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## Positioning Children in the Mélange of Theatrical Practices in Early Childhood Development in Kenya

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### **Abstract:**

*The Early Childhood Development (ECD) landscape in Kenya is endowed with theatre from multiple heritages. Yet, indigenous theatre remains relatively underrepresented in research, policy and practice in favour of dominant Euro-American discourses. Despite belonging to a cultural space, children may not practice theatre in exactly the same way as it is established in their cultures. Therefore, this paper considers children's artistic culture as a unique form within their specific cultural realities. The situation is exacerbated by the tendency to perceive theatrical activities in ECD using adult lenses with less regard for children's ways of knowing. The main objective of this paper is to explore children's theatrical culture as a significant legacy that deserves investigative inquiry rather than neglect and exclusion within their cultural heritages by analyzing theatrical practices at the disposal of children and caregivers from a sampled repertoire of ECD centres in Kenya. By engaging the critical lenses of postcolonial theory, the study interrogates the underrepresentation of children's artistic culture and the globalization of knowledge to conform to a single storyline yet children come from multiple heritages and contexts which deserve a share in global discourses. The findings reveal that children's theatre is a rich cultural aesthetic unique to children's ways of knowing and doing within their cultural realities which also warrant recognition in research, policy and practice. The findings also position children as creative and performing artists with the capacity to engage in age appropriate theatrical activities in their own right as children.*

**Keywords:** indigenous theatre, early childhood development, theatrical heritage

### **1. Introduction**

This paper draws on a study which engaged 1,110 children ages 3-6 and 78 caregivers from 33 sampled Early Childhood Development centres in Ugenya sub-county, Kenya in observation and focus group discussions (FGD) respectively. The participants were mainly from low socio-economic backgrounds in a rural environment where children engaged in age appropriate theatrical activities on their own or through the facilitation of the caregivers. Despite evidence posited by Swadener et al. (2000) that ECD practices are more successful when built around local knowledge, local ways of knowing and doing such as indigenous theatre remains relatively underutilized in the care ecology for young children in favour of the Euro-American storyline which dominates global discourses. This paper argues that the marginalization of local contexts not only leads to subjugating local knowledge systems such as indigenous theatre but also overlooks children as creative and performing artists within local contexts.

The globalization of knowledge to conform only to one storyline is perceived in this study as a gap because it risks applying one absolute standard of dramaturgy in theatre and homogenizing childhood. Marfo et al (2008) argue that not even the most remote village in sub-Saharan Africa is immune to Western notions and practices regarding childcare. The multiple effects of the mixing and integration of cultures according to Bhabha (1994) can range from having enriching effects to oppressive effects: a position that prompts this paper to interrogate the underrepresentation of indigenous theatre and children's artistic culture in ECD research, policy and practice.

Nsamenang' (2010) depicts Africa as having a mélange of ECD heritages derived from: indigenous cultures, Islamic Arab heritages, Western Christian colonialism and postcolonial rights based global child images. Apart from the four heritages above highlighted by Nsamenang' (2010) the findings reveal that children's artistic culture is a unique cultural aesthetic which also deserves recognition in global discourses. Therefore, this paper adds voice to Hovik (2001) who argues that: even though children belong to a cultural space, they may not engage in theatrical activities in exactly the same way as it is established in their cultures but in a way that is peculiar and unique to them as children. Hence the significance of highlighting children's ways of knowing and doing within their cultural realities.

Despite the fact that young children ages 3-6 who form the basis of this study depend on adults entirely for their survival, they do not always need the patronage of adults to engage in theatrical activities during play: Lester and Russel (2010). Consequently, Lester (2012), Hendy and Toon (2001) observe that the focus of research and practice is often based on adult ways of knowing and doing where adult lenses are engaged to measure children's theatrical activities. In view of this, Lester maintains that the adult yard stick

overlooks theatrical activities by children, taking them for granted as daily routine and pastime fancy instead of also being viewed on their artistic merit. Lester and Russel (2010) outline the different ways in which adults perceive children's play as ranging from ignoring, dismissing, dangerous, risky, subversive to being appropriated as a learning or socialization mechanism. This paper acknowledges children as artistic creators and practitioners in their own right as children whose ways of knowing and doing continuously deserve investigative inquiry. At the same time, this paper attaches significance to the role of adults in making theatre happen for young children hence, the inclusion of theatrical practices by children on their own and those facilitated by caregivers.

