ISBN: 9781041172383 (hbk)
ISBN: 9781041172376 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781003688662 (ebk)

Chapter 4

Ghosts

DOI: 10.4324/9781003688662-4

Open access publication was funded generously by the DFG / Leibniz Price.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

4 Ghosts

Open access publication was funded generously by the DFG.

Knowledge about language can be organized in different ways. A grammar, written in a certain academic style, for example, should start with a concise but short introduction explaining the whereabouts and whatabouts of the language it is about, and then it should offer a variety of chapters on phonology, morphology and syntax, arranged somewhat in this order. Other ways include structuring a multimodal archive according to various other criteria, such as in language documentation, while still others are based on the spatial organization and possession of linguistic knowledge.

In Pindiga, knowledge about Hone, its lexicon, structure and social semiotics was something not shared with a large group of people anymore. Most members of the younger generations, broadly those under fifty at the time, had not received any education in this language, its history and context from their parents and grandparents. Being estranged from the pre-existing social norms and values, as well as from the old religion, through Islamization and the effects of colonization, they were not considered capable of dealing with all the concealed powers of Hone and its spiritual momentum. Hone was theorized not only as part of an open, malleable, highly entangling repertoire, but also as the one language practice that stood out as containing cosmic powers, or rather as being a medium through which these could be released. Any youth no longer spiritually connected to it, many of the elderly hinted, would be a potential threat to the village and its inhabitants' safety. Thus, Hone fell out of use in Pindiga and the other villages and settlements around.

The situation was different for Muhammad and me. I had come with the assignment to produce a description of Hone that could be used by other linguists in Western academic institutions, and Muhammad Hamma Dada, a secondary school teacher with much interest in Indigenous philosophy and Jukun history, had been assigned by Alhaji Muhammad Seyoji Ahmad, then the Hakimi of Pindiga, to work with me. There was a forty-page wordlist that now fluttered in the wind and got coated with Harmattan dust and that needed to be filled in. In the beginning, it was interesting, as it helped us to understand word structures. But then the ball pen got clogged all the time from the fine dust, and the way the wordlist was structured was also incredibly boring. Consequently, we used every opportunity to get out and meet elders, visit sites of historical importance, and grasp the language by resonating with the world in which it existed. These forty pages took us more than

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two months, but at the same time, all those who knew the language and were able to decide whether we were entitled to any access to it or not found us satisfactorily engaged with its deep meanings and context, away from the wordlist. And thus, we were gently pushed into an epistemological space in which we engaged with Hone in different terms than the academic ones I had been used to before.

But there is more to this. Linguistic hospitality in a plurilingual society, and in a place filled with spirits and deep meanings, helps to create dense networks between people and all that is filled with life. Language thus didn't become conceivable only once a page of the wordlist was completed, or when someone told a story with a microphone properly placed in front of them, but at any moment we floated communicatively into and out of our counterparts, using our mimetic ability and our mirror neurons, our good manners and social knowledge. In these spaces and moments full of potential for wonder and amazement, there is no particular temptation to limit contingency, and the questionnaire and wordlist are not attractive after having understood all this.

The realization is that we don't usually act so rigidly, preferring instead to flow. The realization is that instead we offer one another refreshment when we meet, maybe a glass of water, and a greeting, of course. The realization is that instead of taking notes, we like to teach one another our names. The realization is that we smile and wink with eyes red with Harmattan dust as the day closes, and then we scare a chicken away from the mat and greet the elder passing by the house.

Áfóó!
'Hello!'

Áfóónɔ̀n!
'Hello to you!'

Ndɔ̄wù saansaan.
'You are very welcome.'

Ndɔ̄nɔ̀n saansaan. Yâwwà!
'You all are very welcome. Yes!'

ɔ̀gwám?
'You are strong?'

Láafiiyaa!
'Healthy!'

Ɔsaa náŋ bá àníyu?
'Do you feel tired?'

Àníyu bánɔ̀ŋ.
'Tiredness is not there'

Ákídɔ̄ŋ dɔ́gyì.
'God may guide us.'

Yâwwà, ákídɔ̄ŋ dɔ́gyì.
'Yes, God may guide us.'

Séí kíí!
'Until tomorrow morning.'

Séí kíí.
'Until tomorrow morning.'

Apart from a few words in the lists, these are the first lines I wrote in Hone. This is the beginning of all the notes and transcriptions and lists. I still find the greetings quite matter-of-fact, not as lavish as those in Hausa, for example. I learned a few variations from the constant encounters I had, such as morning greetings – *ɔzúù?* 'have you gotten up?' – and evening greetings – *ɔkùù ǹyínù?* 'how was the day?' (lit. 'you sun-downed?'), along with an honorific greeting, *Ákìdɔ́ŋ kǎŋwù rî!* 'may God protect you'.

