

NEGOTIATING CONTEMPORARY ISSUES THROUGH CULTURAL CREATIVE DANCE EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract

This study sought to negotiate contemporary issues through cultural creative dance expressions. The study delves into the techniques of dramatisation in the dances, contextualised in their cultural and creative contexts. The synthesis of these concepts was propped on aesthetic theory, semiotics and discourses on African performance for the description of style, themes and messaging. The study was framed on qualitative design to analyse purposively sampled cultural creative dances on various chosen themes and cultures. Primary data included data observed in the sampled dances as well as unstructured interviews. Secondary data was gathered from books, journals, articles and online publications. The data was analysed using content analysis. The study finds that, indeed, a cultural creative dance performed in the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival tackle various themes that are derived from various issues the Kenyan society is grappling with. The study findings also note that the artist has a central role in bringing issues to the fore and affirms the cultural creative dance as a powerful and enduring platform for ruminating on societal concerns. In conclusion, the cultural creative dance, as the foregoing discourse elucidates, is a potent, lively and well-grounded mode of communicating and discussing the issues in the hearts of individual citizens and the nation at large.

Key terms: Dance, dramatisation, theme, theatre, cultural creative dance, storytelling.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) is a very important forum in Kenyan theatre. The festival forms the primary space for grooming of thespians from their early years of schooling in early childhood development and Education (ECDE) centres, through primary school, secondary level up to tertiary institutions (Osiako et al., 2004). The festival is arguably the largest congregation of young thespians in East Africa and has, indeed, over time, proven to be the stepping stone upon which many artists and scholars in art have honed their skills and sharpened the analytical synthesis of their artistic works. The repertoire of the festival has, in a little over half a century, grown from European plays performed by a few schools to about ten genre items derived from poetry, dramatic plays, dance, oral narratives and comedy. With the expanded repertoire, the festival becomes not only a platform for nurturing artistic talents but also a breeding ground of ideas, stories, and much-needed debate on issues of importance to the ambient society.

Continually, the festival administration has provided an annual overarching theme that the institutions and artists draw from in their quest to grapple with various sub-themes or issues encapsulated or insinuated by the main theme, which is mostly drawn from the prevailing issues of national importance and those with a direct bearing to the national psyche. Some of the main festival themes are listed in the table below.

Table 1: Festival themes

Theme	Year
Drama as a unifying force	2008
Promoting National harmony through drama	2009
Developing leadership skills through drama	2010
Enhancing our national values for a better Kenya	2011
Enhancing National Cohesion & Integration	2012
Performance for national healing and integration	2013
Celebrating our diversity for national unity	2014
Embracing Social responsibility for national development	2015
Developing artistic talent for national development	2016
Enhancing National values for development	2017
Enhancing National cohesion & Integration through Theatre and Film	2018
Promoting Moral Responsibility Among the Youth Through Theatre and Film	2019

A keen reading of the above sampled national themes reveals a cyclic reference to the themes with major ideals espoused, including;

- i. National harmony, cohesion and integration
- ii. National development
- iii. National values and Moral responsibility

Notably, it is an almost predictable pattern as it seems to mirror the Kenyan zeitgeist in specific years. It is evident that the five-year election cycle in Kenya keeps the issue of national cohesion and integration alive and potent. Indeed, the years straddling national elections in Kenya, which have unfortunately been severally characterised by post-election chaos occasioned by disputed results, further awaken deep-seated ethnic and class strife and animosity, whose ugliness is conjured up by the elections. The themes of national development seem to be a script right out of a government notebook keen to have her citizens forget about election disputes, albeit momentarily, to focus on growing the country. The festival, therefore, is clearly indivisible from the intrigues of the government and the mood of the country.

It is imperative to note that the didacticism thereof implied is not a coincidence or an involuntary gaze at issues but a conscious expression of belief, opinion and perspective pertaining to the topic in question. Though this thematic/prevalent-issue nexus is not exactly an expression of the ideology of the performers or writers, or directors, it nevertheless tends to offer various angles of the same stories and thereby tendering various viable solutions to the topic. This is particularly important as the festival is a quintessential cross-section curved from the larger society of Kenya in all shades of its diversity. There are many themes covered in the festival drawing from the issues of concern to the Kenyan society and which attract special awards listed in the KNDF official programs (2005-2017), including best items;