The place of indigenous theatre and children's artistic culture in ECD is further exacerbated by the tendency to read theatrical activities by children only in response to developmental milestones with less regard for the aesthetics of performance: Guss (2001). According to Guss defining children's theatrical activities more in relation to their child developmental values and social functions only, subdues its artistic merits and qualities and the uniqueness of children's artistic culture. The same concern is raised by Hendy and Toon (2001) to portray how drama is usually used to service other departments in formal learning environments instead of being strengthened to stand out as a unique artistic discipline. The study adds voice to the position by Hendy and Toon (2001) that the tendency to confine theatre arts under school departments such as English further diminishes its autonomy and significance as an art among children.

According to Finnegan (2005), most scholarly works focus on the analyses of literary works with less regard for the dynamics of performance which characterize indigenous theatre and children's play culture. The situation is further complicated by modern trends in the digital world which is biased towards Euro-American creations and the cultures of other technologically advanced nations. Viuru (2005) alludes to this in his argument by positing that children's play and theatrical activities that utilize the human context of character are further pushed to the periphery in ECD activities due to the culture of materialism where Euro- American driven multinational companies compete to manufacture toys and other play items thus limiting human interaction and interpersonal relationships which are the mainstream of theatre by increasing interaction with other objects which have economic implications. Viuru argues that the focus on materialism has led to the misinterpretation of 'learning by doing' to mean that children can only enjoy play when facilitated by technologically advanced and expensive physical equipment and material without leaning on the creative imagination which is an essential tool for theatre. Indigenous theatre which is a locally available and cost effective resource relying on the human context of character to deliver deserves further exploration to maximize on its potential in promoting children as creative and performing artists.

This paper argues that compromising the artistic creativity of children leads to the objectification of children as if they lack agency. Such a position has also led to the privileging of toys, television, films, computer games, outdoor swings and slides as major modes of enriching children's play and creative activities. The study does not however perceive digital play material as ineffectual except the privileging of these items at the expense of children's agency and creativity as performing artists.

Ukaegbu (2009) and Desai (1990) fault the dearth of data on indigenous theatre forms and practices from the African continent most of which are shaped by Euro-American literary theories and paradigms. According to Ukaegbu, such a situation has persisted over generations compounded by the fossilization of indigenous theatre as something of the past with no relevance for the present among children. Amid calls to view theatre in Africa outside a Euro-American or Western narrative, Ngugi (2012) and Nsamenang' (2010) suggest that this gap in global knowledge can be strengthened by theories and discourses grounded in local knowledge from diverse cultures focusing on performance dynamics within specific contexts.

## **2. The Uniqueness of Children's Theatrical Culture**

To deviate from the observance of exclusive standards of dramaturgy, this paper adds voice to Ngugi (2012), Ebrahim (2012) and Nsamenang' (2010) who posit that global knowledge should be informed from multiple cultures to capture the diversity and heterogeneity of world cultures. Therefore, children's ways of knowing and doing is distinguished in this paper as a unique and specific culture within the broader category of world cultures. Research evidence shows that children are also active agents in their own upbringing and have demonstrated their capacity to create, produce and perform age appropriate theatre activities both on their own or facilitated by adults: Lester (2012), Chilala (2008, 2003) and Nsamenang' (2008).

Chilala (2008) elaborates that African children's theatre is predominantly theatre performed by children themselves or performed by children together with adults yet a lot of studies focus on theatre performed by adults for children which is dominant on Euro-American platforms and uncommon in African contexts among children who are old enough to play on their own. Nevertheless, the study does not in any way dismiss theatre performed by adults as inappropriate for children but seeks to explore the nuances in children's ways of knowing and doing within their cultural realities. Even though Chilala (2008) does not make reference to a particular age group, this paper perceives gaps in the underrepresentation of theatre performed by children on their own as an artistic enterprise to be a matter of concern.