What was more demanding was understanding the sociolinguistic context and pragmatics of these access rituals. Everyone greeted others or needed to be greeted, and yet there were certain situations when a person who was clearly visible and present should not be greeted. This was when taboos applied, such as when one encountered a man outside the village who was on the way to a toilet. Furthermore, the social hierarchies were difficult to figure out; as this was how I observed the behavior of others, I assumed that I should to greet older people first. But many elders saw this differently and treated me as a superior person in access rituals and other communicative events, clearly not as an unmarried woman (who would have a low status in the society) and also not as a junior person. I was constructed in most of these encounters as a colonial figure who had access to various privileges and already held a university degree (a Master of Arts) that would guarantee a smooth career.

The way in which I, a stranger who had only lived there for a short time, was dealt with was otherwise not very different from the way people dealt with other people who were recently arrived strangers in the village. There was an overwhelming amount of social interaction, as there was a lot to learn and also a certain amount of curiosity to satisfy. Muhammad said, after a few days or maybe weeks had passed, that I should visit his mother in her compound in the afternoon when she wasn't busy. She enjoyed daily visits, and I would learn the language much better. Her compound, a small mud house surrounded by a narrow clay wall, was nearby. "Tánú ke túlɔ̀k túlɔ̀k túlɔ̀k túlɔ̀k", Barunde had said up on the hill, 'these small, small, small, small houses'. She said I should sit on the mat: "Shíí gìní." "Zə̀n ke káá?" 'what is the name?', an elderly neighbor asked, and I said, "Zə̀nmɪy Annə" 'my name is Anne', and Aya Amina beamed with pride.

Encounters with Aya Amina and the other elderly women who spoke Hone well and therefore invited me to their places for some storytelling differed from what happened otherwise. Because these women, who would first don their best wrappers, blouses and headscarves and have us snap some pictures – quite an event before the advent of the smartphone – proceeded with their own agenda. All the stories I recorded during these afternoons, sitting on my mat and enjoying beautiful sunsets, were about ghosts. Later, that changed and people wanted to tell stories about their lives, speak about social problems or describe daily activities. But for now, as the setting sun was casting its amazing honey-colored light on the trees and compounds beneath it, I was told stories about ghosts. Later, in Mutuk and Digare – Hone villages south of Pindiga – women also spoke about supernatural phenomena, but also liked to tell trickster stories.

The situation in Pindiga, I think today, was special. Now, so many years later, I wonder whether there was something mimetic intended here, because the situation I was in did resemble, in many ways, the situation they had once been in when they,

as newlywed wives, had to leave their home villages and compounds in order to live with their husbands' extended families. In the beginning, this transition is also into liminality. The new family member is constantly observed, taught, talked to, and has to work quite hard. I was frequently referred to as *amarya*, 'bride' in Hausa, and was obviously conceived of as a person who was undergoing a similar phase of liminality, until she had settled into her new role and environment. Part of this experience of liminality, also as a linguist doing some kind of research, involves longer periods of steady exposure to others – responding to multiple invitations, storytelling events, market attractions (such as a Fulbe Sharo or a performance of a praise singer), as well as making visits, making notes and of course transcribing and translating – a lot of trans-performances and very little rest and sleep. A tired brain, of a new family member as well as of a new researcher, creates specters of its own, something dark that runs beside us while we are walking back to the house, and that is gone when we turn and look. It creates dreams, so intense sometimes that it is hard to know whether they are not actually real. And so I was given ghosts, every time, which today I think were a comment at least, maybe even an invitation to join the alliance of women migrating to and fro, with all these experiences of foreignness and exhaustion that are always also wonderful and fascinating, apart from being potentially difficult and painful at the same time.

The ghost was introduced right in the initial formula of the story, "àsʉ́ŋmíí gwààn zʉ̀ŋ, gwààn zʉ̀ŋ, gwààn zʉ̀ŋ, gwààn zʉ̀ŋ, màpàn kîy" 'my story kills one, kills one, kills one, and catches a ghost'. A more or less literal English translation would be 'my story is about nothing but a ghost', but the other version is nicer, I think, a bit like playing roulette. It had a deep meaning, though. The formula illustrated that the storyteller and her audience were surrounded by the invisible presences of ancestral spirits, gods, as well as other beings connected with the living through experienced relationships of the past. Not choosing a particular figure or remembered person for one's story would be tantamount to pushing them into oblivion, hence "killing" them. The invisible player caught instead would then become visible and audible, present to the senses, through the storyteller's body, which in turn acquired the function of a medium. The ghost as a topic of a story seemed to be fitting in many ways.

In many stories, however, the ghost appeared only after a while, and wasn't announced right in the beginning. In a tale told by Aya Amina, it was after she had killed all the family members of a poor boy. She was quite repetitive in her style in doing so:

> My story kills one, kills one, kills one, and catches a man and his wife and two children. A man and his wife and two children. Rain hits him, by God, rain hits him. The father goes to sow his millet. And he sows his millet. And stooped, he does his farm work. Stooped, he does his farm work and farms and farms and farms and farms. That's close to fate, close to fate. Then he sleeps, rain falls on him, and he goes on doing his farm work, stooped, doing his farm work, stooped, and farm and farm and farm and farm. Time went by and the millet grows, not yet being fully ripe. It stands bent by the ears, bent by the ears. He died, the father died, the father he died, the dying father.