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|---|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Youth and responsible health behaviour | 11. Indigenisation of investments |
| 2. Wildlife conservation | 12. Civic education |
| 3. Gender equality/women empowerment | 13. Prevention of child labour |
| 4. Drug Abuse | 14. Millennium Development Goals |
| 5. HIV/AIDS | 15. Child abuse and neglect |
| 6. Anti-corruption | 16. Fair Trade |
| 7. Reproductive Health | 17. Prevention of FGM |
| 8. Girl child education | 18. Constitutional review |
| 9. Fight against crime by youth | 19. Road safety |
| 10. Anti-Gender-violence | |

Deriving from the above-listed thematic concerns translating to special awards in the festival, it is important to note that the issues under discourse in the performances, therefore, are very important and to cement this fact, the item production and adjudication guidelines peg theme as one of the prime parameters of creation and evaluation of items by rating it as 10 per cent of the important elements in the artistic pieces. This, therefore, translates to a festival that not only concerns itself with talent and skill development but with open intercourse on issues prevalent in Kenyan society.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Cultural Creative Dance

Cultural creative dance is one of the main performance items in the KNDF repertoire (Kimani, 2019). As a genre item, it was introduced to the festival in 1981 during the tenure of the first African inspector of schools in charge of English, Luka Wasambo Were (Osiako et al., 2004). Its introduction was inspired by the energetic clamour to add an African touch to a festival that had for a long time played host to European plays that were performed by settler-populated schools like the Prince of Wales, now Nairobi School, Duke of York (Lenana school) and Duchess of Gloucester now Pangani Girls Secondary School (Ibid).

In its beginnings, the cultural creative dance exuded in many ways characteristics of its folk component and was grounded in the event or the ritual it was based on, like initiation rites, marriage ceremony, funeral rites, birth and naming celebration, harvest and so on. However, through the span of time, as Kimani (2019) notes, the dance has transformed from a ritualistic folk dance to a story form that is widely understood and tells contemporary stories in a way that transcends the cultural and language barriers that could have plausibly compounded it in its earlier form. To adequately explore a topic, the cultural creative dance exudes the following formal and aesthetic elements;

Dance

According to the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF) rules and regulations (2014), the dance element consists of dance movements, dance formations, rhythm and tempo. The dance movements are derived primarily from the cultural source from which the dance is derived, which has grown from the ubiquitous Luhya "Isikuti" and "Kamabeka", and Luo dances to a recent influx of Gikuyu, Akamba, Ameru, Maasai, Mijikenda, Kalenjin and Somali dances inter alia (Barasa, 2004). The movements ranging from thrusting shoulders to gyrating hips, shaking heads, spins, turns, walks, hops, jumps, and the shapes and patterns in the process of dancing are key in communicating specific messages, enhanced by the varying tempos and rhythms that enhance and diminish the energy and intensity of particular moments in the dance performance.

Story/Choice of Dance

This element connotes the cultural source of the dance item and, most importantly, the thematic concern of the dance. The rules and regulations of the KNDF (2014) clearly stipulate that the dance should have a theme and a clear storyline around which the dance pivots as it develops. This is a clear point upon which the crux of this paper rests. It points to the concern of the festival on the importance of education amidst the entertainment. The messages are therefore expected to relate to the festival theme, which is always connected to prevailing situations in the country.

Drama

A dramatisation in creative cultural dance is an import of acting by way of performing certain movements as gestures, simulation of real action and by using facial expressions to exhibit emotions that help elucidate the meanings and imports of particular moments and episodes in a dance performance. To achieve this, the cultural creative dance employs the soloist(s) as actors, with a dance troupe amplifying their character presence. (Mareri & Barasa, 2004). While their dancing is subservient to their paralinguistic expressions, the dancing troupe only marries action to their graceful or vigorous dance

steps, all the while reflecting the actions of the soloist in dance movement. All this is in the quest to achieve adequate characterization that can drive the story forward, hence steering the thematic message further.

Costume and Decor

These elements of the cultural creative dance embody the design rudimentary in the dance creation. They include the set, the costumes and the make-up used in the dance performance. The KNDF rules and regulations (2014, p. 29) stipulate that the costume and decor should aid in the projection of the intended themes and situations of the dance. To achieve this, costume, set, and makeup play the following roles;

- i. Suggesting the life, conditions and personality of the characters.
- ii. Enhance facial expressions and reveal symbols of the depicted settings.
- iii. Should portray positive cultural images (Ibid)