According to the findings, children's theatrical activities on their own during play, remained true to the characteristic often associated with indigenous theatre as being part and parcel of life. The children profiled their experiences through rhythm, movement, chants, song, imitation, dance and mime during play as part of their daily routine in a participatory way without the pressure to perform an audience. On the other hand, the caregivers facilitated theatrical activities modeled on plans informed by the ECD curriculum of activities.

The findings of this study also showed that the theatrical genre in the realm of early childhood was more of a creative experience than a specialized artistic entity with prescriptions regarding talent or quality. This rendered it part and parcel of life rather than a live presentation before an audience who give feedback and determine its quality and success. The success of theatrical activities by children lay in the lived experience, freedom and democracy to perform, the desire to perform and continued participation of the

children. This suggested that the success was child centers and depended on the willingness of the children to perform according to their abilities without making any demands for mastery, perfection as is often the case with professional adult artists. Such a scenario facilitated access for newcomers to the ECD centers to join and perform according to their abilities and willingness.

Children at the ECD centers engaged more with theatre as a participatory process and not as a finished product to be performed before an audience as was the case with theatre facilitated by the caregivers or Western theatre and many forms of conventional theatre such as the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festivals which rehearse and present packaged products before an audience. To this end, it was evident in the findings that the process of performance dictated the genre of performance rather than the determination of the genre as existing in artistic composition in the form of a story, song or poem. This prompted the determination of theatrical genres in ECD to focus on performance dynamics and context specifics for example: participatory theatre, process theatre and impromptu / spontaneous theatre, improvisation and mime.

The children demonstrated that they had their own local terminologies for theatrical forms for example: *Kalongolongo* which was used to refer to a specific kind of role play they engaged in. Even though role play is regarded as a theatrical practice by children worldwide the study found it significant to highlight contextually informed constructions and taxonomies of children's role play such as *Kalongolongo* in Kenya and *Mandwani* in Zambia cited by Mukela (2014).

The performer / audience relationships in theatrical performance by children at the sampled ECD centres conformed to the concept of *Spect-Actor* by Boal (1992) where every child was an actor (performer) and a spectator (observer) hence, they were Spect-Actors. The findings showed that even the children who were observers while others performed, observed out of their own volition because they had the option to join or take an alternative path.

The performances by children were not rehearsed but adapted to what Ngugi (1996) refers to as a performance rehearsal mode which is a characteristic associated with indigenous theatre as opposed to a rehearsed and pre-packaged product. Both the rehearsal and performance were simultaneous and participatory such that even new comers to the ECD centres got the opportunity to participate and learn from the ongoing theatrical activities without the pressure of going through formal auditioning, casting and rehearsal to be part of the ensemble. According to the findings, genres such as stories, songs, dances, mime and poetry were adapted and recreated by children in exploratory and varied ways rather than the children facilitating on the genre as is usually the case with professional artists and adult performers or prescriptive performances of genres which are adjudicated according to prescribed rules. The rules were not binding for children. For example, the children did not have to engage with the entire story or song but only portions they found interesting while performing on their own.

Impromptu or spontaneous theatre as a theatrical activity which was common among children at the ECD centres may be defined as a spontaneous or unplanned theatrical activity representing children's free response dramatically as they interpret their experiences: Huck et al. (1993). Additionally, Hovik (2001) posits that spontaneous play is a unique cultural aesthetic that emerges from the daily social lives of children and which children engage in without the direction of adults. This kind of theatre which is also commonly referred to as dramatic play incorporated elements of participatory theatre, improvisation and process theatre. Dramatic play also engaged artistic forms such as song, dance, storytelling and mime. Given its diversity to engage variant artistic forms and theatrical practices, dramatic play demonstrated its significance in leveraging children's artistic creativity in theatre. Through spontaneous play, children expressed themselves by capturing experiences in their daily lives. Children were also able to enact simple scenes from favorite folk tales and verses in songs and poems by assuming various roles. As part of children's ways of knowing and doing, impromptu exhibited the potential to respond to diversity in theatrical genres and at the same time respecting cultural values.