> Remains the mother, and they are farming, they are farming. They are going to the field, and the mother is cutting leaves in the millet field. She is picking grass and cutting leaves in the millet field. When the millet is ripe, when the millet is ripe, the mother also dies. Did you hear, the mother also dies. It remains, it remains the two of them, the girl and her sibling, the children of the mother and the father, did you hear. The girl and the boy, they are, they are, they are in the field with the ripe millet and out of the field come birds. Birds come out and land on the platform, where the siblings were waiting to drive the birds away. They were waiting, they were waiting, they were waiting, that's it, they were waiting, like this. The elder sister also dies and the brother alone remains. The brother alone remains. The elder sister died and it remains him alone. When the morning breaks he doesn't find anything to eat, he will not be able to. He is weeping. Wherever he goes he is weeping. Wherever he goes, tears in his eyes, tears. His eyes are weeping tears, his eyes are weeping, his eyes are weeping tears. When he goes to the field and climbs on top of the platform, when he climbs on top of it –

And here the tone of the story changed. Lulled into uniformity, we were startled. Aya Amina, who was a wonderful storyteller and by no means boring, with an agile, expressive voice, suddenly became very loud and, with a strong gesture, went on in a different, almost shocking mood:

Kwaalaa	dɔ̀k	hɔ́ɽ̀ɽɽɽɽɽ.
Red bishops	get up	hɔ́ɽ̀ɽɽɽɽɽ

'Red bishops rise hɔ́ɽ̀ɽɽɽɽɽ.'

Kumááyak	tòb	nɔ́m	rí	kwaalaa	dɔ̀k	hɔ́ɽ̀ɽɽɽɽɽ.
when he go	platform	like this	actual	red bishops	get up	hɔ́ɽ̀ɽɽɽɽɽ

'When he climbs on the platform like this, red bishops get up hɔ́ɽ̀ɽɽɽɽɽ.'

Kudò	ní,	tòò.	Wòòòòò	kwaalaa	mɔ́n	tee.	Àkáyìkáyì!
He do	say	well	wòòòòò	red bishops	many	ground	Àkáyìkáyì

'He says, okay. Wòòòòò, red bishops fill the ground. Akayikayi! [sister's name]'

Wòòòòò	kwaalaa	mɔ́n	tee.	Àvúr	mɔ́n	dɔ̃ŋ	do,	kwaalaa
wòòòòò	red bishops	many	ground	earth	many	top	do	red bishops

mɔ́n	tee.	Àkáyìkáyì,	wòòòòò	kwaalaa	mɔ́n	tee,	àvúr
many	ground	Àkáyìkáyì	wòòòòò	red bishops	many	ground	earth

do	kwaalaa	mɔ́n	tee.
do	red bishops	many	ground

'Wòòòòò, red bishops fill the ground. The earth filled up, red bishops fill the ground. Akayikayi, wòòòòò red bishops fill the ground, the earth filled, red bishops fill the ground.'

Nní	ɔkaan	wòòòòò,	nní	ɔkaan	ŋwù	yáyi,	nní	ɔkaan
I say	you chase	wòòòòò	I say	you chase	child	my mum	I say	you chase

wòòòòò,	ŋwù	yáyi	ɔkaan	wòòòòò.	Mán	hùù?	Nmááyak	hwɔ̀abí
wòòòòò	child	my mum	you chase	wòòòòò	who	die	if I go	grave

mərkə̀ŋ	rí,	ŋwù	yáyi	m̀pər	zʊ̃ŋ.	Nmááyak	hwɔ̀abí
and return	actual	child	my mum	person	one	if I go	grave

kudopàn	sháni.
he do take	weeping

‘I said, you chased away wòòòòò, I said you chased away, child of my mother, I said you chased away wòòòòò, child of my mother you chased away wòòòòò. Who died? When I go to my grave and return, my brother is the only person. When I go to my grave he is weeping.’

ɔfúk	áy?	Tòò.	Shíhòw	ní	rízìn	rí	kə̀núúa,
You hear	eh	well	sister	the	is speaking	actual	it is his mouth

fá.
what about that

‘Did you listen? His sister is presently speaking from his mouth, what about that?’

And then, after this highly theatrical and dramatic part of the story, Aya Amina told us the sister returned into her grave, but came back the very next day. She found her brother weeping and now spoke to him instead of through him. She told him to come along to where she stayed and then:

ɔmááyak	pár	tə̀rí	rí,	pár	zʊ̃ŋ	tə̀rí	rí.	ɔyak	ɔdo
if you go	pot	is there	actual	pot	one	is there	actual	you go	you do

bòòwuu	yúú	kə̀rí.
your hand	inside	inside

‘If you go there is a pot, one pot is there. You go and put your hand inside.’

She took a snake and put it inside. He came, and putting his hand inside it, the snake bit him. He died himself.

A snake once more, and in a pot. The cup that I was given contained medicine against snakes. Here, the snake itself was right inside it. This is already quite remarkable. But before the snake is put in the pot, a ghost appears – and in a fairly terrifying way. This is the trace that I now want to pay attention to; this is where I think something that had been lost otherwise remained.

Time to take the old notebook out of the cardboard box once more and look at the text more closely.