The foregoing roles deepen the understanding of the narrative elements of character, setting and events, thereby building a case on certain messages and thematic concerns.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study was framed on qualitative design to analyse purposively sampled cultural creative dances on various chosen themes and cultures. Primary data included data observed in the sampled dances as well as unstructured interviews. Secondary data was gathered from books, journals, articles and online publications. The data was analysed using content analysis.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Thematic Areas Manifest in Sampled Cultural Creative Dances

Corruption

The theme of corruption has been widely portrayed in the cultural creative dance and in a variety of ways in different cultural sources. To deepen this understanding, the issue of sleaze shall be discussed in the context of two dances Esiaki (2003) by Hudson Wafula and Omweri Odonjo ei Ko (2009) by Elisha Otieno. Esiaki, a CCD set in the Luhya culture, is a story about Omulindi, a village head entrusted as a custodian of the Nasio village granary. He, however, betrays the trust of the villagers and, together with his cronies, pillages all the grain stored, throwing the villagers into hunger and pain. The villagers, in turn, rise up to counter his brute force and eject him and his cronies from the management of the granary, which is assigned to responsible members of the village. Omweri Odonjo ei Ko (2009) is a Luo cultural creative dance about Omweri, a vicious python that enters the gourd (Ko) and syphons the village wealth and treasures, and when the villagers kill the snake, they discover their village elder was the one controlling Omweri. They then apprehend him and proceed to cleanse the gourd and then replenish it with supply.

The two dances explore the role of those entrusted by society to safeguard the resources and wealth of the people, who then turn out to be the danger that the society had not anticipated by embezzling the very resources placed in their safe custody. The two dances comment on the leadership of the Kenyan society and the vice of graft that has continually characterised them, much to the chagrin of citizens that have entrusted them with the national cake. Omulindi and the symbolic Omweri represent a class of leaders that have gone against the very principles of integrity and trust that cause the people to elevate them to positions of responsibility and renegade to become greedy and selfish individuals bent on stealing from public coffers. Kenya has for a long time been suffering under the hands of corrupt regimes

and individuals, evidenced by grand scams like the Goldenberg scandal, Anglo leasing scandal and the recent NYS scandals, Afya House scandal, KEMSA COVID-19 PPE scandal, all characterised by bribery, falsification of documents, hefty payments for non-existent goods and undelivered services. This is indeed enough inspiration for the two dances that lay the blame at the doorstep of top leadership in the country.

In their resolutions, Esiaki (2003) and Omweri Odonjo ei Ko (2009) suggest dismantling corrupt regimes and individuals and then subjecting them to the law. In Esiaki (2003), Omulindi and his cronies are subdued and face the wrath of the villagers, who ignore passionate pleadings for forgiveness by Omulindi, remove him from the community leadership and place trustworthy structures to mind the welfare of the granary. In Omweri Odonjo ei Ko (2009), the serpent is killed, and the individual behind the slithering schemes is brought to the book. The two dances are similar, at least in view of their choice of themes, performance outlook and story, to two other winning dances in the festival: Esiaki is relatable to Ufyonzi, the 2003 winning dance by Matuga girls, which also involves a crooked custodian of community grain siphoning it for personal benefit. Omweri, in view of emblematic ideas and themes, relates to Mango, the 1998 national runners-up performed by Dagoretti High School. Mango also personified a snake that terrorised villagers of Nasio by swallowing their contributions towards the education of one of their own. The snake keeps prowling and striking until the people decide to waylay the snake and kill it. The ensuing bloody battle ends with the serpent dead only to unmask Mango, their leader commandeering it. This revelation instigates his punishment and banishment from the privilege of leadership and communal responsibility.

The anti-graft messages in the two dances and their comparatives are therefore very clear and poignant, as are others, a thematic area that is strengthened by the partnership of Kenya Anti-corruption Commission (KACC), now Ethics and Anti-corruption commission (EACC) with festival organisers to enhance the crusade against corruption. The time span of the dances (1998-2009) is a real cause for worry when applied to the macro-cosmic level in Kenya. The implications thereof are that within that decade, corruption in Kenya remained at its peak, with scandals growing in number and value. Indeed the vice has crept like the serpent in Mango and Omweri Odonjo ei Ko, into every facet of the Kenyan space; in education, where even a qualified admission into school attracts a bribe; the security and justice systems which have become "commercial entities" where justice is just a word for the offended and a commodity for the offenders who possess the financial and influence muscle to bid for justice in the "auction".