Impromptu or spontaneous play can be compared to planned theatre which characterized facilitation by the caregivers who relied on a prescribed curriculum to direct ECD activities. According to the caregivers during FGD, most of their planned activities privileged academic work due to the pressure from parents that their children acquire language and mathematical skills as early as possible. Okwany et al. (2011) cite Choi (2006) who refers to this preference of academic curricular in ECD as the *schoolification* of ECD.

The concept of theatrical space by children at the ECD centres was broad and dynamic ranging from physical space, emotional space, cultural space, time, democracy, freedom, opportunity, creativity, and imagination. This kind of spaces were easily adaptable to children's ways of knowing and doing such as impromptu and spontaneous theatre. To this end, it was evident that the presence of physical space alone did not guarantee theatrical space. The support of the caregivers in making time and a democratic environment was also significant. This concept of theatrical space contradicted the dominant storyline on theatrical space to conform only to physical /architectural space where there is a sharp dichotomy between the performers who perform on stage and the audience who occupy the auditorium separated from the performers by the fourth wall.

The dramaturgy of play was distinguished in the findings as a rich theatrical space and experience for children where they became directors, creators, managers, performers, scene- designers and participants at the same time. They were not mere consumers of a pre-existing theatrical culture. They created, re-created, managed, designed and performed theatre according to their abilities, drawing from their daily experiences and culture. According to the findings, children's theatrical activities did not just occur naturally without their creative input.

The findings reveal that children did not engage with theatre as professionals subjected to auditioning, casting and rehearsals. They took on roles depending on the contexts without pressure for mastery of the art. Data indicates that children took on performing roles in variant ways for example:

- i. By voluntary casting: voluntarily taking on roles.
- ii. Random casting: during the process of play, certain roles were acquired randomly.
- iii. Designated casting when assigned by fellow children or the caregiver during planned theatre.

With regard to ownership, the creative works at the ECD centres were part of the collective and creative heritage of childhood rather than the permanent and creative works of a playwright, choreographer or composer. Wilson and Goldfarb (2002) posit that a playwright writes a play and actors interpret it through performance, a choreographer designs a dance and the dancers perform, a composer writes music and a singer sings it. This was not the case with children at the sampled ECD centres. There was no tension arising from ownership and mastery. In the process of participating in the performances, young children inherited the ownership rights. Thus, the freedom of ownership was enhanced through participation.

### 3. The Mixed Language Heritages of Theatre

This paper also analyzes language as a significant element of the *mélange* of heritages in the context of the study because of the triple language heritage of most children in Kenya. The findings in Table 2 below indicate that even though *Dholuo* was the most widely used language at the sampled ECD centres, not all content in the mother tongue *Dholuo* was indigenous because Christian songs and biblical stories in *Dholuo* dominated theatrical activities at the ECD centres. On the other hand, the evidence that *Dholuo* dominated theatrical activities showed the potential for indigenous theatre to thrive.

Most widely used language	Second most widely used language	Third most widely used language	No. of ECD centres
<i>Dholuo</i>	Kiswahili	English	26
Kiswahili	English	<i>Dholuo</i>	5
Kiswahili	Luhya	English	2
TOTAL			33

Table 1: The mixed language heritage

The findings displayed in Table 1 above reveal that: children at the ECD centres engaged in theatrical activities in at least three languages. *Dholuo* was the dominant local language in 26 ECD centres whereas *Luhya* local language; was widely used in two ECD centres on the border of Siaya County where Ugenya sub-county belongs and Busia County; the neighbouring sub-county. Kiswahili was most widely used in 7 ECD centres. The findings reveal that English was also used in theatrical activities by children and caregivers at the sampled ECD centres. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) declares Kiswahili both a national and official language whereas English is regarded as an official language as well as the medium of instruction in schools. Local languages such as *Dholuo* and *Luhya* are promoted in the Constitution as part of one's right and in the Basic Education Act (2013) as a medium of communication in ECD centres and primary school standard 1-3.