At the time I transcribed and translated the text, back then, I could already distinguish the different words and forms and produce a neat translation of a short

story. The transcription on which the translation is based was reliable, since I had a good overview of the phonology and the tone system. But some words stand out and differ from the rest I had already been acquainted with – and they did so right from the start. These are the phonologically saliently marked words that occur when the ghost of the dead sister appears: *hə́rrrrrrr*, *wòòòòò*. Aya Amina's voice became louder and assumed a bit of growl when she uttered them, which was particularly dramatic, as her story up until this moment had moved like a slowly flowing stream. When I read it now, I think we were expected to float to and fro, move up and down with the waves, as everything, virtually everything, was repeated by the storyteller. A text full of siblings, phrases, and sentences that were twins, that appeared in pairs. At the same time, in this story of togetherness, everyone dies and all is lost, even the harvest of millet. At the moment when there was no one else to turn to anymore and the swinging to and fro – like in an ideal conversation – didn't make sense any longer, Aya Amina's voice appeared to explode, a roar of thunder, a sudden strike.

Hə́rrrrrrr, and then something happens. A flock of flaming-red birds – red bishops – lights up. What an image! Imagine the blue midday sky, and then this enormous mass of red birds, vivid and quick. Something magical happens here, but in very good style. Red is already a meaningful color, one that is frequently associated with witchcraft and other spiritually powerful phenomena. To me, this image has several moorings. Matthew Champion, in his book on *Medieval Graffiti* (2015), describes the wall of a Norman church. Originally, the now rather plain interiors of these churches were brightly colored. Engraved into this colorful splendor and on this utterly solid wall of stone were little ships, moving quickly and airily with their fully blown sails, like tiny birds. Ships as many as red bishops, one engraved after the other: "[T]his means that the pier in the south arcade [of Blakeney church] that is covered by graffiti, which we know from surviving pigment fragments was painted a deep red colour, would actually have looked like a fleet of little white ships sailing across a deep red ocean. We also know that those ships were created over a two- to three-hundred-year period; and that the earlier ones were still clearly visible when the later ones were created as they all respect the space of those around them, and don't normally cross over each other." (Champion 2015: 213–214). Magic, in good style.

In Aya Amina's story as well, magic lies in the way motifs are organized and similarity is made productive. Just as the composition of the tale itself is iconic in the whole of the first part, offering resemblances between style and content, gently moving to and fro, the abruptly performed ideophone *hə́rrrrrrr* is quite iconic, being used so disruptively, as well as in the sense of mimicking the sound of the fluttering birds. But this is not the only work that expressive language does.

Ideophones are an open word class, which is marked by several properties, particularly phonologically ones such as extra-long vowels or trills and nasals, which bear tone. Another formal characteristic of many ideophones is the syllable structure CVCVC, with a high-low falling, low-high rising or constantly high tone pattern. Their syntactic behavior is another distinctive feature, as illustrated in the sequences from Aya Amina's story. They either come after predicates or precede noun phrases, which distinguishes them from adverbs and adjectives, for example.

Moreover, they are lexical items that do not differ from other lexemes in how they form part of a conventual repertoire, that is, they are as established as other parts of the lexicon, such as verbs or numerals, and are not creatively invented on the spot, such as mimetic imitations of othered language, for example.

Semantically, ideophones in Hone, as in other languages, are best described as depictive of sensory imagery (Dingemanse 2011). Hence, rather than describing what something looks, sounds, smells or feels like, ideophones *depict* these sensory perceptions. As vivid sensory words and similar to onomatopoeic words, ideophones often mime meaning and reveal utterly iconic patterns. Examples from conversations and spontaneous collection in Pindiga are *pàp* 'boom!', *fwɪ̂ɪ̂ɪ́* 'sound of a car horn', *vɪ̀ɪ̂ɪ́ɪ́* 'sound of a motorbike at high speed', *zízɪ̀zɪ̀zɪ̀dɪ̀dɪ̀* 'pew pew (gunshots)' and *kɔ́lɔ́ŋkɔ́lɔ́ŋ* 'sound of a bicycle bell'. Mark Dingemanse (2019: 19), however, cautions us against reducing our definition of ideophones to their mimetic or iconic features: "Because ideophones are depictions first and foremost, they can invite us to experience a sense of iconicity (perceived resemblance) even when it may be hard to put a finger on the precise structural correspondences between form and meaning." This observation is of much relevance for Hone, where the majority of the ideophones documented in stories and notes from conversations and observations does indeed make it difficult to perceive a relationship between form and meaning. Instead, they use sound symbolic strategies and are often not transparent in the sensory imagery they depict to outsiders and less experienced speakers. Moreover, even though ideophones in Hone, like in a multitude of other languages, are used in a highly performative way, such as by playing with the theatrical voice, their semantics cannot simply be deduced from their form and pragmatics.