The dances, nevertheless, imagine, fathom and flirt with possible solutions, including banishing the corrupt from leadership. It is in that spirit that the revised Kenyan Constitution of 2010 included a chapter on leadership and integrity with radical proposals to bar individuals convicted of crimes, including economic crimes, from societal responsibility. Indeed the letter and spirit of the document wield the solutions, including a stronger and independent anti-graft commission. However, the real solution to the vice is still elusive to date since the constitution has been, to the convenience of the powerful, ignored, mutilated and subjected to interpretation-revisionism to protect the highest bidders and suppress the lowly.

Environmental/Wildlife Conservation

Issues on flora and fauna have continued to nag the global mind for some length of time now, with most of the post-millennial era characterised by debates on global warming and the endangerment of many

species of both animals and plants. This theme was well covered in Kulundu (2004), performed by Dagoretti High school.

Kulundu (2004) is a story of Kulundu and his household with his two wives, Nasitanje and Esipindi. As the dance begins, Kulundu prides himself of the "eliru" (forest), singing happily about the forests and wildlife. Seen as a custodian of the land, Kulundu invites everyone to see the "Ipunda" (Zebras), "Tsinyani" (Monkeys), "Ingwe" (Leopards) and other animals, as members of his household draw water from the raging and clean river. As the dance progresses, Kulundu decides to move his household into the forest, which means deforestation to expand his farmlands, thereby creating a conflict with the animals in the forest space and the pasture/water resource. Severally in the dance, Kulundu has to ward off Zebras grazing too close to his farm, Monkeys innocently swinging on trees around his new compound and chasing a Leopard threatening to attack his compound.

The once rosy relationship that Kulundu prided himself on, and to which he was inviting everyone to witness, becomes a scramble for space and a race of life and death. The once peaceful "eliru" becomes a battleground as Kulundu continues deforestation and bullying animals in their own habitat. As Kulundu settles and his family expands, the conflict continues and reaches a zenith when monkeys steal Kulundu's babies and run away with them, ensuring a race against time to rescue them. That episode, and the fact that the river begins drying up because of wanton deforestation, leads Kulundu to repent and move from the forestland. He thereafter begins reforestation and fences off the forest land, and the dance ends with a celebration.

The story in Kulundu adequately captures one of the biggest challenges Kenya has continually experienced; the diminishing forest cover due to deforestation and poaching that has greatly reduced the wildlife population. Tourism is one of the bulwarks of the Kenyan economy, and it is tethered majorly to flora and fauna, like the Big Five animals and the Wildebeest migration. This has led to many state and private interests digging in to try and find a solution to the erosion of an important component of Kenya's heritage by starting conservancies and lobbies to advocate for conservation and countering threats to the environment.

In addition, Kulundu, eponymously titled after the main character, was seemingly more apt in its societal reference since, at that time, the minister in charge of Environment and Natural resources was Newton Kulundu. A sort of homage to his efforts in turning the fortunes of conservation, the dance seemingly echoed his words quoted in a World Wild Foundation online bulletin (2003) after an aerial tour of the Mau forest where he avers his dismay that,

The Mau forest had, in the past 40 years, lost more than 37 per cent of its original area. The forest suffered its greatest losses in 2001–2002 when 65,000ha were carved off procedurally by the then-government to settle people.

In the same train of thought in the bulletin (Ibid), the minister paints a grim picture of the future, positing that,

The results are now very clear. The number of rivers arising from these forests has been reduced to dry sand-beds. ...If we continue in this way, Kenya will soon be forced to import water for domestic and other uses.

Water is a very important resource for everyday use by both humans and animals. Wafula's choreography in *Kulundu* depicted this, with the scarcity of water depicted on the painted flat backdrops and the drying of the well in the story, leading to more protracted conflict between man and animals and general suffering. The resolution of the dance story seems to be in acquiescence with Dr Newton Kulundu's grim prediction. Kulundu and his family move out of the forest and build a "Lukaka" (fence) to create a boundary - a reminder of the coexistence compounded by the need to respect each other's need for resources. Wafula (Personal communication, 2021) reveals that Kulundu was not only inspired by the wanton destruction of forest cover replete in the news of the day but by the need to dialogue about finding the balance between the growing population and conservation of the environment and natural resources. The choice to have Kulundu as a polygamous man and the two wives being pregnant during the same period was an allegory to a growing population and its need to expand. In essence, Kulundu's family was a microcosmic view of the growing population in Kenya and the attendant pressure on resources.