### 4. The Synergies between the Different Language Heritages

Despite having a major focus on indigenous theatre, the study does not overlook the existence of English nursery rhymes as theatrical performance activities at the early childhood development centres. The findings reveal that the multiple heritages inherent in the theatrical practices by children and caregivers at the ECD centres are evident in the synergies between the multiple heritages. These synergies were mainly experienced by children improvisation.

The mixed language heritage was managed by children through improvisation which was adaptable to different languages because children could fill in the gaps in a song in English with *Dholuo* words that sounded the same. A good example of improvisation of words while singing along was the improvisation of the words in the song *raoraoraorabet* in *Dholuo* while listening to the song *row row row your boat* in English. According to a caregiver during the FGD, it was not uncommon for children to fill in the gaps in a song with sounds or words that they found meaningful. A child who was not fluent in English was likely to use *Dholuo* words to fill in the vague gaps in an English song with familiar sounds. (*RaoinDholuo* means hippopotamus). Not only the similar sounding words were substituted, the rhythm of a well-known English nursery rhyme had influenced the creation and melody of a children's song in *Dholuo*. The multilingual heritage in the ECD context was also evident in the translation and performance of some songs and verses at least three languages.

### 5. The Mixed Heritage Derived from Historical and Cultural Origins

1.1.	Christian songs, dramatic games and biblical stories in <i>Dholuo</i>
1.2.	Christian songs, dramatic games and biblical stories in Kiswahili
1.3.	Christian songs, dramatic games and biblical stories in English
1.4.	Local songs, poems, dramatic games and stories in <i>Dholuo</i>
1.5.	Local songs, poems, dramatic games and stories in <i>Luhya</i>
1.6.	Songs, poems, dramatic games and stories in Kiswahili
1.7.	English nursery rhymes, poems, songs and fairy tales
1.8.	Contemporary and topical songs, stories, poems, games in <i>Dholuo</i>
1.9.	Contemporary and topical songs, stories and poems in Kiswahili
1.10.	Contemporary and topical songs, stories and poems in English
1.11.	Local and contemporary songs, stories sang in a mixture of languages for example: <i>Dholuo</i> , English and Kiswahili

Table 2: The mixed heritages of theatre at the ECD centres by historical and Cultural Origins

According to the findings, a Christian heritage comprising Christian songs and biblical stories in the local languages, English and Kiswahili contributed to the mixed heritage. During the FGD, the caregivers pointed out that Christian songs and theatrical activities derived from biblical stories in *Dholuo* had overtaken the use of indigenous theatre over the years especially during facilitation by caregivers. Evidence given by caregivers was that: the tastes and preferences of most caregivers tended towards Christian praise and worship songs derived from church choirs thereby saturating theatrical activities at the ECD centres with a Christian heritage. The Christian songs were also easily accessible because they were documented in hymn books and some of the music recorded and played extensively over the radio and other audio visual media. Another rationale behind the dominant Christian heritage was that most children attended Sunday school where they were exposed to Christian songs, listened to biblical stories and sermons. Additionally, Christianity was the dominant religion in Ugenya sub-county and prayer in public institutions such as ECD centres was a common phenomenon. Some ECD centres were also attached to schools and churches under sponsorship from Christian denominations. The caregivers revealed during FGD that: it was difficult to make Christian church songs fit into the broad category of themes in the ECD curriculum because church songs often tended towards only spiritual or religious themes. This according to the study is a gap which can be appropriately filled by indigenous theatre which integrates a broader sphere in terms of themes and content. To this end, the study argues that to some extent, the influence of Christian songs and biblical stories compromised the place of indigenous theatre in ECD.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that to marginalize local ways of knowing and doing such as indigenous theatre is to overlook children as creative, authentic and unique players of theatre in the local environment. This paper therefore portrays how children interact with the mélange of ECD heritages in their care ecology to foreground their artistic culture as a significant heritage that deserves investigative inquiry rather than neglect and exclusion.

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