Ideophones exhibited certain constraints in their semantics in Hone. Many examples illustrate visual perception, which can highlight the external world as well as internalities, such as how one feels when experiencing a specific motion, for example. This makes a definition or compartmentalization of specific semantic groups of ideophones rather difficult. *Dúkúmdùkùm* 'short-legged', for example, depicted a person or animal with short legs – the visual perception of a state or static quality – but at the same time could be used to express the interiority of a short-legged person or animal when attempting to keep up with the pace of others, and could thus refer to potentially invisible concepts like feelings and thoughts. *Yúgúp* 'running under difficulties' illustrates a similar polysemic pattern.

Often, however, ideophones in tales and stories were used in order to depict visible motion, such as these examples:

cíbík	'fall of a (healthy) person'
gúrúp	'fall of a leprous person'
dààpdààp	'fast'
gɔ̀rɔ̀pgɔ̀rɔ̀p	'gallop'
kyɛ́pkyɛ́p	'be quick'
nyákàpnyákàp	'smack'
pɔ́mpɔ́m	'flutter'
dím	'fall down quickly'

Depictions of visible motion often saliently involved a depiction of sound, offering a glimpse into other possibilities of synesthesia than the ones just referred to, where exteriority and interiority could both be expressed. The fall into a well or the particular sound of closing the cover of a leather bag after putting something into it, for example, refers to motion as well as sound, but also to both exterior and interior aspects of the sensory experience:

ləblə̀blə̀blə̀b	'fall into the well'
tímm̀m̀m̀m̀	'fall into a deep well'
wàràp	'put in a leather bag'
bòlòmbòlòm	'dripping oil (much)'
bɔ̀tɔ̀lbɔ̀tɔ̀l	'dripping oil (little)'

Ideophones depicting static qualities were also related to vision, but at the same time to emotions, such as affection. They were used much more frequently than others and in everyday contexts, which illustrated the advantage of synesthesia. One could refer to normative concepts of beauty, for example, and at the same time offer information about what feelings beauty triggers in the beholder's mind:

dàwyáw	'beautiful, pretty'
màndál	'lovely' (referring to women)
sàndál	'handsome' (referring to men)
túlɔ̀k	'little, small'

The other large group of ideophones, besides those depicting visual sensory experiences of varying complexity, was the group of ideophones depicting sound. As the following examples of ingestion ideophones illustrate, they are just as colorful and complex, as they depict the sound of drinking and eating, as well as the motion associated with it, and of course, the interior phenomena, such as feelings (satisfaction) and change of state (emaciated to satiated):

gɔ́dɔ́k	'swallowing food'
nyaknyak	'drink water (animal)'
wùrwùr	'eat greedily'
lábàk	'slobber'

Other sound-depicting ideophones also expressed visual sensory experiences, such as a person standing still and motionless, like *kídàk* 'quiet', or the sound of flies that fly around lazily over a heap of trash in the morning sun, *dúúdùù* 'sound of flies buzzing'. Other examples are similarly rich in their multi-sensory connotations:

páták	'falling cow pats'
sháták	'sound of something wet'
shátáp	'sound of something wet'
yìráp	'improvising (music)'
ŋwùù	'gasping'

All of these words had the potential to trigger our imaginations and invite us to experience a situation we are not in and have not been in, but which we can imagine. They were performative and theatrical in themselves, as they could be employed in order to remove boundaries between speaker and audience, between reality and fantasy, as they always referred to both the perception of the exterior world and of the interiority of the mind.

Thus, the flaming-red birds in Aya Amina's story signified the presence of the ghost, but the ideophone *hə̀rrrrrrr* drew us, the audience, into the situation, so that we, too, could feel the excitement that the presence of the supernatural triggers. As Aya Amina continued, another ideophone was introduced, *wòòòòò*. It did not exhibit the transparency of iconicity of the previous one and referred to a different experience as well. It was not the storyteller or the audience who witnessed the presence of the ghost, deducing what was happening by watching the red bishops flutter excitedly, but the surviving boy who was now in focus. The perspective changed and so did the sensory experience. Instead of looking at the scene where something supernatural happened, we were now drawn closer; as the supernatural permeated the boy's body, we were made feel it, too. The word *wòòòòò* went through and through, expressing a different source of our knowledge, which was that of being taken over completely. The dead sister spoke through her brother's mouth, like spirits speaking and acting through a possessed person. And thus, *wòòòòò* expressed knowledge obtained through being the other for a moment, being in someone else's head. The ensuing excess of sensory imagery in this part of the story was also iconic, yet in a still different way. No soft swing between two conversation partners and no excitement while watching the impossible unfolding in front of our eyes, but fireworks from the neurons of two people who, for a brief moment, shared the same nervous system.

In another story, Aya Amina spoke about a ghost's egg, in a tongue-in-cheek, very deep performance of her reflection on foreignness (Storch 2025). She used ideophones abundantly in order to describe the ghost, the ghost's speech and its effects on the boy, who, in that story, had devoured the ghost's egg – the sensory perception of which was expressed as *bə̀rbə̀r*. The intense feeling of greed in which the Other was ingested and appropriated was depicted with *wùrwùr*. And finally, the ideophone that expressed the frightening state one is in once one hears the uncanny sound of an ingested ghost moving about in one's own body was *gə̀rgə̀rgə̀r*. It expressed both the sound of the Other and of one's own horrors.