Kulundu's story is a mirror of many individuals and communities that have encroached on forest land in the Mau water tower, Aberdare forest, Karura forest and so on. The story also speaks of the loss of wildlife like elephants, rhinoceros and lion populations due to poaching and killing of the animals in the arena of conflict with people living in close proximity to wildlife parks. The resolution in *Kulundu* (2004) points towards revitalising people's consciousness on the value of conserving flora and fauna, which will be the first step in building back the environmental towers by re-forestation and fighting poachers and protecting endangered species. The fencing off of the forest in *Kulundu* (2004) can be taken both literally or as an allegory for the protection of forests and wildlife in conservancies.

Social Cohesion

Kenya is a culturally and ethnically diverse country. With more than forty-three (43) tribes and numerous religions practised in Kenya, the nation is a tapestry of many colours. The diversity, though, has, in many instances, mostly triggered by hotly contested ethnically driven politics; Kenya has severally gotten to the brink of the fabric of its nationhood getting torn apart, with the most salient case being the 2007/08 post-election violence that claimed more than one thousand lives and left many maimed and displaced from their homes. The Kenya National Drama Festival is one of the platforms upon which the discourse on enhancing cohesion and unity has been widely had. To evaluate this, we shall analyse two cultural creative dances; *Susana* (2008), performed by the Kenya Institute of Mass Communication and *Uhiki* (2013) by Karima girls.

Susana (2008) is a story about two young men, Vifwoli and Chiliswa, the sons of Musa and Susana. Musa, the patriarch of the family, dies and leaves his spear and shield (symbols of power) and the community in limbo. In no time, Vifwoli and Chiliswa begin demanding the items of power, and with no warning, the home is compounded in chaos as the two sons, in conflict, engage in running battles until their fights almost kill their mother, and they have to stop and resolve their conflict by returning the spear and shield to their mother. *Uhiki*, on the other hand, is a story of two youngsters who fall in love and seek to get married to bring together their warring communities amid spirited resistance. The two dances begin by establishing the binarisms, mostly ethnic, that hamper the unity of society. *Susana* (2008) uses the setup of a family and conflicting siblings, whereas *Uhiki* (2012) explores the idea of love between members of two warring communities.

The demon of ethnic strife in Kenya is seemingly awoken by political competition, and the two dances were performed in festivals preceding and proceeding hotly contested elections in 2008 and 2013. The two dances, therefore, prescribe solutions for the recurrent ethnic conflicts with Uhiki (2012) ending in a wedding which ultimately symbolises and suggests more cohesion and sharing of ideas and ideals in a structured and friendly atmosphere akin to a marriage. Susana (2008), on the other hand, advocates for equitable sharing of the national cake and the edification of the nation beyond the polarising individual and parochial interests.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: In conclusion, the cultural creative dance, as the foregoing discourse elucidates, is a potent, lively and well-grounded mode of communicating and discussing the issues in the hearts of individual citizens and the nation at large. As noted, the dance is a refreshing way of ruminating on what society is grappling with, and an entertaining medium of prescribing solutions to society's most intriguing topics, well-costumed and made-up themes in the stories told through the dances.

However, a lingering question in this discourse of dance, the megaphone of societal matters, concerns the dissemination of important messages to affected communities. Wafula (Personal Communication, 2021) contends with this point and goes ahead to posit that the structure of managing the festival is bound by the objective and focus of the Ministry of Education. Some of the confines the festival has to operate within, including; the school calendar, the ministry's budget, the ministry's mandate and the focus on education. Therefore the performances are only limited to the zonal, district, and regional at the national level, with a slim chance of the state concert. The hosting of the festival is also the prerogative of the ministry to, through the committees, limit the possibilities of items being performed in the localities most affected by the phenomenon they tried to explore.

For instance, Kulundu valorised environmental degradation and its effects. At that moment in time, the debates ministry on the major water towers in Kenya, including Mount Kenya forest, Aberdare Forest and Animal Forest. It will have been prudent to perform the dance in those affected communities. Unfortunately, that dance never went out of Nairobi. All of it was performed at all levels within the city, culminating in the winning National performance on the line on a school stage. That was the last time anyone interacted with a stage performance of Kulundu. How these messages can reach people without the prejudices or limitations thereof is a subject for another research effort.

Recommendation: This paper recommends that the diffusion of such messages can be explored within the following platforms; interministerial platforms, perhaps between the ministry of culture, the ministry of ICT and the ministry of education through their relevant departments to support the dissemination of the messages, adoption of the performances by affected government ministries, state departments and non-state actors involved in various societal matters canvassed in the dances to be used as communication tools in their numerous fora and community engagements and The practice of staging such performances within the community, in locally organised performance fora, akin to village festivals, outside the rigid platform of the KNDF.

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