In a story given by Laraba Maina from Kasan Dare, a forty-five-year-old accomplished singer and performer, a woman leaves her matrimonial home. The husband and his child (*tə̀vɔ́aa mə̀ŋ* 'not hers', as children of divorced mothers stayed in the patrilocal home) go after her. They walk through the bushland surrounding the village and, once away from the social control of the neighborhood, the father reveals his true identity as a ghost. While his quick stride is first referred to as *kyén* 'run', he suddenly moves *yúgúp* 'run with difficulty'. The ideophone here referred neither to the visual perception of someone moving with difficulties, nor to the person's inner state of exhaustion or pain, but – as an epistemic marker like the ones in Aya Amina's stories – to the presence of the supernatural that Laraba Maina, we, her audience and the child featuring in her story now experienced. The difference we

perceived in the walk of the father refers to a change in knowing about his real nature. Thus, upon realizing the ghost's presence, the child begins to sing:

> Husband of my mother, you are ugly. Husband of my mother, you are ugly beyond my capacity. Husband of my mother, I close my eyes. You folks standing there firmly, weaving someone's hair, you stare stunned at the husband of my mother. Husband of my mother, without a navel, ugly beyond belief.

So we know what a ghost looks like. On the tape, Laraba Maina is laughing, and so are we.

But there is more to that story than the mocking of the ridiculous man. That the revelation of true identity of the supernatural father occurs in the forest or bushland outside the village was no coincidence. This, like that of the ghost-father, is a frequent trope in stories from Pindiga and the villages around. The bushland between the village and the farms and grazing grounds surrounding it was a profoundly liminal space. One did not go in there unless one knew the way, but rather stayed on the road. It smelled there, as animals that had fallen dead might have been taken there; there was some rubbish too, and the bushland was also used as a toilet. Dogs roamed about, feeding on the trash and feces, thereby fulfilling their task as cleaners.

The different categories of trash need some clarification in order to make the concept of liminality productive. In Hone society (as well as in other Jukun communities; see Storch 2011a), bodily effluvia were taboo, and this taboo was gendered. Women (including me, the present author) used a convenient outhouse, did not even consider going to the toilet in the liminal bushland, and enjoyed a general indifference about whatever our bodies decided to exude. Female bodies were not constructed as potentially vulnerable, taboo and hence unspeakable, and they were relatively sovereign. In Jukun villages south of the Hone region, such as in Kona, where neither Islamization nor Christian proselytizing had been very effective in parts of the society, women controlled the reproductive powers of their bodies themselves. In Pindiga, having a child before marriage was not as common, but pre-marital sex was not treated as something completely improbable or undesirable for a woman. This was also reflected in stories shared by both men and women (of greater age). Trickster tales about the hare (clever), the other animals (dumb) and God (equally dumb), shared in delightful afternoon meetings, were rich in expressions for female genitalia and their excretions, as well as in descriptions of female sexual lust, as well as that of the hare. This contradicted old ethnographic sources, but nobody cared.

This attitude toward the female body also translated into ways of handling trash, related to its functions. An old oil barrel in front of the house I was staying in was used for disposing of all kinds of trash. Children found it interesting, as I would from time to time dispose of colorful empty bottles of shampoo that, I realized later, could always be reused, or worn-out flipflops that the children might have thought deserved a second chance. My used sanitary pads, wrapped in a leda

bag, were also examined. Not appearing useful, they got scattered all over the little road in front of the house. Nobody referred to this trash in any way, as no secret had been revealed, the secretions of the vagina being a frequent topic in stories and songs.

To me, the discomfiture that happened through the search and display of my delicate trash was not assuaged, but it also did not reveal any powers that the public secret is supposed to hold in store (Taussig 1999). This was completely different with regard to the male metabolism and excretion organs. In the pre-Islamic Hone society, male bodies were constructed as non-secreting closed bodies, and at the time I was there, many men would still be careful not to be seen urinating, for example.

The bodies of men resembled the bodies of the sacred kings and priests in terms of their vulnerability. They were associated with cosmic powers that female bodies only rarely possessed, for example, in the case of female priestesses in shrines previously located in villages in the region. These powers were attractive and consequently were likely to be attacked by witchcraft or other forces that were hard to control; those who held them thus needed protection. The sacred king was protected by a variety of taboos that affected his body – whom he was in contact with, by whom he was seen, touched or heard, the food he consumed and the words uttered in his presence (Storch 2011a, Harnischfeger 2015b) – as well as by members of the court. Male bodies outside the sacred realm of the former court were potentially prone to possessing the same cosmic powers, as all men, in contexts of crisis and political disruption, could in principle assume high positions in the court or establish new ruling dynasties. The idea that a man's body was in need of protection from magical powers was consequently an essential part of constructing men in general as potentially powerful in the context of dynamic frontier societies. Men's reluctance to use the outhouse, instead going to the bush between the village and its farmland to "pick flowers", "collect firewood" or "buy cigarettes", as was often declared, had its deep historical context, in spite of the quaintness it also had. Because the male body was a closed body without any metabolism, a miraculous body that ate but did not excrete, a body without genitals in spite of all the stories of the lusty hare, it was potentially sacred and powerful. The unspeakable penis and the impossible male toilet were therefore the inconceivable, invisible and yet overwhelmingly present proof of male power, both over other men and over women. Women, conversely, had sovereignty over the reproductive powers of their bodies, but were largely excluded from political power, from power in religious institutions, received less education (of whatever type) than men, and had very little economic power.

And this is why the bushland in Laraba Maina's story was not simply a liminal sphere where a man showed his real nature, which is that of a ghost, ugly beyond belief and without a navel – this reminder that men were once contained inside women and have to be born in order to exist, which is not relevant for a ghost. The bushland was also the space where the public secret of the cosmic powers of the men was located and where, at the same time, the very existence of this secret was proven. It was the location of the essence of power. Johannes Harnischfeger

(2015a: 44–45) puts this into the wider context of the Kororofa Empire and its spiritual capital, Wukari, seat of the sacred king:

> The Aku's court in Wukari was like the centre of a secret society. Nobody was allowed to reveal what he had heard or seen there (Meek 1931: 154, 340). Moreover, the court was organized in such a way that only the three most senior officials and a few personal attendants on the king were familiar with the full details of the daily rituals (Meek 1931: 154). Access to the royal enclosure was restricted to persons who observed the menstrual taboo and ate in seclusion. Jukun youth learnt to follow these rules with their initiation into manhood. As adult males, who kept themselves ritually pure, they were allowed to enter all shrines in Wukari, Kona and other settlements belonging to the ritual confederacy. Admission to these sacred places was also open to non-Jukun, provided they accepted the same rules. Of course, they could not expect to be initiated into the higher realms of esoteric knowledge, but they could profit from having confidential talks with the ruling groups of the kingdom, being allowed to sit in the fenced enclosures where Jukun men ate and communed with the spirits of the empire. Eating in seclusion was a means to guard secrets. The Jukun used it to surround themselves with an air of mystery and exclude strangers from their gatherings and deliberations. Elsewhere in Nigeria, it was not the whole adult male population but only the king who was so secretive about food. Kings differed from ordinary people in that they were sacred or even divine beings with spirit-like features. Their body was so charged with spiritual energy that they were often not allowed to touch the ground.

The cosmic powers of sacred kings, stranger-kings, or men who potentially could transform themselves into such beings was in its deepest nature a secret. How they had been bestowed upon a king and his predecessors and what their essence was, how they worked and so on, needed to be kept secret, as did all those things that happened in shrines, courts, sacred groves and so forth, because if there was no secret to protect these bodies and sites from our gazes and curiosity, all we would see, always, would simply be trees, buildings, ordinary men. Yet the secret must never be fully hidden, must never be a true secret, because then it would not be of any interest. The apocalyptic curtain has to be pulled back a bit at times, as the secret needs to be public, needs to flaunted right in front of everyone's eyes, so that we all know that there is indeed something about all that theatre of power, something terrible and overwhelming, as Michael Taussig (1999), in a reflection of Walter Benjamin's idea of the public secret, has eminently shown.

Then the curtain is drawn again. The fascinating thing here is that even after the shrines have all been destroyed and the court of the old king has fallen into ruins, the sites where the rubble remained, and the bushland where the smell of feces betrayed the assumed sacredness of the men's bodies, remained powerful spaces where the proof of the actual existence of the secret was laid bare. In the liminal

bushland, the true nature of the men became obvious. They defecated too, but the fact that we were not permitted to know this made these sites sacred. It might seem as if the public secret of the once omnipotent ruler was almost turned into a travesty here, as nothing but heaps of trash and the smell of feces seemed to remain. Yet the most powerful act was to precisely associate omnipotence with exactly that. Where I saw nothing but a neglected patch of unkempt vegetation filled with rubbish, the most unimportant-looking things testified to the existence of the supernatural. Shit can sometimes be seen as being more precious than gold, says my colleague, Fatou Cissé Kane, and the villages that look most neglected can be the ones most feared for the secret spiritual powers located in them – a motif amazingly empowering epistemologically, as demonstrated in texts such as Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021). The notion of "loss" here bears some interestingly ambiguous dimensions: it certainly denotes material loss, loss in the purest sense, through death and ruination, and yet it also invites life by asking us to move into those liminal spaces where the unlost presences remain, in the rubble and smell, and in-between categories.

In the ghost stories I was told in Pindiga, the liminal bushland was full of evidence of this reality. An adolescent girl went back home in the evening and saw a ghost quickly moving in the bush, *rə̀tə̀tə̀tə̀tə̀tə́*, with red eyes staring at the girl whenever he stood still for a brief moment. The girl then went through disruptive experiences, as did the siblings in Aya Amina's story. In another story, the perception of the trembling leaves, the shimmering light and the birds that flutter up in the bushland, with all its wind-blown garbage and spirits fluttering around as well, was translated by a storyteller with the ideophone *tɔ́ŵŵùù* 'be of large number'. Another ideophone that characterized ghosts in stories, but also in conversations, was *gúm̀m̀m̀*. It could also be used to depict the sensation of stench rising up, for example, when lifting the cover of a container with dirty, wet clothes inside.

Today, I think that these ideophones, which were among the languages I learned first in Pindiga, and which struck me like the flight of comets, bright and amazing, were a marvelous, artful way to express something that could no longer be expressed otherwise. They remind me of the opulence in Sergei Parajanov's films – likely the first thing one notices as being remarkable in his art. These comet-words remind me of shimmering brocades, golden brooches holding veils, embroidered gowns and deep red carpets with black, blue and ochre ornaments on them.

In a little museum dedicated to Parajanov's oeuvre, located in his house in Yerevan, there is, among a plethora of amazing works of art, a collage that shows the portraits of Parajanov and Tarkovsky. This relatively small collage is titled *Tarkovsky's Night Bird* (Figure 4.1). It dates from 1987, when Parajanov was mourning the untimely death of this fellow magician of the screen. Like most of Parajanov's artwork, this, too, is made of mundane matter. The museum is full of robes and kaftans he found in the rubbish, of installations, bricolages, collages, film props and sculptures that are made of trash. Broken things that he rearranged in a miraculous way so that something mysterious shimmers through, creating curiosity in the beholder to find out what might be inside these marvelous objects, as their essence.

Figure 4.1 Tarkovsky's *Night Bird*.

Creating art from trash had, of course, a political dimension. Parajanov had been persecuted by the Soviet state for his deep, reflected work that did not conform to the norms imposed on filmmakers and other artists. Moreover, his films, especially *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965), *Sayat Nova* (= *The Color of Pomegranates*) (1969) and *The Legend of Surami Fortress* (1985), were invitations to resonate with a world that was moored in complex time, with the past not being over and ghosts and stories unfolding their power over and over again. This was a dangerous message that had to be silenced. Parajanov was also persecuted for his sexuality, and was found guilty in several trials, for existing and creating and thus for posing a threat to the system. In the gulag, he continued to create his amazingly powerful art, from trash and whatever he could find there to work with. One of the most moving objects in the museum is the artwork *Thalers* (1977), a collection of golden coins made from foil lids into which he engraved, with his fingernails, the portraits of rulers and gods.

Yet the trash in Parajanov's work does not speak only about what is not supposed to be said. It also has a magical meaning. It is, like the fluttering red bishops in the liminal realm, a sign of the presence of ghosts, and like the rubbish in the bushland, a proof of the existence of a world in which otherwise invisible forces

of the past are present. In Levon Abrahamian's (2018: 24–25) commentary on the filmmaker's work as an artist, this is further elaborated:

> Transfiguration is another important aspect of Parajanov's art. […] "Tarkovsky's Night Bird" is the archetype of metamorphosis. At the time of the 1988 exhibition, Parajanov was still mourning Tarkovsky's recent death. A photo showing them together around a table was placed in an open box fixed against the wall, with a kerosene lamp (one of the two olfactory exhibits) installed in front of the photograph. A mysterious wooden bird flies towards the lamp. This three-dimensional bird is in rapport with two other birds, glued to the photograph as a background to the master bird in the front. The visit of these two enigmatic birds had a completely different meaning in 1987, when the collage was made. Tarkovsky's bird sat on his head, while Parajanov's settled on his chained hands. A similar chain with a big golden medal hung from Tarkovsky's neck. Obviously the birds were messengers of fate, always finding the chosen ones born under the lucky star. The wooden bird had forsaken the chosen one and become an omen of misfortune. With Parajanov, everything turns into something else, and the flickering flight of the birds of fate turns into a composition.

Everything that flies in a flickering fashion here continues to create life, in spite of oppression and destruction. Ideophones and the *Night Birds* – haven't they been overlooked in their capacities to exist across the lines of epistemological boundaries, as sheer transfigurations of time? My colleague and fellow wanderer, Nick Faraclas says that the explosions of unexpected creative elements in Parajanov's work, that invite us to co-create meaning with him, are very similar to ideophones. As if he had always suspected that, and then, in front of all that sacred rubbish – *tɔ̀wwùù*, does that explode!

The ruins on the hill remain as they are, and an old palace crumbles away in the savannah with a pomegranate tree in the midst of the old fortification wall, with fruits as large as pebbles. These Edgelands are places with a different kind of life, as well as interstices of the sacred and the secret that is the basis of power. Ideophones depicting, for a short moment, the exact location of this power resemble geomantic signs (Pogačnik 1989) that not only depict locations of power but are also believed to create life, in a connection with other signs and everything else we might want to consider.

In the liminal bushlands and ruins, language in its dialectic relationship with the world both shapes life and is shaped through its environment, which pulsates with life, whatever this may mean. And the colonization of everything there, the seismic trucks running over precious ancient rubble and the hole of the hare (who is indeed a rabbit), and all the violence against the words no longer to be heard has not yet extinguished the memory of what was once there. I think this is what Aya Amina and her neighbors also had in mind: having known what was happening, and having been aware of the ensuing destruction and ruination – not only of the fields, but also of the village's historical social fabric – they told me stories that caught disruption, desperation and death so that I, too, would understand.

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